
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
10
Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen


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"So, cheers. Enjoy the delicious food befitting Team Amethyst's glory."
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
10




"NOW, IT'S TIME TO DECLARE THE GREATEST WARRIOR OF MERIT! ARE YOU READY?!"
"YEEEAAAAAAH!!!"
A bewildering atmosphere filled the stage. Some men had both hands in the sky, so thrilled that no one would stop them if they surged forth. Eve sat on the throne again, thinking they could have taken down the floor master in this ridiculously heightened state.


"SUCH A CHILD. I WOULD NOT MIND LENDING YOU A HAND AS WELL IF YOU PLEASE."
"NAH, I'M GOOD. IT LOOKS ALL ROUGH. IT'LL PROBABLY CRUSH MINE."
I was like a country bumpkin, which usually would have embarrassed me, but I went with the flow and let Marie lead me by the hand



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Episode 9: Battle for the Oasis

It had all happened before the battle between the Arkdragon Wridra and Prominence Dragon Lavos had begun.

A strong gust of wind swept by. The wind was bone-dry, a characteristic unique to the scorching hot desert region. The unforgiving climate induced constant thoughts of death, even in the minds of seasoned travelers.

The endless, desolate landscape echoed with sand crunching under leather boots. The traveler was visibly fatigued and sunburned in the unforgiving desert heat, yet each step they took was as strong as that of a bison. Their hood was thrown back with another gust of wind, exposing the man's blue eyes and dull golden hair. He was young, but his eyes showed an unshakable determination, and countless wounds could be seen on what little skin was showing. He had clearly weathered a past far harsher than his age would suggest.

This man continued taking one step after another without uttering a word. Iron chains dug into his arms as he yanked them forward, the movement dragging something behind him. At the other end of the chains was a coffin-sized box, half-buried in the sand, an unfathomably long trail stretching behind it to the sandy horizon. A normal person couldn't possibly have endured such a feat. The merciless, blazing sun would have exhausted and fried them like an insect in no time. Still, the man's steps never faltered; he constantly marched forward while dragging the heavy object behind him.

A strong gust blew by again. The man turned his face downward to shield his eyes, only for sand to slap violently against his cloak. When he opened his eyes again, he caught a glimpse of something red—an unfamiliar being that hadn't been there just a moment ago. The creature looked somewhat like a bird and had what appeared to

be small talons. Its blood-colored eyes, scraggly teeth, and overall appearance made it clear it was a demon and monster. It opened its thick lips, revealing a mouth as deep red as if it had just been drinking blood.

"I didn't think I'd have the honor of meeting you here." Contrary to its grotesque appearance, the demon spoke quite eloquently.

The man wordlessly continued dragging the coffin-like thing behind him. The demon looked at him, puzzled; he was only ten meters or so away, surely close enough for him to have heard.

"Our war has finally begun. The time has come for us to turn this world upside down. Our days of indignity at the hands of Arilai...of humans, will come to an end, and *our* age will begin!"

The man said nothing. The heavy chains rattled with his movement, and the demon gave him a dubious look. This reaction wasn't what the creature had been expecting. According to reports, the Prince of Ruin was ostentatious and had a penchant for cruelty, as if to hide his cowardly nature. Even without observing his appearance, his mere presence gave away his identity. The demon was skilled in reconnaissance and power analysis; there was no way he had mistakenly approached the wrong person. However, it was almost as if sharp blades covered the man, meaning he wouldn't have had such a dangerous air if he had been an ally. Unlike open hostility, the demon felt as if there was no telling what would happen if it took another step closer.

The creature sniffed the air, confirming that no one else was nearby. The man had been walking alone without any reinforcements waiting in ambush. The demon decided to try talking to him one more time.

"Please answer. I must know your thoughts on this," it said. "Will you choose the path of complete destruction? The fools of Arilai will suffer comically in their despair and bow down before you."

Those words seemed to have finally reached the man as he slightly parted his dry lips. But the demon couldn't quite hear what he had said. It tilted its head and moved closer, the sand crunching underfoot as it stepped forward. When it was right in front of the man, he opened his mouth once more.

“That’s my territory,” he said.

The demon cocked its head again, unsure what to make of that statement. Inexplicably, its vision slowly began sliding sideways, even though it hadn’t moved. It looked around confused, then saw a blade flashing several times and its own body being cut to pieces.

“What...?”

That was the demon’s last word as its head was sliced apart. A spray of blood followed, leaving a bright stain on the otherwise drab desert.

The man took another step forward. Beyond the incandescent horizon was his destination: ruins that had existed since ancient times.

§

The situation in the depths of the cave was chaotic. Even magical barriers couldn’t block the burning smell and heat filling the air. Soldiers had been spraying oil, shooting arrows, and casting dark sorcery spells endlessly. Many of them gathered there felt as if they were inside a burning furnace.

Said soldiers defending the oasis point had quite the disadvantage, because only about a hundred of them were holding back tens of thousands of enemies. This struggle underscored their need to employ unorthodox strategies, as they had no hopes of winning if they played this one by the books. They roasted any demon that entered the tunnel and had to make their enemies believe that sending in any more reinforcements would be pointless.

The men dumped water on themselves and readied their crossbows, witnessing an image straight from hell beyond their peepholes. Flames danced on the burning oil, while countless spores were being spawned on the walls. One could hardly even breathe on the other side of that magic barrier, making the piercing screams and nauseating stench seemingly never-ending. They grimaced as they fired their crossbows.

Arilai’s forces had been training on the second floor of the ancient labyrinth, each soldier working to hone the specific skill they

specialized in. This method was groundbreaking for their army, as the standard procedure was for everyone to learn the same skills simply because it was easier. However, many exceptionally talented individuals were willing to train others during downtime, asking for nothing in return. The regimen included training in sorcery, sacred arts, energy control, swords, spears, bows, shields, languages, strategy, and more. Some even learned cooking and farming out of personal interest, and everyone had found joy in bettering themselves. The second floor had naturally been turning into a place of learning.

The results were clear. Dozens of arrows whizzed through the air and directly pierced the eyes of a group of monsters. While the attacks weren't quite fatal, the creatures looked up at them, many with eyes resembling crushed tomatoes.

"Don't those bastards fear death?!" one soldier couldn't help but wonder out loud as the enemies charged forth. Flames engulfed the tunnel, yet the monsters showed no signs of slowing their aggression. They trampled their fallen comrades underfoot, sending embers flying into the air.

A demon that had one of its eyes shot out climbed over a corpse and opened its fanged mouth. Then spiky objects quickly flew toward the stone walls. The soldiers who had been in hiding scrambled, clutching their heads in a panic, fearing that the whole cave could collapse.

"Hey! They're coming this way!"

The spikes launched from the creature's mouth had been its pointed fangs, which connected to its nerves. The demon then used the sharp teeth to pull itself toward the wall, slamming into it and the magical barrier. High-pitched screams intermingled with the sound of crumbling rocks. As if that were the cue, a singular red eye glared down the back passage.

"Magic Stone Team, release Hellhound," Commander Hakam ordered.

The enemy had broken a hole through the magic barrier, causing heat to come flooding in. As the soldiers scattered in the burning air, something flashed red as it passed by. It kicked the rock wall with a

heavy thud, revealing itself to be a massive wolf with glowing eyes. A bloody mist mixed with the wolf's breath as it exhaled, and the distinct smell of demon filled the narrow passage.

The Magic Stone Team referred to those who had a connection with the stones that could conjure magical creatures. It was an initiative pushed by Aja, who had recognized the characteristics of Magic Stones before anyone else and personally appointed the team's talented members. Through the arts of Empathic Magic, they had the ability to control monsters born from Magic Stones. They had been wielding these arts for nearly six months and even used them to defeat rebels in the past.

"Go! Go! Take 'em down!"

The wolf nodded to the soldiers, then turned its glowing eyes to the breach. Repulsively, the enemy monster had laid white, pointed eggs all around the vicinity. If they hatched, the situation would surely become even worse. The beast lunged at the monster and sank its teeth into its flesh, spraying white fluid all over the place. But the sickening realization that the insides of the monster were still filled with eggs sent a chill down the wolf's spine.

It immediately decided to incinerate the monster and shot a blast of fire from its mouth, which gradually settled into a steady stream of red flame. As the wolf continued roasting the monster, another summoned wolf charged in and burned the eggs plastered all over the walls. A disturbing screech resounded, and although tentacles lashed out at the wolves, the situation now seemed under control.

Hakam, who had been observing the events, breathed a sigh of relief and returned to his station. No matter how much he had prepared, something unexpected was bound to occur. A few strokes of bad luck, and their battle lines would quickly collapse. The thought seemed to add years to his tired expression.

The ground rumbled once again. These vibrations came from deep within the ground and had been going on for quite some time. The movement caused sand to fall from above, increasing the risk of a cave-in. With danger looming in every direction, Hakam raised his face in irritation.

"What is this rumbling, Aja? It's not just an earthquake, is it?"

"Who knows? Conflicts between dragons are beyond the understanding of man. What makes you think an old man like me can read the situation?"

The old man had been tapping the ground with the staff he held in his hand. Supposedly, he could read his surroundings through the ripples sent out by the impact. Enemy forces had surrounded the tunnel with overwhelming numbers. In the far distance, the soldiers had spotted a dragon spreading its wings. Pale blue lights from the old man's magic appeared on a map, and Hakam widened his eyes.

"You *can* read the situation!" he shouted. "What the hell is that giant dragon?! That looks like a far bigger threat than the demon army, if you ask me!"

"Pipe down, will you? My ears still work just fine!" Aja complained. "All I did was get a read on their positions!"

Aja was perhaps in a sour mood because he had been prohibited from using the wide-range spell he had put so much effort into preparing. However, it was a card they could only play once, and they had to save it for the perfect moment to deliver a devastating blow to their enemies.

Hakam sighed, then approached Aja. "I never would've guessed those tremors were from dragons fighting. We've put so much effort into fortifying this tunnel, but they make it seem like nothing but a pile of sand."

"We have no choice but to trust the words of that fortune teller. You may find it unfortunate, but you won't die here. You'll live a long life supporting this country," the old man said.

Hakam didn't look convinced. His brows furrowed as he grunted and said, "Do such predictions really come true? They sound like nonsense if you ask me."

"What are you asking *me* for? I've never liked them in the first place. There is no rhyme or reason to them. But come to think of it, there may be one way to find an answer to this long-debated topic once and for all," Aja responded with a devious grin. "Walk around the danger zone like you were earlier. If you survive, we'll know the prediction was true. You may even end up helping a few people in

the meantime. If you die... Well, it would just be a case of two old fools getting tricked by that young lass."

Hakam gave him a blank look, then they burst into laughter.

"Then if I die, tell the other sorcerers not to believe in fortunes," Hakam said, chuckling.

"Oh, I will. We should settle this question once and for all," Aja stated. "Also, it's about time you let your men use the arrows tipped with Magic Stones. Now's not the time for them to be training their skills."

Hakam looked at the ceiling contemplatively as if resigned to the fact that the old man had read his intention, then decided to return to the battlefield. An opportunity to face so many monsters like this was quite rare, and he had thought it would be incredibly beneficial for his soldiers to improve their skills while leveling up.

He then turned around as if he'd remembered something and declared, "Aja, it's time to use our third card. Notify the others."

"They're going to be giddy with excitement. All right, let's close up the tunnel entrance," Aja said, then moved the card on the table.

Gaston led Team Ruby, which was holding the tunnel's entrance. Aja placed the piece he had just picked up at the entrance. Any ordinary person would have been ripped to shreds by the monsters pushing their way in, but this move was one that would decide the fate of the battle between Arilai and Gedovar.

Even now, the ominous rumbling could be felt underfoot. Across the mountains, a battle beyond human comprehension had been raging on. The clash between the Arkdragon and Prominence Dragon, a conflict that had stirred since ancient times, was far more savage than even a natural disaster. The fallen creatures in the region were destined to wither away and fade into myth.

Hakam exhaled sharply out of his nose, not letting the thought disturb his mind.

§

Bare Beholder, the commanding officer leading Gedovar's army, boasted superior intellect and combat prowess among its forces. The

monster had a wide field of vision due to its many eyes, which gave it a massive edge in combat. When armed with a sword, it claimed to be able to cut through anything and anyone due to its incredible spatial perception and magically bolstered physical abilities. It could even cut a stone tossed into the air until it was reduced to sand.

However, there were two things even the demon couldn't comprehend. First was the source of the distant rumbling, which had slowed their main forces. According to their initial plans, they should have made their way south long ago, but something seemed to have happened.

The other thing it failed to comprehend was the grizzled warrior Gaston standing before it. The human veteran soldier's forehead had a deep cut, and one of his eyes was stained red. Nonetheless, he unceremoniously approached the demon as if that didn't bother him in the slightest.

A blade suddenly darted toward Bare Beholder, and sparks exploded into the air as the creature parried the strike just in time. In an instant, the old warrior had seemingly vanished, and a sword flew toward its head from the other side. The demon deflected this attack with its fist, although it felt like the sword wasn't even there.

Because the demon had one of its eyes severed, it viewed the aged warrior like a specter. It didn't become aware that this injury had occurred until a moment later. It had surely seen the attack coming and defended against it, so it couldn't understand how.

"What...? What the hell did you do?!" barked Bare Beholder.

"Come on, you'd better figure out my powers soon, or you're gonna lose all your eyes."

The human's nonchalant attitude was infuriating. He was several sizes smaller than Bare Beholder and inferior in both muscles and speed. Even as the demon moved so quickly that it left an afterimage behind, it felt a sharp pain in its forehead for some reason.

"Agh! What is this?!"

The demon reached up and drew a bloody dagger out of its forehead—an ordinary weapon one could find anywhere. When had he thrown it? More importantly, how did he know where the demon

was going when it hadn't telegraphed its movement at all?

Bare Beholder nearly flew into a rage but took a deep breath to collect itself.

Look. Observe. Behold. Focus your vision and see through his attacks. No one else could pull off such a feat, but I *can*, thought Bare Beholder, heightening its visual acuity until it was enshrouded with a palpable aura. However, its opponent was looking off in the distance for some reason.

"Heh, the hell is going on over in those mountains? Looks like the end of the damned world," the human said with an amused smile.

The demon didn't respond. It readied its weapon, with its focus sharpened like the edge of its blade. The man's words wouldn't distract the demon, as it only needed to pay attention to the opponent's sword.

Meanwhile, the old warrior noticed the demon's stance and tapped the flat side of his sword against his shoulder. "Well, aren't you a serious little demon? All right, let me give you a freebie. I'll cut you nice and slow, so make sure to peel those remaining eyeballs and watch carefully. Here I go."

Bare Beholder scoffed at the fool's comment but focused its many eyes on the man's weapon. There was tension in the air as it concentrated on capturing every bit of visual data possible.

The sword moved slowly, just as he had declared. Then the demon realized something was off: The aged warrior's weapon wasn't appearing in his shadow. That had to be his ability; he was using some sort of illusion to make it seem as if he were swinging his sword to catch his opponent off guard like a coward. His sword offered no resistance as their blades met, and in the next moment, the demon's throat had been sliced open.

"Gaaah! What did you do?!"

Black blood spurted from Bare Beholder as it flew into a fit of rage. Its long hair fluttered as it directed its unbridled fury at Gaston. The man chuckled and casually stepped forward. His sword split into two, then three, each attacking from different angles. This attack didn't make any sense.

The demon parried a blade just as it was about to descend into

its head, then a shadowless sword pierced its throat. Regardless, it was relieved to find no pain followed. A moment later, there was an eruption of excruciating pain deep in Bare Beholder's throat, and its chest was slit open in a cross shape.

"What...is this?" it breathed, coughing out blood. Its eyes, withering away like raisins, finally noticed a key detail: The sword Gaston held was unbloodied. Their eyes met, and the human returned a contemplative look.

As Bare Beholder crumpled to the ground, Gaston slowly approached. He pointed his sword directly in front of the demon's eyes, then drove it into the sandy ground. When he lifted it again, there was no blade, only a hilt.

"You finally figured it out in your dying moments, huh? I was never holding a sword in the first place. I focus my energy and use *that* as a weapon. There's no real blade, and I can attack wherever I choose. I call it a Spirit Blade, but...I guess you wouldn't care about that. Anyway, it looks like your eyesight worked against you."

Bare Beholder chuckled. That statement was rich, coming from the man who had insisted the demon watch him carefully. When the demon contemplated the fight, it had played right into the warrior's hands from the start. He had deliberately flaunted his nonexistent sword, baiting it into figuring out his ability. The demon should have overwhelmed him with its superior strength and speed instead.

"It's about time that kid learned how to use this too. He has potential, but I guess it's not gonna happen if he still likes that little toy sword of his. At this rate, Zera will learn it before him," he said.

"What...are you...?"

"It's got nothing to do with you. Just an old man's pastime."

Gaston tossed his hilt aside and crouched beside the demon. Although the backlight obscured his face, Bare Beholder could sense his piercing gaze.

"Why did you attack such a remote place like this? Sure, you can find a few interesting things like Magic Stones here, but it doesn't make sense to go straight here in a war," he asked.

"To...welcome our king..."

"King?"

Gaston looked puzzled at first, but then a thought surfaced: the King of Demons, the King of Night, the legend that had vanished at the end of the battle between demons and gods. Such records were found throughout the labyrinth in the form of murals and written documents. He started to chuckle, thinking the idea was preposterous, only to realize it was true when he considered all of the interference they had faced in the labyrinth.

"Don't tell me you're serious— Oh, you're dead." Gaston rubbed his chin as he watched the creature's eyeballs wilt away. He grumbled, still finding it difficult to believe such a grand being was sleeping deep beneath their feet. "If that's the case, fine. Guess I have something to look forward to."

The future he had been envisioning was finally becoming more and more real. He was sure this would be where his bones would be buried. The thought brought a smile to his face as he stood up straight. If the ancient legends were true, he wanted to bear witness with his own eyes.

After gathering his thoughts, Gaston looked around and noticed his men fighting desperately at the tunnel opening. They were cutting down the hordes of monsters rushing toward them, and the sand on the ground around them turned to black tar. They seemed to be holding their own even without their captain.

Gaston told himself that he'd better get over there, but just as he was about to begin walking, he froze.

He heard something slithering around his feet and realized Bare Beholder's bodily fluids had begun to move of their own accord. In fact, the blood from the other monsters was now doing so as well. All of the blood was slowly gathering into one point, and the heavy, ominous feeling in the air made sweat pour down the aged warrior's forehead.

The eerie slithering sound reverberated throughout the battlefield, giving the soldiers goose bumps. Their eyes were glued to the disturbing sight of the collected fluids taking on a humanoid shape, as if they were witnessing the birth of death personified.

"Bloodpool" appeared above the monster in bloody letters.

Gaston gave an exasperated chuckle and said, "*This* is what I've

been looking forward to?”

He picked up the hilt that he had dropped on the floor and was uncharacteristically full of relentless resolve as an aura emanated from him. Having defeated a captain, Gaston now had to face one of the top brass of the demon army. Deep down, he instinctively knew he was no match for his opponent.

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Sinister demonic shrieking and laughter filled the tunnel as the enemy forced Gaston and Team Ruby back. Their demeanor had changed drastically from earlier, and they pressed forward relentlessly even as their comrades fell.

“What’s going on? They weren’t like this a minute ago!” a soldier cried out, sweat pouring down his face. The thunderous voices of the monstrous creatures reverberated from the depths of the tunnel, and the soldiers felt their skin tingle from the pressure.

The soldiers slowly took a few steps backward. They stood huddled nearly shoulder to shoulder, their expressions giving away their fear of the frenzied demons.

“Yup, it’s because of that thing called Bloodpool. Everything’s gonna end once it makes its move,” said Gaston.

The group turned around at once and saw what could only be described as a shadow. Its roots, spread out wide, sucked blood from the ground, emitting an ominous slithering sound. The branches of the shadow splayed out like a giant red tree, seemingly poised to bury the entire sky. But the soldiers’ eyes widened as they tried to make sense of the inconceivable sight.

“Wh-What is that?! Is that really a demon?” another soldier asked.

“Who knows. Anyway, its name showed up, so it’s probably a demon and killable. I doubt it’s invincible or anything,” replied Gaston, shrugging.

“Please don’t say irresponsible things like that. Are you sure *you’re* not the one who summoned it? You’re always talking about how you want to die.”

"The hell is wrong with that?! If you live as long as me, you'll also wanna go out with a bang, ya idiot! Are you gonna take care of me in retirement, then? Huh?!"

The soldier looked up with a groan, then grumbled in a resigned tone, "No..."

Gaston sighed. "Hmph. Team Ruby's job here is done. You guys retreat into the ancient labyrinth. Hakam has issued an order to withdraw."

Team Ruby looked at him blankly, taken aback by his unusually serious tone. They looked at each other.

"Is he telling us to leave this to him?"

"I think so."

Gaston's eyebrow twitched. "Hey! This is the part where you're supposed to cry and thank me!"

"You say that, but you made us too tough to die easily. We're not passing up this opportunity," one of his men said.

"Yeah. If you're going down here, so are we. When it's all said and done, we'll wake up together in Eden or hell. Considering all the bad stuff you've done, you probably won't end up in Eden. You're gonna end up all alone on the other side," said another member.

"Man, I would've run if I had a girlfriend! Too bad!" said a third.

"So would we, jerk!" the others complained at once.

Team Ruby was full of battle junkies, and they weren't the kind that could ever hope for happiness with a woman beyond a one-night stand. Their idea of trying to woo a woman was to brag about how they'd behead a demon. Of course, a forced smile was the best they'd gotten in return for their efforts.

Gaston wanted to kick them in the ass, but he had to admit he wasn't upset by their response. His lips curled in one corner, and all he could do was tell them to do as they pleased. And so, a fire burned in his heart again as he decided to go into battle with the foolish young warriors.

"All right, it's time to take out the trash! Forget Hakam's orders. We're hunting down every one of those demon bastards! You got that, you little shits?!" he barked.

"Um...sir, *that's* your plan?"

"I don't wanna hear it! Fine, go kick some ass for a chance to win a massage from Eve. I'll take myself out of the running since it wouldn't be fair, and I care about you boys so much."

The soldiers roared with excitement and swung their enchanted blades around. Despite their ridiculous banter, they were a team of battle-hardened veterans who certainly looked the part as they pointed their weapons at their enemies. The enchanted swords each wielded had been imbued with magical powers. While the soldiers could slash with the blades, the most effective way to use them was to unleash the explosive energy within them right at the clusters of monsters. However, if used too much, the weapons would shatter into pieces.

Magic Stones from the ancient labyrinth that one couldn't incubate had been repurposed as weapons. Aja had defined incubation as the process by which the Magic Stone Team manifested Magic Stones into monsters, such as Hellhound. The stones were highly valuable items that could fetch a high price if taken back to the city. Team Ruby had determined that using them to blow their enemies to smithereens would be more effective. They fell into position, lining up in two rows, yet something was off. The monsters had been in an uncontrolled frenzy just a moment ago, but their momentum had nearly drawn to a halt.

Team Ruby heard a metallic object ripping through something. They looked around, puzzled, unable to see well in the darkness. Over and over, they noticed the heavy sound of impact and witnessed a mountainous monster getting ripped to shreds. As another monster burst open like a gruesome balloon, they saw a man standing behind the creature's remains.

"Ah, that's what I'm talking about! That's a very nice, compact formation," the man said. "Now, now, don't get too excited. I'll take care of you all one by one."

Team Ruby let out a singular breath of astonishment. There stood a tall, young blond man with an eye patch, equipped with a large sword and shield. His weapons glimmered with a brilliance that showed he had spent a significant sum on them, and their designs complemented each other with matching blue lines. The man had

once been known as the hero candidate, thought to be unbeatable and capable of cutting down any monster that entered his domain.

"Who is that?" a member of Team Ruby asked.

"Don't worry about it. He's a scumbag anyway. Go ahead and attack with your enchanted swords," Gaston answered.

"All right, fire!"

An enchanted blade required a certain level of skill to wield, especially to activate it in the first place. The difference in firepower between a master and an amateur was night and day. Team Ruby's blades cracked as their power output spiked, firing energy beams straight down the tunnel in unison. The beams shot right through the heads of the monsters standing at the front, and Team Ruby collectively hoped their attack would continue heading all the way to Zarish.

"Hey! What are you doing?! Aim for the enemy, not me!" Zarish complained.

"Looks like it's working," Gaston said. "All right, boys, ready the second volley. You heard him. Make sure you aim real good!"

"You got it, boss!" the members of Team Ruby said with an evil snicker.

Team Ruby and Team Diamond always had bad blood but never truly disliked each other. The former had collectively hated Zarish, the man once known as the hero candidate, who had resorted to all manner of underhanded tactics to rise to the top. It went without saying that he had relentlessly tormented Team Ruby, who had always been his greatest rivals.

"Because of him, my first girlfriend..." one of the men seethed.

"Huh? What happened?" another man asked.

"She was giving that bastard money behind my back! From *my* savings!"

"That bastard!"

Zarish was born with a good-looking face, had more money than he knew what to do with, and was supposedly the prince of a fallen kingdom. Team Ruby was united in unyielding determination and animosity toward the privileged snob.

However, Zarish only let out a resigned sigh. Although he had

massively leveled down due to the earlier battle, he was immune to damage from anything slower than the speed of sound due to his characteristic skill that protected him since birth. He could use plenty of things as cover, but he had to be careful of explosions.

"While I make my way to Eve, I'll use my blade to grind you peons down like pepper," Zarish said with a glint in his eye. His weapon flashed as he ceaselessly swung his sword, grinding the monsters around him just as he'd declared, filling the tunnel with black blood. Suddenly, he stopped. "Hm? What's this? The blood is moving..."

The blood that had spilled from the monsters' bodies began flowing on its own. Zarish observed with his blue eyes for some time, then found it was gathering at the oasis by the tunnel entrance. The enormous malignant tree was making its evil flowers flourish at the dazzling, sunlit oasis.

"So that's why the monsters have gone berserk," Zarish noted.

As the name Bloodpool hinted, the creature likely grew stronger by absorbing blood. It had been draining only monster blood so far. If this had been a large-scale battle with casualties piling up on both sides, it might have grown exponentially stronger. This ability made the monster particularly dangerous in Zarish's eyes. He cut down one last foe and made his way out of the tunnel and into the open sky, though the foe's sinister branches hindered the view of the vast expanse overhead.

Zarish waved off Team Ruby as if to say playtime was over, and they shot back that they weren't playing around at all.

Gaston tightened his lips. "Aren't you a killjoy? Since you're here, block all of that thing's attacks, and we'll consider it a small dent in your long list of debts."

"Fine by me, I've wanted to test my special-order armor and shield," Zarish said. "Are you all right, old man? You're bleeding. I couldn't bear to look at you if you became incapable of even going to the restroom on your own. Why don't you leave this to me and go get some rest?"

"What? Shove it up your ass, you horny little brat."

Both rearranged their battle stances even as they exchanged

insults and glared at each other like a snake and mongoose. Despite their deep-seated hatred for each other, they moved quickly with their lives on the line as the black flowers growing on the monstrous tree were about to bloom.

"I can only defend whatever's within my domain, so make sure you stay in range," Zarish called out. "Also, that thing you were talking about earlier... What was that about Eve's massage?"

"Shut up and keep your eyes forward, idiot! The flowers are about to bloom!" barked Gaston.

"Damn it! You'd better tell me later, old man!"

The two spat at each other as they stomped through the sand toward the monster. Just then, beautiful flowers blossomed upon the massive tree's withered branches.

A dewdrop fell from the end of a bloodred flower petal. Then a cloyingly sweet scent filled the air and clung to the nostrils of those who looked up to see what was happening.

The oasis had been a place of beauty not too long ago, with a refreshing breeze occasionally blowing by. Yet the looming sky now had a sinister air to it. The countless flowers on the giant tree wilted all at once, then fell to the floor like freshly decapitated heads.

Beyond the tree, ten or so men had moved into formation to charge directly at the tree. Even Team Ruby, which was said to have been immortal, had gone pale at the unnerving sight. They simply watched silently as the flower petals rained down, with no idea as to what sort of attack awaited them. Meanwhile, their leader Gaston narrowed his eyes...then sneezed.

"Pollen allergies?" Zarish asked.

"Don't be stupid. You think some stupid pollen would have any effect on me?" Gaston challenged. "Anyway, I need you to put up a barrier. A real tough one, pronto."

"I'm not a fan of half-baked plans," Zarish complained. "Aren't you a little too senile to be a leader? Your team must have it rough, having to take care of you on the battlefield."

"What?! Just shut your stupid mouth and put up a barrier or whatever! Want me to dig out the one eye you have left with this stick?" Gaston snapped.

“What? Who do you think you’re talking to, you old geezer?”

The two butted heads and growled at each other as everyone around them watched, perplexed. Even a child could understand now was not the time for arguing, but it was difficult to point this out to two of Arilai’s most highly recognized warriors. Just as a flower petal was about to fall on Zarish, he swiftly moved out of the way.

“You’ll pay for that later! Sealed Domain!” he shouted.

“Ugh, what a stupid-looking pose. Don’t tell me you strike that pose every time you use that move. You should get your head checked if you do.”

A vein bulged in Zarish’s head as his Sealed Domain formed around him. This ability completely protected the targets within its domain by completely nullifying any damage below a certain threshold. Flower petals clung to Zarish’s pale blue barrier, leaving a trail of viscous, bloody fluid. Then, the fluid dug into the barrier like roots. If those roots had touched skin, they would have drawn every drop of blood from one’s body and fed it to Bloodpool.

“Looks like it continuously digs its way into whatever it touches. Not good,” Zarish noted.

“Will your barrier hold?” Gaston asked.

“Hard to say. I’ve leveled down quite a bit. It might break down at some point.”

A long, sharp noise like nails scratching glass echoed all around them. Disturbingly, as the number of flower petals stained with red increased, everyone backed up toward the center of the Sealed Domain. They began to feel trapped.

“What happens if we attack from here?” Gaston asked.

“My domain will nullify any attack, whether it’s from the inside or out. If you use those enchanted swords like earlier, the damage will just go straight to my barrier,” Zarish explained. “We have no choice but to wait for the attack to end.”

“Hmph. Then what if I do this?”

Zarish’s eyes widened. The old man had drawn his sword, and in the next moment, the roots digging into the barrier had been severed. The former hero candidate’s mouth flapped briefly before

he asked, “Wha...? How did you do that?”

“I went through it, obviously. I learned this technique to bypass your barrier in the first place,” Gaston said, then called Zarish an idiot mockingly, at which the other’s vein on his forehead bulged again.

Gaston’s Spirit Blade was insubstantial, like air. Due to its irregular nature, it didn’t fall under the category of a magical or physical attack and didn’t count as a target for Sealed Domain.

“You *still* want a piece of me, huh? Just when I thought you’d quieted down!” Zarish said.

“You thought *I’d* quiet down? I’ve been training so I can kill you, asshole,” Gaston shot back. “Ugh, to think I had to use this move just to cut some weeds. Oh well, those roots would have devoured a normal sword.”

The old warrior grumbled as he continued cutting the surrounding roots and petals.

Zarish watched the old man, cold sweat running down his forehead. There was a possibility that his Interception, which reacted to anything moving slower than the speed of sound, wouldn’t activate against Gaston’s ability. He would have to assume the aged fighter’s attacks could bypass his defense, and a fight between them would lead to blood being spilled on both sides—a situation he wanted to avoid at all costs. He told himself he had no intention of fighting, though there was no telling what would happen if the old man enraged Eve.

All the flowers wilted and turned brown after failing to drain any blood. It was strangely bittersweet watching them getting blown away at the end, but their view had brightened significantly, and the sky had become visible overhead. The group was surprised to find the entire place around them had turned red. The attack could have killed everything in an extensive area, and the casualties would have been catastrophic if this had been on a crowded battlefield. When two opposing armies had clashed, the battle lines had collapsed decisively solely because of Bloodpool.

“That’s odd. Wouldn’t have expected them to send a monster like this for our little group,” Zarish remarked.

"I doubt it's because they thought we were just that big of a threat. They stand to gain from a drawn out war, but our enemies want to end this quickly for some reason. Maybe it has something to do with these tremors?" Gaston wondered aloud.

No one had the answer to his question, but Gedovar's general certainly was in a race against time. The Tower of Conflagration, an ancient structure in the desert, stood in the way of their invasion of Arilai. The Prominence Dragon had been tasked with destroying it, yet he was still in the middle of a battle with the Arkdragon. Since there were so many unknowns in the enemy's current situation, their options were quite limited. And so, they went for their closest objective, the ancient labyrinth, to secure a stronghold and enlist the monsters sleeping deep beneath it. That was why they had sent Bloodpool under the assumption that it would quickly wipe out the opposition, only to find its petals dissipating in the wind.

"Looks like we survived. All right, get ready to strike back—"

Zarish swallowed his words. When he turned around, he saw about ten blades pointed at the ready. This made Team Ruby so terrifying; they were exceedingly good at sniffing out danger and opportunities. It was no wonder they had been such longtime companions of Gaston, who lived life through instincts alone.

As the wind carried away the final flower petals, the aged captain gazed up at the giant tree with a feral look in his eyes.

"Fire!" he yelled.

"Aye!" his team said in unison.

The moment Zarish dispelled his barrier in a scramble, the enchanted blades all shattered. All at once, the magic energy within them unleashed a massive burst of power far greater than their earlier attack. They had even clustered together and perfectly synced their timing, creating a singular, destructive blast that shot at an angle through the enormous red tree, cutting halfway through it. The cross section was white like fat, and beads of red fluid surfaced from the wound. Blood then spurted after a short delay, and a high-pitched cry, like that of a baby, rang throughout the oasis. One of the team members watched for a moment, then furrowed his brow.

"No good. Doesn't seem like it went all the way through. I have a

feeling that monster is hiding its true form."

"Hmm, you think so too? Then I'll drag it out, so wait here," Gaston said, abruptly walking forward.

Zarish hesitated, unsure of whether to maintain his defense or back up Gaston, then noticed the older fighter beckoning him with a finger. He watched Team Ruby prepare new enchanted blades as he lined up beside Gaston.

"Don't they need protection? They'll be in trouble if the enemy makes a similar attack again," he said.

"Hah, we all die when the time comes. That's what it means to be a warrior," said Gaston, chuckling. "That doesn't apply to anyone on Team Diamond except you. Good women deserve luxury and pampering."

Zarish fell silent and closed his helmet. By now, Gaston and his team were far closer to the members of Team Diamond than he was. There was no question who they preferred between the man who had dominated them against their will and the soldiers with whom they had fought alongside on the battlefield. As he sensed those implications in the old man's words, he couldn't help but hide his dejected look.

The armor Zarish wore had been extracted from a metallic giant and commissioned with various spells cast on it. Veyron armor was a universally admired product, but few knew the hero candidate had invested in it. Zarish believed money was a necessary expense for developing talent, and the products on the general market were made with only the most basic of technologies. His current equipment had been made without any regard for cost, so it was several tiers higher in terms of quality. He had deliberately refrained from releasing the items to the general market to keep an edge over the others.

He exhaled deeply, then breathed in the cold air, adjusting his body temperature. His armor creaked from his enhanced muscles, and the support features for enemy detection activated automatically. His vision extended to behind his back, and he lifted his wide shield and broad sword as if they were weightless. The armor required a certain threshold level and familiarity with magic

but effectively supplemented the areas where humans were naturally inferior to vicious monsters, offering enhanced muscular strength, agility, sight, wild instincts, and tremendous vitality. The rare and powerful armor added two whole Secondary Skill slots on top of its base features, making it a priceless commodity. Zarish had prepared such equipment partly out of necessity due to the massive number of levels he had lost. The loss of Divine Finger and King of Cruelty was quite a devastating blow to his overall power. They were skills crowned as "divine" and "king," so it was uncertain whether he could obtain anything like them ever again.

The enemy detection feature beeped, and the young man faltered. Something was heading toward him from the right, but all he could see were innumerable wilted flower petals dancing in the wind.

"Don't just stand there, kid. Look up," Gaston said.

Suddenly, Zarish felt a heavy impact on his shield from above. His eyes widened at the sight of the red boots before him. His gaze then moved upward to find a woman standing on his shield in an imposing stance, spear in hand.

The woman was Bloodpool. Its armor and hair were viscous, and its contours were somewhat indistinct. More details emerged from the creature's form, like wet clay hardening over time; then it exhaled an icy breath and slowly sized up the man beneath its feet.

Its presence was daunting. Zarish could sense its darkness was far greater than any ordinary floor master. The creature's hair hung in clusters, and its wide-open eyes were gold. It wore a somber expression with drooping eyebrows, and Zarish couldn't help but notice its uncannily alluring breasts and thighs. The angle from which he was looking certainly didn't help either.

Just ahead, there was an empty shell that looked like a fruit that had fallen to the ground and dried up. Perhaps that was where the woman had come from, but Zarish had no time to entertain such thoughts. The creature began to spin the spear in its hand, its speed increasing with each passing moment.

"That's my territory," Zarish murmured. He could tell the creature was strong just by its stance and the way it shifted its body weight.

Moreover, he felt its spear tip would likely surpass the speed of sound by how it spun around. His skin tingled from the intensity of the woman's malice, but he swung his weapon regardless.

Zarish's weapon surpassed the speed of sound. Despite his twisted personality, his skills were considered practically unbeatable in close combat. Yet he had hardly felt a thing as he swung his weapon dozens of times, leaving trails of silver light. It was as if he had been cutting through water. Blood erupted out of the woman's legs, leaving his sword wet with its deep red hue.

"Just like that tree, it barely seems to have a corporeal form. It must be some type of devil. Spiritual attacks tend to be effective against them, but..."

"Spiritual? Hah, we don't have anything like that here. Unless you count my shit talking and your creepiness," Gaston said. "Though, I guess it wouldn't hurt to try. Wink at it and see if that does anything."

Zarish wanted to curse at the older fighter, but the spear spinning directly overhead was inching closer like a deadly fan. It nearly touched the top of his head, then he heard a heavy slashing noise and saw sparks flying. His Interception skill had deflected it.

Seeing the spear decelerate momentarily, Gaston swooped into range. Bloodpool instinctively swung its spear toward his forehead, neck, and legs when it noticed the old man close the distance with an uncharacteristic feline agility. Yet somehow, as it finished its attack, Gaston had ended up standing on Zarish's shield as well.

Bloodpool looked at him blankly.

"Wipe that dopey look off your face," Gaston said. "We can't hit you either, you bloody bitch."

He flashed an intimidating grin, yet the woman's eyes were devoid of emotion. The creature built up momentum behind its back, then whipped its spear forward without giving up an inch. Once again, the attack didn't connect.

Gaston was skilled at reading and controlling energy. He could see less than a second into the future by observing his opponent's energy and manipulating it to influence their perception. His techniques, honed through many years of battle, had reached

heights like a master hermit. Although he was mortal, the skills he had gained through experience allowed him to compete even against devils. The two stood close enough to reach each other, yet neither could deal decisive damage.

Zarish grimaced. "It's like I'm watching a battle between two ghosts. Anyway, get off my shield already. Don't make me send you both flying."

"Quit your naggin'," Gaston said. "It'd be a wasted opportunity if I withdrew here."

While it was a narrow territorial dispute atop Zarish's shield, both knew retreating even a single step would have lasting consequences, as the perceived loss would affect their mental state and subsequent moves. This was the nature of close quarters combat. However, the one lacking perseverance was neither of the two fighters but rather the former hero candidate.

"That's enough! Sealed Domain!" he shouted.

An invisible force rammed into Bloodpool, sending it flying backward. Gaston had already moved to a spot on the sand outside of Zarish's territory. He chased after the woman, only to change his mind.

"Barriers are pretty useful, huh? You can even use them to attack if you know what you're doing," Gaston said.

"What? All I did was knock it away. It won't do any actual damage," Zarish said.

The old soldier chuckled, and Zarish furrowed his brow at the man's knowing expression. Zarish wondered if Gaston was implying there were other ways to use the barrier, but the veteran interrupted his thoughts by telling him to forget it as he turned his chin to the side.

"Looks like that blood woman is really into you. Take care of her for a while, will ya?"

"Hey, don't tell me you're making me deal with it. There are odd ones out there who like old geezers too, you know."

"I don't know about that," Gaston said, chuckling as he walked away from Zarish. He seemed to have been telling the truth, as the creature's golden eyes locked on the younger fighter.

The woman's lips parted, revealing a mouth full of fine, sharp fangs. A leechlike tongue thrashed around inside, likely draining anything it clung to dry. Zarish grimaced at the thought, then glared at the woman with viscous-looking contours. Its armor and hair appeared more solid than before, and he noted that this could have been why its speed had been steadily increasing.

He gripped his sword and heard the old warrior say, "You need my advice?"

"No," Zarish replied.

"Then I'm just gonna say it out loud, and if you make use of it, you'd better bow down to me," Gaston went on. "You're just like that other boy, too reliant on your fancy toys. Get rid of your armor and sword and use your skills more."

If Zarish hadn't been wearing his helmet, he would have spat at the old man for his stupidity. There was no way he could have kept up with this foe without his equipment. He immediately regretted glancing at Gaston for a second, as the woman's grinning face was directly in front of him.

Heavy metallic clanking rang in quick succession as his Interception deflected a barrage of attacks. He swung his weapon after a delay, and the sounds of battle grew ever louder. The ring of steel clashing with steel rang across the battlefield, joined by the sound of boots hitting the ground—the medley soon turning into battle music. Zarish faltered as he realized he had been contributing to the battle music but couldn't pause to disrupt the rhythm. The principles of combat kept him bound to the rhythm.

"Damn it! Are you toying with me?!"

The creature smiled slightly in response. Gaston hadn't been kidding; it seemed to really like him. He no longer had to protect Team Ruby, but he couldn't help but feel that he was being cheated somehow. The monster parted its lips and began speaking what sounded like an ancient language. The indecipherable lyrics were simple; strangely, its resonance made the world seem more beautiful. Their sword and spear sparked as they clashed with a slow melody. A follow-up attack was blocked, a sword swing passed through the monster like water, then another attack was deflected

and dodged. Before they knew it, their movements had become a part of the music.

"A singing monster? You don't see one of those every day," Gaston commented. "I gotta say, this song sounds pretty sad, though."

There was certainly a tragic tone to the music. Despite the world's beauty, it could be a grim and cruel place. The song seemed to be about the suffering born because of its splendor, losing the strength to go on midway through one's journey, and seeking salvation only at the end. Yet no matter how charming the music was, the intensity of the attacks was very real. Zarish clenched his teeth, refusing to retreat a single step. Even as he deflected many attacks with his sword, the woman stayed in his domain like an unending nightmare.

The tune went up an octave, and the monster's spear quickened behind it, surpassing the speed of sound. It moved so quickly his vision blurred. By the time he remembered it had been accelerating as its body solidified, his armor had been vertically split open.

"Shit! Just how fast is this woman?!"

Debris danced around them as they exchanged a flurry of strikes. A cut appeared just above the eye he had lost, and a recovery spray covered his skin and armor. Zarish felt like scalding hot water had hit him, yet the rapid healing of his wound dispelled his complaints. At the same time, he noticed his opponent was right beside him, trying to breathe on him. He reflexively reeled back, and bloodred flower petals poured out of the creature's mouth.

Zarish turned pale beneath his helmet. Those were the same petals that had tried to rain upon them and drain their blood earlier. Considering the distance and time it would take to reach him, it was too late for him to activate his Sealed Domain.

"Gaaah! You're not gonna get me!" he roared, the muscles of his upper body bulging visibly as the tip of his sword vanished. Zarish unleashed a barrage of attacks, perhaps faster than he had ever accomplished. He also sliced the seemingly infinite flower petals until they were in powder form. At the end of his final swing, the sword shattered into pieces once it was drained by the petals.

His heart pounded in his chest. As Zarish stood frozen in the same position as when he had finished his sword swing, he felt the woman's hand against his chest, which was only possible because his enemy had completely read his breathing patterns. He could only watch helplessly as his armor was pried open. The monster woman showed the inside of its deep red mouth, filling his vision with its distorted grin.

"I'll drink every last drop, Zarish."

He thought he had heard those words, sending a chill down his spine. He heard steel creaking, then felt the monster's tongue lick his wound. Fear gripped him, and his eyes opened as wide as they could. He used all his strength to get the creature off of him, but he couldn't even move a muscle. The monster wrapped its arms around him in a nightmarish embrace. It began to take a sip, filling him with dread beyond words, nearly making him pass out on his feet.

I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, he repeated in his head, but dying here was his final act of duty and obligation. That was the condition the royals had given him as a traitor—a heartless order to hunt down monsters on the battlefield until he perished.

Yet he couldn't die now. He hadn't confessed his crimes just to lie defeated in a place like this. He could tolerate torture, truth serums, mind control magic, and verbal abuse. He could forgive it all and submit to their will. The one thing he couldn't accept was a meaningless death. Zarish tried to perceive everything around him, the vision flashing before his eyes as if it would be the last thing he saw before he perished. It was a desperate, last-ditch effort to find some sort of information that would help him survive.

Team Ruby was aiming their enchanted swords in his direction. They were likely going to take out the monster along with him when he died. It was a logical and wise decision, and he even thought they deserved praise.

Gaston let out a faint, dry exhale of amusement as he observed the giant tree. Zarish couldn't help but wonder what his actions meant. The tree was still there and hadn't vanished; it wouldn't have been strange if there was significance in that. And what was with this bloodsucking woman? Perhaps it knew Zarish was a fallen prince

and sought his noble blood? He couldn't understand why it liked him so much.

What had worked against this monster? Which attack was most effective? His sword was useless, so he couldn't imagine it dealing any damage against this enemy. Flashbacks rapidly replayed in his mind as he recalled everything that had happened during their fight: He'd defended against the blizzard of flower petals, then Gaston and the monster had fought on his shield. Annoyed, he had activated his Sealed Domain.

Thoughts burst into his mind all at once. Zarish looked as if he had just woken up from a dream, forcefully removing the helmet from his head and discarding it onto the sandy ground. He softly touched the woman's skin, put an arm around its slender waist, and passed his other arm under its armpit. The monster's golden eyes widened at the gentlemanly gesture, its long, extended tongue still pulsing as it drained the man's blood.

Ignoring the dull pain throbbing from his wound, he slowly opened his mouth and said, "I do love a woeful woman. It's quite enjoyable to try and figure out how to put a smile on her face."

The monster seemed to sense his courtesy and grinned. Its mouth was red with his blood, which dripped down its lips along with saliva. The horrifying sight couldn't shake Zarish's expression, and he only embraced it more tightly so the creature couldn't escape.

"Well, looks like *that's* how to make you smile. Sealed Domain," he whispered into her ear, feeling a sensation in his arms as if something were about to burst.

Zarish's Sealed Domain was a skill that counteracted energy. It had been created to eliminate all threats and could completely shut out human or monster bodies. Bloodpool was no ordinary monster. What would happen if he expelled the elements that comprised it, such as the blood of others, and forced them outside of his domain while keeping the creature locked in place? Just as he'd predicted, the monster screamed, eyes bulging so wide they looked like they would pop out of its head. Blood flowed over its armor, and it frantically swung its spear forward. Even from the unstable position

in Zarish's arms, the spear tip sped directly toward the man's head, but the attack was nullified. His barrier would inevitably cancel out any attack, whether physical or magical.

An anguished screech reverberated around them, and Zarish's domain turned a deeper shade of blue. The endless flow of blood was a painful blow; devils were most fragile and vulnerable when they showed any sign of weakness.

"Now! Fire!"

Enchanted blades howled in unison, unleashing their power on Gaston's order. The beam flew over Zarish's head and directly toward Gaston's target at the root of the giant tree. Somehow, he must have known that would be the devil's weak point.

"Dear beast, if you want to take me down, you'll have to surpass the speed of sound in all of your attacks," Zarish whispered as if to say goodbye.

The monster exhaled quietly, eyes still open wide, and fell apart. It turned its gaze to the distance to find the tree crumbling away as well.

No one there knew whether the tree or the woman was its main body, nor whether they had truly dealt the finishing blow. But when they looked up, a clear blue sky awaited them. The demon carcasses on the ground turned to dust and vanished into the sky as if to follow Bloodpool. If death led humans to Eden, one had to wonder where demons would end up.

Zarish had lost so much blood that he had passed out on his feet. Recovery spray was applied to his chest, and he awoke with a sudden jolt of pain.

"Agh! Okay, this thing definitely has room for improvement. I'll have to talk to Veyron about that..." he grumbled as he picked up his helmet. Gaston and Team Ruby were just ahead, reaching out to their headquarters. He approached them unsteadily, feeling enfeebled.

Gaston turned around to look at him as if surprised Zarish wasn't dead. "Come on, we all thought you would die there. You're just a pain in the ass to get rid of, aren't you?"

"Like hell!" Zarish spat. "Anyway, did you take down Bloodpool?"

“Who knows? All we did just now was sever its connection to the demon realm. You’ll have to ask a specialist if you want answers. Oh, and there was a message from HQ.”

Judging by the look on the old man’s face, this wasn’t going to be good. Zarish raised an eyebrow and waited, bracing himself for whatever words would follow.

“The enemy’s gonna be launching a full-scale attack. Isn’t that great? There’s more fun to be had.”

The news was far heavier than Zarish had expected, and he slumped to one side. Team Ruby laughed out loud, yet the former hero candidate couldn’t understand what they found so funny. He sighed and lay back on the sand with his arms and legs spread out, looking up at the cloudless sky. He then realized the tremors had stopped some time ago.

When Zarish saw the cool and refreshing sky, he couldn’t help but feel that the battle for the oasis had crossed a major milestone.

Episode 10: Battle with the Third Floor Master

"I'm collecting the dishes. Put them here if you're done eating!" Eve called out as the others were resting. Her colleagues in Team Diamond were also helping clean up, but they wore their battle gear instead of the usual maid outfits.

About a hundred people were gathered in the hall, and the smell of delicious food still lingered in the air. If someone happened to wander in, they would likely assume it was just a large food hall. Yet this area of the ancient labyrinth remained unexplored, and the looming presence of monsters was palpable beyond the closed door.

We'd just finished having a light meal and resting in preparation for the battle with the floor master. In the past, dry, terrible-tasting military rations were the norm for meals, but everyone's standards had changed as they spent a long time on the second floor. The mission wouldn't just last days, but months—maybe even years—so I thought that was good. The rations were like clay; people shouldn't be eating that stuff every day. No way.

I had a feeling the person who was most pleased by this change in dietary habits wasn't one of Arilai's warriors but the elf girl rubbing her stomach beside me.

"Oh, that was so good! Nothing hits the spot like some sweet inari sushi. It's a good thing we prepared our own lunches ahead of time," Marie said in Elvish, smiling triumphantly as she looked around the room. She then turned her pretty face to me. "Don't you think so?"

Her demeanor was somewhat condescending to those around us, so I had trouble coming up with a response. Elves were considered mystical beings, but she could sometimes be...worldly, so to speak. She had once longed to be rich too.

Marie was a magic user, as the large staff beside her made clear, and she was even adept at controlling spirits. The lights that had been illuminating this place like chandeliers were groups of light spirits that she'd summoned. When I met her, I felt Marie prioritized efficiency over everything else. Now, she went out of her way to make sure everyone had a wonderful time.

"Eve has so much stamina. She was fighting until she was drenched in sweat earlier. I can't believe she's not exhausted right now," I said offhandedly.

"Yeah," Marie agreed. She wiped her mouth with a handkerchief, took a sip of tea, then her purple eyes met my gaze. "I wonder if I would've had more stamina if I was a dark elf too."

"Hmm, it might just be me, but even if you were a dark elf, I don't think you'd be very fit if all you did was read books all day," I replied.

"You think so?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Probably," I said, nodding.

Marie blinked, her big round eyes making an expression that told me she wasn't entirely convinced. If I had to guess, she would've been cute, small, and slender even as a dark elf.

Judging by how she'd been rubbing her calves, she must've been pretty exhausted. "We did a lot of walking today. Want a massage?" I offered as I moved in closer.

"Huh? Oh, no, that's okay. You're tired too, right?" she said in a fluster, waving her hands side to side. But she seemed to have found the offer enticing since she reconsidered for a moment. She was probably hesitant because she was worried about what the others would think, especially since there were so many people around than usual.

As we wondered what to do, the tall woman named Kartina blatantly stared at us. The whites and blacks of her eyes were inverted, and her close-cropped hair swayed each time she chewed the food in her mouth. How her thick armor dangled to the floor behind her caught my attention. The upper half of her body was bare from the torso of her armor, which reminded me of a molting cicada. She wore a special type of armor known as Demon Arms.

Due to its semiorganic nature, she removed it during meals. Kartina tossed the last piece of inari sushi into her mouth before speaking to us.

"How unusual. Do the men look after the women in Arilai? Like with the food."

"I don't think it's all that unusual," I said. "I'm more used to traveling, and it's best to help each other out when possible."

Because Marie was focused on Kartina, I took the opportunity to put her legs on my knees. This seemed to take Marie by surprise, and she yelped a little. I began massaging her calves, and they were definitely pretty stiff. When I squeezed them through the material of her robe, they were so swollen they pushed back against my fingers. It would be rough to keep walking like this. As I worked on muscles along her calves, she let out a stifled groan.





Marie squealed again, probably because Kartina had joined in on the action. Kartina's arms reached from behind, and she massaged Marie's shoulders with practiced hands.

"Hm, you're skinny. I know you're a spellcaster, but you should get in shape more. It's a bit problematic that you get exhausted faster than us when you've been riding Roon."

"T-True, but I wasn't on Roon the whole time. Before that, I had to walk much faster due to a sense of urgency. I'll admit I don't exercise enough, but I have my own pace that I— Oh, that spot right there feels kind of good," Marie said with her eyes closed.

Kartina and I smiled. Marie had been living in her village for a hundred years, grew up as a Spirit Sorceress, and was now stepping up to challenge the floor master in the ancient labyrinth. She was powerful enough to be our lifeline in the upcoming battle. Yet here she was, being as adorable as a kitten.

People said walking too much made one's legs "stiff as a board." The cause was lactic acid buildup, and this massage was meant to promote better blood circulation and soften stiff muscles. I worked on her heels and calves, then the back of her knees, as if to push the buildup toward the center of her body. Before I knew it, Marie leaned back on Kartina, completely relaxed.

"Oh, that's nice..." she murmured dreamily.

This seemed to catch someone's attention. A woman walked over to Marie, her heels clicking against the ground and her fire red hair swaying with each step. "What is Sleepyhead up to now? Ah, I see. You're plotting to make this elf girl's face look sleepy like yours."

Marie had a blissful expression just a moment ago, but for some reason, that simple comment made her pale. She reached over and grabbed her staff, then tried to muster her strength to raise her exhausted body.

"I absolutely will *not* let that happen!" she declared.

"Why not? They say married couples start looking like each other, and you two are always together," Doula said.

"W-We're not married!" Marie protested. "We just live together, take turns cooking meals, and split chores between us..."

Doula watched the elf count her fingers as she listed out her

points, then cocked her head to the side as if to say Marie wasn't helping her case.

Meanwhile, Kartina nodded knowingly. "Yes, that's exactly how it is to have a comrade-in-arms. You're always together, even in combat. Even trained partners feel stress in cohabitation, but you two are so natural with each other. You seem to be a perfect fit for each other, though she's right. You did look very sleepy earlier."

Marie made a sour expression at the last comment. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but Marie glanced at me as if to ask if we really looked like each other. As I considered how to reply, I realized the soldiers were preparing to depart.

"Oh, it's about time to go. We should get ready too," I said.

"We still have some time. I came over here to go over our plans while we can," Doula said, then turned to her future husband. "Zera, you come here too."

Doula, the overseer of the operation, and Zera, the man who would spearhead the raid, took a seat nearby. The maids—or rather, Team Diamond—took notice as well. After a delay, everyone gathered around us, the wooden plates clattering nearby. The group of armed men and women sitting in a circle made it seem like we were here to listen to some bigwig give a lecture on battle tactics. Despite Marie and me having childlike appearances, we'd earned our spot here after spending so much time in the labyrinth. Of course, we couldn't continue our massage given the situation, so Marie quietly retracted her legs and straightened out the hem of her robe.

Doula's silver eyes turned toward Marie. "Marie, sorry to make you work right after your meal, but would you mind projecting the third-floor hall?"

Before we took our break, Mariabelle had deployed her Prison Keeper in front of the hall where the floor keeper awaited us. This skill allowed us to get visuals within its domain. We hadn't been sure if it would work at first, considering it'd been interfered with by magic matter previously, but it functioned without issues. A light appeared, indicating what appeared to be the floor master.

Only the name "Adom Zweihander" appeared. Prison Keeper was supposed to reveal the target's characteristics and level, but no

other information was available.

Doula tapped the display that had appeared through the Magic Tool. "Look. Judging by how this light looks, there's definitely more than one. But for some reason, we cannot see the levels or names of the surrounding monsters."

Zera rubbed his bearded chin and added, "That's odd. The criteria for showing their name or not is so vague. While some monsters conceal their level, it's unusual for the info on the entire floor *other than* the floor master to remain hidden. I dunno what's going on, but we're probably dealing with a tough enemy here." The large man often shared his straightforward thoughts based on his instincts rather than logic or reason. Yet those instincts were as sharp as those of a wild animal, and Doula seemed to put much trust in them.

The mood had changed drastically from earlier, and Eve found the tension stifling. She looked around the room, then raised both hands in a comedic manner. "Oh, I have an idea! How about Kazu and I go scout ahead? Nothing can catch us, and we could return with better intel."

"Absolutely not," Puseri said sharply. "There is no way we're sending you into a room where the door will lock you in once you enter."

"Aww, you're so strict, Puseri..."

I looked at the ceiling, thinking it would've been a good idea if only I entered. Then I noticed Marie was looking into the void and probably thinking the same thing. After all, I would just wake up in Japan if something happened to me. But using this method would mean everyone else would find out that I could revive repeatedly. I wouldn't have minded revealing this fact if we had no other choice, although I didn't want to bring it up here.

On the other hand, marching in there all alone to face the boss did sound really cool. Any guy would relish the thought of raising a giant sword, cape fluttering in the wind, then saying something cool like, *Kept you waiting, huh?* I've actually said that very line when I'd been traveling solo, but my opponent usually just got confused and asked, "What are you talking about?" That was slightly depressing.

As I recalled those memories, Doula turned to Marie and said,

"Marie, if I recall, your Tear of Thanatos can seal magic, right? Would you be able to use it to build some sort of stronghold like last time?"

"Sorry, but that won't work. It can only seal a single magic spell, and building a structure like that will require the use of many spirits," Marie explained.

That ruled out the idea of deploying a stronghold as soon as we charged in. I suspected Marie hadn't been using that item to its full potential. If she could use wide-range spells, the ability to activate them instantly would have been a massive advantage.

She took a jewel out of her pocket. Its base color was a translucent blue, with pale greens mixing in as it was tilted at an angle. Due to its intricate cut, it emitted an ethereal light, making the women in the vicinity exhale in fascination.

Maybe it was just me, though I couldn't help but wonder if sealing a single magic spell was really the jewel's only ability when I noticed its subtle glow. While it was extremely valuable for that ability alone, it was a special item given to her by Shirley, the floor master of the second floor. I had a feeling it harbored a hidden, extraordinary power.

I gazed fixedly at the jewel, and Marie turned to me. Her purple eyes narrowed as she smiled mischievously, then she put a finger up to her lips.

I wanted to ask, *Wait, you already know it has some sort of hidden power? I thought so! What kind of ability is it?!* But I couldn't say anything with everyone else around. My curiosity was killing me. I had to know what the item was capable of.

Suddenly, Zera slapped his leg and said, "Well, we won't get anything done if we just sit here and think all day. Adom, was it? Let's storm the floor master's hall already."

Doula looked pensive but nodded in agreement. Her expression told me she wanted to reduce any potential risks to a minimum. Still, we wouldn't know anything about the target's abilities or the surrounding monsters until we set foot inside.

She rose to her feet and announced that we would be going in.

§

My breath turned white and drifted away behind me as I exhaled.

No matter how brightly the light spirits shone, I couldn't even catch a glimpse of the ceiling. I'd seen my fair share of labyrinths during my travels, but even I was taken aback at how exceptionally tall this room was. When I looked down, I saw an army of over a hundred soldiers descending a stone staircase.

We couldn't have seen anything past a few steps ahead if it hadn't been for the spirits illuminating our path. The soldiers' conversations grew sparse as the atmosphere became more tense. Once these fighters had overcome the first and second floors, they went through a long span of training to be here. Their experience probably taught them how to get an accurate read on the danger in the air. They appeared to have switched into battle mode as they marched forward. As for us... Well, our minds were nowhere near battle mode as we were having our own little conversation.

"Whaaat? You're almost finished up over there?" Marie exclaimed. In the darkness of the labyrinth, she clung to a square light source like that of a TV or tablet. I shared her surprise since the speaker on the other side had been dealing with the most terrifying entity of this battle, the Prominence Dragon. Yet, she'd defeated him far earlier than we'd expected. "How is that possible? You said he's stronger than you, Wridra!"

"Stronger or not, I will not be defeated if I put my mind to winning," Wridra said. "Hm, I see you do not believe me. Very well, I will prove it."

Wridra appeared on the screen, her rosy lips curled into a smug smile. She was as beautiful as always, though I couldn't help but notice her long black hair fluttering wildly. A bright window behind her made me wonder if she was at a restaurant. But when she reached for the camera, and our view changed, our mouths hung open in stunned silence. It turned out Wridra had been sitting in the pilot seat of some sort of airplane.

She'd actually brought modern weaponry into the fantasy world. I could hear heavy sounds of something firing. Objects that looked like black holes were shot into the horizon, leaving white trails in their wake. In our eyes, this seemed even more terrifying than modern weaponry.

"W-Wridra, don't tell me this is why you wanted to go to the library..." I said hesitantly.

"Hah, hah. Your faces look quite amusing right now. Of course, it was impossible to replicate the original inspiration, as I was unable to gather the necessary materials. However, I made something of my own with my ability to freely manipulate magic matter."

Wridra chuckled, looking quite pleased with herself. For some reason, her beauty and charm went off the charts at times like these. She looked full of life and was practically glowing in her moment of pride and excitement. Honestly, all I could think about was that I'd screwed up on a catastrophic level. The beautiful fantasy world everyone had known was done for.

Meanwhile, Wridra smiled broadly and said, "Look, he seems to be happy too."

The plane continued to fire at something—and that something turned out to be a dragon the size of a mountain. Said dragon roared into the heavens, and a barrage of missiles rained down upon it.

What's going on? Is this the end of the world?

"Hah, hah, there is your proof. I am uncertain if I can convey the significance of this in words. Still, I negated the effects of that troublesome ability Blackout with my Divine Haze... Oh, and the one assisting me is waving to you from outside the window," Wridra added.

I wondered who she was talking about; I'd been under the impression she'd challenged the Prominence Dragon by herself. The camera's view changed again, this time pointing out the window. Sure enough, a man with fluorescent red hair appeared on-screen. I wondered how he flew along with her as he waved at us. *Who is that?*

"My husband," Wridra said.

"Huh?! H-Hold on, I don't follow!" I said, confused.

"Okay, I have a question..." Marie chimed in. "If that's your husband, who are you fighting with? I thought your husband was that Prominence Dragon?"

"Hm. Is it not obvious? I have joined forces with my husband to punish my husband," Wridra explained.

Yeah, I still had no idea what she was talking about. Marie also shook her head, and the Arkdragon puffed out her cheeks in frustration. How could *anyone* make sense of that?

"Hmph! Forget it," Wridra grumbled, then her expression immediately lightened. "In any case, you must finish your business quickly as well. We have a victory celebration and a Japan trip after this. Make haste."

The call cut out before we could say anything. We'd spent a lot of time with Wridra by now, and I had to wonder when, if ever, I would get used to her chaotic ways.

Meanwhile, Kartina—who was also with us—was shocked on a whole different level. Her mouth hung wide open, sweat running down from every pore in her body. She looked like she was moments from fainting. Marie and I laughed it off, thinking it was just Wridra being Wridra, but Kartina's eyes only bulged even wider before she spoke up.

"Y-You do realize that's the Prominence Dragon, don't you?! The terrifying, evil dragon that immediately vaporizes all life in view?! She was one-sidedly torturing it, and *that's* your reaction?!"

I wondered if we should've kept whatever Wridra was up to a secret. Suddenly, I remembered that Kartina was from Gedovar and technically should've been our enemy. But I felt like we didn't need to worry about that because she was head over heels for Shirley.

Marie took a moment to think, then said, "Was the Prominence Dragon a beacon of hope for Gedovar?"

"Yeah... Though I don't know if such a malignant being can be called 'hope.'" Kartina sighed, momentarily staring at the expanse of the ancient labyrinth beneath.

The shock from earlier had settled by now, and she seemed to be slowly gathering her thoughts.

"If it's going to perish, then so be it. Relying on that accursed Prominence Dragon for my future is like having my life drained away by this thing," she said as she knocked on her Demon Arms. "I want to live life doing what I think is right without being bound to evil."

Her Demon Arms wasn't just an ordinary set of armor but a weapon with boundless killing instincts carved into it. Anyone who was consumed by the armor was fated to become a monster, endlessly wandering the ancient labyrinths. Kartina would've taken that path if it hadn't been for Shirley. I could see sorrow in her eyes —maybe she'd been reminded of her past self and pictured her country repeating a ceaseless cycle of destruction under the guidance of evil forces.

"All right, I've decided!" she said, turning to us with a cheerful smile. "Instead of that evil dragon, I'll nominate Lady Shirley for my people to worship!"

Marie and I were dumbfounded, struggling to understand what was happening, much like our earlier call with Wridra. Kartina ignored us and went on, her cheeks rosy with excitement.

"Ah, I'm sure everyone will see right away! Her beauty, and her boundless kindness! And she's so lovely. She's the kind of person who quietly slips into your bed at night to keep you warm on a cold night! Ohhh, she's just the greatest! Having faith in Lady Shirley is far better than some evil dragon!"

Her words echoed into the spacious labyrinth, while Marie and I said nothing, bewildered. For some reason, we heard the raid team far ahead of us yell back, "That's right!" a moment later.

Now hold on... Why is Shirley turning into an object of worship? She's just a normal woman— Actually, she's a former floor master, but I didn't even think she drew a lot of attention since she can't talk.

Anyhow, the battle with the floor master was approaching by the minute. After walking for a while longer, the raid team set foot into the depths of the third floor. The men counted to three, then pushed the heavy metal door in unison with all their might. As it slowly creaked open, flecks of plasterlike material peeled off the door.

We stared up at the massive door as dust rained from above.

Armed soldiers were gathering just ahead of us with Puseri at their head, quietly awaiting the upcoming battle on horseback, clad in heavy armor.

Just then, I noticed something unusual: a man pressed his finger against his blade, slowly running it along its length toward the tip. What was unusual was its color, which changed into the color of blood before my eyes... Or so I thought until I realized it was blood.

"Is that a new skill, Zera?" I asked.

"Heh, heh, that's right. I learned it by training with the old man. Cool, huh?"

I was envious because I was itching to learn a special move, but there was no way I could use that particular skill. I'd heard the Thousand household's blood was unique, and they had the ability to manipulate their blood and turn it into a blade to cut down their foes. They could reportedly end a battle against a giant army single-handedly by manipulating even the blood of their enemies. It was no wonder they were known as the greatest man-to-man fighters of all.





"Hmm, I think I'll call this one Blood Surge," he said.

Marie scrunched up her face a bit from the smell of blood, although there was no doubt Zera would be an even greater asset on the battlefield than ever. The broad-shouldered man crouched beside me and whispered, "I actually wanted to join the oasis defense team. Chaotic, large-scale battles are more my specialty, but I couldn't leave Doula's side."

"That makes sense," I said. "Doula seems like the put-together type, but she can be reckless at times."

Zera groaned in agreement. Doula would take on even the most difficult challenges for the sake of victory. On the other hand, Zera was the opposite. He may have also looked like a risk-taker, but he preferred the safe and steady route. Maybe they made a good couple because they balanced out each other's personalities.

I thought we'd been whispering quietly enough, but Doula must have heard us somehow because she turned around and glared at us. Marie put a finger up to her lips and shushed me, so I nodded repeatedly.

The door slowly opened. Marie and I were full of anticipation and curiosity for the world of unknowns that awaited just ahead. I took her hand in mine and walked toward the front of the crowd, leaving Zera behind.

A loud, heavy creak reverberated as the rusty door continued to open, revealing the third floor hall for the first time. Beyond the entrance was nothing but pitch black. Even when light was shined on the floor, it appeared as if ink had blacked it out. The hall drastically differed from where we'd fought Demon Arms Kartina and Gedovar's soldiers. I heard the sound of rustling and realized that black grass covered the entire floor. It had not wilted and had remained this way for centuries, suggesting it wasn't ordinary grass. Marie and I widened our eyes at the sight of the lushly grown ancient plants.

"It's the color of the Age of Night!" I said.

"Just like the paintings we saw," Marie agreed. "It's as if that world has been sleeping here the whole time."

I nodded, feeling as if we were taking a walk during the witching

hour, when everything and everyone had fallen into a deep slumber. There was a somberness to it, yet the silence was oddly comforting. I thought it wasn't all that unpleasant when Marie whispered to me, "For some reason, it reminds me of the time we went on a walk at night in Aomori."

"Yeah, it does feel similar. This must be the origin of night in this world."

I expressed my thoughts with no rhyme or reason. Apparently, Marie felt the same way because she responded with a small nod. Despite the abundance of people around us, it felt like the two of us were in a world of our own. I exhaled, and my breath turned white from the cold.

Only a sliver of the existing light spilled through the open door. Beyond the entrance lay a different world. We took our first steps inside alongside the rest of the raid team, with Kartina protecting our rear.

A single light spirit illuminated our path as we entered the world of night. If anyone had been around to see us, we would have looked like lost travelers trying to find our way by lamplight. When I thought about it, I barely knew anything about night in this world because I fell asleep at sundown to live my life in Japan. But the view before me made me want to know more about the nighttime here.

We slowly made our way through the knee-high grass. Zera parted the grass as he approached us, then gave Marie and me a puzzled look when he saw us standing still. He followed our gaze, looked ahead, and also froze in place.

Someone was standing there. No, not someone—*something*. It was a humanoid silhouette, reaching both hands toward us with a desperate, pained expression. Their skin was white as snow, having lost color from weathering over the years.

"What the...?" Zera murmured, dumbfounded.

Is that what I think it is?

It was a person—or a statue of one, clad in a robe. When I squinted, I saw many more behind the first. Their faces and clothes were all different, but they had one thing in common: They all

looked like they'd been rushing toward the door.

"This is creeping me out. Were they running from something?" Zera said in a hoarse voice.

Because I was so shaken by what we saw, I didn't notice Marie clinging to my arm. She said fearfully, "This place is hundreds of years old... Have they been like this the whole time? What were they trying to get away from?"

"I don't know. Maybe they weren't able to take control of this floor," I replied. It was just conjecture on my part, but it made sense to me.

I'd heard of a facility for controlling monsters on the third floor that had likely been managed by the ancients. Having studied the ancient language and witnessed the remnants of their civilization and culture, I knew their magic had been far more advanced than ours. So how had they perished?

My gaze gradually moved behind them, and I wondered if the black grass had been here originally. I didn't think so. A huge sword was haphazardly stuck in the ground at the center of the hall, and the grass seemed to have grown outward from there. Something must have existed there before its destruction.

I noticed rubble on the ground and looked up to find a huge hole in the wall. Judging by the cracks running along the wall, a powerful impact must have crashed into it like a meteor. Some sort of incident happened here; these people had been studying here, then that giant sword flew in and was impaled in the ground, putting a sudden end to the research and civilization here. The ancients had fallen, and time seemed to have frozen here ever since.

Someone, or something, was frozen next to the massive sword in what appeared to be a reverent posture. The giant remained motionless like a statue, and even its presence felt like that of stone. Yet, I could sense that the being was incredibly powerful.

The Raid Chat had been silent until now, but Commander Doula's strained voice broke the silence. She was standing with a wide stance at the open door, internally debating whether to advance or retreat.

"Move in," she said after a pause.

The next instant, footsteps sounded in unison. Arilai's finest soldiers put their trust in their commander and obeyed her perilous order.

Doula had nearly gotten her whole squad wiped out in the past. They'd delved into the untraveled ancient labyrinth and advanced without fully understanding the strength of their enemy. Countless soldiers had been devoured by monsters as a result. The decision to advance must have been agonizing for her, considering she once again knew nothing about the enemy's capabilities.

"Well, I'd better go give her some support. See ya, and be careful," Zera said before returning to Doula's side.

Our team and Zera were the ones who had saved her from danger in the past. That event had been the catalyst for them to start dating, and no one else would have been a better fit for her in a place like this.

The soldiers quietly began their march, trying to make as little noise as possible. One by one, the hundred or so members of the raid team entered the darkness beyond the door and began forming a horizontal line once inside.

I was at a bit of a loss for what to do. The enemy showed no movement, granting us some free time before the battle began. I wanted to use this time efficiently by making preparations and syncing up with Kartina. However, she was a knight of Gedovar, so she would never agree to anything more than protecting Marie.

"Kartina, let's register each other on Mind Link Chat," I whispered, but her eyes were alight with excitement for some reason. It seemed she couldn't even hear me, so I waved my fingers in front of her eyes. When she finally noticed me, I asked, "What were you looking at?"

"Th-That..." she said, pointing a trembling armored finger forward. I followed it in a straight line, then saw that she was talking about the giant sword embedded in the ground.

"What, you want it?" I asked.

"Fool, of course I do! That's a *real* enchanted blade. It's fundamentally different from those toys the Arilai soldiers embed Magic Stones into. Listen closely... That sword alone is worth an

entire country."

She flashed a smug expression, but Marie and I exchanged looks, then made a contemplative noise, unconvinced. The Arkdragon had created the staff in Marie's hand, which was probably far more valuable than that sword. It could produce nearly unlimited magic, after all.

Marie parted her lips slowly as if taking time to devise a way to respond without hurting Kartina's feelings. "Umm... Well, maybe if you do well in this battle, you'll receive it as a reward. But it's difficult to fight for you, isn't it? We're fighting against monsters, and you'd be betraying your own country."

"No, it's fine," Kartina said. "Just think about it: although they're technically our ancestors, they're pitiable beings who can't have a natural death. As a knight, I feel it's my duty to give them a peaceful death and release my kin from their sad fate."

She nodded to herself, but there wasn't a shred of sadness in her expression. In fact, there was a spark in her eyes, and I couldn't help but notice she was singing a different tune than before.

Uhh... I guess she's fine with it? I mean, I'm grateful she's cooperating with us, so I'm not complaining. "Anyway, we should figure out our formation for now. We don't know the enemy's abilities, so we can't even tell if we should prepare a platform like last time," I said.

"That's true. If they could fly, a platform would just make us a target," Marie agreed.

"Hm, securing the high ground, huh? I could stay by Marie's side and protect her," Kartina said.

"Oh, it's a different story if I can get a bodyguard," Marie said. "How about we prepare a tower with a small footprint this time? Taking the high ground would give us a great advantage, but a smaller one would take much less time to build."

"Good idea. That way, we can keep our defense to a minimum while fully focusing on offense. The raid team has a good arsenal of ranged weapons too. Let's bring it up with Doula," I remarked.

We continued to discuss our plans. Kartina had once marveled about our group's ability to adapt to various situations, but she didn't

seem to realize she was now part of it too. The way we could continuously add to our repertoire of skills probably made us strong. After all, I'd never heard of other teams doing things like we did.

The door closed with a heavy thud, signaling that all soldiers had entered the room and the battle was about to begin. Even though the tension in the air was palpable, I walked through the grass as if I were strolling through a prairie. I kept my sword sheathed, of course. There was nothing but black grass around me, and white clouds appeared from my mouth every time I exhaled, but my head was totally clear.

I scanned the grassy field as I breathed in the cold air, then looked straight ahead at the giant's back. It was huge and must've been three meters tall, even in its sitting position. It was immobile like a statue, but I sensed it would be a fierce battle if it awakened.

"Hey, I'm in position," I said calmly through the Raid Chat. Being too tense didn't suit me, and excessive tension could cause fatigue and make it harder to think. It was better not to take things too seriously. Maybe this attitude was why people always said I looked sleepy.

"I'm ready too, Doula. The tower can be activated anytime," Marie reported.

"Team Diamond is ready as well," Puseri chimed in. "Do note I may not be able to respond, as I will focus on combat moving forward. Isuka Orion will take command of Team Diamond in my stead."

"Team Bloodstone is ready," Zera said.

As the teams reported in through Raid Chat, Commander Doula took a deep breath. She then pointed her sword toward the battlefield, and a flash of silver light gleamed off her blade in the field of black grass. "Team Andalusite, begin incantations!"

On her order, a chorus of men's and women's voices reverberated in the hall as one battle cry—its rhythm faster than a heartbeat, its resonance powerful and majestic—was enough to embolden even the faintest of hearts. Indeed, it was a song for seeking battle and for the weak to keep resisting and finding their worth in this world. A

myriad of voices layered together and intertwined, shaking the very air, the feeble fires like candlelights merging into a raging inferno. Battle was second nature to me by now, but even I was roused by their pressure.

I felt a bead of sweat run down my face from their powerful war song. There was unyielding resolve in their voices. In this cruel situation where their options were either victory or total annihilation, Doula roared, “Seize victory! In this one battle, you shall *not* embark for Eden! Know that our country’s future exists only when we emerge victorious! Charge!!!”





A row of steel shields parted to either side, revealing soldiers with bloodlust in their eyes. They had been emboldened by the war song, their fear discarded, determined to slay their foes and go home alive.

They took a powerful step forward, and shields were stacked atop their row. A moment later, countless spears emerged between the two readied rows. The ground rumbled in unison as numerous stone spirits built a tower. Mariabelle uttered her incantations with her staff raised, and Kartina held her spear ready as they were carried high into the air.

I was impressed by how heroic everyone looked. Anyway, it was now time to figure out why our target's level wasn't being displayed and why we couldn't tell the names of the monsters around it.

As if responding to my thoughts, sand began to pour down from the statue. It must've been motionless for centuries, waiting for those who would one day raid the third floor.

There was a buzzing sound, then a loud spark. When I turned around, a pale blue light illuminated the shields of the heavily armored soldiers. Several monsters suddenly appeared, causing tremors as they descended upon the ground.

"Level 98 Gazer spotted to the left! Level 102 Geheroth to the right! And behind them, L-Level 119 Azagyur! Each of them are high-ranking unique devils!" A soldier looking out from the tower had practically screamed the report.

"No way," I whispered. In that instant, a portal had been connected with the demon realm to summon multiple high-ranking monsters. The mystery had been answered. Now that the devils had appeared, Prison Keeper's effect had revealed their details.

I couldn't move. The giant before had slowly opened one of its eyes, and I could feel my heart rate rising. As the massive being rose and its stonelike skin turned bronze, symbols appeared all over its body. The creature's heart was at its center, and the symbol there turned into a shade of dark purple. Meanwhile, the giant wearing a black hood raised its barrel-shaped arms. It then wrapped its rough, knobby fingers around the hilt of the giant sword and gripped it. The ragged cloth that had been covering its arms flapped in the wind

and flew into the air.

We only knew the creature's name, Adom Zweihander. Even now, we couldn't discern its level. I felt conflicted watching the titan from behind. On the one hand, I wanted to enjoy the thrilling boss's appearance. But on the other hand, we were in the middle of a battle, and allowing it to run free could cause serious havoc.

"Sorry, I have to end this quickly," I said as if talking to a friend, my sword emitting a high-pitched hum in my hand.

My sword, the Astroblade, had a tendency to greedily drain my energy. Still, after all the training I'd endured, it didn't tire me out like it did before. The humming turned into an even higher pitch as if the weapon were telling me, *I'm gonna drain some more.*

The monsters were seemingly advancing their offense too. A dark purple ring descended from the sky onto the giant. The ring exuded a sinister aura that one could describe as a halo. It secured itself above the giant's head, and that was when I fired my Astroblade.

A loud boom occurred as it discharged an energy blast. I observed the attack's trajectory but had a feeling it wouldn't be enough. And I didn't want it to end with a single surprise attack anyway. Layers of a purple barrier appeared and protected the giant's back, breaking the meteor before it could reach its target. The projectile then burst apart, creating a blast of explosive wind that kicked up dirt all around the point of collision.

The sound of the impact reverberated for some time, and I muttered, "Oh, this isn't good. It has multiple layers of barriers. Marie, I'd like to get an Enchantment for my sword if you aren't too busy."

My voice was calm, but deep down, my heart was pounding. I'd only managed to break two barriers with my attack. Another barrier had a crack in it, yet half of its layers were still intact despite my having gone pretty much all out.

"A holy element enchantment like usual, right? No problem," Marie responded. "Oh, and no need to come over here. This whole hall is within my casting range."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked. As I turned around, I got my answer when a bright light erupted from my sword. I was surprised

to find “level 142 holy element” displayed on it. I took a few swings with it, and it incinerated the pieces of grass blowing around due to the wind. This thing was fast and strong, and the enchantment was even more powerful.

I then remembered Marie had her Tear of Thanatos, which could instantly activate magic. She must’ve known what I would request later and made preparations beforehand. She’d even learned not just Double Incantation, but Triple Incantation too. I could just picture her smug expression. She was probably exhaling out of her nose and making a satisfied “hmph” noise.

That reminded me of the time Marie had said she would improve so much that I’d be in trouble without her. I wished she’d realize that she’d already reached that point long ago. Such were my thoughts as I stared at the giant floating into the air.

I couldn’t tell floor master Adom had four legs because its limbs had been buried in dirt. Each ended at their ankles, and their tips were glowing with richly colored lights. This monster must’ve been imbued with some highly advanced magic. It looked so powerful that I was starting to think I couldn’t beat it. The giant pointed its ridiculously massive sword at me, but strangely, I didn’t feel the slightest bit of fear. I was so calm that I could serenely watch the grass dancing in the wind and dissolving into the darkness of the night.

A thunderous thud echoed as the giant’s blade cleaved through the ground. By some stroke of luck, I ducked just in time, allowing the massive sword to swoop over my head. The weapon had taken a chunk out of grass and marble, then flown straight from right to left. It made terrible swooshing sounds as it swung in a cross shape, ripping through anything in its path. This made it obvious why Kartina had envied the weapon. I had to assume no steel or layers of barriers would stop it.

But I hadn’t spent years wandering and playing in this world for nothing. My Overload skill, which I’d even used to defeat the hero candidate, had completely memorized the enemy’s attack, meaning my second evasion wasn’t by mere chance. I’d dodged it automatically, though that made it sound like I hadn’t put in any

effort. Well, I didn't, but still.

"Okay, let's get started, floor master Adom. Oh, I guess we already did." I'd only meant to swing my weapon lightly as I spoke, but the high-level holy enchantment made revving sounds, so it looked like I was trying to show off. *Well, that was embarrassing. Glad no one's around to see that. Let's see... This one's around level 140, huh? Heh, heh. This should be fun.*

I displayed a sleepy-looking smile.

§

The ground shook as the monster landed, and the first one to charge forth was Puseri.

The devil Azagyur resembled a four-legged cavalryman and moved unbelievably quickly despite its heavy armor—just like Puseri. Azagyur would likely only take a few seconds to wreak complete havoc upon the Arilai soldiers' battle formation.

Besides the other two units, Puseri's instincts told her this one would be particularly dangerous to leave unchecked. She turned her mount's head toward it, unable to ignore the foreboding tension in the air.

Puseri was the master of Team Diamond and the manor of black roses; her elegance clearly showed her elite bloodline. On the other hand, her deeply rooted brutality and combativeness stemmed from the Blackrose household, the former rulers of Arilai. When she faced a powerful foe on the battlefield, a burning desire rose within her. It was a desire to crush and stomp the opposition into the ground, to drive her spear into them and watch them perish.

Her twilight hair, tied at the back of her head, fluttered as she rode forth, her eyes glimmering beneath her closed helm. Astride her mystic beast, she readied her spear, now transformed into an avatar of destruction and malice. She had known this would happen, explaining why she had said in advance she would not be able to participate in the Raid Chat.

She exhaled a white cloud that contrasted starkly with the black grass on the ground. Azagyur grew closer as she pressed forward,

and the creature seemed to recognize her as an enemy. Hooves thundered from both sides as they charged at each other, then a black streak of light flashed across the grassy field. Puseri had evaded her opponent's attack by leaning diagonally and gave an order to her mystic beast without changing her expression in the slightest. "Accelerate."

Countless men found her ladylike appearance attractive. She was considered an unattainable beauty—a graceful and refined aristocrat. But had they seen this side of her—a fierce beast snarling with savage laughter—every last one of them would have turned and ran.

"Die on my spear!" she roared, aggressively leaning forward. When both sides met, she slid the tip of her weapon into the seam between her opponent's armor.

Sparks flew in the darkness. A powerful force repelled Puseri's attack, changing her mount's trajectory off to the side. The impact nearly sent her weapon flying, but she forcefully held it in place. That was a mistake that left her spear crooked and her right arm broken.

Puseri cursed under her breath as she veered her mount back around, then observed her enemy. Blue blood dripped from Azagyur's side, but Puseri seemed to have taken the brunt of the exchange. She considered how she would pierce through her opponent. Should she charge faster? Catch it by surprise? The options ran through her mind as she rode beside the devil, then she instinctively laid flat against her mount. A black flash of light appeared where her head had been just a moment ago, and an explosion rang far behind her where the attack had landed.

"Puseri! Are you listening, Puseri?! Your arm is broken!"

She realized Eve had been running along with her on her left. It would've been impossible for anyone to keep up with her speed—for anyone other than a ninja.

Puseri's calm twilight eyes glanced at the dark elf. Eve did not specialize in hard-hitting attacks, which normally wouldn't have been an issue. But Puseri figured they would be ineffective against the heavily armored devil. And so, she turned her helmeted head back toward her enemy, deciding she would need to end this fight herself

and quickly.

"Oh no, she can't hear me at all," Eve said. "Milia, can you heal her?"

"They're too far away! I can use my wings to fly over there," Miliasha said.

"Wait, don't go alone. Cassey, Hakua, cover her," the acting Captain Isuka ordered from the tower Marie had constructed. It was a rather difficult mission, but the two replied in the affirmative.

Team Diamond wanted to avoid losing their master so early in the fight at all costs. Not only was Puseri crucial to their offense, but many relied on her for emotional support. Miliasha, the one of divine descent, and Hakua, the fortune teller, depended on her as if she were their older sister.

Miliasha managed to make it to Puseri with archery support from the tower. Even as she descended onto the back of Puseri's horse and folded her wings, Team Diamond's master was too engrossed in the heat of battle to respond.

"Miss Puseri, I will reconnect your bones. Please show me your arm," Miliasha said.

Puseri had recognized the request was a necessary one and haphazardly stuck out her mangled right arm. She had been riding without securing her broken arm in any way, so the bone was sticking out. The gruesome sight nearly made the young girl cry. Puseri gave Miliasha a look as if asking her to make it quick, and she tentatively extended her hand.

Miliasha wanted to heal it carefully so there would be no permanent wounds. Puseri had always caressed her head with those beautiful porcelain hands. Eyes full of tears, she spread her white wings even wider, displaying the trademark features of the divine. Her healing powers grew exponentially stronger, and a gentle light began healing Puseri's injury, which the devil simply couldn't ignore.

"Ahh! It's coming this way! Look out, Cassey!" Eve squealed as Azagyur ran toward them at breakneck speed.

Several arrows suddenly embedded themselves into the creature's skull as if drawn there by a magnet, changing its trajectory just enough so the group never exchanged blows.

There was a collective sigh of relief. Anyone who had witnessed those shots would have said it was as if the sniper had known the future. Indeed, Hakua could read into the future and share that information with others using her Skill Gifting ability. This was how Cassey the Neko knew what would happen a few seconds into the future and could shoot with such pinpoint accuracy.

The Neko girl's eyes widened. "Meow! The Magic Stone on my arrow didn't explode! Why?"

"The enemy is using Magic Negation! Stay hidden; it's aiming for you!" Isuka shouted.

Azagyur charged pale blue magic energy from its many eyes, preparing to take out the pesky sniper.

"Meow!"

Cassey continued firing arrows, disregarding the order to hide. The barrage flew in an arc as if drawn to the devil's eyes; then there was a thunderous explosion as an incinerating beam blasted the tower.

"Cassey! Hakua!" Isuka called out.

Smoke billowed at the point of impact, and Kartina floated with a large shield held at the ready. Isuka sighed in relief. Cassey must have chosen not to withdraw because she had seen the backup coming. Having allies who could read into the future was helpful, but these surprises couldn't be good for her heart.

As Isuka was distracted watching her friends coughing in the smoke, Eve's voice rang out. "I told you, Puseri! You can't beat that thing just by charging at it!"

Isuka looked in the voice's direction to find Eve and Hakua trying and failing to stop the freshly healed Puseri from riding off on her horse and veering back into battle. The acting captain felt the weight of immense pressure and responsibility from the constantly shifting chaos of battle.

"Let's go, Darsha. We'll join the others on the front lines," she said.

"Right. Devil hunting with the whole crew sounds fun once in a while," the barbarian smiled.

The two rushed forth across the black grassy field. This was no

time for fun, and the usually stoic Isuka was visibly angry for once.

Indeed, there was no room for play on the battlefield. Eve certainly wasn't enjoying herself as she ran alongside Puseri's horse toward the devil Azagyur. She screeched in horror but couldn't abandon her team's master. Just then, she decided to use the trump card she had been saving for when she really needed it.

"Help, Kazuuu! I'm gonna diiie!!!" she wailed with tears in her eyes.

"Huh? What?" a voice said after a delay through Mind Link Chat.

The sound of a devil screaming in rage and agony as its many eyes were destroyed echoed across the battlefield.

§

Well, this isn't good.

Adom the floor master stood before me, stabbing its giant sword into the ground beside its feet. It wasn't satisfied with that earlier attack that had carved out a chunk of the ground and now followed up by exhaling black smoke at me. I was curious what would happen if I touched it, but that probably wasn't a good idea.

I teleported to Adom's right-hand side and swung my sword, which had turned into a beam of light. Sparks flew as my weapon met resistance, but it couldn't penetrate the enemy's many barriers. I wasn't gonna deal any decisive damage at this rate. The problem wasn't the barriers; rather, Team Diamond was in danger. Eve had called for my help, though I had no idea what kind of trouble she was in.

I had no choice but to teleport to a vantage point some distance away to get a better view of the situation. Then I understood the whole battlefield had devolved into chaos with the arrival of the four devils. Two of them had descended in the center, where Zera and Doula seemed to be holding them off. But there was a malignant, fluorescent spider-looking thing that looked like trouble.

Suddenly, I realized the floor master was riddling the afterimages I'd left behind with holes. I decided to try and keep it busy for a while longer, but I wished everyone understood that I could die at

any moment here. It wasn't always easy going back to sleep immediately after waking up.

I looked back at Team Diamond and noticed Puseri was about to charge at her opponent again. While she would very much take the fair and honorable approach of facing her foe head-on, that wasn't going to work here. It was no wonder Eve had called out for my help.

"Guess I have no choice but to give this a try," I said. "I'm taking the floor master with me, but I don't wanna hear any complaining."

Shortly after, my upper body vanished in one swift blow by the floor master. My remains then disintegrated into black gas—it was another decoy, of course. It was hard for opponents to see through it if I used my energy carefully.

Anyway, my mission was to basically do something about two cars racing toward each other with tremendous speed, which was easier said than done. Not only that, but there was also a dump truck chasing me simultaneously... Actually, that gave me an idea.

"A dump truck... That's it!"

I set my teleport destination where Puseri and her enemy would likely collide. I was still pretty far away, so it would take several steps to get there. Luckily, my Overload would automatically make the adjustments for me.

I felt myself teleporting several times in a row. Before I knew it, Puseri was on the right, and the devil was on my left. Behind me, Adom was charging in my direction. Why did it feel like I was the only one in danger?

One of the advantages of using Overload to automatically teleport to my target was that it gave me extra time to react to things, even when making on-the-fly decisions. However, I didn't have much to do in this case other than casually walk forward.

"I think this should be far enough," I said.

The floor master crashed into the devil, and I thought my eardrums would rupture from the explosive bang that ensued. It was like a scene out of an action movie. Although my "crash it into a dump truck" plan seemed to have worked, I still felt like I was getting the short end of the stick.

"Ahh!" I shouted, surprised at the noise. "How's that, Eve?!"

"Nice, Kazu! I owe you one!"

I then hurriedly teleported away again. Before leaving, I'd caught a glimpse of Puseri's blank expression as she stared at the unbelievable sight. One moment, the devil had been charging at her, and the next, it'd been blown to smithereens by the floor master.

"Make sure you work with your team, Puseri," I said after teleporting directly next to her. She recoiled in surprise, then nodded repeatedly. I was glad to see she'd snapped out of it. Team Diamond was good at coordinating with each other, and I trusted they would take down some powerful devils together. Knowing this area was in good hands, I moved far away by repeatedly teleporting in quick succession, which made me feel a bit nauseous.

The area of the battlefield I'd left behind had quickly changed from there as Puseri had regained her senses.

§

Azagyur rose and began charging forward again, arrows still lodged in nearly half its many eyes. In its blurred vision, it saw three women: the winged healer, a rider with a slightly crooked spear, and a dark elf with long ears.

"I'm just saying I think you should try to be more flexible. I understand you're worried about us, which makes you a great master, but still," the dark elf protested as she walked.

Azagyur's right arm crackled as it transformed into a giant spear. Meanwhile, it couldn't help but wonder how its enemies could be so calm while facing a level 119 devil. It had been targeting the one with the highest level among their group, but they had been getting increasingly difficult to battle against as more fighters joined them. Someone had dashed over from across the grass field, and the tower sniper was quite annoying. After scanning its surroundings and processing its situation, Azagyur rushed forward immediately. It thrust out the spear on its right arm, split its left side into five swords, and achieved max speed after only its first few steps. Its hooves thundered against the field as the creature set its sights on

the seemingly weakest target of the three: the dark elf.

"Valkyrie, lend me your strength," she murmured without a hint of fear.

Suddenly, something heavy landed on the ground behind Eve with a thud. White hooves trampled the grass, and an armored woman rode atop the steed.

The Valkyrie was a peculiar spirit that appeared on fierce battlefields, and it seemed to have recognized the third floor as a worthy stage for its presence. Although the spirit was said to resemble a beautiful woman, its bloodshot eyes glowed with the ferocity of a wild animal.

Eve's body absorbed the spirit. White smoke rose from her tanned skin, her body temperature increasing as if she were about to combust. Strength coursed through her well-trained muscles as the devil leaped toward her.

There was a swooshing sound, and all Azagyur could comprehend was a woman's arm reaching over and touching its horse's stomach. Her striking smile and the way she caressed its stomach revealed her upbringing in the wilderness. The devil struck at her with five instantaneous flashes, but she'd vanished in the blink of an eye.

Azagyur rushed forward, its hooves galloping loudly on the field. There was no time to think about where the dark elf had gone. A moment later, it realized the sound of a blade being slowly unsheathed was coming from directly behind it and let out a silent scream.

The woman was fast—disturbingly fast. The creature unleashed a barrage of full-force slashes in the dark elf's direction, but none connected. Just when it thought she had retreated, a heavy knee strike landed on the back of its head with enough force to dent its body, even though that body was stronger than iron or steel.

Regrettably, Azagyur had lost many of its eyes in the prior battles; it wouldn't have lost sight of her if not for those injuries. She wasn't just fast, but she also had incredibly sharp instincts. The fight felt like it was swinging a greatsword against a small squirrel. Realizing it was pointless to fight her, Azagyur sprinted across the field with breakneck speed. Azagyur swung its blade behind its back

in a relentless blur, as if to swat away a fly. Its weapon had claimed every inch of the space behind it, leaving no doubt that the pest had fled from its back.

Azagyur then noticed something flying at it from overhead and looked up to find a giant axe speeding in its direction. The axe flew with enough momentum to cut down a large tree, but evading the attack was simple for the devil with its horselike lower body. It slid across the grassy field with its back legs like a drifting car, changing its trajectory so the axe landed in the ground with a dull thud, spraying dirt into the air. Azagyur then realized a barbarian woman was standing on the axe's handle after she had leaped on it from seemingly nowhere.

"Ha ha! Let's go! Tidal Wave!" she yelled. The barbarian must have already prepared to activate her skill in midair. She smiled, and her crude armor expanded as her muscles bulged dramatically.

The barbarian unleashed a massive shock wave onto Azagyur's equine body, forcibly changing its trajectory. However, the devil was startled by what happened next.

"Whoa, you almost hit *me*!" a voice said from behind.

There was no time to be surprised that the dark elf was still on its back. A woman stood directly ahead, a sword flashing in her hand. Her flowing hair was blue, and peeking out from beneath it were coiled demon horns. She wore gemstones all over her body that presumably enhanced magical energy, and lightning sparked from the stones to her blade.

"Why don't you get off already, Eve?" the woman said, magic crackling wildly as her blade and eyes glowed.

Assistant Captain Isuka was an utterly pure Magic Swordsman. Demons had an aptitude for using magic, but Isuka deliberately chose not to cast spells. She had specialized all her skills into focusing her magical energy into her sword and using it to strike down her enemies, which was why she was considered a "pure" Magical Swordsman.

The Tidal Wave from earlier was to redirect Azagyur into Isuka's direction. As the realization dawned on it and danger loomed ever closer, the devil roared, "Aaargh! Abyssal Decimation!!!"

It stomped its hooves into the ground, sending an eruption of destructive energy in the area. Through a gate, it had summoned power from the demon realm deep beneath the ground. Black waves appeared, making suction noises as holes were punched in the ground in a ten-meter radius. A dark void devoured everything within range.

As the very air trembled, the devil gradually slowed its sprint. It did a one-eighty to observe the aftermath and check the corpses of the women who had defied it.

"Yo! Took you long enough."

"I blame Darsha's fat legs."

"What do my legs being fat have to do with it?!"

The exchange between the women made a vein on the devil's forehead bulge angrily, which an arrow immediately found. This was extremely vexing as well. Not only did it have to deal with the restricted vision, but if it let its guard down for even a second, this archer who could seemingly read the future would snipe it with arrows. Though the arrows seemed to have Magic Stones attached to them, they were ineffective due to Azagyur's Magic Negation, so it still hadn't suffered significant damage.

Azagyur realized the women were powerless and lacked the firepower to pose any real threat. This realization eased Azagyur's mind, prompting it to sprint again to put them down for good. The devil's spear crackled as it split up, and it swung its five curved swords. Equipped with even greater power, it would have no issues wiping out the enemies this time. Afterward, it would climb that annoying tower and destroy it from the inside out.

It cursed at the pesky humans in its own tongue but was mostly mistaken. More than half of their group consisted of demons, and even a descendant of the divine was among them. Only the fortune teller in the tower, the axe-wielding barbarian, and the lady rushing toward it from the left side were humans.

"Gah?!"

Azagyur's eyes widened at the rider thundering toward it astride her steed with her twilight hair dancing behind her, a blur of steel and shadow. This time, something was completely different about

her eyes. They were burning with intensity, but the bloodlust threatening to overflow from them had been clearly contained. But why was she attacking now? She must have known full well that she could not inflict enough damage to penetrate its armor... Then it heard the dark elf shouting something.

"Puseri! The glyph for its Magic Negation was on the back of its neck!"

"Understood! Behold my elegant spearmanship!" Puseri smiled gracefully, then exhaled and spurred her steed into a furious charge.

Azagyur couldn't understand. Had that dark elf put herself in such danger simply to find out where its glyph was? Besides, there was no magic specialist among them. They wouldn't know how to disable the glyph just because they discovered where it was. It screamed internally, confused about what its enemies would do next, and struck at the knight of the black rose that charged at its flank.

Five swords whipped forth from its tentacles, each with enough force to rip through steel. They could easily slice through a mere human, armor and all. Yet Puseri was a formidable warrior. The devil twisted its equine body as it attacked, and sparks flew off Puseri's thick shield. She didn't so much as blink even as her cheek and hair were cut. She exhaled an icy breath, then shouted out the name of her technique: Traversal Lance. Her weapon went directly through Azagyur's armor and cervical vertebrae, making jet-black blood spray from the creature's wound.

The Magic Negation had been disabled as the women had wanted. However, they were surely oblivious to the powerful spell that had been applied to the glyph. As soon as the glyph was destroyed, the immense regenerative power that had been sealed within would be released, and it would regenerate within a matter of seconds.

Azagyur wondered what their plan had been as it continued sprinting, only to soon have its question answered. A disturbing noise, akin to the cracking of a diamond, reverberated in the back of its head. The cracking sound occurred repeatedly, then it finally remembered something: the arrows tipped with Magic Stones.

All the arrows that had been embedded in its head exploded

simultaneously. The enemy group had always intended to detonate the Magic Stones that the glyph had activated. The creature's entire upper body was vaporized in a pale blue burst of energy, and everyone cheered at the grand spectacle.

"Woo! That was awesome!"

Level-up music played ceaselessly, a grand reward for the victors of the intense skirmish. Team Diamond couldn't help but smile, and even the usually stoic Isuka ran over to their master with an expression of unbridled joy.

As I observed them from a distance, I nearly burst out in laughter even though there were still enemies to defeat. That dramatic explosion was exactly what we needed. While Hollywood movies were mocked for their over-the-top explosions, there was a reason many movies still used them. A massive boom like that was perfect to wrap things up with clarity and finality. There was something satisfying about seeing the women squealing cheerfully with both hands in the air.

Such were my thoughts as I waited for the flying floor master.

§

An expanse of black grass below was visible from the tower, which was quite odd for Mariabelle the Spirit Sorceress. The grass danced in the wind, but there wasn't a single spirit in this entire hall. Yet she wouldn't have described it as dead either. She perceived it as if time had stopped here, with every living being resting in a deep slumber.

The Arilai soldiers advanced in the darkness with torches held high. They resembled colonists traversing a primeval forest, except the two ferocious devils they had been fighting awaited them ahead. Although they were a squad of courageous and trained fighters, it would be no easy task for normal humans to overcome their monstrous foes.

A devil breathed a plume of black flames at the soldiers, and they endured by hiding behind their thick shields. They were still scorched but managed to survive without screaming out in pain. The elf girl

watched from atop her tower, her heart pounding at the terrifying sight.

"A-Are they going to be okay?" Mariabelle asked. "They're up against such a powerful devil. What if they get killed?"

"They should be able to hold for some time. I worked with them while training for frontline command, and they're brave, experienced soldiers. They fought well on the second floor too."

Mariabelle turned toward the voice coming behind her to find Kartina there, her Demon Arms completely covering everything except her face.

Kartina smiled, then walked toward the edge of the tower. She had been working with Arilai's forces but was formerly a knight of the opposing country. She used the tower's superior vantage point to observe the state of battle and said, "First off, their shield formation is excellent. The way they're positioned to support each other prevents them from being easily overpowered, even against stronger opponents. That fire blast is problematic, but their young commander seems to understand this fully."

She used a calm, deliberate voice to reassure the elf girl, likely taking a page from the young boy's book. Yet her peaceful cadence starkly contrasted the unnerving tension of the battle raging below. Indeed, it was so horrifying it could make one faint. Black flames danced in the mouths of the monsters, the heat building up to incinerate their enemies in one infernal blast.

Team Andalusite and Team Bloodstone shouted across the battlefield.

"Hey, Doula! Deploy as many barriers here as you can, now! We've got a big one coming! You hear me?!"

"Quiet! I'm working on it!" the young commander retorted.

Team Andalusite sang a sacred hymn at the rear of the unit to appease the gods. It was also to signify their unyielding resolve as humans facing off against their relentless, demonic enemies. Death was all around them, yet Team Andalusite's song reached even greater heights because of that.

On the battleground that reeked of blood, Doula's lips slowly parted. Reaching out a hand into the void, she was taken aback to

find it glowing as if it were out under the sun. She was surprised by the sound of her own singing. Her voice rang clearly and beautifully throughout the field, and her heart pounded with joy and excitement. Before she knew it, everyone around her had stopped what they were doing, with only her voice resonating in the chaos of battle. For just a single moment, Doula appeared to be a goddess in the eyes of the beholders.

A sound similar to the wind buffeting a cape was present, and many layers of translucent veils enshrouded the area. Later, the devil spat out a relentless blast of black fire. The flames roared as they greedily devoured the oxygen in the air, then covered the barriers from one corner to the other in an attempt to melt them down. Its offense wouldn't end here, as this devil was the very one that had once burned down an entire human metropolis in one night.

The flames crackled as the Hellfire's firepower grew steadily. Highly dense energy glowed in its mouth, ripping its own cheeks before unleashing a cross-shaped fire breath with a deafening boom.

An unbearable sound like that of metal being torn apart reverberated around them. A solid black mass severely warped the barriers, piercing the team in less than a second, erupting in a vicious explosion. The horror only worsened as the blast sent soldiers flying into the air. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. In their final moment, humans felt their perception heightened as if they had suddenly gained the Acceleration skill in their struggle before death. Geheroth, the four-legged beast-type devil, growled irately.

Its Hellfire attack usually instantly incinerated humans in a wide area, but its immense power seemed to have been somehow redirected upward. The reason soon became evident as the blast wave cleared out. There was something obviously strange about the shields the Arilai soldiers held at the ready. Because the group had positioned itself as if defending against the blast center and not the devil, most had retained their integrity without being destroyed.

Doula had quickly given up on blocking the brunt of the attack and deployed a defensive barrier to redirect the explosion's energy upward. Using such incredible focus made her momentarily appear

like a goddess. That wasn't all, as every soldier who had been blown away rose again. Geheroth was astonished to discover Doula had even predicted the damage the soldiers would suffer and healed them in midair.

Geheroth glared at the soldiers, skepticism and incredulity in its eyes. This shouldn't have been possible, it was almost as if the woman could read the future.

Meanwhile, Mariabelle let out a sigh of relief and sat near the edge of the tower. "This can't be good for my heart. I feel like this is going to put me in an early grave."

"Ha ha, that's funny, coming from an elf who has lived for hundreds of years. I'm impressed that they withstood that attack."

The elf turned around and gave Kartina a sour look, only to get a smile in return. Mariabelle pouted, then looked back down from the top of the tower. The tower had been built by controlling stone spirits, and those skilled in ranged combat had been gathered there. The higher ground allowed them to fire arrows and support their allies in ways only they could.

"Team Diamond is full of such talented members. I never thought someone would be able to share the ability to look into the future, even if it's only a few seconds ahead."

"Yes, I believe it's called Skill Gifting. It's so rare that there are no written documents on it, but it can greatly affect the tides of battle when sharing it with a field commander."

Their success had been the ability to look into the future and minimize the worst casualties caused by the devils. Even if they saw death coming, whether they could counteract it was a different matter altogether. The ability to take control of the battle was entirely up to the commander's skill level.

"Oh, looks like they're making their next move. They're pretty annoyed that they used up magic energy without anything to show for it. Let's see what they'll do now," Kartina said as she looked at the grassy field below. Her expression clearly demonstrated that she was thoroughly enjoying the show. The elf was unsure why, but the reason was rather simple.

Kartina had once challenged the Arilai soldiers, and despite

preparing extensively for the battle, she'd failed miserably without making her mark in the slightest. That was why she had decided to have fun with it this time. In other words, she was simply laughing at the misfortune of others.

The four-legged beast Geheroth leaped forth, but the tight-knit shield cluster was a powerful defensive formation. Each soldier supported the other, creating a wall stronger than the sum of their parts. There was scientific merit to the strategy, and even children could use it to repel a fully grown man. Similarly, the demonic beast only slightly bent the wall of shields without doing any real damage.

Kartina noticed something and peered at their formation. "Oh, they're good. They were baiting it."

Marie did not understand, but the answer revealed itself soon after. As Geheroth clawed at the shields and attempted to breathe fire into the space between them, a red sword slid through and impaled it. It was hard to tell from their vantage point, but it had likely been Zera's skill, as no one else would have coated their sword with their own blood.

A myriad of spears was thrust into the freshly opened wound, and the devil leaped back. Just as it was about to land, a voice called out, "Now! Fire!"

Crossbows peeked out from between the shields to fire a barrage of projectiles. Bolts covered Geheroth's right side, causing the creature to bark in pain. It wouldn't have so much as flinched from normal crossbow bolts, but they had been enchanted with holy magic; a few of them had been tipped with Magic Stones. They exploded inside the beast's body, setting its thick fur alight with blue flame and forcing it to retreat farther.

"Soldiers, move forth! Eradicate the devils!" the commander's voice thundered, and the soldiers answered in one powerful voice.

The spiderlike devil retreated as well, abandoning the eggs it had laid on the field, which the wave of soldiers surging trampled. The devils had planned to hatch the eggs so the spiderlings could breach the defensive formation and devour the humans below. But the coolheaded commander had recognized this danger and ordered a charge despite the potential risks. Prison Keeper, the skill that

allowed them to detect enemies within its domain, had greatly contributed to the Arilai side's counterattack.

The battle had once again advanced in their favor. Mariabelle didn't even realize she had been sweating, so she wiped her forehead with a sleeve and said, "Whew, I'm getting nervous just watching them."

"Ha ha, this should be a good experience for you," Kartina said. "There aren't many opportunities to observe the flow of the entire battlefield like this. With your ability to manipulate structures, I'm sure whatever you learn today will come in handy later."

"Maybe, but I feel so uneasy. I don't have Wridra or Shirley with me today."

Indeed, no one was there to turn things around if the situation grew desperate. The Arkdragon had her own battle to settle, and Shirley had been defending the second floor. This seemed to stress Mariabelle, and her mood hadn't improved even as they continued to push the advantage.

Below, they could see Doula gallantly shouting orders to her troops. She knew battle well and had been agonizing over what would come before this had all begun. Yet she hadn't shown so much as a hint of that internal strife, her single-minded focus set on crushing the enemy.

The elf wondered what was the difference between her and the young commander.

"Whether we understand battle or not..." she muttered.

"Hm? Did you say something, Marie?" Kartina asked.

Marie didn't respond, observing the conflict below with her hands on the ledge.

Fires were all around the hall, but it was dark as night. Soot danced around the field, smoke billowing in every direction. Although it was terrifying, her amethyst eyes simply searched for answers.

"Team Diamond has slain the level 119 devil Azagyur..." Prison Keeper announced with electronic beeps.

"What? Really? I haven't received any reports yet," Kartina said, surprised.

At the same time, a three-dimensional image of terrain was projected onto Mariabelle's right hand with a buzzing sound. Normally, a Magic Tool was required to display the surrounding structures, but she only held her staff. She had accurately understood the mechanisms of the Magic Tool Aja had created and learned how to replicate its functionality. Blips of light appeared one after another, seemingly representing the positions of their enemies and allies. Prison Keeper relayed the information it had detected and soon created an overview map of the entire battlefield.

"Is that a map of the battlefield?!" Kartina asked, wide-eyed. "I've never heard of anything that can show every soldier and enemy like that!"

"I've been able to do this much for a while now. This time, I asked the fortune teller Hakua for help through Prison Keeper. Thanks to her Skill Gifting, I should be able to warn others about incoming attacks."

Kartina stared in disbelief.

Mariabelle's answer showed her fear had come from not knowing the battlefield. Just a moment ago, she had been a child who could do nothing but watch and tremble in fear. So, all she had to do was further her understanding and strike the areas that drove fear in her heart.

Upon hearing the report, Commander Doula felt a thrill that sent a shiver down her spine. After all, getting a full view of the enemy forces and the ability to predict their movements had been unheard of. Strategies that had never been possible until now began to pop up in her mind, and she couldn't wait to see how the rest of the battle would unfold.

"Doula, your nose is bleeding," Zera said.

"Oh, is it? Ha ha, I must've gotten excited," she said, her cheeks rosy as a maiden's while her future husband gave her a creeped out look.

As she raised her sword valiantly, the Arilai raid team underwent yet another evolution. Doula's forces, a hundred strong, moved freely under her command because her ability to see into the future allowed her to snipe, evade, and counterattack with perfect

precision. They would be known as Arilai's greatest battalion, but that was a story for another time.

From that point on, the devils that should have been mighty and unrelenting perished without being able to do anything at all.

§

I descended to the field, then left a clone behind as I teleported once again. Less than a second later, the giant's knee crushed my clone and left a crater in the ground. The hooded floor master turned its head toward me, and I watched in silence. I was dealing with a pure power type protected by thick barriers. Its speed and strength were off the charts, yet its movement was straightforward.

On the other hand, I preferred to zigzag all over the place, so our fighting styles were complete opposites. Ideally, I wanted to distract it with a phantom like I'd just done and use that opening to strike. I couldn't imagine breaking through those barriers, so I couldn't carelessly close the distance.

"Hmm, I have to evade all of those insta-kill attacks and crack those barriers somehow. Not sure how I'm gonna do that," I murmured. I wondered if it was checkmate already, then I heard an adorable voice through Mind Link Chat.

"Having trouble over there?"

"To be honest, yeah... Wait, are you almost done on your end? Team Diamond wrapped up their fight earlier too," I replied. "Man, I'm not sure what to do here. That floor master is one tough nut to crack."

As I casually conversed with Marie, the floor master Adom drew ever closer, the air current winding about its massive body. It went on all fours and leaped into the air, then unleashed a purple shock wave charged with powerful magic energy. I felt kind of dejected, to be honest. Being that fast with that enormous body just wasn't fair. Adom had been awakened for the first time in centuries, so it seemed to be brimming with energy.

"I see. But you've been looking for a strong opponent, right? I think you said, 'I'd like to know what defeat tastes like,' or

something like that," Marie said.

"Huh? I've never said that," I pointed out. "Besides, I'm probably near the bottom of the list when it comes to who's the strongest in Team Amethyst."

"Wait, does that mean you and I are competing for last place?"

"No way." I chuckled, then thought about everyone on the team. Wridra the Arkdragon, Shirley the former floor master, and Kartina were all out of my league. Marie had been growing at an incredible rate lately, so I very well could've been in last place.

The bone-chilling sound of Adom's two-handed swords being unsheathed interrupted my thoughts. The disturbing part was the way the blade glowed, its magical pulses sending shivers down my spine. According to Kartina, that sword was as valuable as an entire country. The giant swung it downward, digging the blade into the field of black grass.

I crossed paths with the hooded floor master in slow motion. I'd activated my Acceleration skill, perpetually going in full throttle to analyze the enemy's attacks and, most importantly, keep myself alive. Just as I'd narrowly avoided death, a different woman spoke to me this time.

"It's astonishing how good you are at evading. You're on another level of stubbornness, I gotta say. I don't like you, but I have to admit, you've got guts," Kartina sighed.

While I thanked her mentally for the compliment, this place was a dream world to me, and I couldn't actually die here. So, I didn't really need guts to do what I did.

"Kartina, how would *you* fight against an opponent with barriers?" I asked. "If I had to guess, there are probably around five layers, so I can't break them on my own."

"Barriers, huh...? Come to think of it, only a few could use them in the demon army. There are two types of barriers: those that focus on one point and those that cover one's entire body. It's basically the difference between a shield and armor. Which are you dealing with?" she inquired.

That was a good question. I decided it was probably best to try attacking it to see what would happen. The knobby palms of its

hands were pointed at me as if it were about to unleash a big attack, so I figured this was my chance. Magic often created an opening, and using that moment to strike was pretty textbook stuff. If it went well, the enemy would be more cautious and refrain from using magic again. If it failed... Well, I'd go back to sleep again.

A dark purple torrent pierced through the spot where I'd just been standing. It was a beam about a meter wide that emitted a high-pitched noise like a woman's scream. I swayed out of the way to evade it and moved forward, shaking my head, knowing that one would've insta-killed me too.

I wanted to find the characteristics and possibly any holes in Adom's barriers, even if I had to overextend myself a bit. And so, I'd decided to rush forth with a barrage of attacks even though I hadn't memorized many of its attack patterns yet. I first slashed at its wrist, but a barrier appeared midair and deflected my attack with a loud clash. Without pause, I followed up with strikes to its thigh and ankle. Because the creature was so huge, I could only really aim for its limbs without considerable effort.

The creature's limbs glowed as it stood there on all fours, then a greater force repelled me. As I'd expected, about five barriers seemed only to appear wherever my sword struck it.

"Oh, it looks like its barriers are focused on one point. How do I deal with these types?" I asked.

"I see. From here, it seems like its defenses are semiautomatic. These types are very hard to deal with, and it'll be nearly impossible to break through five barriers just by attacking one spot. Let me give you a hand."

I wasn't sure what Kartina had meant by that. She was supposed to be Marie's bodyguard, and I'd asked her not to come down here no matter what. A moment later, I heard an ominous rumbling from the stone tower where they'd been standing. She was definitely up to something.

Although I was not a magic user, I could sense an abundance of energy flowing from their direction, as if the darkness were being gathered and compressed there. I wasn't the only one who'd reacted to it, as Adom also turned its head toward them. The way it stared

at them was kind of unnerving.

"Kartina, the floor master is looking at you. You haven't forgotten that Marie's safety is your first priority, right?" I asked.

"Ha ha, I never knew you could talk in such a manly tone," she said, chuckling. "Don't worry, Marie and I are much stronger than you think."

It sounded like she'd said, *Marie doesn't need to be protected all the time.* I'd been too distracted by her unusually gentle tone to block the floor master's incoming attack.

Adom thrust its massive sword into the ground, freeing up its hands. They were enshrouded by purple sparks, its muscles bulging one size bigger. The creature then thrust its hands forward, unleashing the magic it'd built up in one huge burst.

There was a deafening eruption, and a line of flame and destruction had appeared in the grassy field. The heat was so intense that my skin would've been scorched if I hadn't covered my face with both arms. Later, it'd become as bright as midday in an instant.

"M-Marie!!!"

The torrent of magic was unimaginably powerful, annihilating everything in its path as it made a beeline for the tower. I instinctively knew that anyone hit by it surely wouldn't survive, and I found myself sprinting forward without any sort of plan. Yet what I heard next wasn't a scream, but an incantation. The pure and resonant voice, ringing with a dignified grace, had stopped me in place before I knew it. When I looked up, I saw two familiar women standing atop the tower.

One of the figures, an armored woman who stood with her body coiled and an enormous spear held in hand, was charging energy into her spear tip to its very limits. The other, an elf girl, stood before Kartina with her body veiled in a pale glow. Both stood in contrast, a beast-like ferocity paired with purity like that of the embodiment of spirits. I was captivated, thinking the moment was so picturesque that it would've been a waste not to capture it in a painting. Slowly, my gaze was drawn toward the floating gemstone that emitted a brilliant light, covering Mariabelle's beautiful skin with

its sky blue hue.





I'd seen that gemstone before. It was the Tear of Thanatos, a special gift from the kindhearted former second floor master Shirley.

Wham!

The magical torrent had finally reached the tower. But as soon as it met the gemstone, its seemingly infinite energy was dispersed into a shock wave in all directions. Such a massive flood of energy absorbed into that tiny gemstone was an unbelievable sight—almost divine, even.

As the light gradually faded and the world turned to night again, a humming sound hung in the air. The gemstone glowed in the darkness like a star in the morning sky, and Marie pointed at it gingerly.

"Wait, is *that* what its power to store magic can do?" I asked, mouth agape.

"Ouch!" she said, pulling her hand away from the gemstone as if touching a hot cooking pot. "Huh? Oh, yes, exactly. It can store *any* magic. It doesn't have to be mine. Do you realize the significance of this?"

Of course, even I understood how incredibly powerful it was. Although it was only for a single instance, it could negate *any* magic and reflect it back to the user. I'd probably complain that it was cheating if I were a spellcaster. Adom seemed shocked too, as it stood there frozen with its arms still held forward.

"By the way, could you move away from there?" Marie asked.

"Hm? Why? Out of curiosity."

"I'm not sure what that magic was called, but you saw how powerful it was, right? I'd like to try shooting it back, but I'm afraid it might fly in a random direction. Though, you'd probably wander out of the way to not get hit anyway," she said, giggling.

Wait, why was she laughing? What if she *did* hit me? But to my disbelief, I saw a cross-shaped flash of light at the top of the tower before I could put in a word of protest. Not only that, but the right side of my body was glowing, and I knew I was seconds away from getting caught up in the explosion.

My eyes bulged and I teleported immediately, just barely avoiding certain death. I'd probably been lucky or had good karma saved up

or something. I rolled around the field and stood up, expressing desperate panic. While I was fast enough to dodge the floor master's attacks, that one had almost landed a direct hit on me.

"Hm, I missed. Maybe I should aim it this way," Marie said to herself as she redirected the beam this way and that, then finally hit Adom dead-on. The beam's trajectory wasn't particularly tricky; it seemed more like a lucky shot than anything.

I then realized she hadn't been aiming for me specifically, though I'd had to run for my life like Adom and seriously thought she was gonna kill me.

Just an unlucky coincidence, I guess. Ha ha ha...

The floor master had defended against the attack with both of its arms, and a crack appeared in the barrier that was floating in midair. Since it was the type of barrier that focused on a single point, it presumably wasn't good at dealing with attacks that dealt damage in a wide area.

We couldn't forget about the Kartina. She'd been charging up her power the entire time and launched her javelin with perfect form, which pierced the sound barrier as it zeroed in on its practically immobile target.

A deep crushing sound reverberated through the field as the barrier was breached, and nearly half of the floor master's head had been obliterated. The attack had even vaporized the ring that had been floating over Adom's head, and the impact sent it reeling backward in the air. Fragments of the shattered barrier flew in every direction, momentarily hanging before melting into nothingness. Thanks to my Acceleration, it all appeared to play out in slow motion.

I wanted to take this opportunity to follow up and finish the fight.

What's that? That's cheap? No, not at all. Team Amethyst is a group of women and children, and it's crucial to coordinate attacks in a game—I mean, to battle like this.

I dug my heels into the ground amid the raging torrent of magic, then leaped forward. As Adom glided through the air, I teleported directly beneath it and grinned at my perfect layup.

Though I had considered where I should attack, the answer was

obvious: the exposed head that I hadn't had access to until now. The thrown javelin had partially shattered its armor, leaving it open to take some serious damage.

When I activated my Overload skill, my vision shifted dramatically into increments of seconds. I was repeatedly teleporting around the floor master, and in this state, I couldn't even do something as basic as making decisions based on visual observations. Rather, I could only perform the simple movement of thrusting my weapon forward with predetermined timing.

For an outside observer, the sound and sight of me repeatedly stabbing at my enemy in a blur of flashing steel was probably kind of disturbing. I landed on the floor master's shoulder, then unleashed another flurry of attacks at its head, my sword ringing sharply as it collided with its target. My bladework left an afterimage resembling a flower in full bloom, which further added to the peculiarity of it all.

I caught Adom's hand twitching out of the corner of my eye. I may have looked like I was doing a lot, but my moves were pretty much being done automatically, leaving my mind completely calm and collected. Adom's massive body tilted at an angle as it braced one of its four legs on the ground. A chilling whoosh instantly followed as it whipped out a horizontal slashing attack. Unfortunately for the floor master, I'd already memorized that move; I ducked below it and returned a counterattack in the very next moment.

A deafening crack rang out, leaving a decisive fracture in the creature's head. The impact left its fingers numb, sending its greatsword flying out of its hands. A whirring sound like that of a meteor flying could be heard from my Astroblade, as if it'd been spurred by the heat of the battle. The sound told me that my sword was greedily draining my energy. Soon, lights flashed across the length of its blade like shooting stars, signaling its increasing firepower.

My target would be its chest. The patterns on its body converged at its center, where a gemstone the color of night was nested, which was likely the creature's core. Amid the slow flow of time due to Acceleration, I was sweating profusely as bits of the broken barrier danced in the air. My eyes widened as I read: Adom Zweihander -

Level 64.

Why had its level been revealed now of all times? And why was its level so low?

Cracks continued to form all over its body. Marie's Prison Keeper tower had clearly revealed its level and left no room for doubt. Having fought the floor master, I believed it was strong enough to be level 140 or so. But this was just my opinion based on its attack power, speed, and pressure I'd felt facing it.

The best course of action would have been to pierce through the gemstone immediately to end the fight for good. However, images suddenly flashed in my mind: the ancients that had been near the entrance and the massive sword with its tip embedded in the ground. What had happened here? As someone who loved this fantasy world and traveling around it, I couldn't help but think about those things even during a battle.

The floor master seemed to be at its limit, even without further intervention. The cracks reached down to the gemstone at its core and emitted a pale light as if it were its final breath. I hesitated for a moment, then the gemstone shattered into pieces.

I didn't know why I'd reached my hand out. Maybe I'd wanted to unveil the mystery of the ancient people, or maybe I'd wanted more of a challenge from Adom. Whatever the reason, I left my hand outstretched. When the particles from the gemstone touched my finger, my consciousness went out like a light.

Where...am I?

I slowly rose, groaning. I was no longer on a field of black grass and found myself on solid pavement. Moreover, I was surprised that the area was as bright as day, with people who seemed to be sorcerers or other magic specialists walking around. But I faltered, noticing the presence of so many people all around me.

It seemed I was in some sort of research facility. No one told me anything, but there were giant vats and various tools and apparatus. The people even looked to be keeping massive monsters for their research.

My eyes were drawn to one of them in particular.

"Adom?"

I'd read the name, written in the ancient language, off the tag on a cage. Inside the cage was a curled-up child, staring at the ground with vacant eyes. His tattered clothes and cuffs on his hands and feet showed just how low his standing was here.

"The ancient language... This must be the third floor hall from long ago," I muttered, and the child's dark gaze turned to me. His gray eyes had no human emotions, making me feel like I was staring into an endless abyss.

What had befallen him to kill his spirit and send him into the pits of despair? The answer arrived a moment later when a black fluid was poured into the tubes connected to his hands and feet. The boy coughed up blood that was the same black color, and his body began to change before my eyes. His bone structure grew, his muscles stretching and ripping as they tried to keep up with his expanding frame. New muscle fibers quickly formed and connected, his childlike appearance transforming into something else entirely.

My eyes widened in horror. "Don't tell me...the ancients have been *creating* demons here to pit them against the powerful monsters in the Age of Night? How could they do something so inhumane...?"

I was in such shock that the words had barely come out. Humans fought at a perpetual disadvantage in the Age of Night, also known as the Age of Demons. It was just a theory, but this place seemed like a facility for creating demons that could fight off monsters. Gedovar had been continuing their advance, and they were said to have been targeting the third floor of the ancient labyrinth. We thought they were after the ability to control monsters, but that begged the question: How did they initially become aware of the ancient labyrinth?

What I saw must have been the answer. This place was the root of all demons, and that was why they'd known about the atrocities that had occurred here. As I recalled how they'd persistently interfered with our efforts in the labyrinth, a cry of rage echoed throughout the facility. It was the child from earlier, now without even a trace of his former self remaining.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

Adom bellowed, perhaps from sorrow or rage against the monstrous experiments. He touched his own face, seemingly lamenting his twisted fate. I felt my chest tighten at the pain in his voice.

Everything seemed to happen in an instant. A violent impact shook the ground as a massive sword was planted in the hall. An immense amount of energy erupted from the weapon, blowing away the tools and ancients around it, sending them slamming into walls and floors with deadly force. The artificial monsters were released, causing the humans to scream.

The familiar grass that was the color of night began to sprout from the ground all around the embedded sword. Adom, now changed beyond recognition, reached for the greatsword and let out another anguished cry that tore at the soul. Perhaps due to the sword's blessing, his level rose incredibly, and resilient barriers enveloped him. No one could keep him contained.

A monster of the Age of Night might have given him the greatsword, perhaps to give him a means to take out the thread of the ancients or to set Adom free. My vision cut out abruptly, so I doubted I would ever get the answer. All I could do was observe in the present as Adom crumbled away in the field of black grass.

Just then, I heard a heavy, metallic clanging. I found a child wearing metal cuffs around his wrists and ankles. His hair had turned white, likely from all the horror he had endured. I was taken aback when I realized he was wearing the same tattered clothes as the child in my vision. He opened his eyes, his gaze slowly scanning the field and the greatsword lodged in the ground. He exhaled, his breath coming out in a white cloud, and muttered, "I see." He seemed to sense it was all over without us having to explain.

His eyes closed again as if in resignation. The edges of his body slowly crumbled and faded away, the sight making my heart ache terribly.

"Wait!"

I knew I could do nothing and was responsible for his downfall, but I moved reflexively. He looked like he was about to fall to the ground, but before I knew it, I was holding him in my arms. Maybe

he was just an illusion, as all I could feel was a slight sense of warmth with nothing tangible. He began to vanish from this world, and I couldn't offer a word of comfort or even hold him. I felt an inexplicable sense of bitter frustration. It felt wrong being unable to do anything for a child who was leaving this world knowing nothing but solitude.

Suddenly, I felt something touch my arm. I noticed slender fingers gently resting and looked up to find sky blue eyes peering into mine. The translucent second floor master Shirley, her eye mask now removed, touched my arm and looked at me as if to ask, *What's wrong?* Her honey-blonde hair seemed unaffected by gravity, as even her clothes were partially see-through.

I blinked several times. Shirley had been on the floor above, so how was she here with us? I looked up, then realized there was a square hole in the ceiling. A small lizard peeked through it, and I recalled some peculiar monsters that had the ability to restructure the labyrinth.

Before I could even express my surprise, Shirley patted my hand, murmured wordlessly, and reached over to the boy. She touched his forehead, and the speed at which his body was crumbling began to slow down.

"Can you...save him, Shirley?" I asked tentatively.

She looked at the ceiling ponderously as if to consider the question, then hesitantly nodded with an awkward expression as if to say, *Maybe?*

I then remembered life and death were equally valuable in her eyes. She'd been known as a god of death, after all. But if she could help Adom, it would mean salvation for me too.

The child's eyes slowly opened, and he noticed Shirley's hand on his forehead. His gray eyes widened in surprise, the expression emphasizing just how young he really was. Shirley did a little fist pump as an adorable gesture of encouragement, so I couldn't help but chuckle.

I wasn't sure what to make of what happened next. Shirley gave the boy a choice: either vanish from this world or be given new life here. Since I couldn't hear what they were talking about at all, I had

no idea what meaning was behind the light that Shirley had pointed out for him, but that seemed to be the gist of their exchange. All I knew was that seeing the hopeful glimmer in Adom's childlike eyes was a relief.

Particles that Adom had left behind drifted in the night sky of the third floor. The final one was absorbed into Shirley's palm; she then turned and met my gaze with her sky blue eyes.

"Is it over?" I asked.

Shirley smiled warmly in response. She gave me a noncommittal gesture, and I felt I knew why. This wasn't the end for Adom—it was a new beginning.

I thanked her sincerely, and she just smiled again. Her smile was so lovely that it was hard to believe she had once been a floor master. I thought I must have been seeing things because white wings were growing from her waist area. They started flapping, and she flew into the sky...

Wait, did she always have wings?

Shirley was a former floor master and was like a ghost, so supernatural occurrences weren't out of the question with her. But I thought she resembled an actual angel as I stared at the ceiling. A ray of light descended from the hole Shirley and the Lizardmen had opened, illuminating the field of black grass and heralding the end of the Age of Night. The experiments conducted by the ancients and the battles from the Age of Night were now in the past. Yet, an end wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It only meant history would be written anew. Such were my thoughts as I smiled at the elf girl running toward me.

Then I noticed Marie's face as she waved at me. I thought she'd be celebrating our victory, but there was sadness in her expression.

"I'm sorry. Did I nick you with that beam earlier?" she asked.

I laughed out loud, completely forgetting she'd nearly vaporized half of my body not too long ago.

§

Some major changes had been occurring far above us, where a

massive horde of the demon army had been marching across the desert.

There was scorching sand as far as the eye could see. It danced on the wind that carried it through the air and into a man's cloak and suntanned boots. A burly man looked at the oasis from atop a sand dune. His name was Hyzoska Behemoth, the indomitable general of the Gedovar army and the linchpin of this fateful battle. He had set foot onto the battlefield vowing to exterminate every human in Arilai, but his army's march had been at a standstill at this oasis. The reason for this halt was the absence of reports regarding the battle between the Prominence Dragon and Arkdragon.

Once a riot of colors evoking death, the eastern sky was now clear. The clash between dragons had likely ended by now, but Hyzoska couldn't move forward or retreat without knowing the results, as something that would impede their advance could still be up ahead. All the general could do for now was seize control of the ancient labyrinth visible below. Even if the opposition tried to resist, his army's massive numerical advantage would eventually overwhelm them. However, he knew full well that anything was possible in battle and did not take it lightly.

Suddenly, he heard something flapping in the wind. Something enormous cast a shadow over the sand dune, and he knew without looking that the legendary Prominence Dragon had arrived. The general's lips tightened in a straight line as he awaited the dragon. Eventually, the ancient creature landed, sending a massive cloud of dust flying into the air.

In the shimmering heat haze, a young man slowly walked toward the general. Contrary to his carefree appearance with his fluorescent red hair and flippant smile, everyone present knew just how dangerous he was. Hyzoska was far greater in stature and held the title of general, though all of them felt that this man was leagues ahead of him.

"What's with the sour look? Don't tell me you were worried about me?" the man said, and the general couldn't help but furrow his brow.

The general wasn't necessarily offended. He was simply

responding to the dragon's relentless and intimidating presence that could be felt when he spoke. If Hyzoska hadn't been in a position where an army and an entire country counted on him, he would have already bent the knee.

"The Arkdragon is a legend herself," Hyzoska said after a pause. "It would have been difficult to predict how the battle would turn out."

"Hm? Yeah, I'm sure. If lowly creatures like yourselves presumed to 'predict' my fate, I would've been so annoyed I'd kill every last one of those worthless soldiers."

The Prominence Dragon laughed and provoked him, but the Gedovar general said nothing. That hadn't been a joke. The dragon could wipe out the tens of thousands of units of his army in a matter of seconds if he wished. One should not make the mistake of thinking the ancient being was a run-of-the-mill monster.

"Then let's proceed as we initially planned," the general mustered. "Our army will now march toward Arilai's castle. The time for you to unleash your power has come, Prominence Dragon."

"Oh, you want me to destroy that stupid tower or something like that, right? I actually have somewhere to be, so I'm gonna have to pass. Sorry," the dragon said with a cheerful smile.

The general nearly fell over from shock. He could hardly believe this was happening, as this exact scenario had been his worst nightmare. The Prominence Dragon was so powerful that it was impossible to predict his actions.

"Why...? We paid you as hefty a sum as you wanted. You promised to bring back the Age of Night. Do you intend to break your promise and betray us?"

"No, I do want to bring back the Age of Night. But I don't really care about that tower. It just doesn't interest me, and I've already given you your money's worth and then some. Also..." the Prominence Dragon trailed off and moved closer, his golden eyes gazing directly into the general's.

This act alone made the general feel as if the Prominence Dragon were about to remove his head from his shoulders. Sweat ran down his back in discomfort, but his expression remained unchanged.

"What makes you think you can call me a liar?" the dragon continued. "That tower has nothing to do with the Age of Night. It's *your* enemy. You can put blood and sweat into destroying it yourself."

Hyzoska swallowed his words, his hand trembling with rage on the hilt of his weapon. If he let his emotions get the best of him, his entire army would be massacred. He desperately contained the urge to do anything foolish and exhaled. The choice between getting completely wiped out or not was no choice at all. Dying here would mean the death of Gedovar. His only path forward was to take control of the ancient labyrinth and call for reinforcements from his homeland.

The Prominence Dragon wasn't concerned about his plight in the slightest. He smiled flippantly once again before walking away.

However, the general noticed something odd about the dragon's hand as he waved goodbye. There were golden rings on each of the dragon's fingers, which had a presence that differentiated them from ordinary gold. Had he always worn such accessories?

"Those rings are quite exquisite... Is it customary for dragons to wear so many of them?" Hyzoska asked.

"Your head may be empty, but you have an eye for quality. The color is quite magnificent, isn't it? These are favorites of mine, more precious to me than anything."

The general had never seen the dragon with such an entranced expression, and he had a bad feeling about this. Although he had no reason to be so suspicious, his gut instinct told him something was off. Besides, why was the dragon walking away when he could fly? And why had he been heading in that direction?

"Wait, why are you going toward the ancient labyrinth? Don't tell me you're planning on defecting to the enemy side!" the general exclaimed.

"What are you talking about? I just told you I'm not gonna betray you. I've heard the second floor is quite interesting, so I've decided to stay there for a while and wait for the Age of Night to arrive. If you want to attack, you can do as you wish," the Prominence Dragon said, exasperated. Then realization hit him. He slowly turned to the

demon army preparing to invade the ancient labyrinth, and his mouth curled into a smile. “What, you lot can’t even take control of that tiny ruin?”

“What do you mean? I’ve sent in five thousand soldiers and Butcher. Of course, we’re going to—”

Flashes of light flickered at the edge of Hyzoska’s vision. The spectacle spread like a chain reaction across the dunes. The general’s eyes widened in shock as something cylindrical erupted from the sand at once, and the dragon laughed out loud.

At that moment, the cluster of energy from a Magic Stone unleashed its power. If one asked the sorcerers of this world, “What’s the easiest kind of offensive magic?” most of them would answer, “Explosions.” They were indeed extremely simple to cast yet capable of causing some serious damage. Explosions were even more effective when encased in some sort of outer shell, as it allowed pressure to build up to its limit and send fragments of the destroyed shell flying outward like shrapnel. One could also deploy them across a surface rather than at a single point to maximize destruction over a large area.

The cylindrical object Aja had created was likely the least wondrous magic in this entire world. It worked without its caster, so it would be more apt to call it a type of Magic Tool. Indeed, the mechanical clicking sounds it produced, and the needles it extended into the area were a far cry from the conventional perception of magic.

Before the sound and shock of the explosions could reach Hyzoska, he caught a glimpse of the demon army getting soaked in a surge of black fluid. As he watched the army spray bits of flesh and blood everywhere, wails of death filling the air, it finally dawned on him. He’d thought he only had to face a hundred or so soldiers, but the essence of battle lay in how effectively one could reduce the enemy’s numbers—it didn’t matter how many men had been gathered there.

“What?! Why didn’t they use that in the initial battle?!” Hyzoska roared.

“You got baited. You don’t reel in the line until after the fish

bites," the Prominence Dragon explained, sounding amused. "That mage may be old, but it's no wonder he survived in Arilai for this long. He's ruthless."

The general didn't have it in him to stop the dragon as he walked away. He would've liked to see anyone who dared. The Prominence Dragon walked straight through the sand dunes, stepping on the fallen soldiers of the demon army and heading toward the oasis where the ancient labyrinth was.

"What is the meaning of this...?! The Prominence Dragon is going to the ancient labyrinth and tells us to invade it? How is this *not* a betrayal?!"

Rage simmered within the general, and he wanted to grab the Prominence Dragon's head and shout at the top of his lungs. He wanted to cry out at the absurdity of it all, but now was not the time. As a general leading an army, he had to live by his wits. The future of the demons would be decided here. He trembled, desperately fighting to stifle his fury as he glared at the setting sun.

Several moments later, the demon army halted their invasion of the ancient labyrinth and reversed course, moving southward. An ancient tower awaited them there, where tens of thousands of demon soldiers would face an unexpected battle.

— Chapter of Betrayal END —

Episode 1: Team Amethyst's Celebration

I'd been holding on to a hanging strap, watching clusters of modern buildings go by in the window view. Autumn was getting closer with each passing day, and the roadside trees had been gradually turning into shades of red and yellow.

Whenever I traveled on the train or bus, I had a habit of thinking rather than looking at my phone. On Mondays, I made a mental note of everything I needed to complete for the week so I could get off work on time each day. Because of this, I may have seemed like a diligent worker, but it was solely for my self-interest. I just wanted to spend more time in the dream world. In that sense, one could say I wasn't diligent at all.

I'd been spending a lot of time thinking about last night. The defeat of the third floor master, the demon army retreating from the oasis, and the downfall of the Prominence Dragon—the Arkdragon's nemesis and husband—had occurred. It had been quite an eventful visit. Though Marie and I had been on the third floor the entire time, we knew little about the battles that had been going on aboveground. I decided to ask Wridra in detail later.

Then I remembered one more thing: I'd promised the ladies I'd take them on a mini trip to celebrate our victory. They seemed wholeheartedly on board when I told them traditional Japanese attractions like samurai and ninjas would be featured. The celebration didn't seem fitting for repelling enemy troops, but my time was probably better spent figuring out how to make sure they'd have a good time rather than worrying about that.

Even though we'd been planning a victory celebration in the other world, Team Amethyst probably wouldn't be able to enjoy it much with all of the cooking and preparation that we'd need to do. As

such, I wanted to have our own little party in Japan first. I tried to think of a restaurant in Japan we could go later in the evening, but nothing really came to mind. Suddenly, my smartphone vibrated, and the name "Kaoruko" appeared on-screen next to an icon. I hadn't even noticed our group name had been changed to "Let's go to another world" until now, which I wasn't sure how to feel about.

Good morning. I heard you had quite a busy night, Leader.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the message. Kaoruko worked at a library and typically had Mondays off. Since she knew what happened last night, she was probably with Marie and had heard all about it. Maybe they were at my or Kaoruko's place.

Honestly, I didn't feel like I'd done much yesterday. I'd been pretty effective at distracting the enemy, but Marie's magic and Kartina's javelin had done most of the work.

Just so you know, I'm probably the weakest one on my team. Anyway, would you like to join our victory celebration tonight? I'm planning to invite Wridra and Shirley. Toru is welcome to join too, if he's available.

I edited the message several times and sent it. Within seconds, her replies popped up one after another. Generally, women seemed to be good at communicating through social media and other apps. Or maybe I just wasn't used to it since I'd only started using them recently.

Oh, that'd be great! We'd love to go! Have you chosen a spot yet? I could ask my husband for recommendations if you haven't.

She sent an image of a character raising both arms and shouting, "Hooray!"

I chuckled again, amused by her sheer enthusiasm. Marie would

have wanted to join the fun if she'd been watching our exchange. I thought I might need to get her a smartphone and smiled. But I realized I probably looked like a weirdo smiling, so I had to be careful.

I appreciated her offering to find a place to eat for us. Despite living in Tokyo for a long time, I didn't go out often for the sake of saving money, so I didn't know many restaurants. There was way too much information online for eateries and vacation destinations, making it difficult to discern which ones were really good. Relying on Toru's experience in times like these was nice. I asked for a place we could get to with a car which served alcohol and preferably offered dishes unique to Japan. By the start of my lunch break, she'd sent me a list of candidates for our dinner spot.

"Oh, interesting..." I said and smiled at my screen. Ms. Elf, the Arkdragon, and the former floor master would surely enjoy this place. I confirmed my option and replied with a circle.

I considered Kartina, the newest member of the team, but decided to invite her some other time. Though I was curious what she'd look like in regular clothes instead of armor, she didn't know anything about this world yet. My discretion wasn't to keep things secret because I didn't trust her, just simply that I had a feeling she'd be a loose cannon if I brought her. I could just picture her charging right at a dump truck or something.

There was a certain dark elf friend I wanted to invite from the other world too. She'd been managing a certain ring that would keep Zarish in check, but I wondered if there was some way for her to come to Japan. When it came to matters of the dream world, the great Arkdragon may have had a solution. I decided to ask Wridra about it later.

And so, I was off to my own personal battle to make sure I'd be able to get off work on time.

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The mansion looked completely different from its usual appearance with dimmed lights. Many injured were lying on the floor

and beds, their blood-soaked bandages painful to see. Originally designed to welcome visitors from distant lands, the building now resembled a field hospital.

A long-eared woman holding a lantern weaved between the sleepers, her footsteps completely silent. Eve the dark elf noticed a girl with a small body nodding off and approached her with a smirk. She lifted Miliasha, who mumbled sleepily from the movement. People claimed the girl was a descendant of the divine, though it was unclear whether that was actually true. Miliasha certainly had a sacred air about her as she'd healed the injured who'd been fighting aboveground and at the ancient labyrinth. Each of the feathers on her wings had glowed with a golden brilliance, beauty taking root in her seemingly youthful face. The contours of her face had been outlined with that same golden glow, and she'd made the wounded soldiers—Eve included—forget all about their pain.

As Eve picked her up, she thought Miliasha was even lighter than she had appeared. She enjoyed the warmth characteristic of children and patted her head while praising her for helping the wounded for so long. She hadn't meant to wake her, but Miliasha tightly embraced Eve's shoulder.

In the back of the building was a staff room. The members of Team Diamond each had their own rooms, but they couldn't seem to break their habit of gathering to sleep in the same area. Many layers of bedding were all over the floor, indicating messy sleeping habits that starkly contrasted their glorious public image, and the dark circles under their eyes as they slept revealed how worn out they'd been. Eve laid the girl down on an open spot on the floor and tucked her in, but Miliasha held on for a while longer. The dark elf would have liked nothing more than to crawl under the bedding but resisted the urge.

This peculiar mansion on the second floor of the ancient labyrinth offered many comforts in the form of lodging, hot springs, and food. Wridra had initially requested payment in exchange, but immediately after the earlier battle, she had decided to provide those services free of charge. This decision was highly praised by Eve, who'd been working there, and by Team Diamond as a whole. They believed it

was the right thing to do and couldn't have borne to ignore the plight of their longtime acquaintances.

Eve quietly left the room where everyone had been sleeping and looked around as if something had just dawned on her. There had been a major change that she hadn't registered until that moment. Everyone used to constantly split up whenever there were injuries to be with their respective teams. But ever since they'd made the second floor their base of operations, the divisions between the teams had been steadily fading away, with members of different teams teaching each other skills and researching Magic Stones. Before they'd set foot into the ancient labyrinth together, the teams had been competing with one another to stand out above the rest. They hadn't realized it, but the soldiers that had once been at odds had been turning into a tight-knit group akin to a village. Having a common goal of conquering the labyrinth and sharing tactical details in depth with each other, no one had fled from fear, even in the face of a powerful enemy in the Gedovar army. It was hard to believe not a single soul had tried to run away, but that was partially thanks to Wridra's mass long-distance movement magic. Anyone could escape anytime, yet no one was dumb enough to run through the desert on their own.

Even with that positive change, the situation was still rather unfortunate for the dark elf, who tended to patients all by herself. It was still the dark hours before dawn. Despite being particularly well-conditioned, the fatigue was getting to her.

She soaked a piece of bloodstained cloth in a bucket of water, the water quickly turning a shade of red. Her golden hair tied behind her head, she repeatedly scrubbed the cloth, squeezed the excess water out of it, and yawned.

"Man... I'm sleepy. Just a bit longer until I swap out. Gotta get through it."

Another member of Team Diamond would switch with her in the morning, then she would indulge in a hot sauna and some cold carbonated mineral water with fruit juice that had been waiting for her. Lying on a sofa in the shade with a drink in hand, enjoying the cool breeze, and taking a nap there sounded simply amazing. Lately,

that had been her favorite way to pass the time whenever she was completely exhausted.

She had willingly volunteered for this job and had even offered to do it free of charge, but Wridra had been adamant about paying her. According to her, "Making people work without pay isn't good for the economy." Being unfamiliar with human customs, Eve couldn't help but wonder what an "economy" was.

Eve had been worried about Zarish, the hero candidate and her lover. His wounds had been healed, but he was resting in a separate room because he had lost too much blood. She sighed, lamenting the fact that she couldn't even talk to him after finally being reunited.

Speaking of not having enough blood, Zera had been in a similar condition. He and Team Andalusite, led by his fiancée Doula, had been running around healing the wounded until recently, leaving them even more exhausted than the patients.

Many of the healthy ones had been working aboveground, looking into the state of the Gedovar army and investigating Aja's trap that had wreaked havoc in a wide area. With everything going on, not everyone was able to fully savor the joy of victory.

"But if everything goes to plan, the victory party will be tonight. I can't wait," Eve said wistfully. "I heard Wridra prepared some weird performance for everyone too. I'm sure that'll brighten things up around here."

Just then, Wridra appeared behind the reception counter. Her glossy black hair was tied into bundles on either side, her alluring bare legs peeking out from her kimono. Shirley peeked out from behind her, clad in a white dress and waving hello.

"'Sup, Wridra and Shirley? You two are up awfully early today."

"Yes, something has come up. Shirley and I will be out for some time. We will return by the evening, so I entrust you to watch over the place in our absence," Wridra said with a smile.

Eve froze mid-wave. Wridra wasn't even trying to hide her cheerful mood, as evidenced by an obvious hop in her step. The biggest tell was the bit of drool at the corner of her mouth. A flash of realization crossed her face before her expression soured.

"Must be nice... I wish I could go eat some yummy food in Japan again," she complained. A moment later, Eve saw the object on her finger, and her blue eyes widened. As long as she had this golden ring, she wouldn't be able to leave this place. Otherwise, Zarish could have ended up going down a dark path again.

The Arkdragon noticed the dark elf's change in expression and tilted her head. "That is quite the conundrum. In shackling the beast, it appears you have shackled yourself as well. But what a coincidence, I have the very same shackles myself."

Wridra raised her hand and showed off the four golden rings on her other hand. Eve's eyes turned into saucers, remembering giving Wridra the rings that Team Diamond had no longer needed.

"Wait a minute. Then, how are you able to go to Japan?!" Eve asked.

"Hah, hah, there is a loophole to everything. As they say, 'If pushing does not work, try pulling.' Ah, but that is a proverb used only in Japan," Wridra said. "Oh well." She beckoned Eve over with a finger.

"Huh? Where are we going? I still have people to attend to..." the dark elf said.

"Shirley. Would you mind taking care of them for a while?" Wridra asked.

The girl with bright blonde hair smiled as if to say, *Leave it to me!* She accepted the cloth from Eve's hands. For some reason, she thought a few of the wounded began stirring and waking up. Soon after, she gently brushed their foreheads with her fingers and exhaled life-infused breath over them, lifting their spirits as if they might soar to the heavens. Some were even grateful for the wounds that brought them this moment. Eve decided to pay them no mind and followed Wridra out of the mansion.

The forest path had grown slightly brighter as dawn approached, and the two walked on it with light steps. Eve's feet grew wet with the morning dew, but the crisp morning air was so invigorating it hardly bothered her.

"Aah, there is something very satisfying about an occasional morning walk. The air here is wonderfully refreshing," Wridra said.

“No kidding. I love it so much that I go running every morning,” Eve replied. “Come to think of it, there are many more deer around here lately. And that bird over there, where are they coming from?”

Wridra only shrugged and smiled.

This land was the domain of Shirley, the former floor master. She embodied the essence of the cycle of life. With the loss of many lives, the forest underwent equivalent change. Since thousands of demons had fallen in battle, changes were inevitable and had even spread to other floors. Perhaps that was why it felt as if there were an abundance of oxygen there. Though its history was remarkably brief, it felt as if they stood within a vast, thriving forest that had been cultivated since the ancient days. Everyone received its blessings—wounds healed faster, and the plants bloomed beautiful flowers. Perhaps the term sacred site would aptly describe the atmosphere.

“This way. Follow me,” Wridra said.

“Huh? I don’t remember there being a path this way...” Eve said as she followed the dragon into a dense forest.

She looked around curiously, baffled that she hadn’t known about the hidden path despite having stayed at the mansion for some time now. However, it was understandable a barrier had protected the area. There was a sacred air about the place as soon as she stepped inside.

“Why did you straighten your back?” Wridra asked.

“Um, I don’t know, but I felt like I should.”

Wridra raised an eyebrow. “In any case, I have invited you here to tell you something important. You may seem frivolous at first glance, but you understand the importance of secrecy.”

“Ah, I actually spilled the beans about our beach trip a while back... Will you forgive me?”

Wridra’s features shifted into a surprised expression, making Eve freeze like a deer in headlights. The Arkdragon’s face then softened into a smile. It had been her attempt at humor, which she had started learning recently. She was enjoying her conversation with the dark elf in her own way.

“Hah, hah, my long-distance travel skill came to light because of

that incident. Everything turned out fine in the end, so I shall forgive you. However...” Wridra trailed off and stopped walking.

A shadow loomed in the deep end of the forest. Eve stopped in place, not because Wridra had done so, but because her body had tensed up from the shocking sight before her: an enormous dragon the color of the midnight sky. Intricate patterns adorned its scales, which glowed in rhythmic bursts every time it drew in breath. A faint rumbling reverberated from it as it growled or purred, and its facial features seemed rather feminine to the dark elf’s eyes.

“Whaaat?! Why? A dragon? How?!”

“It is an Arkdragon that has lived since the ancient age. It generates magic by simply breathing, and a mere exhalation from its nostrils will crumble an entire castle. Long ago, there had even been folktales about swords created by them changing the world,” Wridra explained as she stroked the dragon’s nose. The Arkdragon was a visage of herself, but she had decided it wasn’t necessary for Eve to know that. “If you reveal this secret to anyone, disaster would ensue. You must promise you will speak of this to no one.”

“O-Okay...” Eve said. “Say, would it be okay if I touch it too? Its color is so pretty.”

Wridra’s eyes widened. The girl had known nothing about the ancient dragon, and instead of reacting with fear, Eve simply wanted to touch it because it looked pretty. She chuckled cheerfully, then gestured for Eve to go right ahead. The dark elf squealed like a child and gently touched the wingless black dragon.

The dragon had lost its wings just the previous day. In exchange, it had gained a new compatriot in Kalina, which was currently undergoing repairs from the fierce clash with the Prominence Dragon. Eve would have to wait a while to meet Kalina. Some would say the patterns adorning the dragon’s scales were as fantastical as constellations. Warmth radiated from its body, and there was something profoundly mystical about the creature.

Wridra cocked her head at Eve, wondering if she had been becoming more like Kitase, and softly said, “Lend your ring to this dragon, and you will be able to visit Japan whenever you wish. An ancient dragon will have no issues keeping it hidden from others and

would never even think to use it for evil."

The dark elf had finally remembered the ring and slowly turned to face Wridra, her hand still petting the dragon. Yet the ring also symbolized her connection with her loved one. Although temporary, she couldn't help but feel conflicted about giving it up.

As Wridra noticed Eve's internal struggle, Wridra smiled knowingly. "Not to worry. You need not decide now. As it happens, we will be going on a trip to Japan soon. I hear it will be a village of samurai and ninjas. It sounds quite intriguing, so you may take your time and decide by the time the day comes—"

"What? No! Don't leave me! I wanna go!" Eve snapped.

Wridra looked at Eve with blank bewilderment; then her laughter echoed through the mountains. She had expected the dark elf to take a few days to decide. Even she couldn't have predicted it would take mere seconds. When Wridra thought about it, she had been the same. Her meeting with Kitase and Marie hadn't been on friendly terms by any means, but their relationship had started with a boxed lunch. They had grown closer through their adventures, spending time with them ever since. She smiled at Eve like she would have smiled at the savage dragon she had once been.

Eve then returned to the mansion, her face alight with cheer, utterly unlike the expression she'd worn when she left. Somehow, every last one of the wounded patients from the morning had already been completely healed.

§

Wait, it's dark outside?

I woke up in bed rather perplexed as I stared out the window and around the room. I usually woke up at dawn, but it was still dark, and a dim downlight illuminated the room. Something else caught my attention: I felt something soft other than my pillow on my head, and someone was stroking my bangs. Whoever it was, they patted my head as if I were their child. I looked up, and a pair of sky blue eyes met my gaze, then blinked. I recognized the pale skin and bright blonde hair as the person tilted her head, a gesture that she

used often.

"Hmm? Shirley?"

The woman, who always seemed to be positively glowing, was a member of Team Amethyst. Even if she was a familiar face, I was still confused about why I was lying on her lap. Shirley smiled upside down and mouthed, "Good morning." It wasn't morning anymore, but I returned the greeting out of courtesy.

I sensed someone's presence behind me, then heard a loud yawn. The other guest, Wridra the Arkdragon, seemed to have woken up. Then I remembered I'd gone to pick them up for the celebration tonight. But as she continued to delicately brush my hair on her soft thighs, I felt my eyelids grow heavy again. I began to nod off, the comfort of sleep threatening to pull me back into the dream world. It was as if a silent lullaby were emanating from her.

"I can't... I have plans to show you all a good time tonight. If I fall asleep, the Lady Arkdragon over there will get really upset. Honestly, I'd love to doze off right now," I said with my hands raised in surrender. Shirley revealed her white teeth with an amused smile and giggled. "Wait, did I just hear you laugh?"

As I sat up and looked at her, she only cocked her head again. Maybe I'd imagined it, but even her face looked more lively or not as translucent. Something felt different, and as I tried to figure it out, Wridra stirred behind me.

"You are not imagining it. Shirley has gained power from the third floor master," she said, yawning.

I turned around reflexively and realized my mistake when I found her completely naked. Wridra hadn't visited in the form of a cat this time but as a black-haired beauty. She reached over and grabbed my head without so much as raising an eyebrow, then turned me around so I would face Shirley again.

All I could do was sputter out, "Sorry!"

The woman chuckling with her distinctive laugh was the Arkdragon, or rather one of her dragon cores—though I didn't fully understand how that worked. Her big tail moved out of the corner of my eye, and a horn grew out of her forehead. Those two features obviously set her apart from the average woman of this world.





"You need not apologize, I simply find clothing uncomfortable when sleeping. While I do not mind you seeing me in the slightest, I imagine it would upset Marie. I have been looking forward to tonight's dinner and would rather avoid her kicking me out of the restaurant."

I had a feeling she wouldn't need to worry about that. Marie would probably direct her anger at me by throwing a pillow at my face, pinching my cheeks, and, if she was *really* upset, punching my stomach. Lying on someone's lap was also pretty dangerous, but she wasn't here at the moment. I wondered if I should have considered myself lucky.

"In any case, Adom Zweihander, the third floor master, entrusted his existence and future to Shirley instead of vanishing entirely. That must be why she has taken a step closer to humanity," Wridra said.

That reminded me of the light particles Shirley's hand had absorbed after the battle on the third floor. I hadn't understood the significance of that event, but Shirley's presence had become more tangible. She was just as odd as ever, though. For some reason, she touched my forehead with her slender fingers. Her soft skin stroked mine, almost like when a dog or cat greeted one of its kind. Her sky blue eyes lit up like those of a child.

Wridra was probably the only one who had the answers. I heard rustling behind me as she put on some clothes before she said in a lighthearted tone, "The realm of gods is quite interesting. There, wishes can be granted as long as they are within reason. Shirley took a step or two into the realm of gods. Hah, hah. To think she has the ability to make her own wish come true... You truly have some eccentric friends."

Shirley was the most eccentric of them all, but I was surprised to hear she'd approached godhood so casually.

"Wishes are tenuous things," she went on. "They are shapeless and lack reason or fairness. But strangely, a wish can come true if it is strong enough. They are not good by any stretch, but I do find them fascinating."

Wridra appeared from the edge of my vision with a grin. She'd finally finished dressing, and her tail and horn had vanished. Yet in

her case, her allure couldn't be contained just by putting on some clothes. The dim downlight emphasized the size of her breasts even more, so I struggled to hide my inner turmoil.

I then noticed Shirley was making an expression I'd never seen on her before. She looked at me as if her emotions had abruptly vanished, and even the color in her blue eyes seemed to have faded. She placed both hands on my shoulders from behind and pulled me backward with one quick tug.

This was bad. Now I was *really* glad Marie wasn't around and had to keep myself from focusing on the soft sensation pressing against my back. I was surprised again to find Shirley casting a subtle glare at Wridra, another thing I'd never seen her do. The Arkdragon, on the other hand, seemed entirely unbothered and chuckled with amusement.

"Hah, hah, that is the nature of wishes. One will not be content once they come true, and they will only desire more each and every time. The girl who had gained physical form as she'd wished is now bothered by something that previously hadn't concerned her at all. *This* is what I meant when I'd said they're 'not good,'" Wridra said as she playfully poked the hand on my shoulder with a smile. "I do wonder what the girl who became even more mortal wishes to do now."

Shirley didn't respond to Wridra's teasing for some time. Because I was curious, I slowly turned around and was surprised to find her face was bright red. She looked as though steam would rise from her face any minute now. She pushed me away, although she was the one who'd pressed up against me in the first place, then took in quick, shallow breaths. Judging by her visible tension, her heart must have been pounding in her chest. Her eyes began to water, and I figured Wridra was right. Shirley had changed, and not in a bad way. Maybe it was just me, but I saw her kind of like a sister. She'd always seemed so laid-back and almost oblivious to the chaos around her, so I couldn't help but worry she'd get hurt somehow.

I realized that even though she'd practically entered godhood, it wasn't like she was going away. The thought was somewhat relieving, and maybe she'd sensed my thoughts because she

nervously moved her face closer to mine. Sweat ran down on her forehead, and she nodded to reassure me she wouldn't leave.

"Good," I said. "And Shirley, since you can laugh out loud now, does that mean you can talk too?"

She blinked with her big blue eyes, then shook her head vigorously. Her face had turned red again, suggesting she was too shy to speak rather than physically incapable, but I decided not to pry any further. Maybe she would talk on her own someday.

"So you have a physical body now. I guess that means you won't have to borrow mine anymore," I said before her expression froze as if she were in shock. "Oh, uh, I didn't mean it would bother me if you did! But you'll be able to enjoy good food without tasting it through me now! Wouldn't you like that?"

She'd only visited Japan as a ghostly figure before, experiencing it vicariously through my senses. I thought she'd be thrilled about tasting dinner with her own tongue tonight. When I saw her conflicted expression, I realized maybe things weren't that simple. Perhaps she really enjoyed haunting my body. She was welcome to do so, but whenever I lent her my body, I lost all sense of taste for some reason.

Today was the commemorative day in which Shirley had gained a body of her own, so I had to tell her the customary saying, "So, welcome to Japan, a land full of entertainment, peace, food, and culture, Ms. Shirley!"

She had become closer to godhood as the air around us turned fresh and clear like a storm had passed, with lights flickering all around her. Even if the sight had a sense of holiness, it didn't make her seem in any way unapproachable. Shirley had more of a serene air about her, like a girl who'd lived a peaceful life in the rural countryside, which was very fitting for her. It was hard to believe she'd once killed people left and right.

Her lips moved as if she'd mouthed, *I'm looking forward to it.* Then she smiled.

§

It was already completely dark outside. As we moved away from Kinshicho Station, we entered an area with mostly restaurants and bars, where businessmen getting off of work wandered in for a night of drinking. Although the area boasted many bright, trendy-looking restaurants, it had been populated by old-fashioned, rough-around-the-edges pubs for the masses. I hadn't spent much time at these places before, but I was ready to enjoy my night to the fullest.

I walked up to the man standing under a streetlight and said, "Sorry for the wait."

"Oh, you got here earlier than I thought!" Toru exclaimed with a cheerful smile. His expression had a warmness indicating that we were no longer just neighbors but friends who genuinely enjoyed spending time with each other. Something told me I wasn't the only one who felt that way. He and his wife had accidentally discovered the dream world, and Kaoruko had nearly cut off all contact with us because of a misunderstanding. Thankfully, things had ended up all right, and our friendship had grown. Back then, I thought I was gonna get stomach ulcers from the stress...

Judging by the business suit Toru was wearing, I figured he'd just gotten off of his government job. He glanced behind me and smiled again, noticing Kaoruko approaching with a little wave and the visitors from the other world.

"Welcome back!" his wife said.

"I'm home— Well, not yet. This is the entertainment district. I guess I won't get scolded no matter how much I drink here, so that's nice," Toru replied.

Things had seemingly changed a bit between him and his wife since the incident. Kaoruko approached him and embraced his arm lovingly, reminding me of how they'd been in the dream world.

"No, you still shouldn't drink too much," she said. "But you haven't been working overtime much lately, and you've been coming straight home without drinking, so you can do it within reason."

Toru cheered and flashed a wide smile. He then turned to the three ladies from the other world, whose fantastical appearances had been drawing some looks from passersby.

"The chicken spot we're going to is so good, I really think you

should bring their dishes back to your world. It's really popular among travelers from other countries, and I'm sure it'll be a hit with everyone too."

That was all it took for their colorful eyes to light up with excitement, except for Shirley. She didn't seem to fully follow and looked back at the red paper lantern she'd passed by earlier.

By "everyone," Toru was likely referring to everyone living on the second floor of the ancient labyrinth. More than half of the people in Japan didn't drink, but things were different in the dream world. There was a strong belief there that people who abstained from alcohol weren't really adults, and being a big drinker was considered a bragging point. I couldn't understand that part of their culture, but our worlds had similarities. Namely, the idea that good food and drinks went hand in hand.

We walked around while gazing at the Tokyo Skytree for some time, and our destination appeared ahead. Toru recognized the large lanterns hanging under its eaves and turned to us with a gentle smile.

"There it is. I've been a regular at this place for some time. While I wouldn't call it fancy and refined, it's more about that cozy, old-fashioned vibe that I like. I'm sure you're all going to love it."

"I am looking forward to it," Wridra said. "Your recommendations have always been top-notch."

We all nodded in agreement. None of the places Toru had recommended had ever been a miss. I considered my grandpa my cooking mentor, and for picking shops and sightseeing destinations, the Ichijos were my go-to authority.

It was no wonder Toru had praised the place's vibe, as we found it pleasant immediately upon entering. Maybe it was the timber from old Japanese houses used in its architecture, but the interior had warmth and character, with lanterns adding a classic touch to the decor. The guests had likely never before had dishes using binchotan charcoal, which filled the air with an appetizing aroma. For someone on an empty stomach, the scent of sizzling tare sauce was nearly unbearable. It seeped into the chicken skin, and its sweet-and-salty fragrance hung in the air around us as it cooked. We could all tell it

would be delicious just by the smell alone.

The women from the dream world had enchanting, beautiful faces, which made it all the funnier when they gazed at the food hungrily as if they were going to devour it with their eyes. All three had lived far longer than me, yet they occasionally acted like adorable children.

One thing that hadn't changed about Kaoruko was the way she was watching them. She wore a warm, relaxed expression as if observing her beloved child. She looked delighted they'd brought us here, and I totally understood how she felt. This was exactly why I often treated them to good food and sightseeing spots.

"Ahh! What a delectable fragrance. This is nothing like the type of chicken I had in mind. Kitase, what is that object that resembles burnt wood?" Wridra asked.

"The charcoal with white powder on it is called binchotan. Unlike cooking directly with fire, it makes the skin crispy and fragrant while keeping it unbelievably juicy on the inside. The binchotan gives it this characteristic scent and flavor. Actually, it would be better for you to experience it yourself. We'll be eating good tonight, Wridra."

It was best to get their expectations up at times like these. Just like smell and sight, words had a way of stimulating appetite. As I'd expected, the black-haired beauty's eyes lit up even more. Her cheeks turned pink with an eager, restless glow, and she gulped audibly as she thought about the upcoming meal.

Wridra clung to my arm, which was rare. But she only did so to lean in closer to stare at the yakitori, or chicken skewers, while we waited to be seated. It felt less like the embrace of a loving couple and more like I was trying to keep a curious cat reined in.

The Japanese pop ballads playing over the speakers gave the place a distinct atmosphere, and the fragrant aroma gave it an irresistible allure. But it didn't just feel old. All the wood used in its interior gave it a modern feel. It seemed like it would be popular with a diverse clientele, including international guests.

As soon as we were seated, I opened the menu and started ordering. I'd expected to have to explain the items to the ladies, since they weren't used to dining at places like this. Still, Marie

immediately pointed at the chicken wings and exclaimed, "I want this!"

Wridra added, "I want this, this, and..." Her order seemingly had no end in sight.

I casually glanced over at the Ichijos and made eye contact, the three of us making a nonverbal agreement to split the bill. Toru nodded as if to say, *We planned on paying, but I suppose that's for the best.*

Kaoruko nodded in agreement.

After some impatient waiting, we received a plate full of wings. The golden-brown chicken sizzled, the charred bits making it all the more tempting. The skewers probably looked like a primitive cooking method to the uninitiated, as it seemed like something anyone could do, but that was simply untrue. Specific conditions had to be met to cook with binchotan, and one needed high-quality chicken and in-depth knowledge of how quickly each part cooked, along with the seasonings that went well with them.

The three otherworldly guests bit into the chicken skewers. Their teeth sank into the crispy, charred surface, then came the toasty aroma and a flood of juicy fat. Their wide-eyed expressions told me the women could hardly believe something just sprinkled with salt could be so flavorful.

Visitors from other countries would likely think it was just a restaurant that cooked chicken. Restaurants worldwide served all sorts of fancy, colorful dishes. Compared to those, yakitori looked rather dull, but Japan was a land relentless in its quest to perfect the art of its cuisine. Maybe that was why the three women groaned with satisfaction as they savored the taste of their skewers. They may have been wondering how the meat, merely seasoned with salt and warmed with heat, could yield such a rich flavor. That very simplicity might have brought out the true essence of the ingredients.

As Toru had mentioned earlier, yakitori was popular with the international crowd. I'd once heard that someone who'd visited Japan on a business trip tried yakitori and loved it so much that he went on many more business trips here just to eat more chicken

skewers. While working overtime one day, he had muttered that he wanted to go back to his home country and open a yakitori place.

A good meal wouldn't be complete without some good drinks. We could hardly wait any longer when the beer arrived, and our hands reached for the ice-cold mugs at once. Carbonated beer was perfect for washing down the fat from the chicken, but I remembered why we were there in the first place just before I took a swig.

"Sorry, I completely forgot that this was supposed to be a celebration," I said, and the three women's eyes widened. They each laughed, probably out of embarrassment, as they realized their appetite had gotten the better of them. "This is in celebration of conquering the ancient labyrinth's third floor, Wridra's victory over the Prominence Dragon, and repelling the Gedovar forces, though we weren't really involved in the last one. Anyway, we overcame some unbelievably difficult battles thanks to everyone here."

I smiled involuntarily. As I recalled, our achievements truly were unbelievable. If it had been a different age, those that had gathered at the oasis might have been hailed as heroes; maybe the people of Arilai already thought of them that way. That had been their first time defending a siege from Gedovar's army, and they'd come out victorious. I wondered if it was fine for us to celebrate in such a normal restaurant after achieving such a monumental feat. But when I saw the expressions on the women's faces, I knew this had been the right choice. I could tell Wridra was thinking, *Hurry up and finish talking so I can eat already.* I had to wrap this up before she'd hate me. Her glare was scaring me.

"So, cheers. Enjoy the delicious food befitting Team Amethyst's glory," I said.

Our beer mugs clinked together, and it brought me joy to see everyone's smiling faces.

There were all sorts of rules for table manners around the world, but there was no need to worry about that here. After all, skewers were quite primitive; one had only to pick them up and bite the meat on the stick. Anyone who tried it would quickly understand why it had been such a popular dish for so long.

"Mmf! Delicious! It is simply grilled chicken, but it has such a

bold, savory kick of umami! The fat on it is simply amazing!" Wridra exclaimed.

"My goodness, the skin on Japanese chicken is so fragrant!" Marie squealed. "Oh, it's too good! I'm gonna gain weight! Ah! And this liver is so tasty! It has such a smooth texture and that light but full-bodied flavor! I give it a perfect ten out of ten!"

The chicken that had been cooked with high heat using binchotan was crispy on the outside yet moist and sweet on the inside. It was amusing to see Shirley nodding vigorously in agreement with the others.

Since we were in public, Marie was hiding her characteristic long elven ears. She seemed to especially like the wings and took another bite before wiping the juices from her lips.

"I've tried lots of different cuisines before, but I love how Japanese food brings out the ingredients' true flavors using simple cooking methods. It's unbelievable that it's only seasoned with salt, which makes me feel oddly nostalgic too," she said.

That reminded me of her elven village, where we'd spent time together when we were young. The village had been intertwined with nature, and life there had been sustained through hunting and foraging. Maybe these sorts of meals gave her a sense of comforting familiarity. Unlike the fowl she was used to, jidori chicken apparently brimmed with the essence of how genuine chicken was supposed to taste. The simple cooking method made the difference even more apparent. The Ichijos were better at explaining how brand-name chicken and jidori stood out from the rest, and they gave her the short version.

Afterward, Marie simply replied, "They raise their chickens like they're royalty." This got a laugh out of the table.

Tasty meals paired with the right drinks loosened our tongues quite well, except for one woman. Wridra, her cheeks rosy from alcohol, sighed with a dissatisfied look for some reason. Her silky black hair wavered as she turned to look me in the eyes and said, "I yearn to bring this taste back to the mansion! The *true* taste of chicken, beef, and pork as well! Yet, it grieves me to admit I do not possess the sufficient means to procure it. How cruel fate is. Despite

my wealth in the other realm, I am powerless to attain what I desire most!”

Uh... Is chicken *what Wridra desires most?*

I’d expected her to talk about some heavy topic. It was hard to believe that statement had come out of one who’d attained the utmost mastery of sorcery. First of all, if she brought chicken over to the other world, that meant it would be clucking under my pillow all night. There was no way I would deal with that, but Marie and Shirley were nodding deeply in agreement.

“Such a shame that money from the other side is completely useless here. We could have used it for food, clothes, and going on all sorts of vacations. I’m not even all that happy when I get rewards for completing missions these days,” Marie said.

“I get that too,” I remarked. “What I want out of the dream world is adventure and battle, and I have no interest in making money over there. Nothing’s more exciting than challenging a seemingly unbeatable opponent, and it’s a good way to relieve stress from work... That’s what you mean, right?”

“No, not even close. You’re talking about something else entirely,” she said with a cold stare. Even Shirley was shaking her head. I really thought we’d been on the same page.

The Ichijos, however, found the exchange amusing and laughed out loud. It made me reaffirm that our relationship had greatly changed from before; we conversed much easier with them now that they knew our situation.

Toru caught his breath after having a good laugh, then smiled and said, “I don’t know if I understand your love for battle, but I do get how awe-inspiring exceptional food can be. Half of the reason I travel everywhere with Kaoruko is to experience all sorts of cuisines.”

“He’s right. But in his case, the other half is alcohol,” Kaoruko said with an admonishing look at her husband, who made a strained groan in response, a cold sweat beading on his brow.

Kaoruko’s used skewers, plates, and beer had been neatly organized on the table, reflecting her personality as an assiduous librarian. Toru, on the other hand, had been handling his plates with notable coarseness. I felt like I’d gotten a glance at how they were

during their travels.

"S-Sorry about that... Enjoying local drinks while traveling has a draw to it that's impossible to resist. But walking around that vast stretch of land at the ancient labyrinth and trying food only available in that region was an amazing experience too," Toru said with a reflective sincerity.

"I know what you mean," Kaoruko said in a heartfelt tone and nodded.

The second floor was reborn thanks to Shirley, who ate a dish with seaweed, chicken, and shishito pepper on white rice. Those who knew what the floor used to look like would be shocked to see it so full of lush foliage these days. The land thrived with life, and Shirley was practically on her way to becoming a deity. Yet she just gazed intently at her bowl as if thinking, *This is so good!* Shirley chewed for a while, then cast a glance at Wridra as if to say, *Let's make this next.*

But the Arkdragon agreed simply by making eye contact.

Are you two reshaping the historic labyrinth completely based on your self-interests?

I wondered how the legendary Arkdragon, who'd persisted since the days of old, had become so gluttonous. Then the day I handed her my boxed lunch when she'd been in her humanoid form flashed in my mind.

She'd been so enthralled that she'd kissed the boxed lunch. Could that have triggered her to change? Was that the forbidden apple that led the master of magic onto the path of a foodie? No, that couldn't be; it was just a coincidence. I repeatedly denied it, turning pale at the edge of my seat.

Wridra sipped her cold sake and seemed visibly pleased by its refreshing aftertaste. It was the local sake Toru had recommended earlier. "Hm, I shall discuss the chicken with Shirley at a later time. The males here shall somehow handle the cooking method, in any case. However, we must determine how to renovate the third floor moving forward. There are challenges to resolve, but it would be a shame to let such a large piece of land sit idle."

With that, she pointed at me with her chopsticks in violation of

proper table manners.

The mention of the third floor reminded me of the expanse of black grass, the land where we'd faced off against Adom Zweihander and the three demons that had been summoned out of nowhere. I imagined us surrounded by the dense, ancient atmosphere of the hall, joyfully cooking chicken, of all things.

No, I don't like this. It's ruining my image of a fantasy world!

As I agonized over the thought, Wridra moved her face right up to mine, looking somewhat buzzed. "Why are you holding your head in your hands, Kitase? Shirley must properly maintain the cycle of life now that she has been granted the floor master's powers. Otherwise, that floor will slowly die."

"Hm? Oh, so she's going to work on the third floor like she did with the second floor? I thought you were gonna have me make yakitori there or something," I said, laughing. But Wridra merely held her pretty smile and stared at me, and my laughter slowly dried. Although I'd expected her to deny it, she remained silent, her smile only growing wider.

Shirley sat beside her in a dreamy state, lost in her own little world. Maybe she was picturing herself savoring good food and sake to her heart's content.

Personally, the second floor hall was enough already. It was a lush, verdant place with beautiful views, and the mansion offered all the comforts one would ever need. If I had one complaint, it would be the fact that I'd been forced to work there. Come to think of it, that must have been one of the challenges Wridra had mentioned. Not enough workers would be available if they worked on the next floor. Even the mansion was barely functional with the addition of Team Diamond. The Lizardmen handled the bulk of physical labor, but procuring enough personnel to cover both floors didn't seem realistic. Besides, they hadn't even decided the specifics of the renovations on the new location.

Toru appeared to hold his liquor well, as the few drinks he had consumed barely affected him. He'd apparently heard our conversation about the dream world and was excited to join in, his eyes as round as saucers.

“Ooh, you can repurpose a big plot of land as you please? That’s amazing! Given the limited space in Japan, that sounds like a dream for a commoner like me. The population is very dense here, so creating a comfortable, livable community is not easy. I’d love to work in a place like that without restrictions,” he said.

“Hm, you work in a government office, do you not? Toru, how would you work with a sizable expanse of land if you were free to modify it? The goal would be to make it an enjoyable place to live. It costs nothing to speak your mind, so go right ahead,” Wridra said with her head resting on one hand. It seemed her curiosity had been piqued. There was something inherently intimidating about her demeanor as a dragon, but a remarkable sense of elegance emanated from her slender neck.

Despite the situation, Toru remained calm and poured some cold sake into his clear glass. He must have been picturing scenery from the fantasy world in his mind, as he had a somewhat hazy look to his eyes. After a pause, he opened his mouth again.

“Kaoruko loves books, so a big library would be nice. A book collection in that world would likely have an exotic charm to it, and I’d love to read with a scenic window view myself.” A library popped into our imaginary design. There must have been more to his vision as he traced a finger along the table, spreading a bead of water from his glass like he was drawing up a land readjustment. “You know those fantastical towns you see in picture books? I’d like to see one with my own eyes. A town full of greenery where fairies would occasionally appear, and a winding staircase that extends up to historic architecture... Maybe I’m a romantic like Kitase.”

He laughed self-deprecatingly, but his wife Kaoruko seemed to have enjoyed his description. She smiled at him and refilled his glass as if to praise him for a job well done.

“That was wonderful,” she said. “Maybe it’s because I’ve been to that world myself, but you’ve painted a clear picture in my mind.”

While Wridra, Shirley, and Marie were lost in their fantasies, the look in Toru’s eyes changed as he tipped his drink. His gaze was sharp, like that of a veteran merchant.

“Now, this is where we get down to business. If you want to

enhance the town's appearance, you'll need to consider setting aside high-end residential districts in advance. Within that area, you'll have to decide the prime and nonprime plots from the beginning, then sell them off in order. It'll be much more profitable to take preorders before actually starting the construction," he explained.

The conversation suddenly turned real. I thought about pointing it out jokingly, but it seemed Toru was totally focused on money now. I wasn't the only one weirded out by it, judging by Kaoruko's expression.

"I can guarantee the prime plots will sell first," he went on. "When that happens, everyone else will finally realize they need to jump on the next plot as soon as it becomes available, or they'll miss out. That's when things get interesting. They'll sell like hotcakes as bidders fight over the available plots."

Kaoruko froze in place as she was about to pour some more sake. I understood how she felt as her sparkling fantasy world was about to be pulled into a gritty, gray reality. Marie looked dumbfounded, yet the Arkdragon beside her had the completely opposite reaction.

"You have quite the potential! Nothing like Kitase and Marie, who have nothing but vague thoughts in their heads," she said. "I see. So you would plan to sell high-priced dwellings and thereby amass great profit in a single stroke. Quite cunning."

"No, it would be a waste to restrict the collection of funds to a single transaction. You could charge for repairs and yard maintenance and use those funds to hire laborers. Oh, do you know what business Japan particularly excels at?" Toru asked.

We shook our heads. Half of us clearly weren't interested in finding out, but Wridra and Toru paid us no mind.

"Service," he continued. "There are two major types of business: selling goods and offering services. Instead of just selling houses and ending there, you can continue taking care of the clients to extract money from them in the long term. This country seems friendly from the outside, but it's pretty scary if you think about it."

Oh, they were scary, all right. Their goal was development, so their intentions were at least partially sound. But seeing Wridra nodding enthusiastically and the glimmer in Toru's eyes as they

talked about making money... It was honestly a bit terrifying. I felt like I was watching a runaway truck swerving all over the place.

Marie gave me a look that suggested we let them do as they pleased and learn a lesson the hard way. I nodded, though I would have loved to see the fantasy town Toru had envisioned. Usually, this would have ended in the realm of imagination. They were talking about a massive undertaking, and no one had expected any of it to come to fruition. But one woman gazed into the void, lost in her thoughts as she chewed on her chicken skewers.

Shirley had been the guardian of the forest during the Age of Night, transformed into the terrifying floor master at the hands of the ancients. She'd wandered the labyrinth for what must have been an eternity. What had possessed her to walk the path to godhood once she'd regained her freedom? She knew the answer was for love.

She listened blissfully as the others talked and laughed. There were people she loved all around her who treated her as a neighbor, as a friend instead of one to be revered or feared. She could sense their love in kind, which was hard to believe for someone who'd spent so much time in solitude. It made her so happy that she wanted to skip through a meadow. Her friends were just that important to her that she could imagine the third floor. In the corner of the long-standing yakitori restaurant, she wished to change the world for the better for the sake of her companions.

§

The streets were so quiet in the darkness that it was hard to believe it had been bustling with life not too long ago. Cars were much more sparse, and few businessmen were on their way home from work. We'd been talking so much that time had flown by before I knew it.

After paying our bill, we went for a walk around Kinshicho. The night air was cold, but we were feeling so good from the meal and drinks that we didn't mind. I glanced at Marie, who had her arm

around mine, her eyes half-lidded. It was probably because of the sake, but it made me feel trusted, which was nice. Unfortunately, she looked a bit too young to be inebriated in public. She'd only been taking sips when the servers weren't looking, so I didn't think she'd drunk too much tonight.

"Are you okay? Feeling tipsy?" I asked.

There was a pause, then Marie shook her head. I could feel her warmth through her arm, like a child about to doze off. She struggled to keep her eyes open, and I realized she'd usually be asleep by now. She'd always bragged about being older and more mature than me, but the elf girl with eyes like gemstones was no match for drowsiness. Her white hair whipped around as she shook her head several more times and buried her face into my chest. I was worried she'd mistaken me for her bed, and sure enough, she nuzzled into me like she usually did before falling asleep.

Whoa, she's really warm.

"Enough of your public flirting, Kitase," Wridra said, putting a hand on my shoulder with Shirley peeking from behind her. But once the Arkdragon saw Marie's face, her admonishing look softened considerably. Her expression clearly showed that she saw Marie as a younger sister. When she spoke again, it was almost a whisper, her tone gentle and maternal. "Hah, hah, it appears there will be no second stop. Take her home and let her rest."

Wridra stroked Marie's white hair. Their roles were completely reversed from when the Arkdragon was in her cat form. I couldn't blame her after seeing the elf girl's serene expression and hearing her soft sleeping noises. She was like a lovable child you just wanted to coddle.

I looked up at the clear night sky. If it hadn't been for the city lights, the stars probably would've been almost *too* bright in the vast expanse of darkness. Carrying Marie on my back under the starry sky was quite a fresh experience for me, and the sound of her breathing next to my ear was strangely enjoyable.

As the others chatted among themselves, a thought came to me. After having our fill of delicious food and laughing until our sides hurt, the allure of sleep was too hard to resist. We were like a group

of children in that sense, but in the ancient labyrinth, we were an elite squad of unstoppable fighters. This experience demonstrated that one couldn't judge a book by its cover.

As I felt Marie's warmth against my back, I thought it was about time for us to visit the dream world. I'd heard Wridra had been preparing some performances and the folks there had incredibly powerful personalities compared to Japanese people. The situation would probably be absolute chaos, yet they'd succeeded in a colossal achievement; Hakam and Aja would surely let things slide for this occasion.

I readjusted Marie on my back and began walking again. As always, the view of the Skytree at night was absolutely gorgeous.





Episode 2: Celebration in the Fantasy World

A sharp crack resounded as a fawn grazed on grass. The animal covered in curly fur was only a few weeks old. Based on the sound it made as it hungrily munched on the grass around it, the animal had once been called polpol. At this age, they were known as deer. This living being had entered the cycle of life facilitated by Shirley. It was perhaps reborn from the monsters that had turned to dust and vanished, a human that had attempted to raid the labyrinth, or a different entity entirely. Even Shirley likely hadn't been keeping track of all of the souls she had guided. The process came naturally to her without conscious thought, like taking in a breath or stretching a limb.

This place, where terrifying monsters had once roamed, had completely transformed into a world of lush vegetation and vast expanses of fields. The dramatic change was nothing short of a miracle, but no one on the second floor, including the polpol, seemed all that concerned. Polpol only considered it a place to eat and sleep.

The polpol shook its ears, then noticed something and stopped grazing to peek out of the overgrown grass. The wind carried the sound of instruments from the human settlement nearby, which was a cheerful and jaunty tune that made one want to stand on their tiptoes. Even the animal, which understood nothing about music, listened intently. Judging by the way it shook its little tail, the creature seemed to be enjoying it.

The event happening in the second floor hall was being held to honor those who had defeated countless formidable enemies against seemingly impossible odds. They had since discovered many Magic Stones and valuables. Yet the Arkdragon, who had been living with

humans for a long time, believed monetary rewards simply wouldn't suffice for those who had fought through the grueling battles and seized victory. Thus, she invited many to the celebration without telling Kitase.

With the stage adorned with simple-colored flowers, people gathering with instruments in hand, and several attendees already digging into the food and drinks, things certainly differed significantly from an ordinary night on the second floor. Those who had just survived such a fatal battle might have found it modest, but their faces were all lit up with joy.

Suddenly, a dark elf woman's voice rang out, "Whaaat?!"

The disgusted scream had come from Eve, a member of Arilai's elite Team Diamond. Each team member was so exceptionally beautiful that they were compared to a jewelry box collection and had many fans, men and women alike. On the battlefront, they struck down their foes with speed and coordination as they captivated every man's gaze in the glittering high society. Yet something had elicited such a visceral reaction out of Eve that her face contorted with revulsion, the expression ruining her natural beauty.

"Why. Do. I. Have to massage people?!" Eve roared, stomping her foot as she spat out each word. The birds and deer fled, startled by her loud voice.

The man standing before her looked defeated and stared blankly at the animals. Despite the deep wrinkles covering his face, his bronze-hued body showed no signs of decline, perpetually exuding the aura of a veteran. Yet his face showed the fatigue of his years, or perhaps he was simply thinking, *Please, give me a break already.*

His expression darkened further as Eve grabbed him by the collar.

"Are you listening, *sir*?" she growled.

"Ah! Yes! Yes, of course I am, Eve!" Hakam said in a fluster.

Hakam was the overseer of the labyrinth raid and the man who had coordinated all plans for the previous battles. He was an important figure tasked with conquering the labyrinth under the direct order of the king of Arilai. But at that moment, he had no air of authority about him at all. Perhaps he was ashamed of his request

to Eve, as his following excuses came out as barely audible mumbles.

"I'm sorry, I made the promise without thinking. I've already told the men that whoever stood out the most in the battle with the demon army would get a massage from you."

"And I'm telling you, you're not making any sense! What do you mean by a *massage*? Everyone didn't put their lives on the line just so I'd rub their shoulders, did they?" Eve shot back.

She couldn't understand why such a reward was offered in a battle with Arilai's future on the line. Regardless, Hakam could hardly tell her it had been so effective that the battle could have turned out differently if he hadn't made the promise. He hadn't foreseen the soldiers' irrational assumption that this reward, reserved for the most valiant warrior against the enemy army, couldn't have been a normal massage. Hakam suspected that using Eve's name only deepened the misunderstanding.

The sight of Eve fighting eagerly on the front lines, her skin glowing in the sun, had left quite an indelible impression on many. Some were captivated by her dynamic fighting style, while others lauded her well-developed breasts and curvy hips. Her current attire revealed quite a bit of her tanned skin, the outline of her rear accentuated by her short shorts. Even if her maid outfit was supposedly designed with mobility in mind, she hadn't realized it had the side effect of attracting the male gaze. However, Hakam couldn't tell her that her strutting around in that provocative attire drew unwanted lust.

Perhaps Eve read his thoughts as she covered up her chest and scowled. "You're not thinking of making me do something indecent, are you?!"

Eve had been becoming more expressive each day. She was friendly and smiled often, which explained why her popularity among the men had skyrocketed. The stark contrast with the contemptuous glare was quite startling.





"N-No, of course not!" he said. "I would never request such a thing from a team member. All I ask is that you rub their shoulders and back a little, as a way to care for the exhausted warriors."

"Eh, I don't know... Why does it have to be me, anyway? There are plenty of other women, like Wridra, Shirley, and the rest of Team Diamond. So why?" Eve asked with a reproachful glare.

Hakam fell silent. Even if someone had put a knife to his throat, he absolutely couldn't admit he had chosen Eve because she seemed more approachable than the other women. He had assumed that if he pleaded desperately enough, she would have answered, *Okay!*

Suddenly, he realized why Eve's personality had changed so drastically. Zarish, the former hero candidate, had used a certain ring to dominate Team Diamond and had also been draining their levels. He had been treating them as slaves and eye candy, as well as abusing them when they upset him in any way.

The blood of dark elves ran deep. Because of their naturally gifted abilities, they had left numerous stains on the history of the elven race in the past. Eve had been driven from her homeland due to her race's circumstances and often lashed out at those around her out of a subconscious desire not to be persecuted. However, she and the rest of Team Diamond's true personalities had bloomed as soon as they had been released from the ring's hold. Since then, they had been seen talking and laughing among themselves and with other teams.

Hakam, who had been secretly concerned for the women, was happier than anyone when news of the raid team defeating the floor master came out. Yet he couldn't understand why Zarish, who had apparently lost an eye, appeared at the castle and confessed to all of his crimes. Whatever had happened that night was still a huge mystery.

In any case, the bigger issue at hand was what to do about the massage ordeal. Hakam didn't want to imagine the looks on the soldiers' faces if he told them he had tried to negotiate and failed. He scratched his head, then steeled himself for the task ahead.

"Don't tell me you don't know how popular you are, Eve. You're cheerful, easy to talk to, and even more sophisticated lately. The

men have nothing but good things to say about you," he said.

"R-Really? I think I'm pretty childish, though," Eve replied. She seemed surprised at the sudden compliment, then she blushed slightly.

Hakam had only meant to test the waters, but judging by her reaction, he decided it would be best to switch up his strategy. He would cast aside his shallow stubbornness, pride, and even his position as commander and set his sights on winning her over.

"No, no, you shouldn't be so modest," he said. "Or maybe that's what makes you so attractive. You don't flaunt your strength and beauty, even though you've got both in spades."

"Ahh! Please, don't flatter me!" Eve said, wriggling around with her hands on her cheeks. "I-I dunno, am I really cute? I never thought of myself that way... What do I do?!"

She seemed far more pleased than Hakam had expected, but he couldn't let himself be hasty and think of her as easy. When he saw her adorable demeanor, he believed she was one of the cutest members of Team Diamond.

"Ahem. Anyway, it's quite troubling just how popular you are. It has to be you. The soldiers wouldn't take anyone else as a substitute. I hope you understand my predicament," Hakam added.

"Aw, no way! I don't know..." she said, but her face told him she wanted more.

His instincts told him this was his chance, and he swiftly went in for the kill. He placed his hands on Eve's shoulders and met her eyes with a serious look on his face.

"The unparalleled beauty, Eve."

"B-Beauty?!"

"For everyone's—no, for *my* sake... Won't you accept my request? Between you and me, the key contributor will likely be Zarish or Kazuhiho, and I'm sure that wouldn't be too bad for you. You'd just spend some time having a little chat, is all," Hakam said, bowing his head sincerely.

Eve experienced an inexplicable feeling of unease near the base of her stomach. It was a warning from her sixth sense of sorts, but according to Hakam, she would just deal with Kitase or Zarish. They

had both slain a major enemy, so there was no way anyone else would be eligible. Hakam's explanation that Gaston had resigned from the race for the sake of his men eased her wariness.

Eve nodded, and Hakam thought that she was indeed easy.

"Thank you. A weight's been lifted off my shoulders," he said. He broke into a smile, then took a deep breath for some reason. Eve looked at him dubiously, and he shouted at the top of his lungs as if on a battlefield. "Listen up, men! I hereby declare the beginning of the first 'Get Massaged by a Slightly Naughty Dark Elf Girl Showdown'!"

Eve had thought they were alone, but a tide of roaring voices came pushing forth. She looked around, confused, as soldiers rose from the forest around them, birds screeching as they fled from the sudden pandemonium. A cold sweat ran down the dark elf's forehead at the bewildering sight.

She could tell something insane was about to begin. Hakam walked up and handed her objects, which she accepted without comprehending what was happening. They were a staff tipped with a ruby, a crown adorned with silver, and a red, fluffy cape. He motioned for her to put them on, and she realized he wanted to decorate her as the prize for the competition.

The dark elf grumbled, not understanding how the outfit was related to massages. She nearly jumped when a voice in her head suddenly said, "A Secondary Skill has been unlocked."

"What?! No way! This must be an incredible magical item if it can grant a Secondary Skill! Are you sure you should be using items from the treasury without permission?!" Eve yelled.

Magical items that can activate Secondary Skills were exceedingly rare and couldn't be found on the open market. Only the former hero candidate Zarish used them, and few knew they existed. The voice returned, this time declaring, "The conditions to activate Valkyrie's set bonus have been met."

A list of skills appeared in Eve's mind: Warrior's Blessing, Soldier's Rally, Hallowed March. At the end of the list, a note read, "Only activates when equipped by a beautiful woman."

"Beautiful?! Wait, I mean— What's going on?! Commander

Hakam?!”

Although Hakam had handed her the items, he likely had no idea they would grant her such skills. The third floor’s treasury had just been opened, leaving no time to appraise anything. Even if he had tried wearing them, he wouldn’t have cleared the condition of being a beautiful woman. He had only given them to her to doll her up as the grand prize.

Wearing the staff, crown, and cape together had activated Valkyrie, and its effects were presumably quite powerful. Eve didn’t know the details, but her instincts warned her it was something extraordinary.

But what if it had been a trap? Perhaps the objects were confusing her so she would go onstage and sit on the throne as the shiny prize. By complete coincidence, the men who knew nothing but how to fight had succeeded in treating Eve as a trophy to be won. The creator of the magic item would probably collapse in shock if they saw this. Ultimately, the dark elf settled into the throne, and the men bellowed a crude, thundering shout. Eve finally came to her senses but let out a small yelp when she was met with a fervent surge of desire pressing toward her.

Someone strode boldly across the platform of the special stage. It was the overseer of the labyrinth raid and the very person who had roped the dark elf into this mess.

“Hello, everyone. I will announce the recipient of the honors. But first, let us give Eve a big round of applause for agreeing to do this.”

Their reaction was too intense to be described as a cheer. A deafening cacophony erupted, mixed with wild shrieks and roars resembling a horde of frenzied ghouls. Amid the chaos, the soldiers fixed their drooling gazes on Eve’s thighs. The dark elf gulped audibly, turning pale.

Hakam noticed her reaction and cleared his throat, then pointed at a doll that had been placed on the stage for some reason.

“Before I make the announcement... Eve, would you mind showing what the massage will be like?” he asked.

“Huh? Here? On the doll? Uh... I dunno,” she said, sounding troubled. Reluctantly, she rose from her seat as she had already

agreed to go along with the situation. But she had never given anyone a massage before, and the only time she had experienced one was when a Lizardman had given her a massage after a bath. "Um, I guess I'd push on the back muscles and stuff, like this?"

She leaned over and stretched her arms, the motion further emphasizing her large breasts. A wave of excitement swept over the men as they roared eagerly.

"Hmm, it's uncomfortable from this position. Excuse me," Eve muttered and sat on the doll. She settled her full, curvaceous rear onto the doll, its softness molding into place as she sank. Her thick thighs secured the doll in place from either side, the sight nearly sending the men into a frenzy. The fervor had reached an all-time high—perhaps exactly as Hakam had planned—with the cheering voices turning into shrill, uncontrolled screams. "Huh? Wha? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, that was wonderful. Thank you. Now, please wait for the results over there," Hakam replied, his grin now so wide that it was kind of creepy. He led Eve by the arm, who had no idea what to say. She stood, looking rather puzzled.

A bewildering atmosphere filled the stage. Some men had both hands in the sky, their thrill so intense it seemed like they would surge forth if no one stopped them. Eve sat on the throne again, thinking they could have taken down the floor master in this ridiculously heightened state.

"I'm sure you now see just how wonderful the prize is. Now, it's time to declare the greatest warrior of merit! Are you ready?!"

"YEEEAAAAAAH!!!"

The uproar made the air quake. Eve trembled, nearly losing consciousness from the sheer pressure as she took a direct hit of their ardor. The way she gripped the staff as if holding on for dear life looked somewhat tragic.

Hakam had been shouting, spit flying as he riled up the men, but his expression instantly shifted to one of composure.

"And the winner is...Zarish," he announced. "He has the greatest kill count by far and hunted a heavyweight adversary in Bloodpool. Congratulations."

When Eve heard Zarish's name, her face immediately lit up. Just as Hakam had told her earlier, her lover Zarish had been crowned the honored warrior. The bizarre mood in the air had scared her at first, but she thought all she had to do now was enjoy a conversation, and it would be over. However, something was off. The former hero candidate had betrayed Arilai and the raid team, yet no one raised a single word of protest. The audience was actually applauding him, with some even dressed up and donning bowties. The gentlemanlike demeanor seemed unnatural and out of place. While she wondered why they were all grinning, the answer soon revealed itself.

"Zarish, where are you? If you're not here, you'll automatically forfeit the prize. Hmm, it seems he's not here. What a shame." Hakam didn't look disappointed and quickly ripped up the award certificate he had been holding.

"Whaaat?!" Eve shouted, genuinely shocked.

"Well, the next runner-up would be Kazuhiho. Is he here? Ah, I guess he slept in again. That little rascal."

"H-H-Hold on! That's not fair! You knew they weren't here! You really want a stupid massage that badly?!" Eve protested.

The men pierced her with a gaze that said, *You're damn right we do!*

Eve nearly forgot how to breathe. The soldiers' bloodshot eyes showed a strange intensity, as if they were certain this would be no ordinary massage. She couldn't understand why since she had clearly explained that earlier.

The dark elf felt as if their gazes raked over her body like a tongue, and Hakam slowly moved his face closer.

"There's nothing unfair about it and nothing to be ashamed of. It's their fault for not being here. Whether it be the battlefield or an event like this, there's no mercy for those who are late."

Hakam grinned and ripped up Kazuhiho's certificate to the sound of countless men laughing in the background. Eve then realized she'd walked right into their trap, and they laughed now that their prey was right where they wanted it.

"N-No! I don't want to do this!" she yelled.

“It’s the time you’ve all been waiting for, men! Who will get a massage from Eve? Why, whoever wins this tournament, of course! Ha ha ha, things are getting interesting now, aren’t they?!”

“Nooo! Someone help meee!”

Suddenly, a voice in her mind said, “Valkyrie will now activate to heed your call.”

Eve’s eyes widened in confusion since the magic item had detected its master’s distress and finally activated the skill it had been harboring for many years. The skill reacted to the love directed toward the user, its effect growing more powerful in relation to the strength of the emotions. While it wasn’t all-powerful, it was only effective within a certain area and to a limited number of people. But its power was overwhelmingly effective against the men who had been lusting over her to a ridiculous degree.

The men in the front row abruptly stood up, picked up shields that had been left there, and rushed over to their master’s side. They deployed a formation of shields just as they had on the third floor, erecting an impenetrable wall in an instant.

Eve was stunned by the fortress of shields casting a shadow over her, but she slammed her staff onto the ground. Despite not having an explanation of how to use the magic items, she had somehow figured it out with her innately sharp senses.

“H-Hey, what are you men doing?!” Hakam shouted in a fluster, but he was the one who had cast the dice. If gods existed in this world, they would surely punish those who had considered taking advantage of such a kind, genuine woman who cared deeply for her friends.

Eve sobbed and cried out, “Mow them down!”

Whether gods were watching over them that day was uncertain, but no one stood a chance against the sniffling dark elf. She wielded the power of Warrior’s Blessing, which strengthened the body to its limits, and Soldier’s Rally, which revived fallen warriors, making the crowd bolt in a wild panic.

And so, the gathering meant to celebrate their victory had kicked

off with angry shouts and screams.

§

Strummed strings reverberated across the open air. The man holding the instrument made some adjustments by tightening the strings, then smiled. Now that it was properly tuned, he began playing in earnest.

A delicate timbre resonated from the trembling strings, sending listeners on a dreamy journey across the sand dunes. It told a story of a trek through the scorching hot desert that slowly wore down one's soul, but the sky above was painted with beautiful, vivid gradients of color. Though the emotional melody was quite remarkable, it hardly suited the big, burly man performing. The instrument, which resembled an udobera fruit cut in half, looked like a child's toy in the man's rugged hands. Zera of the Thousand household only smiled wider as the crowd gave him a round of applause. He seemed to enjoy this moment, plucking the strings gently and letting himself get lost in the music. In battle, he faced foes head-on, never yielding a single step. His eyes were like a feral tiger's as he leaped forth with his weapon held high. Yet, he played his notes ever so delicately, filling the hearts of those at the outdoor venue with a sense of soothing comfort.

The facility built along the lakeshore was shaped like a semicircular hall. The humid breeze was quite refreshing, and the setting sun cast a colorful gradient across the lake. Surely, many would consider spending time before such a lavish view.

Amid the peaceful melody, startled voices echoed from one end of the venue. Everyone began looking around to see what was happening, and a woman began walking through the crowd with a brisk, confident stride.

The woman with fiery red hair was Doula. She usually wore no makeup, but her lips were rouged and curled into an elegant smile. She was clad in a white dress that hugged her figure, with her breasts partially peeking out of the top of it as if they were about to spill out. The contrast left onlookers shocked and feeling like it was

all a dream. Her red hair danced with each step, the flowers adorning it sparkling in the evening glow. Doula had the air of a captivating songstress, and the crowd couldn't help but cheer enthusiastically.

"Captain Doulaaa!"

"No way!"

The makeshift outdoor venue erupted into a clamor. The woman with striking brows had driven warriors into the jaws of death time and time again, leading them to victory as their commander. She hadn't covered her freckles, likely on purpose, because she found them quite charming. Her lips parted, then her clear, high-pitched song reverberated through the second floor in tune with Zera's melody.

It was a song about longing for a sky full of stars, walking mindlessly through the unrelenting sun, and pulling a hood over one's head to avoid being roasted alive. Despite the harsh journey, the view of the night sky on windless days took one's breath away. The stars seemed to rain from the heavens and everything visible to the horizon filled one with an indescribable sense of liberation. Those fortunate enough to witness praised the beautiful scenery, exchanging stories and drinks into the night.

The song, filled with heartfelt resonance, had likely been chosen to honor those who fought with their lives on the line. Last night, piles of sheet music surrounded Zera and Doula, making them groan and grumble as they immersed themselves in selecting and arranging the song. They were quite sleep-deprived as a result, but spending the night together in their pajamas had been quite fun for them. Zera had repeatedly told her to "Just wing it," to which she'd laughed so hard that her stomach ached. Perhaps that was why her smile at the audience was filled with such beauty and warmth, her eyes as radiant as the starry sky, leaving the viewers gaping speechlessly.

Zera had seemingly arranged the following part as he plucked the strings with a lively, popping rhythm. The charm of string instruments likely lay in their ability to blend high and low tones, subtly stimulating one's skin with intricate vibrations. They ripped

over the audience like waves, making them feel giddy and excited, and the music swelled as if to spur them on further.

A show that could make people clap or tap their feet was decent, at the very least. Music could come into its own if it could lift their spirits, bring smiles to their faces, and make them unable to resist moving around.

The audience was enthralled until Doula sang the very last word. The crowd exploded into demands for an encore, and the redheaded singer smiled gently to answer their requests to their heart's content.

Several gathering spots sat along the lakeshore, such as eateries and taverns, and some folks even enjoyed some fishing. But on this occasion, everyone flocked to the outdoor venue, eager to catch a glimpse of the side Doula never showed.

Zera stared at his instrument, the applause still ongoing in the distance. He seemed to take a liking to it because it felt right in his hands, and it turned his emotions directly into sound. He stared at it intently before saying, "This is nice. Where'd you get it?"

"I'm delighted that it pleases you. Tourism thrives in the seaside village where we get our food, and they have instruments like these for entertainment. When I mentioned our celebration there, the village chief graciously offered this one as a special gift," Zera's servant said as he accepted the instrument. He held it with white-gloved hands, then carefully placed it into a case.

The servant, who had just begun working there a few days ago, smiled as if satisfied by Zera's performance. No one knew much of his past, but he was clearly no ordinary man by the way he carried himself. Zera thought that much was obvious, given that Wridra had introduced the man to him. In reality, he was far beyond anything they could imagine—a legend in his own right—but it was rather uncouth to obsess on such details on this night of celebration. At the very least, Zera seemed to have some inkling of the man's status.

Zera smiled as he took off his suit and said, "We've got a choir too. I'm sure the instrument will feel right at home with so many music lovers around. By the way, Doula, do you wanna go grab a

drink?”

“Yes, I’d love that. It’s been a while since I’ve done something like this, so I got pretty nervous. I’d like to get some air and calm down a bit,” Doula said, fanning her flushed face with her hands.

The servant also caught her attention, as she stared at him for a while. After a pause, she decided worrying too much about it would be pointless since it involved Wridra. As she grasped Zera’s arm, everyone in the waiting room began to tease her. She waved them off dismissively, then walked toward the path along the lakeshore without looking back.

§

I really didn’t think I should be doing this sort of thing. While I knew today was a special day, and I wanted to celebrate, I might fear falling asleep someday if I kept being asked to cook all the time.

Then I glanced at the freshly harvested onions. Maybe I looked like I was in a bad mood, but I was just frowning because I was cursing my fate for having to use my Primary Skill for cooking when I’d worked so incredibly hard to obtain it. The onions weren’t to blame here.

I activated Overload, and the kitchen knife flashed in my hand. This skill had several characteristics, one of which allowed me to automatically perform a set of predetermined movements. I felt my hands go through the motions, and soon some diced ingredients fell into an oiled pan. It must have been quite a sight, considering someone walking by even stopped to stare for a while.

Love was the foundation of cooking, which I understood very well. But where was the love in this? A row of frying pans was lined up over the fire, and I teleported from one to the next, cooking with all of them at once. This was nothing like the cooking I knew, and it all felt rather mechanical. Not to mention, I caught a glimpse of the Fire Lizards under the oven whenever I lifted a frying pan. For some reason, my motivation dwindled each time they blinked their beady little eyes at me.

I questioned myself the entire time as I moved onto the next

step. I tossed the frying pan, making the translucent, amber onions sizzle, then immediately moved on to the one beside it. An audience had formed by now, and they began buzzing as I zoomed around and continued cooking with a completely straight face. Some began clapping, others watched me as entertainment as they drank, and a few clutched their stomachs, roaring with laughter. A sign next to the outdoor kitchen read, "For your safety, please stay back." It had turned into a sort of show, which made me all the sadder.

Today, we were commemorating our victory on the third floor for repelling the demon army and defeating Wridra's husband. Fortunately, we found a treasure trove of gold and silver riches and Magic Stones, so everyone was in good spirits. I wanted to celebrate with them but hoped they'd understand if I felt a bit deflated.

There were many different ways to cut meat and vegetables. As I saved each pattern with Overload, my memory slots filled with cooking-related movements. It was rather disheartening to override offensive moves with them.

As an aside, my cooking skill had been increasing like crazy, and I felt like I was on the cusp of a potential breakthrough. Something was taking shape inside, like ingredients simmering in a boiling soup.

Don't tell me I'm about to learn a new Unique Skill...

That would be absolutely terrible. If one of my precious skill slots were filled with something related to cooking, I'd probably shut myself in for a while. I prayed that wouldn't happen as I focused on finishing up the dishes.

"You look like you're fighting a life-or-death battle here. They're making the MVP of the raid work like this?" someone asked.

"Oh, Darsha," I said. "It'll take a bit longer before the food is done."

A woman had wandered up to me dressed in a maid outfit, her sleeves rolled up rather aggressively. It seemed she sympathized with my situation. Darsha was a member of Team Diamond, who I'd seen effortlessly carrying a massive axe around the battlefield. Because she was tall and well-built, she carried dishes around with ease and would probably be good at heavy lifting too.

"I got a bit of free time, so I thought I'd take a break. Get me

one of those drinks over there, will ya, Kazuhiho? It's supposed to be a party, and I haven't had a drop yet," Darsha said, plopping onto a nearby seat. She wiped the sweat off her scarred, muscular body. Despite her imposing appearance, the maid outfit suited her, maybe because of her attractive face and cinched waist.

I handed her the entire bottle, then she uncorked and drank straight out of it. She didn't exactly have the best of manners, but there was no need to dwell on such details on this day of celebration.

"You were a huge help the other day. You know, when Puseri got all hotheaded and charged at the enemy," she said.

"Oh, that. It was nothing, really. All I did was pass by," I replied.

That time, I'd brought the floor master with me, hoping it'd run into the monster the ladies were fighting. I had fled immediately after that, so I really hadn't done anything noteworthy. I told her as much, and she burst out in laughter. It didn't seem like she'd be drunk so quickly, but she sat cross-legged despite wearing a skirt and chuckled in amusement.

"Let's spar sometime, you and me. I think I could go all out with you."

"I definitely wouldn't do that if I were you, Darsha," someone interjected.

Darsha and I turned at once and found Eve the dark elf there. For some reason, she was wearing a crown on her head, holding a staff in her hand, and had a red cape draped over her shoulders. We were both probably wondering the same thing: *What was with her getup?*

Her wavy blonde hair was messy, and she looked rather exhausted. The dark elf began removing her accessories and sighed deeply.

"Nothing to worry about... I was just a gullible idiot," she said.

"I know you're an idiot, but why shouldn't I fight him?" Darsha asked.

Eve made an annoyed expression, then sat beside her anyway. She seemed totally worn out and didn't even bother with a rebuttal. Darsha and I exchanged looks, wondering what was wrong with her.

A few moments passed before Eve finally explained what she'd meant.

"I meant it's a bad matchup for you. He may not look it, but Kazuhiro can be pretty cunning. He'll keep poking at your weak spots, and when you start getting frustrated, that's the sign you've fallen right into his trap."

"Y-You think so? I thought I'd been fighting fair and square," I said.

"Come to think of it, you're probably right. He may look like a nice guy, but he's the sneaky type. I'll pass on sparring, after all. Think it'd be too much of a pain," Darsha noted. She was the one who'd asked to spar in the first place, then rejected me with an insult to top it off.

Sweat rolled down my forehead, but my hands never stopped cooking. If I burned the ingredients, I wouldn't know what to say to the Lizardmen who had worked so hard to grow them.

Our little gathering had turned into a wine tasting session before I knew it. It was a special day, so I didn't let it bother me. While we were at it, I lightly grilled some slit sausages until the fat began to drip out, then seasoned them with a bit of salt and pepper. Unlike the kind they sold at grocery stores, sausages were made with real skin in this world. The casing broke easily because of this, so it was best to cook the sausages over a longer period of time with low heat. Since we were using sheep intestines, the proper term would be "sausage casings."

"Ohh, that's the stuff the guys were making the other day, right? I'm lucky I decided to slack off!" Darsha exclaimed.

"Yay! Thanks for the food!" Eve said.

The shed for smoking meats was still under construction, but we had the Arkdragon's custom-built storage facility here, so it wasn't necessary. It would be nice to have a smoker to add a bit of extra flavor if nothing else. Even though I'd thrown this together in an amateur way, there was no shortage of good meat on the second floor, and I'd mixed in some quality salt and spices from distant lands. If a traveler happened to stop by and try it, they'd first be shocked by the lack of gaminess.

The ladies bit into the sausages, their mouths immediately flooding with rich, juicy fat. That first bite was seriously addictive.

"Nngh!"

"Mmf!"

They were already squirming before they could start chewing. The herbs had brought out the meat's flavor just right. Since they were drinking, this was the perfect time to bring out the fancy glass mugs. I poured in the golden brew that I'd sourced from the port town of Ozloi, which carried the bitterness and flavor of sprouted barley malt. Germany had proven that flavor was the perfect match for these types of snacks, and the two women squeezed their eyes shut, savoring the taste for a moment.

"Ahh! This is amazing... That's it, I'm taking the rest of the day off. I can't do it anymore. My body has gone completely into relaxation mode, and it's all his fault," Darsha said.

"Mmm! I can't stop eating!" Eve exclaimed. "You should make this again. Make a whole bunch of it for later too! You should make it a staple dish! Everyone will buy it, me included!"

They looked elegant in their maid outfits, but talking while eating and drinking kind of spoiled the effect. Still, I wanted them to relax on this festive day, so I handed them another drink, and they smiled with childlike glee.

We continued chatting away for a while; then it suddenly became quiet. I looked around to see what was happening, then noticed the soldiers were tense. I followed their gazes to find a young man standing there—Zarish, the former hero candidate. He walked along the lakeside path with a bloodstained bandage peeking out from his shirt. It hadn't been made public yet, but he'd aided Gedovar in the past. From what I could tell, the crowd was murmuring about that action.

Eve stuffed down the rest of her food, then hopped out of her seat. I stopped the fires and told the Fire Lizards I'd return later.

"I've been waiting for this moment, Zarish," I said softly as I removed my apron.

I wasn't sure how the others felt, but I wasn't afraid of him in the slightest. Even though he'd ended countless lives and nearly taken

the women I love from me, there was no anger welling up inside me for some reason.

§

Zarish Engel awakened.

He stared at the fluttering white curtain, slowly realizing that he had been sleeping in an unfamiliar bed. His eyes then scanned his surroundings. He was in a corner room with sunlight pouring in through several windows. Ordinary folks couldn't afford the expensive and unattainable glass, yet it was abundant here. The interior used a classy blend of white tones and wood grains, probably crafted over time by someone with refined taste. It was likely a woman who had seen and appreciated countless works of art.

Zarish's eyes finally began to focus, and he let out a somewhat goofy, "Huh...?"

His vision blurred from loss of blood, but he pushed the blankets aside and stood up. Not only was he in an unfamiliar house, but he'd caught a curious sight through the window. He stepped across the well-polished flooring with his bare feet, then pressed his hand against the glass.

He was seemingly on the second floor, and outside the window was a stretch of coniferous forest reaching for the sky. The vivid colors were a striking sight for someone who'd lived in the desert for so long. He pressed on the glass window, which opened wide without resistance, letting in a strong scent of fresh greenery. Zarish felt as if the breath of life itself lingered there. He was mesmerized by the flowers decorating the footpaths and birds soaring with powerful wingbeats. The boundless, lush expanse of nature left him overwhelmed for a moment.

"Is this...Eden?" he breathed.

The simple act of breathing in air felt healing because it was imbued with life. Oxygen traveled through every corner of his body, making his mind feel sharper. It was no wonder he mistook it for the paradise that only battle-worn warriors could reach. The throbbing

pain in his chest was nothing compared to the strange feeling swelling up inside him. Just where was this place?

Suddenly, he noticed a Lizardman lumbering down the path. Though it was a monster that he couldn't ignore despite being high level, its face somehow looked gentle. Even more surprising was the woman with catlike ears following it with a spring in her step.

"Cassey?" he whispered, realizing she had a striking resemblance to his former slave. The name had come out as a question because he had never seen her display such a cheerful expression.

A knock at the door snapped Zarish out of his reverie.

The newcomer, presumably assuming Zarish was still sleeping in bed, opened the door without waiting for a response. But a moment later, he saw the look on their face and realized that wasn't the case. He saw the eyes and hair color of night itself, belonging to the very individual who had once plotted to enslave him.

"Lady Wridra," he said.

"Hm, I see you have awakened," she replied. "In both body and mind, judging by the look on your face. You appear to be entirely different from when we first met."

He couldn't quite understand what she meant. Her lips curled into a confident smile, and she spread the fingers of her left hand apart. On her slender fingers were familiar objects: the rings he had once taken from a certain dark elf. He stared at the four golden rings glimmering in the sunlight for a long moment, then a slight grimace crossed his face.

"Consider this a warning. Those things are cursed. You'd do well to get rid of them immediately," he said grimly.

"Those are the words of one who had endured much pain. Yet I believe you were quite fortunate that at least one still exists," Wridra answered.

Zarish instinctively touched the ring on his ring finger. Despite calling them cursed, his bond with the dark elf had remained over the years. The love she had poured into him was something he could never forget.

The Arkdragon urged him to sit with her obsidian eyes, and he complied without protest. Wridra, clad in a black dress, sat directly

across from him. A peculiar thin fabric enveloped her crossed legs, its translucent nature revealing a hint of skin underneath.

"That ring was a gift from the dark elf girl, yet you twisted its power to control, just like I had done."

With that, she wiggled her fingers at him. Although Zarish couldn't understand what she was getting at, he recognized his old rings had been altered somehow. Something more advanced had overwritten their magic, but he was no expert and couldn't glean much more than that.

Zarish narrowed his eyes dubiously. "Wait... By 'twisted,' you mean there are other uses for the ring?"

"It appears your eyes could not see the truth, clouded by greed as they were. These rings were originally nothing more than simple charms. Just items born from a girl's genuine wish for her first love to notice her."

As Zarish blinked, he felt his face grow warm without warning. He hadn't seen the woman who came to mind in ages, not since the day he had confessed his sins. Yet it was as if her feelings had flooded into him all at once.

"Yes, it was a charming little thing meant to draw out that expression on your face now. The girl's feelings had come through so strongly that even a hero candidate may have felt embarrassed. *That* is what I meant when I had said it was fortunate for you it still remains," she said, teasingly.

Without realizing it, Zarish was gripping his finger as hard as he could. He took in several deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself, but the image of the girl laughing happily repeatedly surfaced in his mind. She had suntanned skin, a smile as bright as the sun, and a pure love he felt without needing words. This was completely foreign to him. He had thought love was nothing but a delusion, that there was always an ulterior motive behind any desire to win a woman over. Yet he couldn't forget the feeling of her gently kissing his forehead when he had been lying on the sofa.

His heart pounded like a drum in his chest. Zarish realized his face had surely twisted into an expression he didn't want anyone to see, so he covered his face with his hands.

"So, what kind of man was it that a woman like you wanted to win over? That's what I'd like to know," he asked.

As their former owner, he knew a single individual was the target of all four rings. He also understood that the target could barely stand under the effect of their combined power.

Wridra chuckled, looking rather pleased with herself.

"Hah, hah, he is no ordinary man. I am certain you shall meet him eventually. But first, there is something you must do: face punishment for the countless atrocities you have committed."

"I'll accept whatever punishment is given to me," Zarish responded. "But that alone won't satisfy the royal bastards of Arilai. They've forced me to fight monsters until my dying breath."

He showed Wridra the leather wrapped around his neck, which was laced with magic similar to a curse and would inject deadly poison into its wearer unless he regularly slew monsters. The collar likely absorbed the life force expelled from monsters when defeated and turned to dust.

Wridra's smile remained unchanged. "Then there is no place easier for you to live than here. There is an endless horde of monsters on the floors below. In any case, I have said what I wished to say. If you have recovered enough to walk by now, you should thank the one who healed your wounds."

Wridra shooed him out of the room with a wave of her hand, and Zarish finally noticed the sound of a lively tune drifting in from the window he had opened earlier. The music was a blend of percussion and strings, and he realized it was being played to celebrate their recent victory. Wridra flashed him another grin, indicating that he should get out already, and he reluctantly stood up. He had once thought he would be the one ruling over her, but now realized that had been a foolish notion. He picked up his jacket and left the room.

Wridra watched him leave with an amused smile on her face. Though no one was around to hear her, she remarked, "I suppose it is time to begin."

Once outside, Zarish was taken aback by his unusual surroundings. He hadn't understood what Wridra meant when she mentioned the floors below. It was hard to believe, but he saw they

were actually in the ancient labyrinth. The clouds drifting across the sky and the dazzling sun looked real at first glance, but they weren't. He had to accept it, even though he didn't grasp its principles or logic. Flowers adorned the footpath, which seemed real enough upon closer inspection. He found the scent of damp, cool soil nostalgic. While he thought about it, he couldn't recall seeing such a vast stretch of greenery since he'd fled his homeland. Perhaps that was why he'd mistaken it for Eden upon waking.

Zarish wondered how far the outer edge of this place stretched. There were no pillars, and he couldn't figure out how the ceiling was held up, if there even was one. Was it possible for this place to collapse?

When he finally reached the edge, a towering stone wall loomed over him. Its solid, sturdy build remained unchanged but was now thickly covered with vines and moss. This was a far cry from what he'd witnessed during the raid. Nature itself seemed to be consuming the ancient structure.

He suddenly noticed something and stopped walking. Looking up, he caught sight of an ancient mural, and faded memories finally began to surface.

"Don't tell me... No, it can't be. Is this the second floor?"

The only response he received was the chirping of birds. A little bird flew straight toward a freshly ripened fruit, paying no heed to Zarish clutching his head. Birds were quite clever, and this one signaled to its flock that there was food there. Yet for Zarish, who had once enslaved women, no companion existed to offer him any answers.

Memories of the past slowly resurfaced. About half a year ago, darkness blanketed the second floor, the entire place reeking of decay and ruled by the one they'd feared as death itself. That figure had been bound to the labyrinth, and its booming wails still echoed in Zarish's mind. The second floor was known as the realm of the dead, a place where the corpses of countless challengers lay scattered.

"I remember now," Zarish murmured. "This is where I fought that boy and the death god. Things have changed so much..."

The scenery wasn’t the only thing to change; he had lost everything and had been forced to start over completely from nothing. Even the title of hero candidate was something he’d nearly forgotten. He sighed, then began walking again. His next task was to thank the one who had healed him, as Wridra had suggested.

Zarish walked toward the sound of music and faced thick-trunked trees. Looking up, he wondered how many years they’d been around, only to realize they couldn’t be older than six months. He wondered who could have created such an unbelievable sight and what had become of the incarnation of death. Presumably, it had fought that boy and perished, yet that conclusion didn’t sit right with him. If that was the case, how did this place end up looking like this?

The long rest had left his body stiff, and the walk was just what he needed. The path was uneven, but the constantly shifting sights kept him entertained. Despite the wild and free growth of the plants, certain areas had walkable lawns trimmed from the thickets. White flowers surrounded him for a moment. In the next, he found a large stretch of fields, where he curiously watched Lizardmen working diligently. A lake suddenly filled his view beyond the thickets, taking his breath away. The water rippled faintly, with a breeze soon following, gently brushing his cheeks. It wasn’t often that he’d seen such scenery in which the beauty left him dazed.

Perhaps this place was Eden, after all. Zarish recalled reading about such sights in a book when he was younger, though it was just an old tale far removed from any scholarly text. The book told of an ancient story in which a land beloved by the gods existed somewhere in the world, thriving under their many blessings.

“Yet that marked the beginning of what took shape as a god...”

As if pulling on the threads of memory, he recited a passage he’d seen in the book from his childhood. It was a story his mother had read to him before sleep. She was gone now. Everyone but him, the fallen prince, had already taken their last breath.

“When a god descended upon the world, they first shaped the land. With blessings bestowed, life bloomed one after another...”

The sun dimmed slightly, and when he looked up, he saw a flock

of birds flying toward the opposite shore. He realized many people were there, enjoying drinks and food. As Zarish gazed at them with a faint sense of awe, he slowly walked on.

"The blessings were shared with the people too. Thus, the night met its first close..." Zarish muttered as he stepped through a brush, then was met with a woman who froze with a jolt.

Perhaps she had thought a rabbit had jumped out. Her wide eyes, the color of a clear blue sky, stared at him as the firewood she held clattered to the ground.

"I'm sorry," Zarish apologized. "I must have been lost in my thoughts."

The unfamiliar woman wore a white dress, seemingly unbothered by the thought of it getting dirty. He handed her the fallen firewood piece by piece as she stood there, still startled, and carried most of the rest.

"Let me carry these, as a token of apology," he offered.

The woman blinked her big eyes, then moved her lips as if mouthing the words, "Thank you." Only then did he realize she couldn't speak.

As peaceful as the forest was, it must have been dangerous for a woman to walk through it alone, or so he thought. He then noticed a white lizard creature on her shoulder, tilting its head at him.

"Ah, I see you have a little bodyguard with you. I guess you're in good hands. Where are you taking this firewood?" he asked, then the woman pointed. Zarish nodded. "Ah, that clearing over there? I was just headed there myself."

He began walking alongside the woman. Though she couldn't speak, there was something strangely comforting about her calm presence. Simply walking in this place with the gentle breeze blowing by felt pleasant, and he couldn't quite put his finger on why.

Zarish waited every time the woman stopped to watch someone fishing or to stare at a freshly bloomed flower. It felt like he was shopping with a woman, which he found strangely enjoyable. Then he recalled the terrifying second floor master. That one was also quite unpredictable as it wandered around the labyrinth. The transformation of the floor of death and decay remained a mystery,

but seeing a woman like her strolling freely like this brought him great joy.

After a while, he heard what sounded like the laughter of a dark elf girl and smiled. They had been together for a long time, and the memory of making her cry her eyes out during their first meeting came back to him. So much had happened since that day, and he wondered if he would ever be allowed to see her again. Destiny was a curious thing. As he pondered the possibility, another memory came back to him. Earlier, Wridra mentioned he had to face punishment. He had no idea what that punishment would be, but since the message came from that dragon, it would likely be something far beyond his imaginings. Although Zarish had said he would accept whatever punishment was given, he was hit with a baptism of sorts when he reached the clearing. With each step forward, he felt a profound sense of rejection from everyone around him—the lively music, cheerful chatter between friends—all pulling away, shunning him entirely.

Even as Zarish had his lacerations covered in bandages, he walked through the celebration slowly, savoring each step. This injury resulted from the path he had chosen; it was a testament to the ruthlessness of his former self, cutting down countless others who stood in his way. His combat prowess only bolstered his confidence. Once he had drawn his sword, everyone—even his countrymen—was destined to fall to his feet in a pool of blood. Yet his greed knew no bounds, and he'd been no longer satisfied just with the title of hero candidate. Wealth, fame, and beautiful women weren't enough to stop his march. When he set his sights on the kingdom of Arilai, the fateful dice he'd cast landed on the worst possible roll: the grim reaper known as Phantom.

He still remembered that moment, bowing to a mere boy under the scorching sun on the sandy plain. The dream he'd envisioned ended abruptly, and all the gold, treasures, and status he'd gained slipped away into nothing. Even now, he didn't understand why he'd lost back then. Though long gone, the golden rings he had worn gave him strength that far outmatched the boy. It should have been impossible for him to lose. Before he knew it, the world had lost its

color, and enemies surrounded him. Everyone around him had turned their blades against him as if mirroring his heart.

"The hero candidate... What a useless title," he muttered, readjusting the firewood in his arms. The woman walking beside him tilted her head slightly and looked up at him. Her expression told him she didn't care much about how everyone else reacted, which puzzled him.

"Oh, you're still following me? As you can see, you shouldn't stand anywhere near me. I'll carry the firewood, so why don't you go with your friends or something?" Zarish commented, reaching out for her to hand it over. But the woman hesitated momentarily before turning her sky blue eyes forward. Following her gaze, he spotted two figures running toward them.

Underneath one of the figure's slightly wavy tied back hair was a smile as dazzling as the sun. Her radiance was so purifying it seemed to wash away the gloom that had weighed on him just moments before.

"Eve!"

"Welcome back! Welcome back! Welcome baaack!"

Her toned body was brimming with animalistic vitality, and he found beauty even in the sweat trailing down her. Though they had been companions for so long, they had spent far too much time apart.

Eve leaped into his arms, and Zarish caught her. He hoped the woman in the white dress would forgive him for dropping all of the firewood. Just hearing Eve's panting breaths near his ear and smelling the mix of grass and sweat nearly brought tears to his eyes. Holding her tightly so she wouldn't fall, he turned his gaze to the boy who had been following her. It was Kazuhiho, a man who he could call his sworn enemy.

"Hey there, Zarish. I've been waiting for you!" he said.

With her arms still wrapped around Zarish's neck, Eve turned to Kazuhiho and added, "Seriously, took him long enough!"

Their demeanor made them seem like nothing but close friends. Perhaps they had grown comfortable with each other during his absence.

He'd heard that everyone from Team Diamond worked at the mansion. Judging by that radiant smile, they likely lived peacefully in this paradise. Once Zarish realized this, he felt the lingering resentment slowly fade away.

"Knowing you, I bet everything looked so interesting that you've wandered everywhere. Come on, Zarie, just admit it," Eve said, poking at his chest playfully. Her gesture was so endearing and stirred such deep nostalgia that he could hardly bear it. Maybe it was just his imagination, but she seemed far more beautiful than ever when she was close. There was a golden glow about her, and her dazzling smile made him feel lightheaded.

"Y-Yes... I'm sorry. I met a woman here, and I was helping her carry some firewood," Zarish explained and turned around, then the woman popped out from behind him. She narrowed her eyes and grinned gleefully, thrilled about successfully startling Eve.

"Shirley, where'd you go off to? I've been worried about you," the dark elf said. "Anyway, follow me, you two."

"Hm? Oh, sure. It's not as if I had anything better to do," Zarish stated.

He hesitated slightly because the name Shirley rang a faint bell. He wondered where he'd heard it, but with Eve pushing him from behind, he had no time to dwell on the thought. Eve hastily dragged him into the celebrations.

A hot griddle sizzled in front of Zarish, and he stood there momentarily taken aback. When he pointed and asked what it was, the boy smiled proudly for some reason.

"I heard you're good at cooking, so I special-ordered this. Do you know what a griddle is, Zarish?" Kazuhiho asked.

"No, this is my first time seeing one," Zarish replied. "Hmm, interesting. It's like a frying pan but heats the entire plate. How does it work?"

He ducked to look under the griddle to find Fire Lizards lazily sprawled out there. One of them waved its little hand, but they resembled middle-aged people lounging in a rock sauna.

Apparently, the firewood he'd carried earlier was a reward for

these critters. Kazuhiho gave the Fire Lizards the wood, which they licked like special treats. Zarish pretended he hadn't seen anything and stood up without commenting.

"It's not as if I have any other job to do. I don't mind helping you cook, but this hardly seems like the way to treat someone who was bedridden not too long ago. You really are as rotten as ever," Zarish said.

"I won't argue with you there," the boy said. "But right now, I need all the help I can get. I'm running out of time here."

Suddenly, Kazuhiho's expression turned grim; it was as if he'd seen something that had planted a sense of despair in him not too long ago.

Zarish wondered what could have happened in a festive place like this. He was puzzled by the boy's unusually dark expression, but the woman beside him was brimming with expectation and excitement. So, he figured the civilized thing to do was to entertain her.

"All right, I'll do it," Zarish noted. "Can I use this apron? You sure came prepared. As for the ingredients... Oh, these are interesting noodles."

Wheat-based noodles were quite common, but he'd never seen ones with a yellowish tint and curly shape. Upon touching them, he could tell they'd been dusted with high-quality flour. The meat, vegetables, and other ingredients nearby were top-notch, free of any bad smells. He was growing curious despite himself.

"First, we steam the noodles. That one extra step makes a huge difference in the taste. I brought some seasonings, so use these."

Zarish listened to the boy's advice and accepted the so-called seasonings. He quickly licked the unknown liquid and froze in shock. The sharp tang barely had time to register before a rush of sweetness of fruit and the deep, unmistakable richness of seafood flooded his senses. He felt a shiver crawl up his neck.

"Whoa now, are you trying to start a culinary revolution here, Kazuhiho?!" Zarish asked.

"That's a little dramatic," he replied. "Anyway, let's give it a try."

Zarish felt it wasn't an exaggeration at all. He started by tossing in what seemed to be boar fat, and as it melted, he noticed the

aroma carried no hint of gaminess. It stayed solid like wax until it dissolved, so he cut it up into smaller pieces. He quickly saw that this place had some impressive meat processing.

He began steaming greens a bit later, and they surprised him too. Fresh, crisp vegetables were rare, especially in sandy lands where people mainly grew fruit and tree-grown produce. Thus, he figured these foods could be eaten raw if they wanted.

"Unbelievable. These could be worth their weight in gold. Where in the world did you get them?" Zarish inquired.

"Oh, I just harvested these with the Lizardmen earlier. Didn't you see the fields on the way here?"

Zarish groaned. It had been odd enough to see Lizardmen working, but he hadn't expected to end up eating their harvest. The ingredients were of the highest quality; he would have shelled out a fortune for them without a second thought in his era of prestige. Food was just that important to him.

"By the way, Zarie, you've always loved cooking, haven't you? You were always collecting seasonings and dishes and stuff. Why's that?" Eve asked with her cheek propped on her hand. She seemed to enjoy the scent in the air and had a glimmer in her eye as she asked the question. Zarish smirked at her expression as he slowly recalled the old days.

"Oh, it wasn't anything worth mentioning. My mother was odd. You couldn't stop her from cooking if you tried. I suppose it was because she could never get used to foreign flavors."

While cooking was supposedly only for the lowly, his mother had taught him its importance. His kind mother had said it was a pity to not know the flavors of one's homeland. Those dreamlike memories had vanished when war broke out, but the lessons from his childhood stuck with him. That was why he cared so much about making the most of ingredients.

Zarish tossed the steamed noodles onto the griddle, and a sizzling aroma filled the air. No matter how hated he was, the enticing smell had an irresistible allure, making more and more people sneak glances his way.

"So that's why he brought me here," Zarish groaned. That boy

was quite crafty despite his sleepy-looking face, or so he thought. But when he looked at him, the boy's expression suggested he hadn't been thinking at all.

Frankly, Kitase hadn't considered anything like that in the slightest. He was just worried he'd have unlocked a Secondary Skill if he'd kept cooking like that. In other words, he'd only been worried about himself.

Oblivious to all this, Zarish felt a warmness in his chest as he focused further on his cooking. He drizzled a bit of the special sauce over the slightly charred noodles, unleashing a fierce fragrance that one could have considered violent.

Zarish sneered, realizing this seasoning was a culinary weapon. It was a mixture of sweetness and tartness, burrowing deep into one's nose and refusing to let go. This dish he'd never heard of, yakisoba, had such a potent fragrance that a single whiff would send signals blaring into one's brain like, *This is absolutely delicious!* And with cooking, freshness was everything. The fragrance wafting about during its preparation stirred appetites the most. In that sense, his earlier quip about starting a culinary revolution hadn't been a joke at all. Sure enough, a crowd with hungry eyes had begun to gather around the griddle.

"Ahh, I can't take it anymore! What's that smell?!" a man from the crowd said.

"Hey, what's up with you guys? We're gonna eat first. We'll bring some over once we're full, so go wait over there till then," Eve said.

"Oh, come on, Eve! We're dying here! We'll handle passing out the plates, so please, let us have some too!"

Eve groaned in protest, puffing her cheeks in discontent. But the men had desperate faces and scrambled to get to work. Zarish was taken aback by the sight; Eve had completely become a part of this community, so much so that a little grumbling from her was enough to spur them into action. Long ago, she'd been such a shy woman who lived deep in the mountains to avoid human contact as much as possible. Back then, she'd been wary no matter how he spoke or smiled at her, even climbing trees to get away.

Now, the same woman spun around to face him. She narrowed

her slightly fierce eyes and smiled, still as radiant as ever.

"Come on, Zarie, everyone's waiting. Why don't you start dishing it out?" she said.

"Yeah, I will. It's good to see you're having fun," he said with a grin.

"Having fun?" Eve murmured curiously, her eyebrow raised. But when he held out a plate before her, her blue eyes widened, sparkling with excitement. Zarish was filled with a sense of happiness as he watched Eve's reaction, her mouth ajar with awe.

"Yay! Time to eat! Shirley, you can have some from this side!" Eve said.

"Wow, that looks good. You really do have a gift for this, Zarish. There aren't many people who can make it look this nice," Kazuhiho said.

Zarish was unaccustomed to getting such praise and wasn't sure how to react. He flashed a grin to hide his embarrassment, but it couldn't outshine the delighted expressions of the women and children stuffing their faces.

"Wow, this is amazing!"

Her wide-open eyes were unbelievably charming. Zarish's heart grew warmer, and his face broke into a smile all on its own. He muttered, wondering which one was the real weapon. Still, the biggest victims at that moment were the onlookers surrounding them. The tantalizing smell, the mouthwatering look, and the beautiful women eating with such blissful expressions were all enough to make their stomachs growl uncontrollably. They practically climbed over each other to eagerly thrust their plates. Zarish gaped for a moment before bursting out into laughter.

He thought this place was fortunate to have a girl blessed by faint, floating, translucent spirits, which she had left behind before heading out. Ice floated in a container nearby, and Zarish grabbed a chilled bottle from it. He swallowed a mouthful of saucy noodles and washed it down with some fine liquor. The food was so delicious that he involuntarily let out a groan of satisfaction.

A woman glared intently at the young man and his companions, who were reveling in their meal. Her twilight eyes burned with anger

as she stepped forward, one foot after another. Even the air grew colder, and the sound of someone taking an icy breath could be heard.

§

The woman's hair, a twilight hue reminiscent of night's arrival, flowed in gentle curves down to her waist, strikingly similar to the black roses that bloomed wildly at her manor. The Blackrose family was said to be the oldest lineage in Arilai, with a history stretching far beyond the years the current royals had ruled. Yet, she was the only one left of the bloodline. They had perished one after another, not even a gravestone left behind. Puseri mused that their eradication had been thorough at the hands of the former hero candidate, Zarish. If he was a man who left no loose ends, then Puseri was a woman who turned the air around her into a bleak midwinter chill with every step. The sharp crack beneath her foot might have come from a frozen puddle. Those who saw her didn't cry out in warning; they instinctively sensed danger and backed away slowly.

When locked into a combative state, her breath grew shrouded in frost—likely a characteristic of her bloodline. Like a freezer door swung open, Puseri let out a low, chilling breeze with each exhale. She usually spent her days in an elegant maid outfit, but when faced with a formidable foe on the battlefield, she couldn't help this true nature from emerging. This attitude was meant for war zones and kept tightly concealed beneath an iron mask. But now, her raw malice spilled out unchecked, and those who saw her felt a heavy sense of dread.

Ahead, on the deserted path she walked, stood that man. He had one eye covered by an eye patch, and his presence lacked the fierce edge it once had. Still, his face was the same one that had haunted her dreams countless times. Just seeing it made the veins in her forehead throb with animosity.

The mere fact that he was breathing the same air as her and chatting so casually with Eve, her squadmate, was maddening, as

was how he could speak the same language as civilized humans. Because Puseri had once been brainwashed, she could picture the naked body beneath those clothes. She, who'd forgotten the Blackrose family creed, served him with a smile even after her bloodline had been decimated. Every single part of this encounter sent a torrent of loathing through her veins.

Puseri wondered what kind of face she was making now. One look at the dark elf—who froze the moment their eyes met—was answer enough. Eve let out a soft "Oh," but no words escaped her throat. Even when Puseri nodded at her, Eve stiffened as if ice had been shoved down her back and could not react immediately.

Also present was the sleepy-looking boy. He carried a gentle demeanor but seemed to have a bold side to him, greeting her with a faint smile and a "Hello, Puseri." Puseri found herself quietly impressed. He'd apparently given up on offering her food, sensing her business was with someone else, so he took a single step back.

Finally, Zarish stood right in front of her. He bowed deeply, waiting for her to speak. Puseri pondered if she should split his skull open or gouge out his remaining eye but decided to start with a ladylike greeting instead.

"Hello, Zarish."

Her voice had come out dripping with venom, sounding almost inhuman, but she paid it no mind. She glared at Zarish, her icy gaze scanning him from head to toe with piercing scrutiny. Puseri's uncanny intensity sent a shiver down Eve's spine. The dark elf had finally grasped Puseri's true nature. Despite Puseri's appearance as a refined lady on the outside, she upheld that image with an iron will, determined never to reveal her inner self.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused, Puseri," Zarish said.

A strange creaking emanated from Puseri's body. The urge to strangle him clashed with the desire to boil him until his bones melted, neither impulse quite winning over the other. The cheerful air of the celebration had vanished entirely. Although the group consisted of seasoned warriors, many of them trembled behind trees.

Just then, something changed. A mist appeared, rising to knee

height, soon obscuring vision so much that one couldn't even see the other side of the lake. Birds retreated into the forest, sensing unease as the warm sunlight had suddenly faded.

"What the...?"

When Puseri finally realized something was off, she glanced around. One by one, lamps along the path flickered to life. They seemed like markers for those who had lost their way, or possibly an invitation from the dead to lure the living into the abyss. The light from those lamps guided the way toward a stage by the lake's edge, glowing faintly as it emerged from the haze. Standing there was a black-haired woman, the master of this second floor.

Wridra was clad in white ceremonial robes, and her face was utterly expressionless. She whispered, "It was a day such as this one. A cold, clammy wind swept in that dreadful night, seeming to cling to everything."

Despite the lack of emotion in her voice, everyone's eyes fixed on her like moths to a flame. Some may have noticed the lamps lighting the area weren't just along the path but swaying over the lakeside. The air felt frigid, tinged with an uncanny sensation, as if they were in a living nightmare. Just the wind brushing their skin was enough to raise goose bumps uncontrollably.

Everyone exchanged glances as if trying to figure out what was happening, but no one had a clue. They were all frozen in place with the same wary, puzzled looks.

There was a loud crack as lightning streaked across the sky. A rumble echoed from the forest moments later, along with screaming. Wridra looked up, sighing resignedly as if to say, *It has begun.* The defeated look from a woman usually so confident and composed stoked everyone's unease even further.

"I shall recount what befell that night," she went on. "What grim fate struck the old manor of black roses. Come now, all of you. Gather close, shoulder to shoulder. If left alone, what fate would await you... I dare not even speak it aloud."

Her strained voice sent the onlookers scrambling together in a panic. Those too weak-kneed to stand screamed, pleading tearfully for someone to take them along.

All the people gathered there had no desire to see into the dark past of the Blackrose family. They longed to crawl into bed and drift off to sleep with a pleasant buzz from the earlier festivities. But the otherworldly aura Puseri had unleashed moments ago, paired with Wridra's ominous words, chilled them straight to the bone. They wanted to flee from this place at once, yet none could muster the will to stand alone and trek through that dark, lonely path. The mood of the scene held them captive like an invisible binding force.

The cloth atop the stage began to glow faintly, where the words "Black Rose" emerged and evoked a dark tale. The logo's shape twisted unnaturally, seemingly written with an unsteady hand that hinted at madness. Soon, the fierce warriors who'd once rampaged above and beneath the land swallowed hard in unison.

Kitase had been watching the situation with mixed feelings. Eve clung to his shoulder, half-sobbing, her legs so weak she could only shuffle forward pigeon-toed, one shaky step at a time. He murmured reassuring words to her, but her grip only tightened, and she sniffled loudly.

Shirley, on the other hand, showed no fear. That was expected, considering she had once been known as death itself. When Kitase glanced her way, she returned her usual smile, grabbing his clothes as if to guide him through the dim path without getting lost. Of course, they were headed toward the front of the stage, where everyone waited.

Voices and whimpering cries of the audience drifted over. Upon hearing them, Kitase let out a single, resigned sigh.

Not long ago, he'd visited an attraction with a similar vibe. Wridra must have taken inspiration from it, but the perfectionist in her had taken things a bit too far. He was already fretting over how best to tell her this later.

Meanwhile, Puseri and Zarish walked far behind the rest of the group. Not only had the intricate performance softened Puseri's earlier terrifying glance, but she'd been startled to see her own face projected on the screen. Beside her wide-eyed self, Zarish looked remarkably pale for some reason.

"Ah, it's over... I pissed myself back then. They're all gonna see it

soon...” Zarish muttered and sighed deeply. He recalled Wridra’s words about his punishment and seemed to realize what lay ahead. His expression tightened from the thought of being publicly shamed in front of everyone.

The hero candidate from back then, once brimming with valor and ambition, had vanished. The sight made Puseri’s venom soften even more.

“Didn’t you once say you feared nothing?” she asked.

“I do have fears. As you can see, that’s me over there screaming and running around in fear.” Zarish pointed his thumb toward the screen, where a figure was trembling like a newborn calf. Since he’d realized this was the punishment Wridra had spoken of, he couldn’t shout for everyone to stop looking. “Then I’ve no choice but to accept it. I swore I’d accept any punishment coming my way, after all.”

“I see. Something about you seems to have changed, Zarish.”

“Maybe. All I know is, things are crumbling in a bad way. Oh, no, stop— Please, don’t show that... Oh god...”

A collective “Oh, ohh, ohhh,” rose from the crowd, thick with anticipation. At the moment Zarish wet himself, they erupted into laughter as if all their prior fear had instantly vanished. They clutched their sides, howling and rolling at this brutally harsh spectacle. The prolonged tension amplified the effect, making the crowd burst into uncontrollable laughter, unable to stop by their own will. With everyone around them also doubled over, the absurdity was only magnified further.

Zarish groaned, clutching his head with both hands, tears welling up in his remaining eye. Seeing this, Puseri chuckled softly.

“I’m stunned. You were all show, weren’t you?” she asked.

“Seems so. I’m just realizing it myself,” Zarish admitted. “Turns out I was nothing but a coward. But I suppose you get over it quickly. My humiliation, how terrifying you are. None of it seems all that big of a deal anymore.”

His blue-green eye turned toward her knowingly.

“Oh?” Puseri said, caught off guard. She thought she’d scared him properly, but he hadn’t been trembling earlier. She gestured with

her eyes to ask what he'd meant, and he looked her straight in the eye before speaking.

"What I fear is loss. Losing what matters most terrifies me above all else. And you, Puseri Blackrose, don't seek to take anything away."

"You don't know that for certain," she uttered. "I may just pluck out that remaining eye of yours. Of course, Eve over there is trembling like a lamb and is a dear, precious friend of mine."

Zarish smiled slyly as if to say, *Exactly.* Puseri responded by puffing out one cheek with a sulky frown. Somehow, her expression still had a tinge of noble grace that seemed to lift some of the hero candidate's gloom.

Now that his most embarrassing moment was exposed, Zarish would be relentlessly teased from here on out. However, it wasn't all loss. The alienation he'd felt when he'd arrived had faded, so perhaps Wridra's punishment wasn't so bad. Even as his screams blared from the screen and the crowd laughed out loud, the mood between him and Puseri had lightened somewhat compared to before.

The ordeal lasted about the length of a short film. Puseri and Zarish walked slowly. By the time they arrived, the scary parts had ended, and the screen showed an image of black roses glistening in the morning dew. There was no telling how many years it had been since those flowers bloomed last, but their beauty provided a soothing end to the movie.

Wridra shot Zarish a triumphant grim, to which he nodded back as if to admit, *You got me.*

As the sun sank below the horizon, the group gathering ingredients for their meal returned. Wridra, who'd used her proficiency in long-distance travel to bring fresh seafood from a fishing village, was welcomed back with cheers and applause. She had fostered a mutually beneficial relationship with the village, and most of the food she'd procured had been traded for mountain harvests like vegetables and meat.

A small elf girl scampered over, and the sleepy-looking boy

stepped forward to greet her. His worried look seemed to say, *I wish you wouldn't run, you might trip.* Sure enough, his eyes widened moments later when she snagged on a branch. He immediately reached out and caught her as if he'd expected that to happen, then let out a sigh of relief.

Just then, Zarish felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. Puseri stood there with his former subordinates of Team Diamond. He wondered just how much they'd grown since he'd last seen them. Yet she was at the forefront and seemed almost dazzling.

"I am known as the master here," Puseri remarked. "But I know I am too green to protect everyone and lose myself in battle. Still..."

"You really were out of control the other day. You wouldn't listen to a word from anyone and just kept charging ahead. I was so flustered I cried."

"Yeah, Eve was crying and screaming, 'Nooo!'"

The members of Team Diamond had shared their opinions.

"Be quiet! I'm still speaking!" Puseri snapped, red-faced. She then covered her mouth with a fan as if regaining her composure, her twilight eyes turning back toward Zarish. "You will never be able to fully atone for your sins. Yet you can make some amends, and I won't rob you of that opportunity."

Puseri then told him to fight for Team Diamond from that moment forward. It couldn't have been an easy decision because the young girls behind her still feared him.

Even so, or because of that, Zarish nodded.

"Understood, Lady Puseri. I'll become the sword and shield to protect you all."

He knelt and bowed deeply, and the sharp sound of a blade being drawn echoed around them. A white sword etched with fine markings tapped each of his shoulders, thus welcoming Master Puseri's new knight. Zarish's title changed from hero candidate to Knight of the Black Rose, marking a steep demotion. Yet his smile under the moonlight seemed somehow content.





§

Zarish slipped into a suit, fitted with impeccable care. Grooming was everything to a gentleman. Frayed threads and sagging fabric were out of the question. As he checked himself thoroughly in the full-length mirror, another man stepped into the changing room.

The man was about as tall as Zarish, with decent features, but his neatly groomed hair was a harsh fluorescent red. Both strangers locked eyes for a moment, each thinking, *What's with this guy?* That was before they noticed their identical outfits and realized they were coworkers.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Zarish."

He figured a proper greeting was important for his first day on the job and promptly extended his right hand, but the man sneered mockingly. The stranger instead raised his left hand to flaunt his fingers with a proud smirk, not for a handshake.

Zarish's eyes widened as he took in the four golden rings on the man's fingers.

"What?!" he blurted out, then paused. "But wait, it's not about quantity. What matters is quality; the weight of love!"

"You poor fool, you still haven't realized you've lost on that end too, have you?"

The man was Lavos, a formidable figure who'd sent the Gedovar army running with their tails between their legs. For now, he was a fellow workmate who'd be sweating it out alongside Zarish. Their heated bickering would soon become a daily routine on the second floor.

As an aside, the men had grown much kinder to Puseri ever since they watched the film humiliating Zarish. Handing her a plate after eating felt audacious, so a strange custom was born where they cleaned up after themselves rather than troubling her.

Episode 3: The Dark Elf Visits the Warring States Village

When people heard "ninja," what came to their minds? Was it someone wielding a katana and shuriken in battle? Or someone blending in with townsfolk, going completely unnoticed as they spied on their target? Both were probably right, but people typically craved the action-packed thrills of the former in popular media. The performance unfurling before my eyes depicted a type of ninja I'd never seen before.

It had a touch of that over-the-top, edgy vibe with long chants featuring words like "death" and "kill," with various one-liners being said to each other. I didn't know much about real ninjas, but the ones on TV showed a crew of characters with all sorts of traits teaming up to fight a group of bad guys. It was brilliantly done, keeping the viewer constantly entertained with its themes of love, friendship, and betrayal. I thought the best part of the show was the guy who appeared on-screen as he slid open the fusuma sliding door.

"Aaaaaah! There he is!"

The cheers were so thunderous I couldn't help but let out a surprised "Whoa!" covering my ears instinctively and backing away from the girls. The character was one of the two most popular in Japan. His deep, cool voice sounded badass even to guys like me, and he was known as the strongest in the story. Furthermore, the viewers always got hyped up whenever he appeared, as his entrance marked a sharp jump in the plot's pacing and battles.

"Shishimaru!" The shrill cheers of the elf and dark elf echoed across the terrace seats.

To my surprise, there was a sparkle even in Wridra's eyes. She had conjured the giant screen in this dream world but didn't join the

circle of giddy girls, perhaps to save her dignity. She brushed back her long black hair and smiled at me as I sat beside her. Even this gesture was elegant, seeing she was the legendary Arkdragon.

She sure is mature, I thought, but I hadn't yet realized her true nature.

"Oh, wonderful, is it not?! Behold, Kitase, my masterful spell! My magic is projecting that video! You must agree that it is simply amazing. Mm-hmm, nothing beats stellar anime such as that one for spreading the culture of the land of entertainment!" Wridra exclaimed, laughing.

"Ow! Ow! Don't smack my back, please!" I complained.

It turned out Wridra was just thrilled about having the girls hooked on the anime. The elegance I'd sensed crumbled in seconds, replaced by a vibe of demanding praise. All I could do was awkwardly nod and agree, unable to voice concerns like, "This is probably not what real ninjas were like," "I don't know how I feel about watching anime in a fantasy world," and "Do you even have the rights to play this footage?"

Still, Wridra's plan had worked. She'd gotten the girls hooked on the world of anime. Maybe it was thanks to the show's unique and captivating characters. The main character had little power and was looked down on by those around him, who worked harder than anyone but never seeing results. Yet, watching him struggle without giving up made the viewers root for him before they knew it. As soon as a seemingly insignificant event triggered his powers to bloom, the girls, who'd been chatting away the whole time, had fallen completely silent. And when his mentor—the guy they were swooning for earlier—had appeared, they were completely done for.

The guy uttered incantations under an ominous sky full of dark clouds. He drew the eyes of the fierce opponents and silenced the audience, a battle so riveting they couldn't even blink had begun. Since there was practically no entertainment like this in the dream world, Eve was completely unprepared for such a spectacle.

"Oh, my, gosh! Sooo cool! Beyond insanely badass! Ninjas are so freakin' crazy!"

Crazy was right. Eve's energy was crazy high, and I should've

known better than to get anywhere near in that state. She shook me back and forth, making my head rattle uncontrollably. I thought my neck was gonna snap.

Unfortunately, I hadn't explained to Eve that what she'd watched was a work of fiction. Marie understood this, of course, but she was too caught up in the show to bother explaining. The novelty of the anime medium initially captivated them with its snappy, comedic dialogue. As they'd settled in to watch in earnest, the real action had begun. The pacing was really well written, and Eve leaned forward more than the beginning. Even if I'd called out that dinner was ready, she'd probably just nod, "Uh-huh," and stay glued to her seat.

Anime was also popular in Japan, so it was easy to see why someone could get hooked, but something still nagged at me. I waited for the cheering to settle down, then pointed out, "But Eve, you're an *actual* ninja."

"No, no, no, not even! I'm nowhere near his level!" Eve said as if she couldn't consider herself in the same league.

She was strong, fast, and beautiful. I didn't think she needed to be so humble.

Marie, who'd known anime longer than Eve, suddenly smugly said, "Oh, I see you've finally caught on to anime's charm. In the other world, it airs practically every day. I even struggle to keep up with all the episodes I've recorded. The shows being *too* good can be a problem in itself, I suppose."

"Whaaat?! That's so cool!" Eve exclaimed, her smile absolutely brimming with joy.

While Marie had always been a bit of a bragger, Eve tended to blurt out her honest thoughts and was quick to yearn for things others had. Her reaction further fueled the elf girl's smug grin, her cheeks flushing redder by the second. The trouble was that I couldn't help but find her adorable when she acted this way. She was usually cute, but seeing that greedy look on her made me feel differently. Perhaps it was just me, but there was something so human about it despite her being an elf. Catching glimpses of those expressions made me feel like I'd somehow scored a win. I had no idea why.

As I mulled that over, Eve turned her gaze toward me. Maybe it was the fierceness in those big blue eyes, but she kind of reminded me of a haughty cat.

"Oh, you sure are something, Kazu. Not only do you cook tasty meals, but you take me to Japan too. My Zarish is sweet, but even he can't do that," she pouted.

There probably weren't a lot of people with my particular quirk. I didn't even understand why I could travel between our worlds and couldn't do anything about it.

Meanwhile, Marie's cheeky smirk from earlier had widened even more. She shuffled right up to me, plopping her head on my shoulder.

"Oh my, now you're even getting envious of him? What are we going to do? He comes with a lot of perks, but he still looks like a child. Of course, he's a mature adult in the other world and treats me so kindly that it sometimes surprises me."

"That's the best part! He's cute over here and a grown-up over there. You get the best of both worlds! It's not fair! Don't show off in front of me because it's super irritating!" Eve complained.

I couldn't stand being caught between their stares like I was totally on pins and needles. Plus, I couldn't understand how Marie could look so pleased in this mess. Also, I had lately thought that Marie had been getting noticeably more careless. Her chest had been rubbing up against me repeatedly, maybe because she'd been so focused on the conversation. Each time it poked me, I felt my body temperature rise.

Yes, I knew Marie was cute. She had a petite face, and her gorgeous skin felt unreal. Her vivid eyes seemed to pull me in with every glance. She was an otherworldly being, yet very human desires were visible in those purple eyes of hers.

"Hehe, isn't he great?" Marie asked. "It's not often that other women understand his charms. But you've got good taste, Eve. I finally get to brag about him, and it feels nice."

"No fair, I feel like the only one left out here," Eve replied. "Oh well, I'm usually the one with Kazu in battle. We sure make a good match, don't we? I bet you've got me memorized in all of your slots."

Marie’s pale purple eyes flicked my way, not showing anger or sadness but piercing as if they could see straight through my soul. This was kind of unnerving, causing a cold sweat to creep down my back. I couldn’t fold here. This was the moment to stand tall. Like Eve said, we’d often teamed up to cut through the front lines in battle, and memorizing my partner’s moves was crucial.

“Um, about twenty-four patterns, I think. Several times more than that if you include the minor adjustments,” I answered.

“For real?! Hold on, what’s with your boyfriend, Marie? Sounds like he’s totally obsessed with me. Oh, this is awkward. But he’s a guy, so what can ya do?” Eve said.

“We need to have a talk later,” Marie declared.

I felt sweat gushing out of every pore. Her emotionless tone was downright terrifying. Her unearthly cuteness added a layer of intensity that made me flinch.

Marie’s icy stare remained fixed on me the entire time until the next anime started to play.

With a heavy sigh, I sat on a different seat from before. I didn’t love nor hate anime, so I’d quietly slipped away from the girls. It definitely wasn’t because I was utterly exhausted or anything.

“It must be quite difficult being such a ladies’ man,” Wridra teased.

“Not you too... They were just toying with me,” I grumbled. “Why are you all the way over here, anyway? Aren’t you gonna watch the show with the others?”

“Hm? Oh, I *am* watching. Watching them enjoy the show.”

An excited squeal suddenly filled the air, and Wridra’s lips curved to form a smile as she gazed at them from afar. Her expression reminded me of how a parent might look at their beloved child, then her sharp eyes turned toward me.

“I enjoy live-action shows as well. Watching that blind swordsman was truly captivating.”

“You mean that period drama?” I asked. “You always had a bit of an old-school taste.”

Wridra’s smile widened at my comment. Though she’d lived since ancient times as the Arkdragon, she’d spent countless hours

watching movies and dramas in her cat form. Maybe her tendency to obsess over entertainment didn't differ from Marie's. But when she got *too* absorbed in something, no one was more troublesome than her.

"Behold, my hidden blade!"

Wridra drew a slender sword from its sheath with one swift motion. She was dressed like a Japanese swordswoman, maybe because she felt like doing a bit of cosplay. Once she slid the blade back into its sheath with a sharp click, a nearby stone ornament slipped down diagonally, sliced clean through. I stared at her, stunned by the speed of her technique—like something from an anime.

"You're not gonna cut me down too, are you?" I asked.

"Hmph. Do not fret," she said, smirking. "I used the flat side of my blade."

I patted my own body and found no sign of bleeding or having been struck.

Just a joke, I thought with relief and smiled at her. I realized I still had much to learn about Wridra's personality. "Ha ha... Huh?!"

Suddenly, my clothes were cut to shreds. I stared in shock at the fabric confetti formerly known as my outfit, my mind filling with indignant curses at her audacity.

Beyond Wridra's bright smile, I caught sight of Marie's and Eve's shocked faces. I felt a chill run through me as their eyes slowly drifted downward from my face.

"O-O-Overload!"

I activated my skill with lightning speed, vanishing from sight. From a distance, I heard, "Hah, hah, that desperate look on his face!" followed by roaring laughter. While I usually seemed pretty laid-back, I wished they'd understood that even I could get a tad annoyed.

The chirping of birds reached my ears. A view, full of lush nature would've been perfect for a picnic with a boxed lunch or a barbecue. Yet I was sulking visibly, my face set in a deep pout.

"Unbelievable," I grumbled. "She left me naked... My clothes are

completely gone. She better not have accidentally nicked me somewhere."

I was in a thicket far from the mansion, muttering complaints under my breath. The dim surroundings dampened my mood even further, but luckily, I seemed unharmed.

"Looks like I'm fine," I mumbled, then realized a woman was standing before me. *No, not fine at all.*

Shirley's sky blue eyes were wide as saucers, her honey-blonde hair was tied back in an old-fashioned yet charming bun. This was not the time to compliment her style. I could tell by her outfit that she was out on a stroll. Her face was flushing redder by the second.

She didn't make a sound, but she looked like she was squealing. Her expression shattered any faint hope I'd had of my nakedness not bothering her, being a sort of ghost and all. Even as she covered her face with her hands, from between her shaking fingers, she stared fixedly at *something*—though I won't say what.

Soon, my loud scream echoed throughout the forest, inviting more laughter from a certain black-haired beauty. I could hear her crude, resounding cackles all the way from here. The ever-expanding second floor had been growing in population, becoming livelier by the day. Still, I couldn't help but think it could be just a bit quieter.

"Ugh, what a mess," I said, sighing as I returned to the mansion. "I'll steer clear of Wridra when she's in one of her giddy moods. I don't want to deal with something like this again."

There wasn't much else I could do; it was like steering clear of a barking dog. What if Wridra approached me instead? I'd just give up on the spot, of course. She was an Arkdragon, so there was no winning that fight. It'd be an automatic loss as soon as she got near me.

Luckily, I specialized in movement skills and could brag about my escape speed to anyone. That's how I slipped away from Shirley, though I still needed to come up with an excuse for why I was wandering around the forest buck naked.

As an aside, I'd obtained my current clothes from the room in the annex. Sneaking in my birthday suit, praying no one would spot me,

was kind of a living nightmare. Honestly, I never wanted to go through that again. Such were my thoughts as I walked through the mansion, then I noticed something at the end of the corridor.

"Huh? A white doll ornament?"

The ornament was smooth like porcelain, with arms and legs like any doll. Yet it was round overall, with a black patch on the head area. What threw me off was why anyone would bother displaying something like this. I would've understood if it was something cute like a stuffed bear, but this?

I kept my eyes on it as I tried to walk past it until two round lights flickered on its face. It blinked audibly a few times, then the thing I'd thought was a statue jerked its head forward.

"Whoa, it moved!" I yelped, taken aback by the oddly smooth movement of this seemingly lifeless thing. Anyone would've been surprised. I was in a dimly lit corridor with no hint of life anywhere nearby, after all.

The thing stared fixedly at me, raising a hand to its mouth and blinking its lights that resembled eyes. Its round, neckless form wasn't intimidating by any means, but seeing it so up close creeped me out just a little bit.

"Greetings. I am Kalina. Who are you, person-startled-by-my-appearance?"

I was surprised by the feminine voice. The speech was a bit mechanical, almost cold, but there was a touch of humor in how she tilted her head and peered up at me.

As I remembered she'd greeted me, I knew I had to respond. While I was usually off having fun somewhere or sleeping, Kalina looked downright bizarre. Still, I had to respond like a proper member of society.

"Hello," I replied. "People call me Kazuhiho in this world."

"'In this world'?" Kalina asked, chuckling softly. "That's an unusual way to phrase it. It's almost as if you've known many worlds. Is this world wonderful to you?"

Her eyes curved into crescent shapes, which seemed to represent a smile. At first, I thought she was an unknown entity I should be cautious of. Surprisingly, she was easy to talk to. Maybe it was the

polite, gentle way she spoke.

"Yeah, this place is like a dream. Don't you think so?" I inquired.

"Absolutely. I'm glad you feel the same way as I do," she said with a few playful, charming hops.

I wondered where she'd come from or who'd brought her here. We were in the Arkdragon's mansion, making it unlikely she'd wandered in on her own.

"So, are you waiting for someone here?" I asked.

"No," she answered, "I am on standby to be called upon—a very important task. I must be able to introduce myself properly, or I may end up disliked."

"What? Who could possibly dislike you?" I said.

"I do not know. I was only born recently. You're the second person I've spoken to, so I lack confidence. This body was put together in a rush too..."

She looked down, seeming dejected. Her head and torso were fused together, so the gesture made her look even cuter.

Suddenly, she perked up and said, "Still, talking to you has put my mind at ease a bit. If I'm not mistaken, I believe I've made a good impression, and you've remembered my name! This is a splendid development."

"Glad I could boost your confidence. I hope this doesn't come off as rude, but you're pretty adorable. I bet everyone will like you."

Kalina froze at that comment. I wondered if I'd said something wrong, but she raised her round, fingerless hand to her chest and clenched it. She made a little "hmph" noise resembling a triumphant puff of breath, which I took as a sign that she was pleased.

She's an odd one, I thought as she bowed politely. I hadn't expected such manners from that unique appearance.

"I'm sorry for bothering you with the sudden conversation," Kalina said. "May today be a wonderful day for you, Master Kazuhiho."

"It was no bother at all," I replied. "Thanks for talking to me; it was fun. I'm rooting for you to do great."

She waved enthusiastically as I walked away. In the end, the mystery remained unsolved. *Who was she?* She had a feminine voice, but her appearance might not fit neatly into traditional

categories like male or female. I supposed I'd find out eventually. The second floor wasn't *that* big, and someone would soon tell me. If Kalina had known what I'd just been through, she probably wouldn't have wished me a "wonderful day."

I sighed, then began walking toward the courtyard again.

When I finally got back to the terrace, I found everyone having a blast without a care in the world for me. I hadn't expected the group to worry, considering I'd just ended up naked and zipped away on my own. *Heh.*

Seemingly influenced by the anime they'd just watched, the girls devised ideas to re-create ninja techniques, look cool, and strike dramatic poses. Playing pretend was a kid's game, but Eve's profession as a ninja made it relevant to her work. She gripped her raised index finger in that classic ninja gesture that, although historically accurate, they probably didn't do that sort of thing.

Then there was her outfit, likely prepared by Wridra. She was wearing a ninja-style getup with a slit going all the way up to the absolute limit. While the navy kimono was fine, the way it exposed skin from her hips to her thighs and even up to her underarms was a bit much. A real ninja would probably faint from shock seeing it. I initially wanted to say a lot but reconsidered, thinking maybe this was fitting.

After embarrassing myself earlier, I attempted to make myself invisible and slip into a corner seat. As I slowly made my way there, Eve's head suddenly whipped toward me. Unfortunately, her instincts were as sharp as ever. I braced for mockery after my earlier humiliation, but to my surprise, the dark elf just turned away with a huff. Her lips twisted into a pout, and her voice cracked slightly as she gave me a "Yo."

Marie's reaction was more obvious. When she noticed Eve's glance, she turned in my direction and froze. Her cheeks flushed red before my eyes, and she looked like steam might shoot out of her head.

"Wait, did you see—"

"Nope, nothing! Not at all!" She cut me off. "You disappeared so

quickly, I couldn't get a clear look at all! Right?!"

As Marie blurted out her denial all at once, Eve was still looking away as she stiffly nodded and awkwardly muttered, "Y-Yeah..."

Her reaction was far from reassuring, yet I felt more uneasy than ever. For some reason, I was compelled to end my life immediately.

You, Ms. Arkdragon. Don't cover your mouth like that and laugh at me. You're the one who caused this mess, I complained.

"Hah, hah, you were fortunate to be in your child form. If I had done the same thing to you in the other world, you'd do more than just sulk," Wridra said.

I mean, she was right. There was no way I could get revenge against her here, but she was usually in her cat form in Japan, meaning I could do something in that state. I started scheming terrible acts of revenge, like snatching tasty food from under her nose. Then, I noticed her blade was unsheathed and decided to drop that notion. Peace was definitely the better option.

"Anyway, let's forget the whole thing," I said. "Why'd you decide to have an anime viewing party in the first place?"

"When I mentioned Sengoku Mura to Eve, she grew quite curious," Wridra explained, referring to the Warring States village. "I had thought it would be excellent viewing material to prepare for the visit. Much like what you do often."

"Huh? Me?"

She chuckled softly, leaned close, and whispered, "You build anticipation before the event. You cannot fool me. It is clearly a deliberate effort on your end."

The sunlight dimmed, and her obsidian eyes narrowed as she grinned slyly. I nodded, almost without thinking—not that I was intimidated or threatened—but because of her strange aura.

Wridra had changed greatly since we'd first met. She still had that inner child in her, but maybe it was the strength she'd gained as an Arkdragon and mother. Even as I was kind of impressed, there was something I wanted to say.

Hesitantly, I asked, "Does this have anything to do with you stripping me naked earlier?"

"Fool," she scoffed, propping her cheek on her hand. "Of course

not. I simply found it amusing."

"Right." I slumped over and nodded. I figured she hadn't put any deep thought into it. It wouldn't have annoyed me less if she had done so.

Her long, glossy black hair danced in the wind as she flashed me a smile. Those slightly upturned eyes narrowed, giving her an air of maturity mixed with juvenile playfulness. Behind her, her dragon tail swayed cheerfully.

Back in Japan, it was right around the time for peak autumn. Rather than plotting revenge, I figured planning our trip would be way more fun. With that thought, I settled into a chair, and an adorable elf face inched close to me.

Meanwhile, Eve kept a distance, maybe because of what had happened earlier. She positioned herself so Marie sat between us, gripping the back of her chair with both hands. Her cheeks were flushed, and she stared at me with an uneasy expression.

"I didn't think things would get this chaotic before making travel plans," I commented. "Anyway, Wridra and Eve, I want to officially invite you both to the tourist attractions. Can I assume you're all set with the arrangements?"

"Of course," Wridra replied.

"Totally!" Eve confirmed.

Both flashed dazzling smiles. Eve's enthusiasm was one thing, but Wridra's certainty told me everything was good. By "arrangements," I meant the special rings that kept the Prominence Dragon's and Zarish's wild personalities in check. Without their masters around, those two could rampage like beasts off their leash.

Wridra acted as if everything were under control, her smug grin deepening even further. She parted her glossy red lips and said, "On that note, there is someone I would like you all to meet."

"Huh? Who?" I asked.

"Oh?" Marie said, curious. "Who could you possibly want us to meet?"

We exchanged curious looks, light purple eyes staring into mine. Seeing those mystical eyes so up close was almost too much. Even though I should've been used to it by now, I couldn't resist the long

lashes framing Marie's upward glance.

I felt a sudden smack on my head.

"Why'd you hit me?!" I yelped.

"Fool. Must I explain why? You are constantly drooling over that elf girl with every little look she gives you," Wridra snapped. "And you, Marie. Enough of you seducing him every chance you get."

"Wh-What?" Marie stammered. "I'm not seducing anyone! And even if I was, it'd be more like I was just turning on the charm... You know, in a more sophisticated mature approach. It's totally normal in the city— Hey, stop pinching my nose!"

Wridra was annoyed by Marie's cheeky attitude and grabbed her perfectly shaped nose. But the Arkdragon looked rather amused as she watched the elf make her muffled protests.

Seemingly satisfied, Wridra abruptly released Marie's nose.

"Very well," she said. "In any case, I wish to introduce a new friend of mine. Kalina, come here."

A familiar robotic voice answered from behind. I turned, and the same figure I'd met in the corridor earlier stood there.

"It's you!" I exclaimed.

"I didn't expect the person I'd be introduced to would be you, Master Kazuhiho," Kalina said, giggling. "Though, I secretly hoped it might be. And the lady beside you must be Miss Mariabelle. She's breathtaking. You two seem to be the perfect pair."

Kalina waddled forward with those short legs on her squat, round body. When she finally reached our seats, she looked up, the lights representing her eyes curving into a smile.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly," she said. "I am Kalina. This is just a terminal prepared for remote use. I may look like this, but Lady Wridra has granted me the special privilege of sentience. Impressive, wouldn't you agree?"

Marie, who'd been looking wary of Kalina until then, softened at her charming words and broke into a smile.

"Oh, you're quite something, aren't you?" Marie said, reaching over.

She couldn't resist patting Kalina's head despite it being their first meeting. That humorous, lovable appearance and polite yet childlike

way of speaking was hard to resist. Kalina let out a proud, delighted laugh as the elf girl patted her head.

"Since I have been summoned here, does that mean I can be of service somehow?" Kalina asked. "If so, that'd be wonderful. I have always dreamed of being appreciated by others."

"Kalina," Wridra said. "You are a hard worker and have a sharp mind. In due time, you will certainly have the gratitude of not just myself but many others. Now, let's discuss why I have brought you here."

Wridra rose from her seat, then began removing the golden rings on her fingers. Those seated near her could tell they weren't just ordinary jewelry. A strange humming sound echoed as the ring slid down her finger, followed by a sound like creaking wood just before it came free.

Meanwhile, Kalina slipped on a pair of fingerless white gloves that fit like socks. She stood next to the Arkdragon, who casually dropped the ring into her hands.

Kalina stared intently at the ring and said, "This is clearly Lady Wridra's handiwork; the magic quality is unmatched. The ring is so dense yet flawless, causing no excessive strain on the wearer. And absolutely beautiful, like the finest of gems."

Wridra grinned, removing the rest of the rings one by one. "These have the power to seal the power of the Prominence Dragon, but they do not tame his ferocity entirely. They only guide him toward the path I have designated. The lost dragon foolishly clinging to dreams of the past is no more."

"You have always been so kind," Kalina chimed in. "I believe 'scumbag' would be a fitting title for such a deplorable man."

Kalina had spoken politely, so I was caught off guard when she casually hurled an insult, even though it somehow seemed fitting. Maybe it was just that her mechanical tone made it hard to read for emotion.

We watched as Kalina stored the rings in a case and snapped it shut.

"I will take responsibility for these in your absence. Shall I handle your ring as well, Miss Eve?" she said.

“Huh? Mine?” Eve said, blinking. “Oh, right, I’m supposed to give them up during the trip. Hmm, I’ve worn it for so long it’d feel weird without it, but... I guess there’s no other way. Oh, should I write my name on it so it doesn’t get mixed up with the others?”

“There’s no need for that,” Kalina assured her. “You must be truly exceptional to be able to create a ring like this. I’ve hoped to speak with you since I knew you’d be wonderful.”

Eve wasn’t used to such praise. She reeled back dramatically, paused for a good few seconds before recovering, and lunged forward to wrap Kalina in a hug.

“Oh my gosh, you’re such a sweetheart! Where’d you come from? A shop somewhere? I wanna go there too! You gotta stay by my side forever!”

“I am not for sale,” Kalina said, laughing, “unless Lady Wridra puts a price tag on me.”

Wridra dished a bonk on Eve’s head, looking annoyed, and huffed, “Fool. Of course she is not for sale.”

“What? Come on!” Eve protested. “Just lemme have her for a bit! I’ll give her back by night!”

Kalina stood between them, hesitating briefly before her glowing eyes curved into a smile once more.

I totally understood how she felt, considering how anxious she’d been in the corridor earlier. She seemed delighted that she’d introduced herself properly and received affection. Our eyes met, and she flashed me a smile.

It wasn’t just Kalina. I noticed the rest of the women were looking at me, their eyes full of anticipation, making me suddenly feel a rush of excitement. For some reason, I pictured boarding a train with them, eagerly choosing ordinary station bento boxes.

“All right, let’s kick off our Nikko trip!” I said. “Everyone ready?”

Sleeping on the night before a big trip was usually difficult. The girls cheered and clapped for some reason, and I wondered if they’d be too restless to get any good shut-eye.

Meanwhile, I didn’t notice the woman peeking out from behind a stone lantern. Her sky blue eyes starkly contrasted her blushing

face, and she seemed lost in thought momentarily.

§

I heard the faint sound of voices from somewhere that might have been close by or a bit farther away. Though I could sense people nearby, I only wanted to sleep in a bit longer. The blankets were as light as a feather, perfectly warm, and smelled amazing.

My body craved rest, and giving up this cozy drowsiness would've been a shame. I might get scolded for oversleeping, but so what? I'd gladly accept whatever punishment I had coming. As I'd shamelessly given up on waking, I heard someone calling my name.

"Eve, it's about time you get up."

A gentle, motherly voice and a soft chuckle echoed right beside me. I still wanted to sleep, but when I opened my eyes, my drowsiness disappeared immediately. It was as if someone dumped a bucket of cold water over my head.

Chaos filled my vision. There was a box with glowing numbers in it. Flat figures, not drawings, in a square frame chattered in an unfamiliar language. Even the magical relics buried deep in ruins couldn't compare to what I was seeing. I'd never seen the tools in the room, but their designs were logical.

"Japan!" I blurted out, realizing where I was.

Bathed in sunlight spilling through the curtains, I sat straight up. My somewhat unkempt hair flashed gold under the sun in the corner of my vision.

Japan was the name of a far-off land. I'd been here once before and still hardly understood anything about it. But I had so much fun last time I couldn't stop laughing out loud.

"Morning. You're full of energy already, huh?" a sleepy-looking guy said.

Kazu was tall here, unlike usual. He got bigger back in Japan, though I still had no idea how. I'd been teaming up with Kazu a lot lately, and we'd gotten much closer since the last time we were in Japan. I didn't need to be on guard with him, which made him a million times better than other guys. Honestly, it was kind of nice.

He wasn't the type to do anything inappropriate or strange around me. Though, he did weird things like happily bake a pizza in a monster-filled labyrinth.

"Morning," I replied. "Judging by how you look, we must be in Japan, right?"

"Yup. Welcome. Make yourself at home," he said with a gentle smile that made him look like a mature grown-up. I realized I was definitely much older than him when he suddenly leaned in close and whispered as if sharing a secret. "That's what I'd like to say, but we've got a packed schedule today. You really should get up."

"Huh? What schedule? We just got here— Oh!"

I was wide awake then. With my eyes wide open, I threw the blankets aside.

Hell yeah, we're going sightseeing around Japan today! Wasting no time, I jumped to my feet, started yanking off my pajamas, then froze and pulled them back on. *Crap, forgot he was right there.*

I paused.

"My bad," I muttered. "I'll be careful."

"Y-Yeah," he stammered. "You can change in the room over there. Marie and Wridra are there, so it might be a little cramped."

That was close. Knowing how harmless Kazu was had made me *too* comfortable, so my danger radar didn't make a beep. A part of me didn't see him as a guy, but more like a small animal or something similar. Still, he seemed different as an adult. He had a mature air in the labyrinth, but he felt more dependable here. Maybe I was lost in my thoughts or simply out of it because it'd been ages since I'd been to Japan, but my head was in the clouds.

"Eve, the changing room's over there. Wridra set out some clothes for you," Kazu explained.

"Thanks," I said as I carelessly swung the door wide open.

Marie stood there hooking her bra behind her back, and Wridra was in the middle of putting on some black stockings.

Crap, I thought immediately, and the changing room echoed with Marie's high-pitched shriek. I whipped around in a panic to find Kazu had already turned his back, walking away briskly.

"Whoa, so fast! And that's why I've crowned him the safest guy

there is! He must be used to these kinds of events!”

“Eve, stop analyzing and close the door already!” Marie snapped.

That was a fair point. Bowing apologetically, I quietly closed the door behind me with one hand.

Sorry about that.

A warm-looking wool sweater, half coat, and a checkered skirt that seemed short enough to show my underwear were on display. I was eyeing each piece when someone spoke up behind me.

“There are tons of clothes, so pick whatever you like,” Marie said. “If you want something specific, just tell Wridra. She should make it for you.”

Marie’s outfit was so well put together that it was downright impressive. Her skirt and tie matched perfectly, and the collared shirt paired with the brown vest gave her the vibes of a refined lady. *So cute.* I appreciated how elegant she looked as I glanced at Wridra.

Oh no, I can’t. That’s way too lewd.





Her reddish turtleneck looked prim and proper at first glance, but everyone's eyes would really go straight to her boobs. Even I was staring, and I was a girl. Her black hair was styled to show off her nape, and that long skirt cinched at her waist screamed sex appeal. I was pretty confident in my figure, but standing next to her made me want to apologize.

"Eve, we're leaving soon," Marie cut in. "You should hurry up and pick something."

Oh, sorry! I couldn't help but critique their fashion.

Marie was adorable even when she was scolding me. She had those fierce, elven eyes as she nagged but helped me pick out my clothes anyway. She was short like a kid, but there was something charming about how she acted like a big sister. If I had a sibling like her, I'd probably spoil her rotten. Wait, was she older than me? That was hard to believe. Maybe she'd lied about her age to play the bossy older sister.

As I was lost in my thoughts, I scanned the wide selection of clothes.

"Don't you have any shorts? Something easy to move in?" I asked.

"It's autumn. You'd freeze out there," Marie said.

"Nah, I'll be fine. The labyrinth is way colder, and I like clothes that don't make me feel restricted. Oh, this one looks good. Light, stretchy, and looks good for running."

Guess I was unusually tough against the cold. I'd heard it had to do with dark elves hosting spirits in them, but who knew?

I grabbed a pair of black, skintight pants with a single stripe down the side. After that, Marie and Wridra used the pants as a base to pick out other stuff for me to wear, one after another.

"This T-shirt, hoodie, and those sneakers would work," Marie said.

"Yes, that should provide enough mobility," Wridra agreed. "These shorts can go over the tights as well."

Their speed shocked me, and I was known for being quick. I couldn't help but admire their fashion game. They knew what they were doing, while I could be rough with this sort of thing.

"Looks pretty good," I said in front of the mirror.

"If you're fine with it, let's get going," Marie said. "Come on, this way."

"Huh? Wait, already?" I asked. "I wanna check if there's other stuff."

Marie tugged my arm, and I stumbled toward the front door. As it opened, it revealed a shockingly beautiful blue sky overhead. A tower in the distance looked tall enough to reach the clouds, and buildings sprawled as far as I could see. Even a thriving castle town couldn't hold a candle to this place. Everything was so high up that I didn't know how they built all this stuff, and the buildings had too many floors to count. I couldn't resist peeking over the railing to look down.

Oh, there's Kazu. He was walking on the street below and spotted me, waving his hand.

As I waved back, Marie said, "No time for waving, Eve. Come on, follow me."

"Whoa, why the rush?" I asked as I caught up. "Where are we going again? My head's still hazy from just waking up."

Marie abruptly stopped her speed walking, then pressed a button, lighting it up. Her white hair swayed as she turned to me, a whirring sound going off behind her.

"Nikko, of course," she said, smiling. "We need to get to the ninja village."

My eyes widened. *That's right!* It finally came back to me. We were about to have an awesome day.

"Let's go!" The shout came out louder than I meant, and I quickly slapped a hand over my mouth. Marie found it hilarious, squeezing my hand as she laughed out loud. *Today's finally here!*

The last time I came to Japan, I'd gotten dragged to Grimland without knowing what was happening. Thinking about it made me feel nostalgic. Back then, I was so hyped I could hardly sleep, and honestly, it was a total blast.

I heard a ding, then a door slid open to a tiny space. It was barely big enough to fit a few people and weirdly had no exit. This might've scared the old me, but when Marie pulled me forward, I stepped inside with my heart racing.

This is gonna be awesome!

§

A perfectly paved road seemed to stretch endlessly into the distance. Even on my second visit, seeing those things called "cars" speeding by was still pretty crazy. Though, they didn't scare me nearly as much anymore.

"There's a line painted on the ground," I pointed out. "Oh, that weird thing's glowing green. What's that mean?"

"It means we can cross the street," Marie explained. "Let's go."

The elf girl tugged my hand, and I noticed the cars around us had stopped. It seemed there were certain times when it was safe to cross. Things didn't work that way with horse-drawn carriages. The horses stomped around, hooves clattering, and the drivers yelled at you if you got in their way. If they hit you, they'd just act like nothing happened, so maybe it was just a personality issue.

There were buildings all over the place as if they'd sprouted from the ground. Yellow trees lined the streets, and glass was used everywhere in shops and homes, even though it was fancy, expensive stuff. I couldn't help staring into the brightly lit stores. I was like a country bumpkin in a way, which usually would have embarrassed me, but I went with the flow and let Marie lead me by the hand.

"This is crazy," I said. "Can't stop looking around. Oh, a dog!"

"Eve, let's hurry up and cross," Marie urged. "Crosswalks have a time limit. If you're too slow, the cars will start honking."

"Whoa, scary!"

Kazu and Wridra had already made it across, and the green light was blinking, signaling the time was almost up. I broke into a run, forgetting that I was still holding Marie's hand.

"Don't just spring out of nowhere!" she yelped. "Goodness, you're like an overexcited puppy sometimes. Though, I understand why you're so stoked. Don't worry; I'll take care of you during your stay in Japan."

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver. I'd definitely get lost without someone

looking after me. Like, so lost that no one would ever find me again," I said with a dead-serious look, to which Marie laughed and called me dramatic.

I wasn't joking, though. I'd looked down at the city from that high-up spot earlier, and this was nothing like the towns I knew. Those usually had boundaries, like castle walls or fields marking the areas where residential areas started and ended. But here, the streets and buildings stretched on forever. Plus, I didn't speak this country's language, so I tightly squeezed Marie's hand. I hoped she understood that.

As I mulled that over, I caught Wridra smirking at me. That pompous look she was giving me was a bit irritating.

"Such a child," Wridra said, chuckling smugly. "I would not mind lending you a hand as well if you please."

"Nah, I'm good," I shot back. "It looks all rough. It'll probably crush mine."

I hid my hands behind my back, but Wridra's shady grin only widened. She had a draconic glimmer in her eyes, then I heard a sharp whoosh.

So fast!

Her hand moved so quickly it left an afterimage, putting my finely honed vision to shame. Before I knew it, she had my hand in hers. *Her hand's so slender!* It was cool to the touch, and her skin was impossibly smooth. She gripped me firmly from the base of my fingers, staring down at me with gorgeous eyes enough to make a girl swoon. I wanted to ask her not to do things like that because it left me speechless.

"You couldn't get lost now if you tried," Marie said.

"Indeed," Wridra noted. "I could have my familiar accompany you just in case, but that would be difficult to do on the ride."

That reminded me of that strange animal with sleek black fur, long limbs, and a lazily swaying tail. I'd seen it around a few times before.

Anyway, I couldn't help but wonder what Wridra had meant by "ride." I'd assumed we were walking to the so-called Sengoku Mura, but apparently not. I turned to Kazu, who was watching us with a

sleepy expression.

"Hey, aren't we riding that car thing today?" I asked.

"No, not today," he replied. "It's great for chatting and fine for short trips, but for a place like Nikko, it's a bit of a toss-up."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's something else we can use on the way to Nikko," he said, crossing his arms with his cheeks flushed slightly with excitement.

"That's right!" Marie shouted beside me. "The Spacias Limited Express! It carries the spirit of its traditional design while introducing an even more luxurious feel! How could we *not* ride?"

Whoa, her eyes are sparkling*!*

Marie's eyes were as gorgeous as amethysts and outshone any genuine gemstone when she got like this. For some reason, she squeezed my hand really tight.

I frowned, baffled. Their over-the-top hype weirded me out, so I blurted out my thoughts.

"Wait, you're that excited about some vehicle? Why? It's just a way to get around, right?" I asked.

Most people would wonder the same thing if you asked me. There were different grades to vehicles—ranging from good to bad—but what mattered was getting to your destination quickly, safely, and cheaply. It went without saying that carriages stuffed to the brim with people were brutal because they were cramped and smelly and rattled like crazy. Riding solo on horseback was more comfortable, but the advantage of a carriage included a cover from bad weather and keeping you from getting lost.

I thought it was a totally valid question, but the three stared at me as if they were thinking, *How do we explain this to her?*

"Once she rides it, she will understand," Wridra said.

"Yup," Kazu agreed.

"Yes, let's do that," Marie added.

What was with them? Did they all just decide explaining it would be too much of a hassle?

They were being so weird about it, and I didn't understand why we were just standing around on the side of the road. If they

wanted to catch that whatchamacallit ride, we should've been heading toward the boarding area. So why weren't we moving?

Man, I just don't get Japan.

Maybe I was lost in my thoughts because, for someone with sharp instincts, I totally missed the massive thing closing in from behind me.

Screech! Pssh!

"Waaah!"

I spun around, completely unprepared for the sight that awaited me. This thing shooting out steam was bigger than anything I'd ever seen. I screamed, stumbled, and landed hard on my butt. Not to brag, but I had a pretty big butt, so a little bump like that didn't even sting. I was totally fine, though that *really* wasn't anything to brag about. The giant, ironclad, boxy thing before me was more impressive.

"What the...? This size, this power! Is this the Spacias Limited Express?!" I said.

"Nope," Kazu replied.

"Not even close," Marie added.

"You are as much the lovable idiot as ever," Wridra said.

They'd roasted me before I could even blink. *What gives?!*

§

I rubbed my butt, groaning with a conflicted look on my face. Falling flat on my ass in front of everyone was pretty humiliating since I prided myself on my reflexes.

Kazu explained that the huge thing wasn't Spacias, but just a bus. What the heck was a bus?

That was fine. It just startled me, and I wasn't scared of it or anything. The problem was that some sweet old lady nearby said, "Oh dear, are you all right?" She helped me up, which was super embarrassing.

I couldn't help but think this country had many kind people. Usually someone might have pickpocketed me, yet that lady had even given me some tasty candy. Still, I never wanted to go through

something so shameful again. I swore to myself that no more falling on my butt. Ever.

While I secretly made that vow, Marie held something in front of me with a "Here."

I looked down to find a piece of orangish paper, with some sort of writing. Flipping it over, the back was solid black. I gave it a sniff, but still had no idea what it was.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A ticket," Marie answered. "You need it to go through that gate over there."

Her voice was adorable. That much was obvious, but she'd always had this prim, honor student vibe. Maybe it was just me, but she seemed so different here: she was restless, almost giddy. Come to think of it, that giddiness looked familiar... Although I couldn't remember where I'd seen it. I swore I'd seen that expression all the time.

Before I could figure it out, Marie pointed ahead and said, "Look, over there."

I followed her finger and saw people walking through these metal box things.

"Whoa, that's cool," I said. "They beep every time they touch it."

"That's right. In this world, people don't check tickets. Machines do."

Machines?

I had no idea what she was talking about, but Marie had been living in this country for a long time and was way smarter than me, so I figured those things were completely normal here.

"Hmm," I noted, holding up the ticket. "So what happens if I don't have this thing? It's so tiny. What if I lose it?"

"Oh, something so terrifying I'm afraid to even say it out loud," Marie said dramatically. "You'd be trapped in this station forever."

"Yeah, right," I said, laughing and brushing it off. The metallic box thing was only waist-high, and I could easily hop over it. Not to mention, the path was wide open, so I could immediately tell she'd been joking. *Heh, you think you can fool me just because I'm not from here? Think again!*

Maybe I was getting overconfident. While Marie explained where to insert the ticket, I kept staring at the gate. Yeah, I could definitely walk right through it. It was narrow enough to let one person through at a time, but I could probably fool it by pretending to put a ticket in. Even when Marie scolded me for not listening when people were talking, I ignored her and started walking. I didn't know why; maybe I just couldn't rein in my curiosity. Once I started wondering what would happen, I just had to find out.

I decided to zoom right through without using the ticket. I faked putting in my ticket and briskly walked right past it.

Nailed it. I'm too good.

Just as I thought I was about to get through, a loud dinging sound blared. The gate snapped shut, and some mechanical voice started saying something to me in another language. The unsettling, inhuman voice creeped me out, causing me to yelp in shock and fall flat on my butt.

I just swore I'd never do that again!

I assumed it'd be safe because kids were passing through just fine, but it had bared its fangs on me out of nowhere. Who *wouldn't* have been surprised by that?

All I did was skip the ticket—what the heck!

"Are you okay, Eve?" Kazu said from behind as he helped me up.

Even in his grown-up form, his face was as sleepy-looking as ever. But today, there was this mature vibe to him. I wondered why he seemed like this, considering he always had this restless, childish energy in the other world. I thought about it for a while, then it hit me.

"Oh, I get it!" I exclaimed. "You flip-flop with Marie! Marie's the one who's all restless in Japan, and in the other world, it's you!"

It finally made sense. Earlier, Marie's antsy behavior caught me off guard when she was usually Miss Honor Student, but Kazu was the same way. The way they glanced around eagerly with a smirk was practically identical.

But Marie didn't seem to appreciate my genius discovery. She glared at me and said, "*You're* the most restless one here. Stop holding people up and get through the gate already."

“My bad,” I said. “But it’s kind of amazing. You two are, like, perfect for each other.”

She kept her glare fixed on me, but her cheeks turned faintly pink. Her skin was so pale that I wondered if she ever saw the sun, so even a tiny blush stood out. Even as a girl, I found her reaction super cute.

“W-Well, fine,” Marie stammered. “I’ll take that as a compliment, but we need to hurry. The popular bentos might sell out.”

“Huh? Bentos?” I asked. “We’re gonna buy food somewhere?”

Marie looked like she was in a hurry, so I figured I shouldn’t keep her waiting. I slid my ticket into the slot and passed through with no problem this time. To my surprise, the ticket reappeared at the exit so fast that I thought it had teleported. It was hard hiding how thrilled I was.

I followed Marie and caught Wridra smiling at me from the side.

“In this country, you enjoy food that fits the journey,” she explained with a chuckle, her black hair swaying.

“Hm? What do you mean?” I asked. “Marie mentioned bentos earlier. They’re basically portable meals, right?”

It depended on the region, but back home, we’d pack food that didn’t spoil easily in woven baskets for travel. Nutrition and how long the food would stay fresh were priorities, so there was very little expectation regarding taste.

“Eh, I don’t get it,” I said. “I guess I’ll just take the cheapest one.”

I was in Kazu’s care in Japan, so I didn’t wanna make him spend too much money on me. Besides, I wasn’t expecting much from those bento things anyway, which explained why I wasn’t picky.

Wridra, who was a bit taller than me, gave me a surprised look. She glanced back at Kazu and said, “I suppose you heard that nonsense.”

“Now, now,” Kazu replied. “She might change her mind once she sees them.”

Huh? What’s with that look of pity? I was so confused.

A few minutes later, I realized I really had been speaking nonsense. The array of bento boxes laid out before me sparkled like

treasures. Marie clutched her hands tight, her pale purple eyes glittering with wonder.

"Oooh, the limited edition Spacias deluxe bento!" she squealed. "Look, look, they're so luxurious! I want this one! Yes, this one for sure!"

I was shocked to see Marie, the super smart one, acting like a kid in a candy shop. She was way older than me, and a great Spirit Sorceress who dominated the ancient labyrinth. Yet here she was, bouncing up and down with excitement. I glanced at the price tags, and turned pale when I found the cheapest thing in the shop was an unattractive bread roll with some strawberry jam.

No... No, no, no. That bread roll probably tasted good; it even came with strawberry jam. But it couldn't hold a candle to the gorgeous boxed meal offerings. There was a world of difference between them.

For some reason, my legs started shaking, and my idiot self saying, "I'll just take the cheapest one," echoed in my head over and over.

Who'd say something so stupid? Oh, right, me! "Aaaaaahhh!" I wailed.

"Whoa, Eve, don't start bawling in the shop!" Kazu tried to calm me in a panic. "Come on, pick whatever you like!"

Behind him, Wridra was doubled over, howling with laughter.

Damn you, Wridra!

§

Okay, I was totally wrong.

Earlier, I'd thought Marie and Wridra were childish for getting so giddy over some food. That was a huge mistake.

I held a bento bag with a huge grin on my face. There was no point in trying to make excuses. *I was wrong, and I'm sorry.* That was all there was to it, and I was happy to admit it.

We were totally lucky to score these limited edition meals. Marie and Wridra were walking beside me, also grinning ear to ear.

"Wridra, you're all smiles too!" I pointed out. "And you acted like

you were too mature to care earlier!”

“Quiet, you,” she shot back. “It is not too late to get you that sad bread roll instead. In fact, I will be eating the bento you have picked out.”

I was just kidding! Please! This one’s mine!

This chick was insanely strong, and she wasn’t kidding! She grabbed my bag from behind, and I screamed, practically in tears as I held on for dear life.

Kazu must’ve had enough of our antics because he stepped in and told us to cut it out. I hid behind him in a flash, remembering that I was a ninja. After all, hiding quickly in moments like these was my specialty.

Marie seemed fed up too and raised an eyebrow as she pointed at Wridra.

“Watch out for her,” Marie warned. “The first time we met her, she scarfed down our boxed lunches. She even demanded three or four more. She wasn’t joking about eating your bento. If you let her, she’ll gobble it up in an instant.”

I could hardly believe it, but then Wridra said, “Did I?”

She looked away, so I was a hundred percent sure Marie was telling the truth. Wridra then shot a sneaky glance at my food, and I hid it behind my back in a panic.

Kazu must have sensed danger like me since he also hid his own.

“Oh, you got the same bento as me?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I usually just pick whatever, but today’s special.”

Special? Maybe that meant he didn’t often go on sightseeing trips. Still, I wondered why he hesitated a bit when he’d said it. I stared at him, and he quickly moved away, acting all shifty. Something was definitely up.

“W-Well, it’s about time,” Kazu stuttered, glancing at his watch. “Let’s get on.”

He was taller in this world, and with his calm voice, he gave off a dependable impression. I had to stick with him, or I’d get lost in a heartbeat if he left me alone.

“Okay!” the three of us said in unison.

I wasn’t sure what to call this feeling. Thrilled, maybe? We passed through the sleek, black reception box, and the scenery changed to a fancier, more upscale vibe.

“Wow, I like the ambience here,” the girls excitedly whispered. Their energy was so contagious; I felt it too.

My heart started thumping hard as I stood on those weird stairs that moved on their own and watched the scenery change automatically. Suddenly, something sleek and white zoomed by, making my chest pound like a drum.

“Whoooa! It’s the Spacias Limited Express!” Marie shouted, her purple eyes sparkling.

§

Eve couldn’t blame Marie for raising her voice. That pure white exterior, the cage-like window designs, and the glimpse of its glamorous, relaxing interior they’d caught stirred their anticipation even further.

The Spacias Limited Express bridged Tokyo and Tohoku, making it the ultimate vehicle and a dream ride for any journey. One look at its design—modern, yet incorporating traditional Japanese elements—and one couldn’t help but feel a thrill for their trip ahead. The women from another world stared at it intently, completely spellbound.

“There’s a café up front. It’s basically a VIP lounge. We’ll be taking a route that’s been popular since the Edo era, and we can savor the view in style.”

That comment from Kitase was all it took for the women’s eyes to sparkle even brighter, as they were immersed in the sight before them. It truly was the stuff of dreams. In the past, only nobles had the privilege to experience such luxury, but anyone in modern Japan could book it. The next-level extravagance left the women in a dreamy haze, and all they could do was nod in response.

The group walked along the platform, gawking at the positively gleaming train. They didn’t speak a word the entire time, not because they were bored, but rather the complete opposite. When

they saw the dazzling interior, they were picturing the journey ahead. Marie unconsciously grabbed Kazuhiro's hand, her hair as white as dandelion fluff, swaying with each step.

"We only get to experience the fancy stuff on the way there, though," Kazuhiro pointed out. "The return trip will be on a regular train, and we'll be coming home later today, so no overnight stay. We were able to splurge like this *because* it's just a day trip."

Yet everyone was far from disappointed. They would likely be so exhausted from having so much fun that they would sleep like logs on the way back anyway.

The women arrived at the front car and gasped in unison. They found a plush red carpet, a bright, sunlit interior, and a café corner just for VIPs, where a uniformed attendant greeted them with a cheerful smile and "Welcome!"

The crisp, arctic blue sofas even had cushions. This place looked far more comfortable than any luxury carriage or ship. Perhaps subconsciously, the word "Amazing" spilled out repeatedly in various languages such as Elvish, the common language, and even the rare Dragon tongue. Even Wridra had a childlike twinkle in her eye as she stepped onto the fluffy carpet.

§

Some words from an unfamiliar language from overhead followed a weird pinging sound. For some reason, it got my heart thumping. I couldn't understand the words and letters here, which normally would've stressed me out, but the excitement from the Grimland trip came rushing back. There was a jolt, and Spacias started to move.

The scenery outside the window began to change, and I blurted out, "Whoa."

"It's so spacious!" Marie said from the seat across from mine. "It's bright in here too! And these seats are so nice! It's a night and day difference compared to regular trains!"

I thought I'd been so impressed because I didn't know anything about big cities, but even Marie was hugging a cushion and kicking her feet like a kid, totally hyped. She pointed at something and

urged me to look, and I spotted a tower standing straight up amid the view flowing by. Light flashed off it under the clear blue sky, so bright that I had to squint a bit.

"Whoa, it's huge," I breathed. "That's the Skytree, right?"

When we'd gotten off of that bus thing, I had been floored by its massive size. I didn't exaggerate when I thought it might actually touch the clouds. This world was crazy advanced, but it still had these gorgeous views. Maybe they'd planned out their expansions so they could still preserve the scenery.

As I pointed, I asked the two who were smarter than me, "It's so tall. What is it for, anyway?"

"It's a broadcast tower," Marie explained. "The things you saw on TV come from there."

"Indeed," Wridra agreed. "My projection magic is similar. In fact, it was based on the Skytree."

Wait, the thing that plays anime? Whoa.

I paused.

"That's wild. They built that whole thing for anime? It was really cool, so I get why it's so huge."

"No... Japan is known for anime, but they didn't make something of that scale just for anime," Marie said.

"Once again, you are the lovable idiot," Wridra remarked, sighing and shaking her head like I was hopeless.

Honestly, their exasperated gestures ticked me off a bit. I didn't know anything here, but that didn't mean they could just rag on me like that! I puffed out my cheeks, but then Kazu, sitting next to Marie, said something to make my annoyance instantly vanish.

"Wanna go up there together sometime?"

"Yes, definitely!"

Marie, Wridra, and I had said in unison. We locked eyes, then burst into laughter so loud that those around us turned to stare.

Something pretty unusual that looked like some sort of cup made of paper was placed in front of me. There was black liquid in it, which smelled kind of nice. As I stared at it, Kazu smiled at me.

"I've never been up there either. I don't often take trips like this, nor do Marie and Wridra. We're all kind of in the middle of learning

about this country bit by bit. We're actually not all that different from you, Eve," he said, then looked out the window.

Across a wide river, the Skytree faded into the distance. The clouds glowed with sunlight at the perfect time of day. It was a pretty sight, and I couldn't help but feel jealous about their life here.

But as our boxed meals were spread out before us, the scenery took a backseat to the food. I couldn't help but let out a giddy little cheer when I saw the fish, mountain veggies, and meat packed in my bento. The crazy part was that the little box had dividers separating it into sections, each with a totally different dish. *Wow.*

Even Wridra, who was just mocking me a minute ago, had a sparkle in her eye as she said, "This is what I have been waiting for!"

I couldn't exactly call her out, considering I was already sniffing the food without even realizing it.

"I know it's bad manners, but I can't stop sniffing!" I gushed.

"I get it," Marie said, casually bringing her box up to her nose and taking a whiff. "It smells amazing. Since we elves lived in the wild, some say we do this to check for poison, out of survival instinct."

I'd never heard of that, and I hadn't really seen elves sniffing things like that, but I just agreed, "Right." She was giving me a way to cover for my bad manners, so I might as well take it.

As I wondered if she'd made it up, Marie raised a finger up to her lips and whispered, "Shh."

Heh, so she did *make it up.*

They *really* weren't kidding about the bento being fancy.

I can't believe the fish is raw. It's kinda small... And are these orange things eggs? Ew, gross. No way am I gonna eat this... I'll just shove 'em aside. That was what I first thought, but I decided to try a bite, and my opinion did a complete one-eighty.

Having come from another world, Eve didn't realize the boxed meals from this country were somewhat peculiar. Anywhere else, portable food was all about being long-lasting and providing sustenance. However, what the people desired in boxed meals had changed drastically from the explosive popularity of these

makunouchi bentos in the Edo era. Simply being filling was no longer enough. Bentos had to incorporate seasonal ingredients, be visually pleasing, and delight the taste buds to truly be considered "iki," which was a sense of refined elegance. It was a message conveyed through food, and this iki transformed the humble bento into something else entirely, distinguishing itself from portable meals from everywhere else in the world.

The globally renowned Wagyu was glazed with a sweet-savory sauce, making it so tender that one could cut through it like butter. Its glossy richness was a true delicacy for a dark elf girl accustomed to life in the mountains.

Delicious, she thought, appreciating its subtle seasoning. It blended perfectly with the rice, and the stewed onions complemented it perfectly.

Eve learned how to use chopsticks in no time out of the sheer desire to savor these flavors. Of course, it did not take her much conscious effort. She was driven by a strong urge to devour the meal before her until she mastered the skill in no time.

While living at the mansion, she'd fallen in love with Japanese cuisine and had even begged her man to make her favorite dish. That was why she knew Wagyu, even when cold, was delicious. Its refined yet bold flavor, concentrated juiciness, and fragrance of soy sauce made her brows crease in delight.

"I *love* beef," she said, groaning. That statement might have sounded odd for an elf who lived in harmony with nature, but the other two nodded eagerly, so it didn't seem to be an issue. They may have seemed far from fantastical at that moment, but no one was complaining.

The issue was the raw fish. Eve had grimaced earlier at the trout marinated in seasoning known as shio koji, which excellently masked its fishy odor. Still, for someone unaccustomed to raw seafood, the sight alone was enough to make her wince. Tentatively, she brought a piece to her mouth with her chopsticks. Seeing the girls enthusiastically go on about how delicious it was must have piqued her envy. As she chewed, the light, snappy texture surprised her with a flood of umami.

“Ngh,” she moaned, and her sky blue eyes sparkled with delight.

The flavor grew richer with each bite, the rice seeming to amplify the waves of umami surging forth. Eve was pleasantly surprised to find the koji marinade had eliminated any trace of fishiness. The meat was lighter than Wagyu, but its flavor had so much depth. Her tongue was taken by surprise, so she dove back into her vibrant bento with her chopsticks.

Everything was so delicious that she couldn’t stop. The dark elf relished her food so much that it was a joy to watch. She breathed momentarily, then noticed the lush green fields going by outside.

So pretty. Oh, birds! There are a lot of them in this world too.

She was somewhat surprised to find herself so relaxed. The train moved faster than a horse galloping at top speed, yet she wasn’t scared at all. As she pondered why, she glanced at Kazu sitting across from her, gazing out the window with a contented smile. He ate slowly, savoring each bite, contrasting his usual demeanor in the other world.

“Hm?”

§

As Kazu noticed my stare, he turned this way. I wasn’t doing anything bad, but my heart skipped a beat anyway.

“Oh, uh, it’s not like I needed something,” I said. “You just seemed kinda different from usual. Are you taking your time eating because the food’s so good?”

I was expecting him to nod, but he looked troubled.

“Uh, yeah. It’s probably good, I guess,” he said.

“Huh? You don’t like it?” I asked.

“No, it’s just... Well, it’s hard to explain. Anyway, don’t worry about me. Enjoy your food.”

What’s that supposed to mean? He was acting pretty suspicious. I stared at him, and he looked away as if hiding something. Come to think of it, he’d been acting shifty in our earlier chat too. The more I thought about it, the sketchier it seemed. He was definitely keeping a secret, and I was dying to know what it was.

But Wridra suddenly piped up, “It is time to enjoy some beer!” So I stood up with my gaze fixed on him the whole time.

You’re definitely hiding something, and I’m gonna find out what!

A server in a navy vest flashed me a smile. Seemingly everyone in this world wore makeup, and the server’s red lipstick really made her grin stand out. She twisted a golden tap thing, and I heard a fizzing sound as pretty amber lager was poured into a glass.

Nice. I like it, I thought. That wasn’t just because of the way she carried herself, but the way she poured so the foam was just right; it felt like she was putting on a performance for us. The beer’s shiny gold tap looked pretty fancy. Just as I wished we had those at the mansion, I noticed Wridra next to me, deep in thought.

“Hm, it appears you have been thinking the same thing,” she said.

Wridra, who was looking down at me, was rocking autumn colors with a reddish turtleneck and brown skirt for more of a mature look than usual. But the wrinkles around her chest highlighted their size even more, and “mature” wasn’t nearly strong enough of a word to describe them. They were more like *monstrous*.

“Can’t you re-create that tap with your powers?” I asked.

“Indeed, I could,” she replied. “Technically.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can re-create the exact same object in appearance, but the issue would be what is on the inside. Behold, why do you think there are so many spouts?”

Wridra pointed, and I followed her finger. Sure enough, there were several ale taps. I furrowed my brows, tilting my head.

“I don’t get it.”

“Think for yourself for once,” she said, then turned to Marie. “Marie, what do *you* think?”

Mariabelle shot her hand up like a student called on in class. She was also wearing autumn colors with a tie around her neck that made her seem more like an honor student.

“They’re for different drinks,” Marie answered. “They keep the spouts separate so the flavors don’t mix.”

"Oooh!" I clapped, impressed. Marie puffed out her chest proudly, though it was kinda modest compared to Wridra.

"Therefore, we would need to source a variety of drinks such as ales, craft beers, and lagers. Simply copying appearances would not be enough. They would be nothing but shiny decorations without the ability to handle them properly."

Oh, I get it. Why didn't she just say so in the first place? I considered this, then noticed Kazu and asked, "Wait, couldn't Kazu just bring them over? Didn't he say he could take food and drinks?"

"Sorry, I can't," he said. "It'd cost too much money."

He was usually kind, but he'd pretty firmly shut down that idea. The folks back home drank like fish, so he'd probably need to be super rich to afford it.

"Couldn't you set up a brewery then?" I asked. "Wridra's loaded and can travel far, so why don't you bring over whatever booze is made in this world?"

"Ah!" Marie and Wridra said simultaneously. I didn't understand the complicated stuff, but whenever I tossed out random ideas, they did the deep thinking for me. I'd known them for long enough that I'd figured out how to get them going.

"Ahem," the server cleared her throat loudly, snapping us back to reality. "Here's your order."

I didn't speak Japanese, but I stumbled through the "Arigato gozaimasu" I'd just learned, blushing immediately after I said it.

The express train picked up speed.

I saw the countryside rolling by through the big windows on both sides and the front, and I felt kind of refined as I let out a slightly boozy "Whew."

The speed was nothing like walking or riding a horse; the only thing that came close was probably a flying dragon.

As I considered that, Kazu stood up from his seat. He grabbed a blanket from his bag and draped it over Marie, who was fast asleep by the window. He acted like it was no big deal and sat back down, but I thought it was really sweet. It made me curious, and I asked him an unusual question.

“Hey, Kazu, are you always nice to girls?”

“Hmm, I dunno if I’d call it that,” he said. “Maybe it’s more like meddling. Or I’m just a worrywart.”

There was nothing wrong with that. I liked it when people worried about me and fussed over me. Overdoing it didn’t appeal to me, but his casual, low-key way of showing he cared was really nice.

“So, what’s the deal? Are you gonna propose to her?” I asked, leaning in close. His cheeks turned slightly pink, and Marie’s ears twitched despite her being supposedly asleep. That item Wridra made to hide her long elf ears was pretty amazing, disguising them to look like her natural hair.

“Eve, are you drunk?” Kazu asked.

“Oh, I dunno, maybe?” I remarked. “What about you? You’ve only been ordering juice. This stuff’s good. Try it.”

Maybe I was being a bit annoying, but I was just so hyped about going on my first real trip. I was having so much fun. I put an arm around his shoulder and held my cup to his mouth like we were best buds.

He gulped loudly; then my smile vanished.

His raised hands blurred, and to my horror, his fingers doubled. A shiver ran down my spine, then a sharp “Eek” escaped my lips. A blue eye then flickered out of his temple, finishing me. Just as my knees buckled, I was about to scream at the top of my lungs when a hand covered my open mouth.

“It’s okay, calm down,” Kazu said, shushing me, cold sweat running down his face. He sounded like he was trying to reassure himself, not just me.

Maybe I’d calmed down like he said. I stared, wide-eyed, as his freaky hands slowly returned to normal.

Shirley bowed her head apologetically over and over.

We’d moved to a more private deck after that incident, and all I could do was flap my mouth like a fish. She was wearing some sort of old-school gown, silky, reddish... But that wasn’t important right now.

“Wha...? Why are you floating like that? And half see-through...” I

said, my voice shaking.

Kazu cleared his throat. “I’m sorry for not telling you, but Shirley’s been tagging along incognito.”

“Huh? Incognito? Why?”

It wasn’t like coming to this world was a crime. Shirley could’ve just shown up without hiding like me.

He scratched his cheek awkwardly and said, “So, uh, I’ve been keeping this a secret, but Shirley is actually a ghost. She can take on a solid form if she wants.”

Shirley bowed her head deeply as if she were a new hire introducing herself.

This wasn’t making any sense. As I struggled to process everything they were telling me, I groaned and sweated buckets. Who could blame me?

“Also, she’s actually the second floor master,” Kazu added.

“Wha?”

Shirley bowed her head again. Was this some kind of joke?

Wait just a minute! My brain’s not keeping up here! That scary second floor master was a monster called Shirley... Ahh! They have the same name! How have I not noticed?!

I paused.

“Th-This is insane,” I stammered and plopped onto the floor.

Both looked at me, worried. I was reeling from all this crazy stuff Kazu told me, but he kept going.

“There are a few more things I haven’t told you, Eve. Do you mind if we keep them a secret?”

“Yeah, fine,” I said. “This is all too much. There’s more?”

“Well, she helped us a little with that prank on Zarish at the manor... You know, the one that had you cracking up?”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

That one time they got Zarish at the manor!

That night of horror wasn’t something that I could describe so casually. While I’d thought the magic was pretty amazing when I saw it, I didn’t think the culprit would be fist-pumping in front of me as if to say, *Nailed it!*

Talk about oversharing!

Eventually, the door to the train car creaked open.

As I was drenched in sweat and my legs shook like crazy, I probably looked like I'd gone through something wild. Kazu walked up from behind me and whispered, "It's a secret," which probably would've given people the wrong idea.

The Japan trip sure was full of surprises. I glanced outside and caught a breathtaking view of vivid red and orange leaves.

"This place is unreal," I said, sighing dreamily.

I stared for a while longer, forgetting about what happened just a minute ago.

§

Maple leaves fell one by one, drifting down to cover the path like a red carpet. A Japanese landscape awaited just beyond, leaving me speechless. The maple trees were especially vivid in the season of turning leaves. They were red like blazing fire, dancing dreamily as they fell.

Beyond the checkpoint, there was a sprawling view that reminded me... Actually, it was way more advanced than the second floor.

"Aaaah! We're here!!!"

"Eve, calm down! People are staring!" Marie hissed. But how was I supposed to be calm? This was way too exciting. We made it to Sengoku Mura!

"Wow, this is so cool!" I said. "It's a bit different from that Grimland place. Like, people actually live here. Oh, look at that round bridge! Wanna check it out?"

I knew I was acting like an overexcited kid, but I couldn't help but point and eagerly urge them to hurry.

Kazu was more grown-up than usual in this world, though. He just chuckled like an understanding parent, enabling my inner child to surface even more.

"Hold on, Eve," he said. "You can change into costumes in that building over there. I think a ninja outfit would suit you well. Wanna try one on?"

"Huh!!!" I screamed. *Uh-oh.* That provoked my inner child so much that I wanted to roll around on the ground like crazy.

I'd gotten used to living in human civilization, and Team Diamond was one of Arilai's top organizations. I never imagined I'd work my way up like this from living in the mountains, but I was basically a kid right now.

"Sounds great!" Marie said. "I'll wear a kimono. What about you, Wridra?"

"An obvious question," Wridra responded, chuckling. "I am a lover of the blade."

She gestured as if she were holding a sheath. With her black hair, straight posture, and fierce beauty, I knew she'd look awesome with a sword in hand.

I couldn't wait any longer, so I grabbed Marie's outstretched hand.

Kazu's smile as he waved us off stuck with me for some reason. That fond look on his face kinda reminded me of my parents when I was little. Those days had disappeared when I became a dark elf. Maybe that was why I wanted to keep staring at his face... It wasn't like me to get all sappy like this.

Anyway, those thoughts were all blown away as soon as we stepped foot in the outfit area. Wridra had her black hair tied back in a ponytail, totally nailing the swordswoman look. The only word that could describe her was "badass." *So cool!*

Her draconic eyes, sharp features, and massive fake sword at her waist had the ladies nearby practically gawking at her with hearts in their eyes.

"Not bad, if I do say so myself," Wridra said, smirking.

The women looked ready to gush about her beauty, but they said nothing. Maybe they didn't wanna bug a tourist visiting their country.

"Love it!" I said. "Great choice with the black kimono."

But then I glanced to the side and wished I hadn't done so. Marie slipped into a dazzling kimono, so radiant that I nearly went blind. When I watched her clap her hands, she really looked like a princess. Her gemlike purple eyes, dandelion fluff hair, and fairylike beauty didn't seem real.

“And then there’s me...”

I looked down at my ninja outfit, which was dark enough to melt into the night. My blonde hair and blue eyes were kind of—no, they were *way too* noticeable, but I was nowhere near as elegant as Marie.

“Ugh, I was so hyped for this ninja outfit!”

“What are you complaining about?” Wridra asked. “It suits you perfectly fine. Here, take these shuriken.”

Whoa, ninja stars!

I knew I shouldn’t take them, but that was all it took to get me all hyped up again. But there was just something exciting about the hefty weight of the iron in my hands.

“Come here, Eve,” Marie beckoned, “Let me give you this katana.”

“Whoa, for real?! This is awesome! I don’t know much about katanas, but the pattern on this guard is so cool!”

I didn’t know why, but I was feeling giddy. The light fabric of the outfit was nothing like armor. Come to think of it, I’d always worn thin gear in the ancient labyrinth, so maybe Japanese ninjas prioritized mobility too.

Sunlight poured through the wooden windows. It was warm for fall but perfect sightseeing weather, even if my eyes were drawn to the costume list.

“Whoa, so many outfits! Wait, what’s that?” I pointed at an outfit that Marie and Wridra looked at.

“A traveling merchant!” Marie doubled over laughing. “They even have a farmer costume!”

She looked like a princess and was so adorable that the nearby employee stared wide-eyed, but she was roaring with laughter that didn’t match her look. That tight kimono probably made it hard to breathe too.

“I bet Kazu would look good in this,” I said.

They must have pictured him in it because both snorted in unison a second later.

“He definitely would!” Marie gasped between fits of laughter. “Let’s call him over and make him change!”

“My sides!” Wridra wheezed. “Why is a commoner’s look so fitting

on him?! He is the one who single-handedly took down a hero candidate!”

Perhaps that was why Zarish’s reputation had tanked so hard. He lost to someone who looked so average. Kitase was a high-level swordsman and was no pushover, but one couldn’t tell by looking at him.

Kazu probably would have argued against wearing the costume if he had been there, but unfortunately, he wasn’t there. So, he was forced to change into the merchant costume by majority rule. Naturally, the three women relentlessly laughed at him.

“My sides! I cannot breathe!” Wridra roared. “Stop that strained smile! Are you trying to kill me?!”

I felt bad for him since he was outnumbered and forced to wear the outfit against his will. He looked like he had no idea what to say. There was nothing I could do to help, though. My abs were twitching like crazy, feeling like they were gonna explode. I caught Marie’s eye as we struggled to hold it in, and it was all over. We blew up in an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“I’m dying! My stomach!” I howled.

“It’s too perfect!” Marie squealed, gasping. “Please, I can’t!”

He could not say anything when standing there, getting roasted by his girlfriend. The way he stood there with what looked like a medicine pouch wrapped in cloth slung over his back looked way too fitting. Maybe he had been a traveling merchant in a past life.

We made such a scene that everyone around us was staring, but I was having so much fun. Since my arrival, I’d had the time of my life. I learned how fun it was to hang out with friends and check out cool places.

My stomach still hurt, and I had tears in my eyes, but I felt totally refreshed in the warm autumn sun.





Whew. I seriously thought I was gonna die. That was a close call.

A cross-shaped throwing weapon slammed into a wooden board with a thunk. It sank into the wood with some serious force, sending tiny splinters into the air on impact. Before anyone could comment on the nice throw, it was followed by three more rapid-fire shurikens burying themselves in the target. After I ran out of those, weapons resembling daggers known as kunai rammed into the target in quick succession, like a scene out of anime or games.

The crowd went wild. I was showered with cheers and praise, mostly from kids. I held my throwing pose for a few seconds because it looked cooler that way.

I breathed out, then flashed a grin. The kids and their parents clapped like crazy, some of them shouting "So cool!" I couldn't speak their language, but it put a big, ridiculous smile on my face.

"Wow, Eve, your practice really paid off!"

Sheesh. Marie's smile could make flowers bloom. I'd heard a girl's smile is her weapon, but Marie's was on a different level. It practically lit up the whole place, and I could tell she was being completely sincere. *She's so sweet.*

I got a bit carried away and hugged her, and *whoa!* The lovely, floral scent that hit me caught me off guard. *What's up with that?* She smelled like that naturally? She was tiny, delicate, and light as a feather. Elves really were something else. I was also one, but we rugged sea elves were different.

Part of me wanted to keep sniffing, but I didn't wanna seem like a weirdo. When I let her go, I got a good look at her. She blushed and looked like a Japanese princess in her kimono. Yup, she was cute as hell.

The scenery around us was pretty different from what I was used to. The locals called it a post town, with flat-roofed houses made from bamboo, wood, grass, and even paper. Maybe that was why there was such a rustic vibe here. The houses blended in with the greenery, giving them an air of mysteriousness.

I stared at an ukiyo-e painting; there was a strange charm to it that drew me in. I told Kazu next to me, "This place is cool. The

wide roads, peaceful vibes... I like it better than the crowded city we were in before. Why don't they make more towns like this?"

"Hm? Well, they're really vulnerable to fire," he explained. "Most of these old towns probably burned down in wars. That tends to happen with wooden buildings."

That made sense. Scenery like this must have been lost in wars with some powerful nation. It was terrific that they kept the old-school culture alive, though. Where I came from, culture and currency were a jumbled mess after conquering and getting conquered by other countries, so figuring out how far back the roots went was difficult.

"Arilai's like that too," Marie said from beside me.

"What do you mean?" I asked. She was into history and culture, so she knew more about my country than I did.

"Puseri's Blackrose household used to rule Arilai before the current royals conquered it," she said. "Since then, its culture as a desert country has mostly faded, replaced by Western-style towns and gear. Some traditions stuck, of course, but it used to look completely different."

I didn't know that. By the time I moved there, the royal family already ruled it, making it a modern place with a touch of Western influence. I wondered what it was like back then, but I'd probably never find out. It felt like a waste, or like I was missing out on something.

"Wish I could see how it looked back in the day," I remarked, sighing. "Too bad it's impossible."

"Well, that feeling of missing the past is kind of why places like this exist," Kazu said. "Here, you three, smile!"

He aimed a gadget called a camera at us. I'd gotten used to it by now, so I threw up a peace sign with the others, and he snapped a picture.

I nearly burst out laughing. We had a princess, a ninja, and an Arkdragon swordswoman... Then there was the cameraman, a plain-looking merchant.

It was just too funny.

I took a moment.

"This place is pretty plain and kinda blends in with the scenery," I said. "No clue what that sign says, but it could use a bit more pop."

I didn't think it was a bad take. The view was nice, but it didn't have huge rides, flashy fireworks, and sparkly parades like Grimland. I was just speaking relatively, but Wridra gave me a look. Although I was trying to stay on topic, her tall, sleek build in that outfit made my heart race. She'd be dangerous dressed like a man, and I was *not* gonna catch feelings for her. No way.

"You are not wrong," she said, chuckling. "Now, let us move on."

Wridra grabbed my hand, pulling me along. I wanted to know the reason behind her sly grin, so I nodded and asked, "S-So, what did that sign say?"

"As you implied, it was nothing of significance. It simply said, 'ninja training grounds.'"

"Oh, I see. I guess they have— Wait, ninja training grounds?!"

I froze, eyes wide. Even though I tried to free my hand, Wridra dragged me forward with her vise grip and freakish strength. I went pale, plopping on the ground, and started wailing in the busy street.

"Nooo! I wanna go! I wanna go ninja training! Please, don't drag me away! Please!" I begged desperately with tears in my eyes, but Wridra stopped and started laughing. She pointed at me and gasped, claiming she was dying between uncontrollable fits of laughter. *Unbelievable. I thought we were friends. You think your abs hurt? What about my pride?*

"Ah... That was quite a laugh," she said, wheezing. "You certainly are entertaining. Very well, we shall go to the so-called ninja training grounds. I presume you have your shuriken and sword?"

Wridra had issues, but my immediately flipping to a grin was also a problem, which I couldn't help. According to the anime I watched, everyone from kids to adults loved ninjas. They were agile close-combat fighters and intellectual stealth specialists. I didn't exactly look like an intellectual crying like a baby, but ninja training was more important than pride.

Shuriken? Check. Ninja sword? Check. We double-checked our gear, then stepped into the training ground. Fun fact: real ninja swords were short, straight, and easy to hide. Ninjas knew what

they were doing.

"Eve, slow down," Marie said. "It's supposed to be a training ground. What if there's something tough ahead?"

"Oh, it'll be fine," I said with a grin. "Unlike you guys, I'm a real ninja. A little challenge isn't gonna faze me."

I meant no disrespect, but Marie was the one we should've been worried about. Her specialty was spirits and sorcery, and I'd never seen her do any physical training. It was fair to wonder if she'd be able to keep up.

But as soon as we stepped into the wooden building, I froze. I lost my balance completely and slumped against the wall. I couldn't move.

"What is this? I feel sick..."

"It's slanted," Kazu said. "Everything looks normal, but the floor is actually tilted, messing with your senses. You rely too much on instincts, so it's much worse for you."

I was too confused to understand his explanation. My legs felt like jelly, and I struggled to brace myself. I tripped, but Kazu caught me before I cracked my skull on the ground.

"Th-Thanks," I mumbled.

When I looked up, I noticed a plain-looking merchant assisting me, and I had to stifle the urge to burst out laughing. However, it helped since I could focus on my weight and stand on my own two feet.

I carefully crept through the training hall, using the basic ninja slide-step, hyperaware of the disconnect between my senses and the slanted view. Eventually, I reached a goal marker, and the tilted world finally returned to normal. Feeling slightly proud, I blurted out, "Yes!" then jumped at the applause behind me.

"It seems to have been proper training for you, after all," Wridra said with a smirk.

I was annoyed by her looking down on me, but when a camera was pointed at me, I threw up a peace sign and grinned like a kid. It felt good getting compliments, and I had fun.

Suddenly, I had a realization. Everyone gave me curious looks as I glanced around, but I wouldn't share my discovery. I'd realized this

scenery mimicking the Edo period wasn't built with something fancy. It was all just wood pieced together without even using a single piece of glass, which meant we could recreate the same thing on the second floor of the labyrinth. We could even make a ninja village and invite people over. Piping hot udon tasted amazing in the cold, and I could even teach people my ninja tricks and combat skills.

When I first arrived in this world, I believed it was crazy. Nothing made sense, and I thought I was gonna lose it. But back then, this world wasn't all that different from mine; it was just people living in tune with nature.

"Uh-huh, I get it now," I muttered, finally understanding what the others had been up to.

Developing the second floor of the labyrinth with the mansion, walkways, and even a lake was some incredible work. I realized this view was what they'd been chasing. They wanted it so bad they had made it themselves. That was why that place came to be and why it started drawing visitors.

I turned to the others with a warm smile. Now, I felt like we weren't just a ragtag group of oddballs but friends I shared a connection with.

The need to apologize for my complaints about this place's plainness arose. It had a really cool, rustic charm, kind of like a handmade toy.

"Hey, Kazu, take a pic with your camera," I said.

I couldn't see the Arilai of the past anymore, but photos could capture the moment as it was. Maybe we couldn't save everything, but I wanted to keep the stuff that really drew me in. If I had smiling friends at my side, it'd be all the better.

I kept that thought to myself as I posed with Marie and Wridra for a photo.

There were big and small tanuki statues, spinning windmills, and a bright red gate popping with color. I also heard festival music in the distance. Feeling like I was living in a storybook, I let out a laugh that rivaled that of a kid.

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki. This afterword comes with a rather late announcement, but here it is: The *Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!* anime is set to air in January 2025!

In the story, Marie enjoys a variety of movies and anime, but to think that she would be in an anime... I feel like I should say, "Welcome to the World of Anime, Ms. Elf!" Oh, and I visited a recording studio, where the most surprising discovery that day was how much the voice actors struggled to pronounce "Kazuhiho." It didn't look so bad in text, but when I tried saying it out loud, I had to agree that it was pretty hard. My apologies for giving him such a weird name; it's the name I always use whenever I play RPGs.

For details on the broadcast station and airdates, please check the TV anime's official website. I can't wait to watch it myself! Personally, I really like the ending song, so please be sure to give it a listen!

Also, this series has now reached its tenth volume. I'm deeply grateful to everyone who has been reading for so long, as well as to the busy folks at Hobby Japan who have supported me, and to Yappen, who's been handling the illustrations. I look forward to writing more about hard-to-pronounce Kazuhiho and anime-loving Marie. I appreciate your continued support!

Now, moving on to some free talk and personal updates about me. Recently, I have rekindled my passion for cooking. I'd been away from it for some time due to my busy schedule, but seeing delicious-looking recipes on video sites has sparked my interest again. Isn't it great? You can affordably and conveniently create rich flavors at home that are difficult to find in restaurants. It does take a bit of time, but you get a huge sense of accomplishment when the dish turns delicious. My parents have a garden, so I'm planning a visit soon to snag some fresh ingredients.

I sincerely hope all of you are living happy, healthy lives. I look forward to greeting you again in the next afterword.

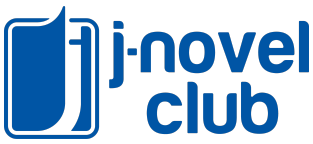
Makishima Suzuki











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by Makishima Suzuki

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