HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI
DEATH MARCH
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD
RHAPSODY
22

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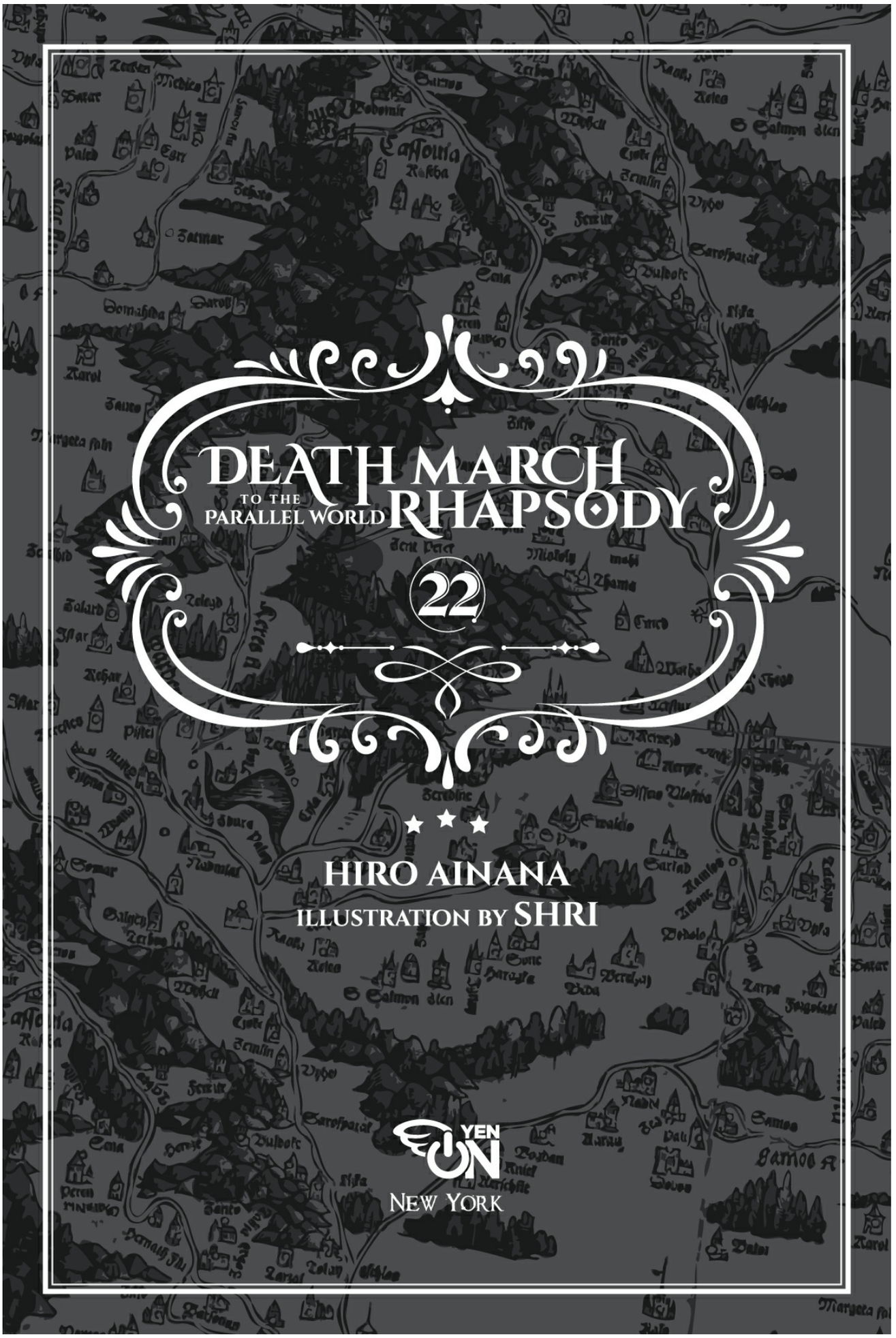
DEATH MARCH 22
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

“Arisa, teleport us to the peak of that mountain, please.”
“Okey-dokey!”
I transformed into Nanashi the Hero with the help of my “Quick Change” skill and took out our small airship from Storage, placing it on the side of the mountain.
“Time for Nanashi the Hero and his Golden Knights to take to the battlefield!”



# DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

22

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HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Yen Newsletter

# Land of Dolls

***Satou here. In ancient times, dolls were sometimes used in place of humans or as tools for cursing people. These days, though, I think they've been firmly established in a partner-like position to bring happiness and comfort.***

"It's a dragon egg, sir!"

Pochi, a little girl with dog ears and a tail who wore her brown hair in a short bob, shouted with her eyes sparkling.

She was cradling an egg with the speckled pattern often seen in dinosaur movies.

We were visiting the "Land of Dolls," Lodolork, our third stop since Parion Province, where we were initially sent to deal with a demon lord.

Most of the passersby wore light clothes suited to the temperate climate of the region; men and women alike had colorful cloth draped from one shoulder and wrapped around their waists. Judging by the fashion, this area probably specialized in textiles and dyes.

"Pochi, we didn't pay yeeet?"

Tama, a girl with white hair, cat ears, and a tail, grabbed Pochi's shoulder to stop her.

It was hard to believe from her cheerful expression that she'd just recently been lamenting the betrayal and loss of Sorijeyro the Sage, who she had admired as her ninjutsu teacher in Parion Province's "Village of Adepts."

"Oh no, sir. Pochi did an oopsie-daisy, sir."

Pochi hurried back toward the stall with Tama.

The crowded street market didn't slow them down in the slightest as they nimbly wove their way between shoppers.

“I’m sorry, sir. Pochi wants to buy this dragon egg, sir!”

Pochi apologized to the stall owner.

The Inland Sea Common Language, which was similar to the language spoken in Parion Province, was used popularly along with the local Lodolork Language. I acquired both skills, but the former was derived from Flue Empire Language and seemed like it would have more practical use, so I only put skill points into that one.

“Heh, I was wondering why a rich-looking little lady would run off with my merchandise. That egg’ll cost ya ten gold coins.”

I got the impression that there wasn’t that much discrimination against demi-humans in this kingdom.

Maybe it was because of all the animal plushies that were sold here, true to the nickname “Land of Dolls.”

“Wowie!”

“T-ten gold coins, sir?”

Pochi peered into her coin purse, looking distressed.

She couldn’t possibly have enough. The pocket money I gave Pochi and Tama when I did a currency exchange in the Lodolork Kingdom port was only around one gold coin per person.

On top of that, my AR display told me that the **Dragon Egg** Pochi was holding was really a **Wyvern Lizard Egg**. According to my “Estimation” skill, its market value was just one silver coin. Besides, it’s not like you’d be able to buy a real Dragon Egg for ten gold coins anyway.

“We’ll buy it for one silver coin.”

“Come on, that’s the worst lowballing I ever heard.”

“Is it, though?” I whispered in the owner’s ear. “That’s about right for a Wyvern Lizard Egg, wouldn’t you say?”

The man broke into a cold sweat and agreed to my price immediately. I’m sure my “Haggling” and “Fabrication” skills helped, too.

I accepted the egg from the man and handed it to Pochi.

“Be careful not to drop it.”

“Yes, sir. I’m going to hatch this egg and become a Dragon Knight, sir!”

“Ooh, très bieeen?”

I quickly sewed up some cloth to make a belt for Pochi to carry the egg in.

Even though I tried to do it discreetly at the side of the road, there were curious eyes gathered on me by the time I was done.

“Master, which of these larvae is the cutest? I inquire.”

Luckily, the blond, busty Nana gave me an excuse to leave. She was a homunculus who was only born a little over a year ago, although she looked like a high school–aged human.

The larvae in question turned out to be two stuffed animals at a nearby stall, one a penguin and one a dog. They were both round and equally adorable.

When I said as much, Nana looked flummoxed and started examining the plushies intently.

“Penguin.”

Mia, whose aqua hair was tied up in pigtails, offered her opinion in a single word. Her hood shifted, offering a glimpse of her slightly pointed elf ears hidden beneath.

“The bisque dolls in this kingdom are on a whole other level!”

Arisa, a reincarnation, looked just as adorable as the princess-like doll she was holding up at the neighboring stall. Her purple hair, which was despised in this world as an ill omen, was hidden under a blond wig.

“These ones would make good souvenirs for my dear comrades Shizuka and Hikaru, don’t you think?”

Arisa showed me two dolls designed to look like pretty young boys.

“Sure. I bet they’d like those.”

“I’ll save these two for them, then. It’s awfully hard to choose from all the wonderful dolls in this kingdom.”

The sage had set up Shizuka to be worshipped as a holy woman, forcing her to transfer skills for him by overusing her Unique Skill until she turned into a demon lord. The whole ordeal sent Shizuka spiraling into a deep depression. Now that she was free from the sage, she was staying in our secret base near the Shiga Kingdom, making *doujins* with the former ancestral king Hikaru.

“By the way, Master. The gossip about Parion Province all seems to be in line with the official announcement, don’t you think?”

“I guess compared to the stories about Hayato the Hero defeating a demon lord, rumors about the pontiff retiring, and the sage’s downfall probably aren’t as exciting?”

The sage’s ambitions ended with him trapped inside the Evil God’s Prison, and

we'd already defeated the green greater demon that was apparently working with him.

The scandalous news that Pontiff Zarzaris and the sage had both been transformed into demon lords hadn't reached the neighboring lands, thanks largely to the efforts of Cardinal Dobbunaf. He and the Holy Sword wielder Sir Mezzalt, who was now the captain of the Holy Knights, were now leading the efforts to rebuild the province.

"It's too bad Mezzalt gets all the glory, while there's basically zero rumors about us."

Arisa shrugged disappointedly.

The hero's party were the main topic of interest, as well as the locally famous Sir Mezzalt. Other than that, everyone else involved—our party, the black knight, the Saga Empire warriors including the two samurai—was hardly ever mentioned at all. On the rare occasion that we did come up, we were usually just referred to as "the brave warriors from Shiga Kingdom."

Unlike Arisa, I had no complaints about that treatment. Fame would just get in the way of our sightseeing trip.

I did feel a little bad that the girls weren't getting any public acclaim, but they were still young. Sooner or later, they were bound to get famous even if we tried to hide it.

"Oho! I spy a little boy doll in shorts!"

Arisa closed in on the doll like a bird of prey swooping down on its next victim.

"What is this spice called?"

"That's numbing wasabi. If you use just a little, it'll really bring out the flavor of a dish."

Meanwhile, Lulu, a gorgeous girl with long black hair and Japanese features, was peering into jars of spices and herbs at another stall.

As a lover of cooking, she seemed very excited to have found a new kind of seasoning.

“What do you think, scalefolk lass? Our spears are all handmade in Stelork, the Land of Smithing.”

Down a side street, Liza was gazing intently at a spear from a stall lined with weapons. A glimpse of her orange scales, a mark of her tribe, was visible on her wrists and neck.

While the main street mostly consisted of stalls selling dolls, ingredients, and so on, the side street had some stalls selling weapons and armor mixed among normal metal utensils and tools.

“This is a very unusual metal. I thought it was rusted at first, but now I see that the steel appears to be tinted with red.”

“Heh, you got a sharp eye to figure that out on your first time seeing it. S’called redsteel, an alloy made exclusively in the Land of Smithing.”

That piqued my interest, so I decided to join in on the conversation.

“The color is very different from scarlet ore. Do they use some kind of special material when they forge the steel, perhaps?”

Since my AR display also called it **redsteel**, it was probably a different metal entirely.

I suspected it was another fantasy metal made with alchemy, like the blacksteel used in the black armor of the Saga Empire.

“Ga-ha-ha. Buddy, that makes it sound like you’ve seen the legendary metal with your own two eyes, ya know.”

*I have, and I’ve forged it, too.*

“So how much is this spear?”

“Two hundred gold coins.”

“That’s just ridiculous!” Arisa butted in, popping up out of nowhere. “Even Magic Swords don’t cost that much!”

When did she get here? She was looking at dolls just a minute ago.

“How about twenty gold coins?” she countered.

“Come on, that don’t even cover the cost of materials.”

“Thirty-five gold coins, then?” I chimed in.

Judging by the price my “Estimation” skill showed me, that should still leave the man with plenty of profit.

I tried flowing some magic power through the redsteel spear, being careful not to use “Spellblade” by accident.

“It’s not bad at conducting magic, but it doesn’t seem as sharp or sturdy as a mithril alloy sword.”

They must have used magic-conductive material for the handle as well.

“Can’t ya go a little higher?”

“I’d be willing to pay thirty-seven gold coins at the most.”

“Sold!”

I exchanged the Lodolork Kingdom gold coins for the redsteel spear, which I handed to Liza.

“I shall gladly carry this for you.”

Liza politely accepted it, producing some cloth from her Fairy Pack to wrap around the spearhead.

“I’m not asking you to carry it—I’m giving it to you as a gift.”

“Th-thank you very much, Master…!”

Liza looked uncharacteristically flustered.

“You’re bright red, Miss Liza.”

“Arisa, it is not kind to tease, I declare.”

“You’re right. Sorry, Miss Liza. That spear really suits you, too.”

Our group walked around the market together, stopping for lunch at a restaurant recommended to me by the gourmet-loving Cardinal Dobbunaf.

“Mushroom steak, yummy.”

“This Lodol chicken with honey teriyaki sauce is delicious, too.”

“I really like the wild plant-and-mushroom stir-fry.”

“Liver paste ruuules?”

“The roasted Mr. Deer is tasty, too, sir!”

There must not be much farmland in Lodolork Kingdom; normal vegetables were very expensive and didn’t taste particularly great. On the other hand, foraged food like wild plants, mountain birds, and especially Mia’s beloved mushrooms were delicious.

There was seafood as well, but that was standard in all the nations around the inland sea, so we didn’t eat it much.

“Thanks for waiting! Here are those extra mushroom steaks.”

“A very welcome addition, I declare.”

I cut up the mushroom steaks, which were slathered generously in honey butter, and handed them out to everyone.

“Cave mushrooms are in season right now. Eat ’em up while you can!”

“Is it possible to purchase these mushrooms as souvenirs?”

“Head to the market on the mountain side of the city. The seaside is all seafood.”

In addition to the wide variety of these specialty mushrooms, they were nearly basketball-sized, making for a wonderfully filling meal.

Since Mia seemed to like them a lot, I had better stock up.

“Here’s the mobba skewers and round steaks!”

Several more waitresses came over with big platters of food.

They were all stacked with meat dishes made from a long-bodied wild animal called a “mobba.”

“Delicious. I wish it had a bit more bone, but it’s still nice to chew on.”

“Om-nom-nom!”

“*Munch munch*, sir.”

Liza used a knife and fork to cut up and eat her food, while Tama and Pochi just stuck their forks into big pieces of meat and tore into them with their teeth.

Their faces were nearly on top of the plates.

There was a loud *thunk*, and Pochi jumped up.

“That was close, sir. I almost crushed Mr. Egg there, sir.”

I guess that sound was the egg bumping against the table.

“Why don’t you just take the egg belt off?”

Pochi shook her head firmly. “I can’t, sir. The leopard lady told me that mommies carry their eggs or babies in their tummies for a long time, sir.”

This “leopard lady” was probably one of Pochi’s fellow slaves back in Seiryuu City.

“It’s fine if it’s just for a little while.”

“Okay, sir…”

Pochi nodded, but right as she was about to untie the belt, she stopped and patted the egg lovingly instead. “Actually, I think I’ll just keep it here, sir.” She clearly thought of herself as the egg’s mother.

“Arisa, won’t Mr. Egg get hungry if it doesn’t eat anything, sir?”

Pochi tilted her head, fork in hand.

“No, it’s fine. It has food inside the egg.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yeah, all you need to do is keep it warm. So just relax and eat your meat, okay?”

“Yes, sir! Pochi is eating for two now, sir!”

Everyone smiled at Pochi’s slightly off-the-mark declaration.

After this fun mealtime, we acquired mushrooms and other ingredients at the market, then decided to check out the city’s tourist spots that the waitresses told us about.

◆

“It’s a big bronze statue, sir!”

“Why is it missing an arm, I wonder?”

One of the landmarks was a bronze statue of the kingdom’s first king. It was enormous, nearly fifty feet tall.

“That’s ’cause of those Sobal bastards.”

A rugged craftsman spoke up in a gruff voice.

Despite his stern appearance, he gave an oddly friendly impression, perhaps owing to the bear-face applique on the back of his work jacket.

“Sobaaal?”

“That’s the land next to ours. As a fellow artisan, I gotta respect Sobalork’s furniture craftsmanship. But I hate them and their blasted war-crazy king.”

According to the craftsman, the bronze statue’s arm was blown off by a Sobalork cannon when they attacked the kingdom.

“You don’t hear of kingdoms attacking each other very often. There’s no monster territory around your border?” Arisa asked.

“Nope. Lodolork here and Sobalork used to be the same kingdom, till three hundred years ago when the two princes fought and split it into two. The older brother made Sobalork, see. Every couple years they attack us, saying they’re gonna ‘ennecks’ Lodolork and make it back into one kingdom. Although before that, Lodolork used to do the same thing to Sobalork, I s’pose.”

*“Ennecks”… Ah, does he mean “annex”?*

“Plus if we fight too much the ol’ red dragon shows up, so they hardly ever invade all the way to the capital. Most recent time was big trouble ’cause some bastards at the border betrayed us. Lucky the pontiff in Parion Province sent Sir Mezzalt and some Holy Knights to mediate, and they chased off those no-good Sobalork freaks for us.”

Now there’s a name I wasn’t expecting to hear in this story.

Come to think of it, I’d heard before that Parion Province mediated conflicts between other nations.

“Time before that, the great sage stopped the battle with a big-ass spell. We

owe Parion Province a whole lot, tell ya that much."

With that, the craftsman pulled out a holy symbol of Parion from his breast pocket and showed it to us.

*Ah, I see. So they evangelize for the Parion faith while they're mediating.*

"You mentioned something about a 'red dragon' showing up…?"

"Yep, there weren't any mediation from Parion Province when I was a young'un. Back then, if battles got too big, the red dragon would come flying in from Redsmoke Island and put an end to the fighting right quick."

"What do you mean by 'put an end to'? I inquire."

"Exactly what it sounds like. The fighting stopped as soon as the red dragon flew in. If you didn't run for your life, you'd be dead meat. The red dragon would get so excited about fighting that he'd try to join in on the fun and end up roasting everyone on the spot."

I remembered Hei Long, the black dragon.

It certainly made sense that no normal human would survive if a full-grown dragon tried to join in on their battle.

"Now normally, we'd only start fights when the red dragon was dormant or gone off somewhere, so it were only lesser wyrms and demi-dragons and whatnot that came at us, but they're still plenty dangerous for folks like us."

The craftsman explained that there were smaller islands near Redsmoke Island where the red dragon's demi-dragon minions nested.

"Hey, boss! The lumber auction's startin' now!"

"Yep! Be right there!"

The craftsman ran off toward his young apprentice who'd called him.

Feeling curious, I wandered over to watch the auction…

"Those cypress logs are mine!"

"Back off, I'm buyin' these!"

"Quit hogging all the zelkova, dammit!"

A whole group of craftsmen were furiously jockeying to buy up lumber.

“I’ll knock yer lights out if ya talk to me like that again!”

“Shut up! Go make some more dolls outta mud, why don’cha?!”

“Bastard! You makin’ fun of bisque dolls?! Why don’t *you* go bang on some rocks?!”

“Wait just a damn minute! Did you just insult stonemasonry? How ’bout I make you a gravestone?”

A few of the men had even started grappling with each other.

“Uh-oh, this is scary, sir.”

“No fightiiing?”

As much as Pochi and Tama frantically tried to keep the peace, the men were too heated to hear them.

Rather than helping them mediate, I was taking advantage of the confusion to buy up a bunch of lumber myself.

“You folks from out of town?”

“Don’t mind them. That’s just business as usual.”

A few women passing by kindly paused to address us, rolling their eyes at the men. They patted Pochi and Tama on the head, praising their kindness before moving on.

*I guess this is sort of like the drunken brawls you always see in red-light districts?*

“Sounds like these guys just communicate with their fists. Let’s not get involved.”

I led my group away to return to sightseeing.

◆

“Seeing these burnt and broken watchtowers reminds me of the anti-dragon towers in Seiryuu City.”

Liza gazed up at a collapsed tower on the castle wall. Back when she was a

slave, she had worked for a while in the gabo fields near the anti-dragon towers.

“Part of the castle wall looks brand-new, I declare.”

“Maybe this is from conflicts with the neighboring kingdom, too?”

“Probably.”

Many laborers were carrying stone to repair the towers. Their defenses seemed to be the highest priority.

There weren’t many golems, only two small ones around ten feet tall. This work was going to take a long time without more of them.

“Shoddy.”

“You mean the Earth Magic? Whoever cast it certainly was rather sloppy.”

Mia and Arisa were looking at a section of the wall that had been reinforced with spells like Hard Stucco and Stone Wall. It was clearly slapdash work, even from this distance.

The caster couldn’t have been very high-level. It was probably practice for a mage in training.

“Many of the monuments are damaged, I declare.”

“I guess it’s probably because they make easy targets during battle?”

There were traces of battle all over the place as we toured Lodolork City.

We heard as we walked around that the battle had been half a year ago now. I guess even in a world with magic, repairs take time in a small nation like this one.

“Found a cat statuuue?”

“There aren’t many dog statues, sir.”

“Rabbit.”

Lodolork was known as the “Land of Dolls” for good reason. There were statues of all shapes and sizes, from bronze to stone, on almost every building and street corner.

We enjoyed the decorations in the residential district as we made our way toward the artisan district, which led to the shop-lined main street.

“A lot of these workshops make wooden statues.”

“I hear the sound of stone being chiseled across the way, I report.”

“Look, it’s a workshop that makes plush toys.”

Through the wooden frame of an open window, we saw people sewing a rainbow array of fabric into plushies. Although most of the plushie-makers were women, I saw a few men as well.

“Master, it looks like they have a shop here, too.”

Arisa led me by the hand into a store area.

“Lots of plushies.”

“They’re very, very cute, sir!”

“Amaziiing?”

Mia, Pochi, and Tama gazed around excitedly at the colorful stuffed animals.

“Oh, this is wonderful!”

“Yes, Lulu. There are so many larvae, I declare.”

The other girls seemed to be enjoying themselves, too. Even Liza, who looked self-conscious that she might be out of place, was still inspecting the plushies with a serious expression.

“It’s a dragon plushie, sir! I want to give it to Mr. Egg after it hatches, sir!”

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s a great idea.”

Pochi held up a bigheaded dragon plushie.

“Oho, looks like we have lots of visitors from far away.”

The proprietress emerged from the back and greeted us.

She appeared to notice Pochi’s egg belt but made no comment about it.

“They’re all very adorable, sir!”

“Glad to hear it, missy. My daughters and I, and the other gals, too, put our

whole hearts into making each one of them, y'see. It's the love and care that makes them so cute."

Evidently she was one of the plushie-makers.

"I create plushies as well, I insist."

"Well, isn't that something? I'd love to see what kinda plushie a foreign gal like you makes, if you're willing to show me."

"Yes, shopkeeper. I will gladly show you my plushies, I declare."

Nana put some of her dolls on the table, which the shopkeeper examined with great interest.

"What an unusual fabric. Feels unique to the touch, too. Oho, so you use stones like these for decorations… Mm-hmm, very educational indeed. Might I ask where you come from, missy?"

"Shiga Kingdom, I declare."

"My, that's awfully far away."

Nana seemed to be enjoying herself, even though she was still expressionless.

"There's wood statues, tooo?"

Tama scurried over to the wooden figures in a corner of the store.

"Fantasticooo?"

"My hubby and our sons made most o' those. They'll even make figureheads if you wanna order one."

The shopkeeper's face was full of pride.

From the figures' faces to their richly detailed costumes, all so lifelike it was hard to believe they were made out of wood, it was easy to see that her family was full of skilled artisans.

"Would you like to take a look around our workshop?"

"Yes, shopkeeper. Please give us a tour, I request."

Thanks to the generosity of the proprietress, who'd made fast friends with Nana, we got a chance to go in past the store area and see the workshop for

ourselves.

There, two sisters who looked like younger copies of the owner were sewing plushies. The elder daughter was making an animal, while the younger was making a bird.

“You can’t be serious!”

Just then, we heard angry shouting behind another door.

“We can’t even make figurines to sell at the offering festival if we don’t have logs! And there’s only a few days left till the festival’s submission deadline as it is! What are we supposed to do now?!”

“Don’t gimme that crap! You think I don’t know that?! That bastard Gobba and that idiot Bascom got into a bidding war and bought everything up at stupid high prices.”

It sounded like the wood-carving husband and sons were arguing on the other side.

“Sorry about those noisy idiots. They’ll quiet down soon.” The proprietress apologized to us, implying that it was normal, and started explaining areas of the workshop to Nana without bothering to intervene in the fight.

Between this and the battle over the lumber earlier, I guess arguments and fights must be an everyday occurrence around here.

“Wait a minute, big brother. It’s not like we didn’t get any wood at all. I know it’s a little thin, but if we carve this just right, we could still make a statue or—”

“Shut up! And don’t call me that! You’re no younger brother of mine!”

“Watch your mouth now, son! You’re old enough to realize there are some things you should never say!”

Hearing her sons’ heated exchange, the proprietress turned furious and stormed into the other room.

“Ralus is just upset ’cause Jes is better at carving than him.”

“What a dummy. Jes is never gonna inherit the workshop, no matter how good he is.”

“Why? Because he’s younger?”

“No, no. Jes is a war orphan they adopted, just like both of us. Only Ralus is their child by blood.”

The sisters explained their complicated family situation to us. We had no idea how to react to this information.

“No need to look so upset.”

“Yeah, war orphans are pretty common around here thanks to the stupid former king.”

“Who cares about people who’re dead and gone? The current king is a pacifist, so the wars will stop soon, I’m sure.”

I learned later that the previous king had repeatedly gone to war in hopes of making the kingdom rich, yet never won a single battle. Eventually, he got fed up and led the charge into an enemy kingdom himself, only to die in the process. If you ask me, it was awfully reckless to go out of his way to a place where he couldn’t use the power of the city core.

“Yeoooowch!”

“Honey! Your haaand!”

“Big brother! Where do you think you’re going?!”

“Forget him! If that idiot wants to leave, fine!”

There was a flurry of full-on screaming and shouting from the other room.

We ran in with the concerned sisters to find the husband bleeding from the hand while his wife and son frantically tried to stop the bleeding.

“It’s the man with the bear applique, I declare.”

At Nana’s words, I realized he was the same person we met near the lumber auction.

“Need healing?”

“Eh? Are you a priestess, missy?”

“Mom, just let her help! We can ask questions later!”

“You’re right, o’ course. We can’t do much to repay ye, but we’d be mighty grateful.”

*“Mm. ■■ … ■* ***Aqua Heal*** *Chiyu Mizu.”*

Mia’s Water Magic healed the husband’s injury in the blink of an eye.

“Well, I’ll be damned. You’d even give the priestesses at the temple a run for their money.”

“Aren’t you amazing for such a little thing!”

Mia puffed up her chest proudly.

As she did so, her hood slipped back, revealing her ears.

“My word, are you an elf?”

“A real one?”

“Never seen one before.”

The proprietress and her family gazed at Mia in awe.

“Thanks, little lady.”

“Mm. Moves?”

“My hand, ye mean? Yep, moves just fine.”

The man flexed his hand a few times, then turned toward his son: the younger one, who was watching him worriedly, not the older one who’d run off.

“…Jes. You make a figure for the offering festival.”

“D-Dad—I mean, Boss!”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’ll have Ralus make one, too. And I ain’t gonna decide who inherits the workshop just ’cause of whoever does better at the festival.”

“But we only have two logs. If I make one, there won’t be any material left for you…”

“I ain’t gonna enter. Hands are a craftsman’s livelihood, and I dirtied mine with blood right before the offering. I can’t use these hands to make a doll to offer to the goddess, now can I?”

“Maybe it’s bad karma?” Arisa muttered under her breath.

“Very well. I’ll put everything you taught me to good use, Boss.”

The younger brother clenched his fist resolutely as he looked at his father, or rather the boss.

At first, I was going to slip away so I wouldn’t interrupt. But now I’d seen something that caught my interest, so I hesitated for a moment before venturing to speak up.

“Were you going to use that thin log there to make a statue, Boss?”

It was about five feet long but only a foot or so in diameter.

“That’s right. There was too big of a bid war over the thicker ones.”

“If it weren’t for that fire, there woulda been plenty of big logs to pick from…”

There must have been a fire at the lumberyard or something. That explained the slim pickings.

“Couldn’t you just cut down a new tree?”

“It ain’t that simple, Mr. Noble. Trees take time to dry out after you cut ’em down.”

“But if you use magic—”

“Drying ’em with magic can warp the wood a smidge. Might be fine for a building, but even the slightest warping can have a big effect on a statue or figure.”

I would think that would still be better than trying to make a figure from such a skinny piece of wood. He’s the expert, though.

“What kind of wood works best for making a statue?”

“Around these parts, that’d be cypress or zelkova. They say the real amazing ‘Sword Maiden’ statue at the royal castle is made from a branch of a giant tree called a Mountain-Tree, but that’s gotta be a fairy tale.”

I had Mountain-Tree wood, and even World Tree wood for that matter.

“Well, I can give you a few pieces.”

From my Magic Bag, which had an expandable opening, I produced a few three-feet-long logs of cypress and zelkova, handing them over to the boss.

“Whoa, would ye look at that!”

“We could make something really special with such nice lumber.”

“Yep, you don’t see wood so fine but once in a lifetime.”

I was glad they seemed to like it.

While I was at it, just for fun, I gave them a round slice of a Mountain-Tree branch.

The base would’ve been way too big and firm, so I went with a relatively soft part from the end of a branch. I normally used the base parts, which were harder than steel, for making wands. They were tough to work with but very good at conducting magic.

“No way…”

“…Whuh.”

The two of them were stunned into silence.

I guess I went a little too far. Good thing I didn’t break out a World Tree branch.

“R-right! I’ll go get my brother.”

The younger brother returned to his senses and started to run out of the room.

“Wait a minute, big bro! If you go, Ralus will just be stubborn about it. I’ll go get him instead!”

“Good point. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Uh-huh! Be right back!”

The older sister stopped the younger brother and ran out of the workshop in his stead.

“Min will take care of Ralus. You get to work on the doll. There’s only five days left.”

“Yes, Boss.”

The younger brother examined his log closely, shaving a piece off the end to get a feel for the texture.

The boss watched his work, looking proud.

“Sorry for all the racket. Would you kids like to try making plushies?”

The proprietress brought us back to the plushie workshop, where she and the younger sister started instructing us on making dolls.

“Pochi wants to make a Mr. Dragon doll, sir!”

“That might be a little tough.”

“…I can’t, sir?”

Pochi’s ears flattened dejectedly.

“Of course ye can. Just make it in pieces and ye’ll manage, I’m sure. Do your best, and I’ll give ye some pointers.”

“Yes, sir! Pochi will do her best for Mr. Egg, sir!”

The proprietress’s encouragement got Pochi fired up.

She tried to stand on top of her chair, only to knock the egg against the table and panic. Maybe I should add a cushion to the belt later.

“Ye got some real skill there, missy. Make these often, do ye?”

“Yes, shopkeeper. I like to make plushies and give them to larvae as presents, I declare.”

The owner seemed impressed with Nana’s work.

Despite her usual expressionless face, I could tell from Nana’s mannerisms that she was very happy about the compliment.

“If ye make a good one, why not submit it to the offering festival, too? Besides the wood statues, there’s categories for plushies, stone statues, puppets, and other types o’ dolls, too.”

“Yes, shopkeeper. I wish to make a submission, I report.”

“Ah-ha-ha, guess that makes us rivals then, huh?” the younger sister joked.

“I could not ask for a better opponent, I declare. I shall give it my all, I announce.”

Nana’s eyes glinted, and she devoted her full attention to her sewing.

Meanwhile…

“…Owie. I stabbed my finger with the needle, sir.”

“Me tooo?”

Pochi and Tama, who hadn’t done much sewing before, kept pricking themselves with their needles.

When they both tried to solve this by licking their injured fingers, I wiped their hands with a potion-infused handkerchief and put bandages on the wounds.

I made these modern-style adhesive bandages at Arisa’s request.

“Oh, looks like big brother Ralus is back.”

“Go check on him, would ye?”

Noticing a fuss in the other room, the younger daughter went to investigate at her mother’s request.

Always curious, Tama and Pochi peeked in from behind her.

“Looks like we’re in the clear. He’s patting the wood all over and looking pleased.”

“What am I going to do with that boy…”

“Ah, now he’s apologizing for Dad’s injury. Those two really love carving, huh…”

“Oh, it’s all right. That’s how they ought to be.”

I half-listened to the family’s conversation as I inspected my finished plushie. Then I noticed that one of the blue dots on my radar had snuck into the room over.

It was Tama.

“Hey there, kiddo. You interested in wood carving?”

“Aye.”

I practically teleported over to retrieve her, but it was too late. The boss had already spotted her.

“I’m sorry if she’s getting in the way of your work…”

“Nah, s’all right. You gave us this fine lumber, after all. Now, would you like to try carving something, kiddo? We don’t have any use for this skinny log here. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

“Aye!”

Tama nodded and set to work carving the log.

“Would you like to give it a try, too, young master?”

“Well, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble…”

I didn’t want to leave Tama alone, and I was interested in wood carving anyway, so I started carving along with her.

Tama finished making a little deer figurine in no time flat. The boss’s eyes went wide.

“Oho, you got some real talent, both of ye. Studied with someone before, have ye?”

“Tama carved stone statues at a workshop in the royal capital of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“That explains it… This is real nice work, very lifelike. For some reason, it sorta seems like it’d taste real good if ye ate it… Very mysterious charm, that has.”

I tried making a deer statue like Tama.

“Ye work fast, too, young master. Not much artistry there, but very realistic. If ye added a little more sense of movement and expression, ye’d have something special for sure.”

It felt nice to have my work complimented, even if it was only thanks to my maxed-out skills.

“Whoa, Dad likes their work!”

“We can’t let them do better than us, Big Brother.”

“Yep, that goes without saying.”

Seeing this got the two brothers even more determined, and they went back to their own carving.

I suspected the boss was using us to motivate his sons. Still, I didn’t really mind, since Tama certainly seemed happy.

“Say, why don’t you and the little miss join in on the offering festival, too?”

“Are amateurs allowed to enter?”

“They don’t accept submissions from just anyone, but we can submit ’em from our workshop. ’Sides, Karion Temple is hosting this year. They don’t sweat the small stuff, no need to worry.”

“Do you want to enter, Tama?”

“Aye!”

Tama nodded, looking full of competitive spirit.

Although our original plan was to stay two or three days and move on to the next nation once we finished sightseeing, it sounded like we might be staying a little longer.

“The prompt this time around is to make a figure in the image of Goddess Karion, who looks like a little girl. Pick whatever pose ye like, though nothing indecent, seein’ as the model is a goddess and all.”

The boss explained the regulations and gave Tama and me some logs.

Since most of them were too big for a small statue, I borrowed their backyard to cut some of the building logs down to size.

For some reason, a crowd of onlookers gathered to watch me split wood, which was a little embarrassing.

“Ooh, what are you guys up to in here?”

“Tama is a hard worker, sir.”

Pochi came in from the other room, accompanied by Arisa.

Tama was too focused on her carving to respond, so I beckoned them over.

“What are you making for your entry, Master?”

“Hm? Just a normal statue. Since it’s supposed to be based on Goddess Karion, I figured I’d give her a book or some lab equipment.”

According to the documents I had on hand, Karion was the goddess of wisdom.

“Something like this?”

Arisa produced some clay from her Fairy Pack and skillfully crafted a statue of a little girl. It came out great, with lots of detail.

I guess she learned a lot from making a weirdly suggestive figure of me in that pottery class.

“Why don’t you carve one, too, Arisa?”

“I’m good, thanks. The wood chips would get in my hair, and I’d probably hurt myself with the knife or the chisel.”

Arisa shook her head.

“I’m thinking something like this.” Hidden behind the log, I used the Light Magic spell Illusion to create a concept rendering.

“That looks an awful lot like Lulu.”

“Well, since she’s a young girl, I did base it partly on Lulu’s hairstyle and proportions.”

I kept the chest size modest to make the model more childlike.

Unfortunately, even with my maxed-out “Woodworking” and “Carving” skills, I couldn’t reproduce Lulu’s exquisitely beautiful face.

“Could you make it look more like there are flowers scattered around this part? You know, like in a shoujo manga.”

“You mean like this?”

“Yes, exactly. And maybe this part, too?”

I modified the illusion to Arisa’s specifications. While it did make for a wonderful image that an expert modeler could craft into the perfect anime

figure…

“I can’t reproduce this with wood.”

“Why not?”

“I think something this finely detailed and delicate would probably break partway through carving.”

“Couldn’t you make it in separate parts and attach them afterward?”

“That would go against the regulations.”

The statues for the offering had to be made in one piece.

“How about using some sturdier material then? I bet you could carve orichalcum if you really wanted, right, Master?”

I had to admit, Arisa was right. A World Tree branch or a piece from the base of a Mountain-Tree branch would certainly be sturdy enough.

“I guess I can try…”

“That’s more like it!”

Arisa snapped her fingers excitedly.

I decided not to point out that she’d used Space Magic to produce the snapping sound.

I produced a log-sized World Tree branch and began carving. Since even the shavings were still useful material, I spread out a mat on the floor to collect them.

By the end of the day, I had carved most of the basic shape; from the second day on, I worked on the decorations and special effects. When the brothers saw my work, their eyes blazed, and they worked on their own submissions with renewed fervor.

I was glad to provide them some extra motivation.

“Nin-niiin?”

“You’re amazing, Tama, sir. Super, ultra fantastic, sir!”

Tama used earth and wind ninjutsu to put the finishing touches on her statue.

Her version of the goddess was remarkably dynamic and fun. It was like she'd modeled it after a younger version of Liza, with a more peaceful version of Pochi's expressive face. Just looking at the charming figure made you want to dance along with it.

We finished our pieces on the third day and gave them to the boss.

"They're both contenders for the win, that's for sure. Young master, what yours lacks in expressiveness and energy, it makes up for in detail and beauty. The curve of her hips is nice, and the hint of the bust is even better. It's great how you can infer the shape of them even with the loose-fitting clothes. Only someone who's closely admired a great deal of chests could produce something this detailed."

Okay, I appreciate the compliment, but you don't need to make it sound like I'm obsessed with boobs. I mean, not that you're wrong, exactly.

"And little missy, yours has plenty of passion, even if your technique isn't as refined as the young master's. I've never seen a figure that makes me want to dance with it."

"Nye-he-hee…"

*It makes you want to dance, too, huh?*

"My sons are no slouches, either. They're in for a helluva fight, though."

The boss clearly had full faith in his kids, despite what he said. I could tell from the way he gazed at them with his arms crossed that his trust in them was unshakable.

Since there wasn't much time left because of the fire, the two of them were working hard with hardly any breaks or sleep.

Not wanting to hinder their work, I gave them some special nutritional supplement potions to help them work through the night, and we left the workshop behind.

"We're staying in Lodolork a while longer, right? Let's go find something fun to do!"

"Agreed."

I patted Arisa and Mia on the head, and none of the other girls objected to their suggestion, so we traveled around Lodolork Kingdom sightseeing until the offering festival two days later.

◆

“Wow, that’s a lot of people.”

When we arrived at the plaza in front of the Karion Temple, where the offering ceremony was taking place, there was already an impressive crowd gathered there.

“Maybe there’s not much else to do around here?” Arisa commented.

“The more the merrier, I insist.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

A lively atmosphere was an important part of a festival, even if it felt like we would bump into other people if we weren’t careful.

“Pochi, look ooout?”

“Waaah, sir!”

Pochi stumbled over a bump in the road, possibly due to the egg blocking her view.

Rather than protecting her own face, she covered the egg at her waist with both hands as she dove headfirst toward the ground.

Luckily, Tama and Liza quickly grabbed her belt and saved her from disaster. She should really prioritize her own safety first, although I understood that the egg was important to her.

“Statues.”

Mia pointed at a stage on the other side of the crowd, where several figures of the young goddess were on display.

Since it looked like they were all the submitted entries, we searched for our own pieces, but for some reason ours were on an altar in front of the temple.

I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to get a bird’s-eye view and confirmed that the boss and his sons were in that area, too.

“Looks like our statues are over there.”

We admired the other goddess statues as we made our way toward the boss and company.

“It doesn’t look like we can go any further.”

“Yes, Liza. There is a line of restricted entry, I report.”

Stone statues that looked like wild boars with wings stood in front of Karion Temple. A white cord was strung between them to discourage unauthorized entry.

Someone from the temple spoke to Liza and Nana. “I’m sorry, only staff and participants are allowed past this point.”

Apparently people would still go inside if it was only a cord stopping them, so some of the temple workers were also stationed there to tell people not to enter.

“Entry conditions registered. I will not enter the restricted area, I declare.”

Nana nodded and stepped back.

“Hey, young master! Over here!”

The boss called out to me from the other side of the cord.

“That young man and the little lady with the cat ears are entrants. Let ’em in, please.”

At the boss’s words, the temple worker allowed me and Tama inside.

“Whew, I’m glad to see ye. We never did ask where ye were staying.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I forgot to mention it. Why, is there a problem?”

“Far from it. I wanted to tell ye to come today ’cause you and the little missy’s works were chosen to be the final twenty candidates. My sons are in there, too.”

“Congratulations to them.”

I had the boss show me his sons’ submissions.

“This is my elder son’s piece.”

“Agressiiive?”

“Very inspiring.”

It was a statue of a girl holding a sword and a book.

Interestingly enough, she was wielding the book like a shield.

“And this is my younger son’s.”

“Wow, fantasticooo?”

“This is really wonderful work.”

This girl statue was holding flowers and a book and looking up at the sky. Somehow, it was deeply moving, to the point where just looking at it brought on bittersweet feelings.

“Will the offering be chosen from among these twenty finalists?”

“No, all the submissions are up for offering. Out of these twenty, five will be given awards and brought to the Karion Central Temple. There, they’ll decide which is the winner, and it’ll be passed down there for eternity as a treasure of the temple. For us wood-carvers, there’s no higher honor.”

The Karion Central Temple was in the “Sage’s Tower” City-State of Kalisork, which was a bit far to transport the statues by land. They would probably be brought by boat or airship.

While I was chatting with the boss, the judges must have finished making their decisions. An important-looking priest walked over to stand in front of the entrants.

In order, they were going to announce the excellence awards, a grand prize winner, and the special jury award.

The first excellence award went to the preeminent carver from a famous workshop. As for the second…

“From Beardbear Workshop, ‘Sword Maiden’ by Ralus!”

“Yessss!”

It was one of the boss’s sons. The elder one, if I remember right.

“Congratulations, Big Brother. You really are amazing.”

“Yeah, sure. Yours was pretty damn good, too.”

The elder brother grinned proudly. His father and brother looked happy, too.

“This next excellence award also goes to a work from Beardbear Workshop. ‘Praying Maiden’ by Jes!”

“Good going, Jes! You got an excellence award, too!”

As the younger brother stood there looking shocked, the boss smacked him heartily on the back. It looked a little painful.

The grand prize went to a nude figure called “Pure Maiden” by a name none of us recognized. I was surprised anyone would go for a nude statue to offer to a temple, even if the most important areas were tastefully hidden.

“That leaves the special jury award. Normally, this would only be given to one work, but the judges were simply too divided in this case. So, there will be two winners this year.”

As the head priest spoke, the entrants stared intently at the paper held in his hands.

“The first special jury award goes to ‘Deliciously Dancing Girl’ by Tama Kishreshigarza!”

“Tama, you did it, sir! Congratulations, sir!”

Hearing the announcement, Pochi shouted excitedly from far away.

“Well done, Miss Tama.”

“Thank thee berry much…”

Tama looked nervous as she accepted the award from the priest.

“And the other special jury award goes to ‘Cherry Blossom Beauty’ by Satou Pendragon!”

*Whoa, I didn’t think I would win, too.*

Despite my surprise, I stepped up next to Tama to accept my award.

“The six winning entries will be transported to the site of the main festival at

Karion Central Temple in the City-State of Kalisork on a high-speed ship generously provided by King Lodolork."

The priest explained that the ship would leave the following afternoon in order to get there in time for the festival.

While the carvers weren't required to go with them, we were already planning on going to Kalisork City. Besides, I was curious about this high-speed ship of the king's, so I figured we would take advantage of the offer.

"Master, my stuffed animals won an award in the plushie category, I report."

Nana held up the stuffed sea lion sisters she'd made.

"Arisa's doll won a special prize, too, Master."

"Hee-hee, I didn't think my little figure would get an award for originality."

Arisa looked rather pleased as she held up her creation.

It appeared to be a half naked figure of a young man with a rose in his mouth, though he looked a little familiar…

"Arisa, could I take a quick look at that?"

"N-not on your life! This isn't for men to view. It's a lady's little secret."

"That's right, sir! A little secret lady, sir!"

Ignoring Pochi's declaration, I snatched the figure Arisa was trying to hide.

"Aaaaa! Not my sexy Master figure 'Aesthetic Afternoon'! Noooo!"

…So it *was* modeled after me. I knew it.

"I'm confiscating this."

I put the figure into the Confiscated folder in my Storage.

"I beg of yoooou! Pleeeease, have mercyyyyy…"

"Mercedeees?"

"Confiscerated, sir!"

Tama and Pochi danced around Arisa as she shrieked.

Pochi's steps looked off-balance, probably because of the egg at her waist.

“All right, let’s go celebrate.”

We went to the best restaurant in Lodolork and toasted all the winners. The next afternoon, we boarded King Lodolork’s galley and departed for the City-State of Kalisork.

Incidentally, the smell on the ship was met with disgust from all of my companions; we used a great deal of Deodorant magic to save the day.

Yeah, that was the first time I’ve had to deal with the gross realities of a fantasy world in a while.

I guess that’s part of the adventure, too, but I’d rather avoid it if at all possible.

# Interlude: The Vice City

“Bazan! I found you!”

Her lovely red hair fluttering beneath her hooded black robe, the girl called out to the black-clad men who were running through the barren rocks.

“You again, Serena?”

Bazan told the other men with him to hurry on ahead and remained behind to face Serena.

Serena had noticed the oval-shaped cloth bundle that one of the men was carrying, but Bazan addressed her to stop her from intervening.

“What business do you have on Redsmoke Island? Didn’t the great sage put you in charge of Sherifardo State?”

They were indeed standing on Redsmoke Island, a volcanic island in the inlet sea of the western continent.

At the foot of the mountainous island was a criminal paradise known as Sibe, the vice city.

“I heard an unpleasant rumor.”

“…A rumor?”

As he echoed her words, Bazan slowly shifted his standing position.

“Yes. That you found the ‘Key.’”

“Heh-heh. I see. So one of his pupils put you in charge of the cleanup, eh?”

“So you really did get your hands on it, then…”

Serena could tell from Bazan’s tone and laughter that her fears had become reality.

“I swear on the name of our great teacher, Sorijeyro the Sage, that I will

eliminate you.”

Serena drew the Magic Sword from her waist and held it in front of her like a staff.

Both of them were evidently students of Sorijeyro the Sage, a man who was being hotly discussed in Parion Province.

“Is that the fire Magic Sword Ganjero? What happened to the talisman techniques you love so much?”

“I’m not foolish enough to use such flashy magic right under the red dragon’s nose, even during his dormant season!”

The Magic Sword glowed red with Serena’s magic power, her red hair blowing in the resulting breeze like flames.

“Hmph, you coward. ■■■■■■”

“D-Destruction Magic? Are you out of your mind?!”

Serena swung her Magic Sword, shooting a fireball at Bazan to stop his chant.

There were several Firelight Pearls inlayed in Serena’s sword, allowing it to produce Fire Shots with the same principles as a Fire Rod.

But the Fire Shot scattered just before striking Bazan.

“*Tch*—a delay rune?!”

*“■■* ***Ominous*** *Ka!”*

As Bazan finished his chant and spoke the invocation word, a maelstrom of destruction formed directly before Serena’s eyes.

*“■* ***Stack Tile*** *Juukabefu!”*

Serena produced several talismans from her pocket, which stacked on top of each other to create a wall, blocking the brunt of the Destruction Magic.

Still, it wasn’t enough to stop the spell completely. Serena was blown backward.

Even as she flew through the air, Serena unleashed another Fire Shot from her sword, but it disintegrated before reaching Bazan just like the first.

“How irritating. I suppose even Destruction Magic cannot pierce your talisman techniques with lesser spells…”

“Care to try intermediate spells, then? That would surely wake the red dragon from its slumber!”

“Heh-heh, it’s too late for that. The red dragon will awaken soon either way, no doubt.”

Bazan’s words confirmed Serena’s suspicions.

“So that cloth bundle really was…”

“If you realized that, why didn’t you give chase? It’ll be in Sibe by now.”

“You bastard! Do you realize what you’ve done?! If you invoke the red dragon’s wrath, a half-baked city with no city core of its own will be reduced to cinders in the blink of an eye!”

“So what? No one’s gonna mourn the loss of a den of criminals. In fact, I bet they’ll be clapping and cheering for the red dragon’s good deed.”

*“Tch—”*

Serena turned to run, only to find her path blocked by several monsters.

“Summoned beasts?!”

“Yep, I used the summoning spheres our dear master gave me.”

Cold sweat ran down Serena’s brow.

If she took too long getting rid of the monsters, Bazan would blast her with Destruction Magic from behind.

And it would be an intermediate spell capable of dealing a fatal wound, too.

“What the—?!”

The monsters went back into their spheres, and a bloodied, black-clad body was thrown down between Bazan and Serena.

It was one of the men who was working with Bazan.

“Kamusim!”

Serena’s face lit up.

The young man she called Kamusim glared at Bazan with an icy look to his handsome face.

“The rumors were true! Please, help me! Together we can stop Bazan!”

Without answering Serena, Kamusim readied his staff and spoke to Bazan coldly.

“Have you forgotten the sage’s teachings, Bazan?”

“Why should I worry myself about the words of some stupid monkey?”

“Sacrifices and cruelty can be necessary, yes. But only if they are the most effective means to achieve one’s goal.”

“That only applies to people who contribute to society. It doesn’t matter if a nest of thieves and pirates gets destroyed.”

“Bazan, don’t get your goal confused with the means of reaching it.”

“Kamusim…?”

Sensing something strange about the pair’s conversation, Serena called out to her fellow student.

“Serena, take the front line. I’ll start my chant while you hold him off.”

“Got it! I’ll make sure Bazan can’t finish any chants. You use Ice Magic to restrain him, please!”

Serena ran toward Bazan with flames forming around her Magic Sword.

“You fool. ■ ***Bash*** *Yaburu!*”

*“* ■ ***Tile*** *Kabefu!”*

Sneering despite being outnumbered, Bazan used his fastest Destruction Magic spell to force Serena to use a talisman technique, slowing her approach.

“… ■ the chant is done. Move, Serena.”

“Got it! ■ ■ ■ ***Fall Slip*** *Rousoufu!*”

Serena threw a talisman into the air, stopping Bazan in his tracks as she quickly retreated.

“…Damned fools!”

Unable to finish his chant in time, Bazan stopped and activated a magic device hidden in his cloak, protecting himself with a barrier.

“Freeze over all before me—”

The temperature suddenly dropped to extreme cold, creating diamond dust as Kamusim’s staff drew a white arc in the air.

“—Cocytus.”

Kamusim’s staff unleashed a highly advanced Ice Attack spell.

It created an icy hellscape, the torrent of extreme cold freezing the earth and even crystallizing the air itself.

Serena turned to watch the final moments of her former friend.

But Bazan was standing there utterly unharmed.

“Why—?”

The answer came in the form of icy hell that washed over her from the side.

Serena was swallowed up in an instant, like a candle before an avalanche.

“If only she were a little more flexible, she wouldn’t have had to die so young…”

“No, Serena has the Safety Hibernation skill the Holy Woman gave her. It’s a Unique Skill that can heal even fatal wounds by sleeping. She won’t die that easily.”

“Should we dig her up and cut her head off, then?”

“No, there’s no time right now.”

“GYZABBBBSZZZZZZZZ.”

As if to prove Kamusim’s words, a wrathful howl echoed from the peak.

“I guess the red dragon’s awake.”

“Sounds like it. Let’s get out of here before it comes to take its egg back.”

“Yes, we’d better.”

“This way. I hid a high-speed magi ship in the cove over there.”

It was in the opposite direction from the vice city of Sibe.

“Did you plan to sacrifice those men from the start?”

“They’re just hired hands. Needed someone to distract the red dragon… Got a problem with that?”

Kamusim didn’t answer. He activated a stealth skill and started sprinting toward the cove containing the high-speed magi ship.

Bazan shrugged, then used the same skill and followed him.

“GYZABBBBSZZZZZZZZ.”

The dragon emerged from the volcanic crater and unleashed a howl toward the heavens.

The volcanic ash that had burned out long ago burst into flame and rose into the sky, creating the smoke that gave Redsmoke Island its name.

At the base of the mountain, the pirate ships and other vessels anchored in the vice city of Sibe began preparing to set sail all at once, while the people who lived in the city jostled and shoved each other as they fled to the underground shelters.

Many of the low-income residents who couldn’t get into the shelters began to riot with desperation or despair, while others pressed against each other and trembled in dilapidated houses that looked like a breeze could knock them over.

“GZRURURURU.”

The dragon flared its nostrils, tracking the people with its own scent to the settlement at the foot of the mountain.

Its eyes burned with rage as it drew in a deep breath.

As it inhaled deeper, red lights danced around its jaw like fireflies.

“GYZABBBBSZZZZZZZZ.”

With a howl, the “Dragon Breath” poured across the ground and into the sturdy castle walls.

The walls were blasted away in seconds, and the flames licked through the

city, burning the castle itself to a crisp as they blazed onward.

The black-clad men on the pirate ship desperately piled defense magic on top of the barriers of the ship, but it only delayed their deaths by a matter of seconds.

The ship went up in flames, and the heat from the evaporated seawater burst against the ship and the shore alike, the flames and impact reducing everything to charred rubble.

It was a terrible sight to witness.

“Like destruction incarnate…”

Standing on a rocky wall, a bald man known as the former Phantom Thief Pippin gazed up at the dragon standing atop the volcanic crater.

Watching the sky where the high-speed magi ship had taken off, the dragon spread its wings.

Evidently the red dragon wasn’t as foolish as the villains had assumed.

“I only came to investigate whether this place would cause any trouble for our trade or branch stores… I never expected the place to get burned to cinders.”

Pippin looked down grimly at the final moments of the vice city Sibe.

“…Nngh…”

A voice rose from beneath the ice and snow at his feet.

“I’m amazed anyone could survive advanced attack magic like that.”

Marveling that the world was full of surprises, Pippin hopped down with Short-Range Teleportation.

“You’re a pretty lady, but you could use a bit more meat on your bones.”

Pippin dug out the lovely Serena from the snow and put a magic potion to her lips.

A flush of color began to return to her deathly pale face.

“Better get you warmed up for now.”

Pippin picked Serena up and carried her away from the icy snow.

“Looks like I stuck my nose into trouble again…”

He removed Serena’s soaked outerwear and wrapped her in a blanket from his Magic Bag.

“I better get back to the branch office team leader so I can talk to Lord Kuro about this… Guess I should see if there are any lives left to save first, though.”

Still muttering to himself, Pippin left Serena with the blanket and walked toward the burning remains of the vice city Sibe.

# Tower of Wisdom

***Satou here. Just like you'd always imagine a king living in a castle, I picture a mage living in a tower, although I can't remember exactly which piece of media put that idea in my head. A tower seems like it'd be impractical to live in, doesn't it?***

"Finally… We finally reached land…"

"Land hooo! I see the shooore!"

The moment we made landfall at the City-State of Kalisork, the wood-carving brothers couldn't contain their joy.

There was an enormous spire at the center of the city that must have been the "Tower of Wisdom," surrounded by several other five-or six-story towers and buildings. This city-state appeared to excel in architecture and engineering as well as the magic and academia for which it was best known. There were a lot of unusual ships and rafts in the harbor, too.

"Revived."

"Whew, it stank to high heaven in there…"

"I didn't know normal ships rocked back and forth so much."

Mia, Arisa, and Lulu all gulped down deep breaths of fresh air.

I kept an eye on them as I used the Search Entire Map spell to collect information about the City-State of Kalisork. At a glance, the place was at least free of Unique Skill holders, demons, demon lord worshippers, and other such potential troublemakers.

"Ha-ha-ha, the inlet sea isn't so bad. I hear it's many times choppier on the open ocean."

One of the wood-carvers smiled brightly at us and went to greet the Karion Central Temple priest who'd come to collect us. We followed to do the same.

“Welcome to Kalisork! Karion Central Temple will provide lodgings for everyone who’s presenting an entry at the main festival. While spouses and families will be sharing rooms, we must ask that you do not engage in any sins of the flesh whilst staying under the roof of the Holy Goddess Karion, please.”

*Did you really have to look at* me *while you said that?*

“Master! Look up! There’s magic carpets and pots flying up there!”

Arisa jumped up and down with excitement as she pointed at the sky.

I did think about making “magic carpets” when we were playing pretend Arabian Nights, but I never expected to see the real thing. I was curious how they worked exactly.

“Are there any witches flying on brooms by chance?”

“Not that I know of, miss. However, I believe there is at least one individual who rides a wooden Pegasus.”

Arisa looked disappointed at the priest’s response.

“…The vice city Sibe was destroyed?”

Suddenly, my “Keen Hearing” skill picked up an alarming conversation.

If I remembered right, the “vice city” Sibe was known as a den of pirates and criminals where stolen goods and contraband were bought and sold.

“Apparently they pissed off the red dragon and it burned the whole city to ash, even the pirates in the harbor.”

“Serves them right. I bet some greedy Sibe thieves snuck into the red dragon’s lair in search of treasure.”

I thought about the dragons I’d met, like the black dragon Hei Long and the sky dragon.

Yeah, I could see them destroying a whole city easily enough.

“They woke the red dragon during its dormant season? Yeah, no wonder the city got destroyed.”

“Let’s just hope it stays their problem and not ours.”

They were certainly talking like it was some distant disaster.

I guess they weren't too worried about the awoken red dragon going on to wreak havoc on an unrelated city.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, not at all."

I didn't really care if a bunch of villains reaped what they sowed.

However, I do want to say a prayer for any innocent people who got mixed up in the fire.

"Well then, let us proceed to the temple."

We boarded the carriage and headed to the central temple.

The other wood-carvers all rode in the cargo carriages instead, stubbornly insisting that they wanted to travel with their pieces.

The harbor was full of dockworkers and fishermen and such, but once we left that area, there was a drastic uptick in the number of robed scholars and mages walking around.

While the total with magic skills was still less than 30 percent of the population, that was still far more than any other kingdom I'd seen.

"The temple has come into view."

"Is that it right in front of the big tower?"

"Yes, since Goddess Karion is said to rule over 'wisdom,' the Tower Master kindly permitted us to build our temple directly in front of the Tower of Wisdom."

That giant tower must be the Tower of Wisdom, then.

The priest also explained that the "Tower Master" was a role similar to a king in other nations, while people called "elders" were in a similar position to the nobles of other lands.

"Ice?"

"Yes, Mia. It is a mystical ice temple, I declare."

Technically, the building was made not of ice but crystal, reinforced with Earth Magic and alchemy.

The holy seal of Karion on the front wall was the only part that used vermillion crystals, resulting in a rather stylish effect.

“Sparklyyy?”

“See-through, sir!”

“It’s amazing that they made a building out of ice.”

“Well, some people have traveled the galaxy in a spaceship made of ice. It makes perfect sense that there would be a temple made of ice, too.”

Arisa casually referred to a certain legend of a galactic hero who founded a democratic nation.

While I knew she was joking, the other kids seemed like they were taking her story seriously. I informed them that it was actually made of crystal.

“It looks even more mystical in the winter, when snow piles up on top,” the priest informed us.

Now that would be cool to see. I resolved to visit again in the winter sometime.

“There’s an awful lot of people in robes here, not just priests.”

Arisa nodded toward the believers walking along the temple paths, many of whom appeared to be scholars or mages.

“I imagine many of them are here to visit the library within the temple.”

“There’s a library in the temple? Is it open to the public, then?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s not open to just anyone, as there are many valuable theological and historical texts stored in the temple library.”

Authorized personnel only, huh? I didn’t care about the theological stuff, but I was a little curious about the historical texts.

We walked through a narrow passageway and entered a spacious cathedral.

“There’s something floating, sir!”

“Book?”

“It is surrounded by vermillion light, I observe.”

Indeed, there was a golden book floating above the altar, surrounded by a red barrier. As I watched, the geometric patterns forming the barrier shifted and changed, likely to make it more difficult to analyze the spell.

According to my AR display, the book inside was called the **“Book of Wisdom” Karisefel**.

The binding was inlaid with a red gem I didn’t recognize called a “wise spring stone,” and the cover was decorated with orichalcum instead of gold leaf.

As we walked toward the altar to take a closer look at the floating book, someone called out to the priest who was escorting us.

“Do we have visitors, Priest Temuto?”

It was a priestess with fox-like eyes. I suspected she would look great in a schoolteacher’s outfit.

“Yes, these are some of the artisans who created statues to submit to the festival.”

“I see. May the blessings of Goddess Karion be upon thee, artisans.”

The priestess uttered a quick blessing and left.

“That was Head Priestess Maiyah. She is an ‘Oracle Priestess’ who can hear the voice of the goddess most clearly than anyone in Karion Central Temple.”

As I listened to the priest’s explanation, I gazed at the Book of Wisdom and the mythology depicted on the wall behind it.

It was a similar story to the picture book about the gods that I once read to Pochi. Partway through, it shifted to focus on the history of the Flue Empire, and then to the foundation of the City-State of Kalisork.

“Piiink?”

“I would say it’s more vermillion than pink, don’t you agree?”

Tama and Liza were looking at statues carved from reddish rock salt, placed in the middle of the depiction. Evidently it looked pink to Tama.

In addition to people, there were also figurines of beasts and monsters.

“There’s something written on the pedestal.”

“It says, ‘On the transition from living creature to immortal being, and repudiation of its irreversibility.’ Sounds like the title of a thesis paper. ‘Each of the red salt statues are inscribed with the topics and fields of research of the scholars who donated them.’”

Intrigued, I looked at each of them in turn. Several of them sounded fascinating, including “Changes and differences from primitive magic to modern sorcery,” “Did levels and skills not exist when the world was first created?” and “On the relationship between modern sorcery and the Evil God.”

However, they couldn’t include the entire theses on the limited space of the pedestals, only a tiny taste of each subject.

“Are the rest of these written down somewhere?”

“It’s all collected in the temple library. I believe they are kept in the great library of the Tower of Wisdom as well, but the only other copies likely to exist would be in the personal collections of whomever wrote them.”

When I asked, the priest said that only bishops or higher had the authority to grant permission to enter the temple library.

After giving a rather generous donation to the temple, the priest led us to our lodgings. We were given a spacious, well-furnished room, which could have been thanks to that donation.

Since there were still two days until the festival, maybe we could do some sightseeing and try to visit the Tower of Wisdom?

◆

“It looks even bigger from directly below, huh?”

“Berry biiig!”

“Hawk-eye-doe, sir!”

Pochi definitely didn’t know what Hokkaido was. Arisa must have taught it to her as a catchphrase.

“It’s not as big as the Sky Tree, of course, but it looks taller than Tokyo Tower, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s actually a little shorter than that. But taller than the Eiffel Tower, I think?”

I told Arisa the information from my AR display.

While its height was in that range, the Tower of Wisdom was wider than a radio tower, making it look even larger.

At the very least, I’d never seen a building of this size outside of the architectural structures of the elves.

The area around the tower was set up like a park, where anyone could walk around or take a break.

“There are a lot of people in robes around.”

“Yes, they all look like they’re having very intense discussions.”

I saw some people arguing heatedly, and a few older folks lecturing students while drawing figures and formulas on the ground.

“Here. Wrong.”

“By Jove, she’s right! There’s an error in this magic circle!”

“Remarkable, young lady. We’ve been mulling over this problem for three months, and you solved it in a matter of seconds!”

I turned around at the sound of shouting only to see that Mia had poked her head into a group of students drawing magic circles on the ground.

“Which private school do you attend?”

“Why, she might even be a graduate.”

“Wrong.”

“Mia is neither a graduate of nor a student at a private school, I append.”

Nana spoke up behind Mia, then picked her up by the armpits and carried her away.

“Rude.”

“You mustn’t wander off alone, I declare.”

Mia formed an X in front of her face to protest being treated like a child; Nana was unmoved.

We headed for the entrance to the tower, ignoring the conversation behind us: “Is she an exchange student?” “What if she’s a visiting professor at the tower…?” “I would take her class.”

“Master, there’s gatekeepers.”

About fifty yards away from the tower, there was a moat, walls, and a heavy gate; on either side of the gate stood heavily armed guards, both elite warriors with levels in the 30s.

“Hello there!”

“Hello, little missy from a foreign land. Sir, do you have business in the Tower of Wisdom?”

The guard’s first statement was a response to Arisa, while the second half was addressed to me.

“We’d like to peruse the books in the great library. Is there some special permission required?”

My main goal was to investigate whether there were any leads on how to turn the chimera people from the Kuvork Kingdom back to normal, although I also wanted to climb the tower and enjoy the view.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Only those with permission from the elders or students from prominent schools are permitted inside. Besides, this tower is our equivalent to a royal castle. I can’t let anyone in without permission.”

A royal castle, huh? In that case…

“Well then, please pass this along to your superior, if you wouldn’t mind. It’s a letter of introduction from His Excellency the prime minister of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“Shiga Kingdom? Seems too elaborate to be a prank. All right, I’ll make sure this gets into the right hands.”

Despite his dubious expression, it looked like the guard was going to pass it along properly.

I told him that we were staying at the Karion Central Temple, and we left the area.

“How’d you get that letter of introduction, Master?”

“When I was appointed Vice-Minister of Tourism, they gave me official letters to all the major nations we might visit.”

It didn’t cover every nation, of course. The only ones I had for the western part of the continent were addressed to nations that had central temples or diplomatic relations with Shiga Kingdom. I didn’t even have a letter to Lodolork Kingdom, where we stayed before this.

◆

“I love how many bookstores there are here.”

As we toured the city, we found that there were a lot more bookstores and libraries than in most other cities.

“Lots of picture books, sir.”

“Oui, oooui?”

Pochi and Tama delicately cradled their newly purchased picture books.

“You really loaded up this time.”

Normally they narrowed their selections down to one or two each. This time around, they’d bought five or six.

“Arisa said that reading aloud is good for a feeties, sir.”

“Um… I see…?”

I’m not sure if that theory about unborn fetuses applies to eggs. Then again, some people play music for their plants, so I couldn’t argue against it. Besides, it never hurts to have more picture books.

“Mrr, spellbooks.”

Mia puffed up her cheeks grumpily.

“If we meet someone important from the tower, we’ll see if we can get permission.”

We’d quickly learned that you needed special permission to buy spellbooks in this kingdom.

“Master, I have returned, I report.”

“It appears that even ordinary civilians are allowed to climb that tower, Master.”

“Thanks, Liza and Nana.”

I’d sent the pair ahead to investigate.

Since I remembered that there were several other towers in the city, it had occurred to me that we might be able to see the sights from one of those for now.

We paid the entry fee at the tower and climbed up.

Since Pochi kept stumbling on the steps, I held her hand for most of the way. Maybe I should have told her to at least take the egg belt off when going up stairs.

There were a lot of sightseers, even though it was relatively expensive to get in. The people of the city must be fond of heights, too.

“That’s a great view, all right!”

“Aw yeeeah?”

Since the railing was high up, Arisa and Tama climbed up to hang off it and enjoy the view.

Pochi started to jump up after them, only to get worried about her egg and change her mind.

“Come here, Pochi.”

“Thank you, Liza, sir.”

Liza lifted Pochi up so that she could see the view. What a great older sister figure.

“Beat uuup?”

“Pochi knows about this, sir! It’s from a battle, sir!”

“Was there really a battle here, too…?”

“Don’t worry, it was more than half a year ago now.”

A scholar in a robe reassured the anxious Lulu.

“Kalisork City has many mages and golems, as well as the great Tower Master. Even if the savages to the north come after our harbor, we can chase them off easily. We’re perfectly protected.”

“Precisely! Why, those barbarians’ artillery cannot even singe our outer walls. The worst they can do is burn the fields and orchards outside the city.”

“That is a matter of life-and-death for those who live outside our walls, you fool! Do not speak so lightly of it!”

“I-I’m sorry, Professor!”

The scholar scolded the student for taking such a casual tone.

“Generally, the Spring Masters, the witches, and mages of the smaller towers will drive the savages off, but this time the attackers wove around their territory and invaded all the way here. Even savages can learn their lesson, it seems.”

The scholar explained that powerful witches and mages would build towers over small springs, like “spirit pools” or “monster pools,” and defend against outside invaders.

Maybe they were like the old witch of the Forest of Illusions that bordered Kuhanou County in Shiga Kingdom?

I thanked the scholar for sharing such interesting information.

After we enjoyed the view for a while, we descended from the tower to check out some other sightseeing spots.

“Candy.”

“Yummyyyy?”

We all snacked on some malt candy we'd bought from a candy seller.

Here in Kalisork, there were a lot of vendors selling this sort of thing out of buckets or boxes.

"There are a lot of sweets in this kingdom, aren't there?"

"Yes, Lulu. The galette we ate earlier was delicious, too, I report."

"Maybe using your brain really does make you crave sugar?"

"Could be. When I worked as a programmer, I was always loading up on sugary snacks like chocolate and candy."

Arisa and I nodded sagely.

Of course, we'd have to be careful, since too much sugar could spell doom for your physique.

*…Hmm? What's that smell?*

"What's up, Master?"

"*Sniff, sniff*… smells like *cob-fee*, sir."

"You got it."

There was a place that looked like a coffee shop nearby. I decided to check it out.

Although it was a little different from the coffee shops in Japan, it was definitely still a place where you could get light snacks and enjoy a hot drink.

They appeared to offer food as well, so we went in for lunch, too.

There were many varieties of coffee on the menu. Mocha, Bullman, Kilimanjaro… all were famous coffee-producing areas in the Saga Empire.

"I'll take a cup of Merica, please, and whatever meal you recommend."

I decided to order the blend I didn't recognize.

The girls seemed to think that coffee was too bitter; they all ordered blue green tea or herbal tea along with lunch sets.

"We'll take a round of the squirreltail yams with honey for the table, too. And a 'squishee,' please—I'm curious."

Arisa boldly requested a mystery dessert from the menu.

“All right, here are your squirreltail yams with honey. The squishee will take a little longer.”

The waitress left a large tray at our table and left.

“They look like candied sweet potatoes.”

Since they were cut into cubes, we all sampled them.

“It’s sort of like a sweet potato, just a little on the dry side,” Arisa remarked.

“I think the sweetness comes from the honey on top. The yam itself isn’t sweet on its own.”

A true chef to her core, Lulu analyzed the taste of the yams.

The “squishee” arrived a little while after the rest of the food and drinks.

“Is it agar-agar, maybe? Ooh, it really is squishy and soft. It’s chewier than *warabimochi*.”

Since Arisa seemed to enjoy the squishee, I tried one as well.

*Huh. Reminds me of tapioca.*

I asked the waitress about it, and she explained that the squishee was made from the starch of the squirreltail yam.

She showed me a raw squirreltail yam at my request. It looked nothing like the cassava plant, but I might be able to make tapioca pearls with them. I’d have to buy up lots of squirreltail yams before we left Kalisork City, just in case.

“Maybe there’ll be a bubble tea boom in this world, too,” Arisa joked.

That did sound like fun.

If it was possible to grow squirreltail yams in Shiga Kingdom, the Echigoya Company cafes might have a hot new menu item on their hands.

◆

“Wow. There’s even more dolls here than in Lodolork Kingdom.”

Having returned to the Karion Central Temple, we took a peek at the hall where the statues and sculptures had been brought in. There were over a

hundred of them in total. In addition to wood carvings, many of them were made of stone or plaster. Some even seemed to have mechanical functions like living dolls.

We'd brought back snacks for the craftsman brothers who came with us, but it didn't seem like the right time for a handoff, since they were both inspecting the submissions from other kingdoms with intently serious expressions.

"Master and Tama's sculptures are perfectly on par with the other submissions."

"Of course they are, Arisa. Look, some of the artisans are even dancing in front of Tama's statue."

I followed Liza's gaze to see several craftsmen and priests swaying as they gazed at Tama's artwork.

If I didn't know any better, the scene would make me think that there was some kind of magical effect on the statue.

"Such magnificent modeling."

"Yes, sir. It looks as if it might spring to life."

A foreign craftsman and his apprentice were looking at my statue.

I felt a little bashful hearing such earnest praise of my work.

The next day, on a recommendation from the temple, we went out to a shopping district with clothing shops, alchemists, and so on.

"It's strange to see alchemist shops between the clothing places."

"Apothecary."

"Some of the shops sell raw materials for formulation, too."

We snacked on some candy sticks we purchased from street vendors while we went window shopping.

"Mew?"

Tama's ears perked up, and she peered around the area.

"What's the matter?"

Just as I asked Tama this, I heard angry shouting in the distance.

“What? You say you don’t have any money?!”

“Aye. No matter how many times thou may ask, the answer shall be the same. Thou shalt refrain from asking pointless questions.”

A muscular candy seller was arguing with a pretty young girl around Lulu’s age.

“Was she trying to dine and dash?”

“Arisa, have we seen that girl somewhere before?” Lulu asked.

“Now that you mention it, I do feel like I recognize her a little. Maybe it’s just because she looks like you from behind, except with white hair?”

I had to agree with Lulu and Arisa. The girl looked oddly familiar.

“Doll?”

“Yes, Mia. She has perfect features like a doll, I concur.”

“No.” Mia shook her head. “Satou’s.”

“My…doll?”

I tilted my head and gazed at the girl for a moment. Then I realized what Mia was trying to say.

She looked exactly like the wooden statue I created.

Curious about the girl’s identity, I looked closer until more information appeared next to her in my AR display.

“Guh!”

I almost choked when I saw.

Because all it said was…

**UNKNOWN.**

All of the girl’s information was displayed as **UNKNOWN**. I couldn’t “Analyze” her.

I’d only seen this phenomenon twice before: once with the mysterious little

girl who appeared during my battle against the Dogheaded Demon Lord, and once with the Evil God's Spawn.

Come to think of it, when Doghead called the girl "Parion," she didn't actually confirm or deny it. Her voice and overall vibe were very different from the one I heard in Parion Province, which made me think the little girl might not have been Parion at all.

"Don't you back talk me! If you ain't gonna pay, I'll knock you out and turn you in to the authorities, dammit!"

The candy seller flew into a rage. I hurried over at near instant teleportation speeds, stepping between them and catching the man's fist.

Otherwise, he might have gotten turned into a frog or trapped in a painting or something for attacking such a mysterious being.

"Outta my way!"

"I'm so sorry for the trouble that my young friend here may have caused you. Here's the payment, as well as an extra tip. Please find it in your heart to forgive her."

The candy seller accepted the silver coin I offered him and stormed off in a huff, looking frustrated that he didn't get to express his pent-up anger.

"Thou shouldst not have interfered. Insolence shalt be punished."

"No, there was no need for punishment. He was only angry because you took candy without paying for it."

"I didst grant him compensation. A word of gratitude from my lips is worth a thousand gold coins."

From the look on her face, the girl was dead serious.

"My name is Satou. Could I ask for your name, young lady?"

The girl stared at me for a moment, then nodded once and revealed her identity.

"Karion."

If she was telling the truth, then this young girl was really a goddess.

“Isn’t that the goddess’s name?” Arisa pointed out.

“Aye. I am a goddess, hallowed be my name. Thou shalt show me reverence.”

As she said those words, everyone present except for me immediately dropped to their knees and bowed their heads.

I checked my log but didn’t see any signs that she had used Psychic Magic or anything of the sort.

“What art thee?”

*You could at least say “who.”*

“Why dost thou not bow thy head? Thou shalt explain at once.”

“I’m not sure how to answer that. Maybe because I’m not part of your religion?”

That applied to all of my companions, too, but I genuinely didn’t know the reason, so I just responded with the help of my “Fabrication” skill.

“Intriguing. I shall grant thee the honor of accompanying me.”

“Uhh, okay then…”

I was so caught off guard that my instinctive response was decidedly impolite.

“Thou shalt show more gratitude.”

*Well, for now…*

“Could you let my friends raise their heads, please?”

That would be a good place to start.

◆

“Is there anywhere in particular that you’d like to go?”

“Thou shalt choose. Do not disappoint me.”

I decided to show Karion around alone rather than risk anything happening to my companions. As much as Arisa protested, she relented when I pointed out that it was too dangerous that the goddess could evidently force them to obey her every whim.

By now, they had probably left Kalisork City and changed into their gold armor to wait on standby.

Since I was worried I’d stand out walking around with Goddess Karion, I put on the sort of robe a priest might wear and pulled the hood down over my face.

“What brings you to the mortal realm, Goddess Karion?”

“An excellent vessel was offered up to me.”

Ah, so she was sightseeing in the human world out of curiosity just because she acquired a vessel? Whoever gave her that was a real pain in the neck—no, wait a minute. Come to think of it, she did look just like the statue I made.

“Could it be that the ‘vessel’ you’re referring to is the statue carved from the World Tree that’s in the central temple?”

“Aye. It fits most splendidly.”

Dammit. So I was the culprit all along.

“Whosoever offered up that statue shalt be granted divine protection.”

*I don’t need any, thanks.*

“Thou shalt find the person who offered the statue at once.”

“All right. We can ask when we go back to the temple.”

Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that.

“How strange.”

Karion stopped walking and looked up at me.

“What is?”

“Thou dost not obey a goddess. I cannot see thy thoughts. Most fascinating indeed. I shall uncover thy secrets yet.”

Having someone boss me around with a blank expression was getting a little old.

Unfortunately, the fact that I didn’t immediately obey her order had apparently piqued her interest in me.

*Wait, does that mean she can read people’s thoughts except for mine?*

“You don’t want to go to the tower?”

“No need. I have already seen it. Thou shalt guide me elsewhere.”

I tried changing the subject only to find out that she’d already hit the major sightseeing spot.

“You must have caused quite a commotion at the tower, hmm?”

“Nay.”

“Wait, really?”

“Aye. For I did not desire a commotion.”

“And since you didn’t want it, it didn’t happen?”

“Aye. Humans shalt comply with my desires.”

*Wow. I guess being a god has its perks.*

“So why haven’t you come to the mortal realm before? Because you didn’t have a vessel?”

“Nay.”

“Why, then?”

“The cost. A shrine maiden wouldst break, and it consumes too much of my divine power. Thou shalt refrain from needless waste.”

Now that she mentioned it, I heard once that Holy Magic has a spell that can bring a god down into the user’s own body.

“Is it really that costly?”

Karion stopped and stared at me again.

“Thou hast many questions. Thou shalt refrain from excessive prying.”

I didn’t want to make her mad, so I stopped asking questions and focused on showing her around.

“If possible, I would appreciate it if you’d call me ‘Satou’ instead of just ‘thou.’”

“What is that?”

Karion ignored my request and pointed at something in the distance.

“A windmill. Looks like it’s being used to grind flour.”

“And that?”

“A cafeteria. It’s a place where people eat. Doesn’t look like it’s open at the moment.”

“I see. And over there?”

The goddess kept peppering me with questions, as if everything she saw was brand-new to her.

*“How’s it going so far, Master?”*

*“She seems to be having a good time seeing the sights.”*

*“Aye. The information content in the mortal realm is negligible. Their speed of thought is far too slow. However, it is strangely fun to experience such an inefficient world.”*

As I was reporting back to Arisa, Karion casually joined in on the private telepathic conversation.

*“G-glad to hear it. It’s never a bad thing to have fun.”*

*“Aye. The pleasures of a physical body are mysterious. Most fascinating indeed.”*

I guess gods don’t have physical bodies in the divine realm.

“Want to go find something tasty to eat, then?”

“Aye. I am intrigued by the concept of ‘taste.’ Thou shalt introduce me to the finest delicacies.”

“How about that, then?”

I spotted a street vendor walking down the road and headed over.

“What is that?”

“She’s selling hard candy.”

“I shall eat it.”

The goddess started strolling toward her. I quickly got there first and paid for the candy, handing it to Karion.

“’Tis sweet. Much harder than the chewy malt candy. And that?”

“Those are galettes. There are two kinds, sweet ones and savory cheese-filled ones.”

“I shall eat both.”

Karion shoved her half-eaten hard candy into my hand and headed to the galette cart.

After one or two bites of each galette, she handed both of those to me, too.

Evidently she wanted to do a lot of taste testing.

“And what is that?”

“A street performance.”

Karion spotted a performer with a golem in one corner of a plaza and ran over to watch.

He was using a small knee-height golem in a similar way to a trained monkey.

“Mister, the flip! Do the flip!”

“Maybe once we get a few more donations.”

“C’mooon, I wanna see the fliiip…”

The kids who were already gathered watching the show were badgering the man for a flip.

“Donation.”

Evidently intrigued, Karion tugged on my sleeve and demanded that I make a donation. Her eyes were glued to the cartoonishly dancing golem.

“Will this do?”

“Oho, a silver coin! You’re a big spender, eh, young man!”

The performer stood up enthusiastically, gave me a bow of thanks, commanded the golem—then did a midair flip himself.

*C’mon, YER the one who does the flip?!* I almost blurted out in a fake Osakan dialect.

Karion looked as delighted as the children.

“The golem doesn’t do a flip?”

“Nah, it’s too heavy for that.”

“What if you made a golem out of lighter material, like wood or paper?”

“Wood might work, but ya can’t make a golem outta paper.”

“Nay. A paper golem is possible. Thou shalt not confuse thy inexperience and limitations with the realm of possibility.”

With that, Karion held out her hand to me.

I had a guess what she wanted, so I reached into Storage via my Garage Bag and produced a thick piece of paper, handing it over.

“Thusly.”

Karion’s eyes glowed red orange.

*Red orange…?*

The vermilion light flooded over the paper and caused it to fold on its own into a humanoid shape that then began to move like a golem.

Red orange must be Goddess Karion’s personal color.

Since Holy Swords and Goddess Parion’s holy light were blue, I just assumed that goddesses gave off blue light by default. In this case, maybe holy light came in colors like green and yellow, too.

“Thou shalt flip.”

On Karion’s order, the golem did a flip.

“Whoa! That’s soooo cool, lady!”

“You’re a golem-making genius!”

Karion puffed up her chest, looking pleased by the children’s praise.

Even when the kids got excited and started hanging off her, she didn’t raise a hand or use her mysterious powers to stop them.

“I shall grant thee this boon. Thou shalt continue to pray and live devoutly.”

Karion turned the golem back into a flat sheet of paper, then made a script appear on it that formed a spell, which she handed to the golem trainer.

I snapped a quick picture of it using magic; it appeared to be a spell for making paper golems.

I guess Karion wasn’t the goddess of wisdom for nothing.

After that, we continued trawling through the city, visiting food stalls and watching more street performers and minstrels.

We happened to pass by the Joppentelle workshop, which I heard about in Parion Province. I paid a quick visit, but Mr. Joppentelle himself wasn't there at the moment.

"Why dost this transform? Human thought processes are fascinating. Thou shalt explain the design."

"I'm sorry. If the master were here, he could explain it…"

"Understood. Thou art not accountable. How dost this umbrella transform?"

"Well, you see…"

Goddess Karion got excited about Joppentelle's transforming devices and pestered his wife, who was tending the store, and kindly humored her.

In the meantime, I contacted Arisa and gave her a progress report. Thus far, Karion seemed harmless other than her ability to force people to obey her words, and from what I could tell, she didn't use that ability out of any ill will.

While I had no idea why I alone was immune to her ability, equipping accessories that were resistant to Psychic Magic did make my head feel a little lighter. Maybe it would be safest to equip my companions with similar items.

"Shall we head back soon?"

I called over Karion, who seemed to have had her fill playing with all of the products in the Joppentelle workshop.

Of course, it would be rude to the proprietress to just test them all out and leave. I bought up anything that caught my interest or seemed like a good souvenir, and requested to have them delivered to our lodgings.

"I shall not return to the divine realm yet. Transmitting and receiving the experiences of a spirit avatar costs a great deal of divine power."

Apparently this Karion was a spirit avatar—like a copy, not the real thing.

"I only meant to go back to the temple, not the divine realm. The sun will set soon, and the city streets aren't as safe after dark."

“Safe? There are few who couldst harm a god, aside from perhaps a dragon or demon lord. Thou shalt explain these threats.”

*So dragons and demon lords can harm gods? Huh.*

“Well, there will be more drunkards around, which means it’s more likely that someone might displease you.”

“Understood. I shall not seek out any such displeasure. Thy suggestion is acceptable. Thou shalt take me to the temple.”

Since Karion so generously agreed, I led her back to Karion Central Temple.

◆

“How noisy. Temples shalt be silent.”

When I returned to the temple with Karion in tow, some sort of commotion was going on.

“I wonder what happened?”

I caught one of the priests, who was bustling around in a general panic, and asked what was going on.

“I-it’s terrible! All of the priestesses passed out at once!”

“Is that what all this uproar is about?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m told that before the head priestess collapsed, she cried out Goddess Karion’s name in a desperate plea. Such a thing has never occurred, even when we received an oracle message about the return of the demon lord. It must be an omen of a disaster even worse than a demon lord!”

“Stop! Why are you telling an outsider all this when we don’t even know the truth of the matter yet?!”

A serious-looking priest scolded my loose-lipped informant.

“You there—don’t tell anyone else what you just heard. Those who spread rumors that may not even be true are subject to divine punishment.”

“Nay. Divine punishment is not doled out so lightly. It costs a great deal of divine power.”

“And who are you?”

*Yeah, this is the goddess that you all worship.*

“Kari—”

“More importantly, about this commotion…”

I stopped Karion from introducing herself before I could find out what I wanted to know.

“Is it only the priestesses of Karion Central Temple who collapsed? What about those of the other temples?”

“Such insolence. Thou shalt apologize at once.” Karion was pitching a fit behind me, but I ignored her and waited for the serious priest to answer.

“The other temples haven’t said a word. It’s only here in Karion Central Temple.”

*Well, that answers that.*

I turned to Karion. “Looks like you’re the cause of all this.”

“Aye. Logically speaking, thy conclusion is sound.”

“What do you mean, you’re the cause?! Did you do something to our priestesses?!”

The serious priest misinterpreted our exchange and moved to grab Karion.

“Such insolence. Let it be known that thou art in the presence of thy most hallowed goddess.”

As soon as Karion said this, everyone in the temple chapel immediately fell silent and dropped to their knees, prostrating on the floor. It was like the afternoon’s incident all over again.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me…”

“Thou hast served me well. Thou shalt return to me tomorrow when the sun hast risen.”

Despite my attempt to leave the rest to the priests and make myself scarce, apparently I was supposed to come back and show her around the city again

the next day.

That was fine, I supposed. It wasn't that hard, and I did get to learn more about the divine realm.

I left the chapel and changed out of my priestlike robes, heading for the hall where the statues were on display.

My goal was to find out if the statue I made really had turned into a vessel for Karion.

"Young master! Bad news!"

"Your statue's been stolen!"

As soon as they saw me, the wood-carving brothers started shouting.

Another man chimed in to protest. "No, it wasn't! I'm telling you, it suddenly glowed with red light and turned into a person!"

Wow, there was even a witness. So my statue really did become the vessel of a goddess, then.

"You're still spouting that nonsense?!"

"It's true! I swear it!"

"I believe you."

"Young master, please, there's no need to humor him…"

"Well, I did just meet a girl who looked exactly like my statue."

"R-really?"

*We even went sightseeing together.*

"Wow, Big Brother! It's like a myth or a fairy tale."

"R-right…"

The elder brother was stunned into silence at first, until the pair announced that they wanted to make a statue of that caliber someday and ran off to acquire more lumber.

Apparently this incident only lit a fire in their artistic souls.

I contacted Arisa with the Space Magic spell Telephone on my way back to my room.

*“Arisa, Karion returned to the temple. You can all come back now.”*

*“All righty. What about our armor?”*

*“You don’t need to wear it. Just keep some anti–Psychic Magic accessories equipped, please.”*

*“Okey-dokey!”*

Based on the afternoon we spent sightseeing, my fears that Goddess Karion might hurt my friends seemed unfounded. A little bit of protection against her divine commands was probably good enough.

“We’re hooome!”

“Welcome back.”

Once my companions returned, I told them about Karion as we headed to a cafeteria.

“You don’t have any food?”

“Just give us a bit more time! All of the cooks got summoned to the main hall. All we have is soup and bread, so you can eat that while you wait.”

Evidently all of the chefs had been called away to cook for Karion.

“Lulu?”

“Right away, Master.”

“Master, if it’s all right, I would be honored to help as well.”

Lulu and Liza immediately caught on to my intentions and agreed to assist me.

“We’d be happy to help. Could you tell us what’s on the menu for this evening?”

“Oh, thank you so much! As long as you can make it with the fish and veggies we have here, anything is fine. We don’t know how to do anything more complicated than peeling and boiling potatoes.”

Since the girl promptly dropped all the responsibility in our laps, we picked

some dishes that were easy to make in large quantities, split up the work, and got cooking.

“Tama will help, toooo?”

“Pochi can help, too, sir!”

Pochi, Tama, and Mia all joined in on peeling potatoes, while Nana helped out by skimming the scum off the stew.

“Boo-hoo…”

When Arisa realized she was the only one who couldn’t help, she curled up on a chair to sulk in solitude.

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, you know?

I decided to ask her to help with taste testing later.

“Master, what should we do with these potatoes?”

“Hmm, good question…”

There were tons of those same cassava-esque squirreltail yams here. I prepared them in a few different ways: French fries, a recreation of a dish I enjoyed while walking around and snacking with Karion, a spin on a dish I learned in Parion Province, and so on.

“The food’s real good today.”

“Is there a different head chef than usual?”

“I wouldn’t mind eatin’ this every day.”

The finished dishes seemed to go over well.

Relieved, I turned my attention to mass-producing the dishes, until…

“G-Goddess Karion, please wait. This is the cafeteria used by the common people…”

“Nay. I sense tasty morsels here—aha.”

Karion’s eyes locked with mine.

The next moment, she suddenly appeared directly in front of me, as if a few frames had dropped in the process.

“Thou shalt offer me the morsels at once.”

“I only have the same food we’re serving to everyone else. Is that all right?”

“Aye. Tasty morsels. Quickly.”

I produced a somewhat nicer plate from Storage via the Garage Bag and piled food onto it.

Somehow, the priests had already turned one corner of the cafeteria into luxurious VIP seating, so I brought the plate there.

“Here y—”

“Tasty.”

Karion brought the spoon to her mouth without waiting for me to finish speaking.

“I hereby appoint thee as chef to the goddess.”

When Karion spoke, notifications appeared in my log.

**> Title Acquired: Divine Chef de Cuisine**

**> Title Acquired: Karion’s Personal Chef**

*Hang on, I don’t need these titles that sound like they came out of a cooking manga.*

On closer inspection, I realized that before Divine Chef de Cuisine, I’d also acquired sculpture-related titles like Divine Sculptor and Carver of Sacred Statues at some point without even noticing.

*Okay, I’m just going to pretend I didn’t see that.*

“Thank you, but I must respectfully decline.”

As soon as I said this, the priests and priestesses around me all started exclaiming things like “Insolence!” and “Sacrilege!” until Karion silenced them all with a look.

“Why? Thou shalt present thy reasons.”

“I’m not worthy of such an honor. Besides, I am not a follower of the Karion faith.”

“Unbelievable.”

Karion’s eyes widened in surprise.

Then she frowned, looking as if she’d noticed something.

“Thou dost smell of Parion. And something else, too…” She paused, tilted her head, and muttered, “An adulterer?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mia and Arisa nodding gravely. But I’ve always been devoted solely to Miss Aaze.

“Please eat before it gets cold.”

I changed the subject, gesturing to Karion’s food.

“Tasty. The shine of the honey tempts one’s appetite and envelops the savory chicken in sweetness. This shall be served at formal banquets henceforth.”

Karion praised the food like a reporter on a gourmet dining show as she ate.

Despite all the snacks we’d eaten that afternoon, her appetite apparently knew no bounds. Maybe a goddess’s stomach is bottomless.

“Tasty. Bring the next plate.”

“Goddess Karion gave you a command, chef. Prepare the next dish immediately!”

Maiyah, the head priestess with fox-like eyes, demanded another course.

“I brought out all of the dishes we can provide.”

“Nay. I smell unknown morsels yet. Thou shalt provide the next dish.”

Karion teleported from the VIP seats directly into the kitchen.

*Unknown morsels?*

I looked around the kitchen uncertainly. Pochi had a plate of Hamburg steak, Tama had a dish of Lisork jumbo shrimp stewed with tomatoes, and Mia had a dish of Lisork mushroom steak.

I’d forgotten that I made them each personal meals.

“You can have a little bit of Pochi’s Mr. Hamburg, sir! It’s super extra delicious, sir!”

Pochi held out her plate, and Karion took a forkful without even sitting down.

Head Priestess Maiyah looked like she might faint at the sight and shouted for someone to bring a table and chair for the goddess.

“Unbelievable! So tender! The savory meat melts in my mouth and mixes with the sweetness of the onion to create an unknown tasty morsel. This is a revolutionary meat dish!”

Pochi smiled happily at Karion’s praise.

However, her smile turned to shock when she saw how quickly her Hamburg steak was disappearing.

“You can try Tama’s shrimp, too?”

Noticing Pochi’s distress, Tama offered her own dish.

“It’s rather tough.”

The shell of the shrimp stopped the goddess’s knife.

“A-allow me to remove the shell for you.”

“No need. Shell, thou shalt remove thyself.”

Karion waved the head priestess away. She tapped the shell gently with the back of her knife, and it promptly peeled away from the shrimp on its own.

“Wowiiiie?”

Tama’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Tasty. This red sauce gives the shrimp more depth of flavor, and a faint acidity that doth improve the aftertaste.”

Goddess Karion smiled in deep satisfaction as she chewed on the exposed shrimp.

“Want some?”

“Hrm, what brings an elf here, pray tell? Thou art bound to the World Tree, no?”

“She’s traveling the world to expand her knowledge. The high elf in charge of the World Tree gave her permission.”

When Mia held out her mushroom dish, Karion looked at her suspiciously, causing Mia to draw back. I stepped in and explained on her behalf.

“Understood. If thou hast permission of thy responsible party, then all is well. I accept thy offering of tasty morsels.”

Karion beckoned to Mia and cut off a piece of her mushroom steak, bringing it to her lips.

“Tasty. ’Tis simple, yet the butter, salt, and pepper draw out the flavors of the mushroom most amply. The chef shalt receive my praise.”

**> Title Acquired: Favored by Karion**

*I don’t know how I feel about receiving a goddess’s favor just for that.*

Pochi, Tama, and Mia sharing their food with the goddess seemed to make her less intimidating to the others; Nana, Arisa, and the rest all let her taste their meals, too.

Karion and Head Priestess Maiyah requested that I make more dishes, so I agreed to provide my own ingredients and cook in exchange for permission to visit the temple library.

“Yummy, yummyyy?”

“This is really delicious, too, sir!”

“Agreed. Yet another unique and tasty flavor.”

For some reason, Tama and Pochi were eating with Karion.

Since the goddess had given them permission, Maiyah and the other priestesses couldn’t protest.

“*Unadon* is extra delicious if you add this powder, I declare.”

“My tongue is tingling…”

“I think you added too much. I’ll remove a little.”

At Nana’s suggestion, Karion piled wasabi onto her eel *donburi*, then

puckered up her face. Lulu, who was bringing out the next dish, removed the excess wasabi from the rice bowl to a smaller dish. The head priestess looked incredibly disappointed to have missed her chance.

“This is stew made from sheep sinew. Please try it—it has a wonderful mouthfeel.”

“’Tis tough. Let it be known that this body’s jaw is not that strong.”

Liza looked a little disappointed that her favored dish was rejected.

*I’ll eat some with her later.*

“Now I feel kind of silly for being so wary of her,” Arisa remarked, popping up next to me while I wielded my frying pan.

“That’s a good thing though, right? Better safe than sorry.”

I wouldn’t want to regret not being more careful after someone got hurt.

During the meal, Karion used her divine commands a few times, but they didn’t affect my kids much—presumably thanks to the anti–Spirit Magic accessories they equipped.

Now that I knew it worked, it’d be nice to find some slightly more effective ones.

“That’s true. Maybe my judgment was a bit clouded by certain preconceptions.”

Come to think of it, Arisa mentioned that she was warned in a dream to be very careful if she met any other gods and goddesses or “God’s Apostles,” and that they would be likely to attack her if they realized she had inherited an ability from a different goddess, so she should run away or fight back for all she was worth.

But in reality, Karion hadn’t really reacted at all when she saw Arisa.

And while Arisa was hiding the purple hair that proved she was a reincarnation with a blond wig, surely that couldn’t have fooled a goddess who could read other people’s thoughts.

For that matter, Arisa was with me when Goddess Parion gave her thanks to

me, too.

Based on these examples, maybe whoever appeared to Arisa in her dream was the one we should be most wary of.

“Goddess Karion…!”

I turned around at the sound of Maiyah’s cry to see Karion slumped over the table.

Uh-oh. Maybe I used ingredients that didn’t agree with her?

“Thy fear is needless. Carry this body to the sanctuary,” Karion commanded the head priestess in a dismissive tone. “I shall sleep for three rotation cycles for optimization. Let it be known that thy pious prayers shall accelerate the optimization…process…”

Sounding like she was fighting to stay awake, Karion managed to finish her statement before she fell asleep completely.

From the sound of it, she would be sleeping for three days or so. I’d better take care of everything I wanted to do in this kingdom in the meantime.

◆

“Business seems to be booming.”

“You’re right, Big Bro.”

Since I had a rather eventful day, I decided to go to a bar to blow off some steam after I put the girls to bed. Rather than go out drinking alone, I invited the wood-carving brothers, who seemed like they couldn’t sleep anyway.

I listened in on the chatters in the bar. The descent of Goddess Karion was nowhere to be found among the many topics of discussion. I guess rumors hadn’t reached the streets yet.

“Heya, Joppe. How ’bout you invent us a cask that makes infinite beer?”

“That’s impossible, you idiot! Save the gibberish for your sleep-talk!”

As soon as we sat down, the customer next to me started arguing with the drunk seated across from him.

“Ga-ha-ha, you’re askin’ way too much of a guy who can only make

transforming trinkets.”

“No kidding. A loser who can only make devices that pointlessly change shape could never create a magic tool of any actual use.”

“With a weirdo like him around making transforming trash, people might think Kalisork and its Tower of Wisdom are just a den of loonies.”

*Transforming…?*

“Wait, are you Mr. Joppentelle?!” I asked.

Before he could silently lunge at the drunk across from him, I grabbed the hand of the man next to me.

As he looked at me in confusion, the name **Joppentelle** appeared in my AR display.

“Erm, yes… And you are?”

“My name is Viscount Satou Pendragon, Vice-Minister of Tourism of the Shiga Kingdom.”

“What could a foreign noble possibly want with me?”

“I saw your work in Parion Province and was deeply impressed. In fact, I hurried to your workshop today hoping to meet you and have a chat with you in person.”

Mr. Joppentelle looked like he didn’t quite believe me.

“Hold your horses, Mr. Noble. I can make you a way better magic tool than this talentless hack who can only make useless transforming toys.”

“Yeah, this guy’s a disgrace to the magic tool association. Why, just today he went crawling to the association to beg for money to research some stupid transformation or other, and they sent him packing right away.”

Apparently the men who were badmouthing Mr. Joppentelle were magic tool craftsmen themselves.

“That moronic association! I don’t need their damned money anyway!” Joppentelle snapped back at them.

“In that case, I would be happy to invest.”

“You would…?”

Joppentelle blinked at me doubtfully. I nodded.

“Do you have any idea how much magic tool development costs? We’re not talking about ten or twenty gold coins here, you know?”

“Yes, I dabble in magic tool research myself, so I’m aware of the market prices. Just tell me how much you need, and I’ll make it happen.”

I once dismantled one of his transforming magic tools that I acquired in Parion Province, and it was full of unfamiliar mechanisms and brand-new uses of monster parts. I could learn a lot from him.

If all he needed was one or two thousand gold coins, it would be worth investing on the spot.

“Three hundred gold coins, then. If you can give me that much, I’ll even move to Shiga Kingdom!”

*Ooh, he’s willing to come to Shiga Kingdom? In that case, I’d love to introduce him to the “Rotation-Mad” Professor Jahado and see what kind of chemical reaction they produce together.*

“Very well. Here’s an advance payment of three hundred gold coins. If you don’t mind, I’ll come to your workshop to discuss the details tomorrow.”

With that, I placed a pouch full of gold coins on the table. Mr. Joppentelle and even the men who were harassing him all stared at it with their jaws dropping to the floor.

Come on, magic tool craftsmen should be used to seeing that amount of money.

“What a fine day indeed! I didn’t know how happy I would be to find someone who understands my works of art at last! Let us move to another venue. I know the perfect pub.”

Mr. Joppentelle tugged me out of my seat. It was then that I remembered I’d left the wood-carving brothers behind; luckily, they were already deep in a heated discussion about sculpture with a group at another table who were evidently wood-carvers from a different kingdom.

“Miss, take this to pay for that table over there, please. If there’s any left over, you can give a round of beers to everyone else on me.”

“That’s very generous, mister!”

I handed a few gold coins to the waitress, along with a large silver coin for a tip.

Hopefully that would make up for inviting the brothers out to drink only to abandon them.

“Heya, Joppe. No luck with the association, huh?”

“Don’t just assume it didn’t go well.”

“But it didn’t, did it?”

As soon as we entered Mr. Joppentelle’s chosen pub, a few men around his age greeted him with a sympathetic air.

According to my AR display, they too were fellow magic tool craftsmen and alchemists, with dishonorable-sounding titles like **Dismantling Expert** and **Explosion Expert**.

“The association turned me down, but I did find funding, after all.”

With that, Mr. Joppentelle introduced me to his fellow researchers.

“Damn, I can’t believe a noble from Shiga Kingdom scouted Joppe.”

“Yeah, now our down-and-out researchers’ club will be down a member.”

I prompted the grumbling researchers for more information and learned that each of them had gotten far too preoccupied about a single subject as well, and could barely find any supporters, let alone commercial success.

When I asked about their research subjects, they all described fascinating fields of study. The “Explosion Expert” in particular was working on such advanced technology that he probably would’ve been invited to work for a military kingdom by now—if it weren’t for the huge amount of magic power required for his experiments, and the fact that they couldn’t be controlled.

However, since he was doing the equivalent of developing nuclear weapons in a kitchen, he couldn’t present much proof of his theories.

The ideas he was using were very similar to those of the atomic bomb–like forbidden spell I acquired in a banned bookstore in Shiga Kingdom; if his research proceeded, I was worried that it would result in a weapon of similar capacity to that forbidden spell. I would prefer if he did his research somewhere where I could at least keep an eye on his progress.

“Would all of you like to come to the Shiga Kingdom as well?”

When I made this proposal, all five of the researchers agreed to the transfer.

I planned to ask the Echigoya Company to prepare to receive them and arrange for a lab and testing sites where no one else would be harmed.

I spent the rest of the night drinking with the researchers and their assistants and friends until dawn. In the midst of the festivities, I was able to ask them for ideas about curing the chimeras.

“If you can’t separate juice that’s been mixed into water, why not mix in more water until you can’t taste the juice anymore?”

“You mean reduce the chimera elements, and inject them with more human elements?”

“Indeed. I once saw such a thing described in a book from the ancient Lalakie dynasty era in the Tower Master’s collection.”

“That’s very intriguing.”

It just so happened that I knew a place where I might find some Lalakie-era materials.

I decided to visit Paradise Island for the first time in quite a while. Karion wouldn’t reawaken for another three days anyway.

◆

“Master, I delivered the letter to the Tower of Wisdom’s reception desk.”

“Master, we have secured rooms in the best inn in Kalisork, I report.”

After I drank all night and got scolded by Arisa and Mia accordingly, I sent Arisa and Nana out on some minor errands. The goal was to change Viscount Pendragon’s official lodging to an inn.

“A bigwig at the reception desk said that the Tower Master is busy dealing with an urgent situation and won’t be able to have any meetings for a while.”

“It’s too bad we won’t be able to go into the great library, but I don’t mind not having to do that whole song and dance.”

Apparently the earthly visitation of a goddess was a historic event, and it sounded like it’d be a pain if word got out that I was involved. I was going to try to pass off the version of me in the temple as someone different from the “Viscount Satou Pendragon of the Shiga Kingdom” who showed up at the Tower of Wisdom.

Luckily, the only times I’d introduced myself as Satou since arriving in this kingdom were to the tower guard, Karion, and the researchers. I was hopeful that I could still get away with it.

As for the great library, I could probably get permission to visit it as Kuro once we started a Kalisork branch location of the Echigoya Company.

“So try not to call me ‘Satou’ while we’re in this kingdom, okay?”

“Mm. Got it.”

Mia is the only one of my group that refers to me by name anyway.

“Okay, shall we visit the temple library now?”

With that, I led my companions to the temple library, which I’d just gotten permission to enter yesterday.

Just to be safe, I dressed the same way as the day before so that my face was difficult to see.

“So many books, sir.”

“Très bieeen?”

The library was lined to bursting with bookshelves; there were even more enormous collections on the second and third floors.

We were looking for the rest of the information on the research topics that were written on the red salt statues in the chapel.

“The children’s books are right this way.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I wanna see, too?”

A librarian kindly directed Pochi, Tama, and Nana toward the picture book section.

“I’m not a big fan of religious texts…,” Arisa murmured.

“Oh, this one is about temple cuisine! And there are eight whole volumes, too.”

Lulu seemed to have found a book series that captured her interest.

“Found it.”

“Master, I believe Mia has located the research texts from the red salt statues.”

I went over to where Mia and Liza were beckoning me and found three shelves crammed with string-bound books.

“Won’t it be hard to find what we’re looking for in here?”

“Not at all.”

Making sure that no one was looking, I took the opportunity to use my magical telekinesis “Magic Hand” to put the books briefly into Storage, shelves and all. Then my built-in OCR function converted them into strings of text, allowing me to use a search to find the books I wanted.

“Okay, that’s just ridiculous.”

“Pretty convenient though, right?”

“Can’t argue with that.”

Arisa rolled her eyes and shrugged, then picked up one of the books.

“Hmm, I can mostly read the ones in Saga Empire Language, but I can only pick out a few words when they’re in the Inland Sea Common Language or Flue Empire Language.”

“Mm. Difficult.”

I forgot that their translation rings only work for conversation.

“Well, I can translate them for you later. Just let me know which titles sound interesting to you.”

I started reading off the titles to them.

Then I used the Picture Recorder spell to photograph the books that they requested, as well as the ones I was curious about, and quickly conveyed the contents of the outlines.

“Hmm, a lot of those don’t have much evidence to back them up.”

“Disappointing.”

Arisa and Mia seemed disappointed that none of the theories seemed to offer hints toward new spells as they had hoped.

Personally, I was plenty satisfied just to have learned from the “Changes and differences from primitive magic to modern sorcery” thesis that modern magic was given to humanity by the gods, and that before this there was something called “primitive magic” that was entirely different.

On the other hand, the “On the relationship between modern sorcery and the Evil God” thesis, which proposed that this modern magic was brought about not by the seven goddesses but by the Evil God, was a little forced. It referred to inscriptions from several ancient ruins as proof, but later investigations discovered that those were made much more recently than the time of the gods.

Another young researcher’s thesis, “Did levels and skills not exist when the world was first created?”, suggested that the mysterious powers in question weren’t around when this world initially came into existence. Rather, they were created by the gods later or, perhaps, even brought about by the Evil God. The basis of this claim was that the only god that appeared after the genesis of the world was the Evil God.

“…Ooh, what about this one? It says, ‘The gods’ magic as related to heavenly punishment.’”

“Hmm.”

“Ugh, isn’t that just another made-up religious myth?”

“No, apparently heavenly punishment is a real thing.”

Although the term was a little different, Karion did mention that “divine punishment” cost “a great deal of divine power.” Mukuro mentioned something about it in the bottom stratum of the Celivera Labyrinth, too.

“What does it do, then?”

“Apparently it brought down natural disasters and climate change on an ancient empire that used to exist around here.”

“An ancient empire? Does that mean the Flue Empire?”

“Judging by this description, I think it’s a different empire entirely.”

Given that it was consistent with what Mukuro told me before, it must be the empire that he built long ago.

“It also gives an example of a small city-state that committed taboo and was turned into a pillar of salt—people, buildings, and all.”

Apparently the remains of the city that was transformed into salt were discovered underneath some sediment.

“I wonder what chemical change could possibly cause that, don’t you? I thought the same thing when I saw the ‘Cradle’ collapse.”

Now that Arisa mentioned it, I remembered that “Cradle of Trazayuya” turned into a mass of salt and collapsed at the end.

“Chemi-call?”

Mia furrowed her brow, prompting Arisa to explain the basics of chemistry.

“Arisa, Mia, apparently the other volume of this research text is in the forbidden library of the Tower of Wisdom. And it says it contains records of research to try and reproduce divine punishment with modern magic.”

“Wow, that’s a little scary… I am a little curious, though.”

“Mm.”

I doubted they’d give us permission to see it very easily, but it was worth a shot.

After that, I read a bunch of other books that interested me, until we wrapped up our investigation of the temple library around lunchtime.

While we were busy researching, the librarian generously read picture books aloud to Pochi and the other kids who couldn't read the text. I decided to send her some delicious pastries as a thank-you.

"…There you are, Apostle. We've been looking for you."

As we left the library, we ran into the serious priest.

"Please, I'm not an apostle or anything so dramatic as that. I am but a humble wood-carver and chef."

"No, no. I am told you created the statue that served as Goddess Karion's vessel, and even served as her attendant. We would love to have you join Karion Central Temple as a—"

"More importantly, weren't you looking for me for some reason?"

I rudely interrupted the priest, mostly to stop the conversation from taking a bothersome turn.

"Ah, yes. My superior, the archbishop, asked me to seek you out and inquire as to whether you have any requests in exchange for your noble work as an Apostle."

Requests, huh? Since we already got permission to visit the temple library, I didn't really have any.

"In that case, I don't suppose we could have permission to peruse the great library and the forbidden bookshelves and such? We've been asked to investigate something, and the temple library didn't have the books we needed."

"Good heavens! I had no idea you were given such an important mission! I shall inform the archbishop at once and secure all the permissions you need."

The serious priest hurried off to talk to the archbishop in a panic, probably thanks to Arisa's deliberately misleading phrasing.

There were no popes or cardinals at the Karion Central Temple; the archbishop was the highest-ranking clergyman here.

Evidently the archbishop at this temple also served as the head priest and was referred to interchangeably by either role.

Rather than stand around waiting in the hallway, we decided to go have lunch in the same cafeteria as the day before while we waited.

“Whoa, the table and chair are on display as relics.”

“Yes, Arisa. The goddess’s used silverware is on display as well, I declare.”

There were ropes around the table Karion had eaten at to forbid entry; holy men and women were gathered around it, praying with serious expressions.

“I don’t see the bigwigs. Maybe they’re in the other dining hall where the goddess was eating at first?”

“No, it looks like they’re praying in the sanctuary where Karion is sleeping.”

I told Arisa the information from my map search.

While we were trying to decide whether to eat in the crowded cafeteria or go out to eat somewhere, the serious priest returned, gasping for breath. I was especially impressed since I didn’t even tell him where we were going.

“My deepest apologies for the wait, Apostle. I was able to acquire permission for the great library right away, but I’m afraid an ordinary priest such as myself could not qualify for the forbidden shelves. The archbishop is going to negotiate with the Tower Master now.”

“Thank you, and please thank the archbishop as well.”

I tried to imitate the politeness of the priests from the evening before.

By the time we finished eating lunch in the dining hall for the higher-ranking priests, the serious priest told us that we’d been granted permission to view the forbidden shelves, so we decided to head over there right away.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t get permission for the whole group at once, so I brought Arisa and Mia with me while I sent the others to go on a food tour under the pretense of searching for ingredients and supplies.

“Are you quite sure you’re all right with wearing priest robes?”

“Yes, I think bishop or pastor robes would get in the way of browsing books.”

Since I was visiting the Tower of Wisdom as Karion's "apostle" this time, I wore a priest robe, while Arisa and Mia put on the robes of priestesses in training. Since Arisa and I had already shown our faces, we pulled our hoods down over our faces.

The serious priest led us through the gates of the Tower of Wisdom.

We entered a building near the base of the biggest tower, where we were greeted with an entrance hall full of scholars and students earnestly exchanging opinions.

*"According to documents from the Flue Empire era, the magic circle carved into a fire rod must be…"*

*"Modern Magic Guns and the Magic Cannons found in Lalagi: the Kingdom of Sorcery have several major differences, such as the magic power capacity…"*

*"It is my strongly held belief that the use of necromancy would allow us to clear out monster territories for habitation without any loss of human life!"*

*"In order to effectively use water stones for production of water in desert regions, the use of kelpies as a catalyst is…"*

Though this was a garden of knowledge and learning, there were an awful lot of theories with possible military uses.

Considering that there was a real threat of monsters in this world, military technology for reinforcing city defenses was probably more immediately relevant than on modern Earth.

"Look."

"There are red salt statues here, too."

The same statues we saw in the temple were displayed here and there throughout the halls.

"Yes, these were originally votive statues used for Goddess Karion's trials, but now the pedestals are engraved with the prefaces of thesis statements that the elders and sages deemed worthy of being passed down to later generations."

"I'm impressed you know so much about them."

“Well, before I became a clergyman, I was a scholar under the tutelage of Reverend Robson.”

The serious priest added that when he was young, he worked in the Tower of Wisdom.

“Before we go to the forbidden shelves, Apostle, the Tower Master wishes to meet you.”

“Really? A meeting with the Tower Master?”

“Yes, the condition for allowing you to enter the forbidden shelves was to meet you in person first.”

“Very well,” I responded diplomatically, since I had a feeling this might happen.

“Elevator.”

There were several old-fashioned elevators on the tower’s first floor.

“You know of them? Yes, the tower’s history books state that they were modeled after the ‘ele-vaters’ of the elves. Here in the tower, we refer to them as lifts.”

“By elves, do you mean the ones of Bolenan Forest?”

“No, the elves of the Bulainan clan, or so it is said. Once every decade or so, Lady Sebelkeya the elf comes to do a routine maintenance check on our lifts.”

*Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.*

I wasn’t expecting anyone to mention Miss Sebelkeya, the guildmaster’s advisor in the Labyrinth City Celivera explorers’ guild, in a place like this. I did remember that she was from Bulainan Forest, so it must be the same person.

That must be quite a commute, although she probably used the dryad’s teleportation.

“Simply ring this bell, and the doors will open.”

The serious priest rang the very analog doorbell with a clatter, and the lift doors opened. It wasn’t a magic device sensing it—there was just a lift girl inside. Actually, the person was male, so I guess you’d call him a lift man?

“This lift is exclusively for the top floor. Do you have written permission?”

“Yes, right here.”

“A-an invitation from the Tower Master?!”

The serious priest held out a card that prompted the lift operator to exclaim in surprise before beckoning us inside.

There was even a convenient bench to sit on while the lift was going up; perhaps they had a lot of elderly visitors.

“We’ll be going up now. If this is your first time, please hold on to the handrail.”

The lift operator rang a little bell as he began bringing the elevator upward.

Evidently the lift was powered from within; the lift operator charged magic power into a complex magic device to control the elevator’s speed. I kept watching him work until…

“Outside.”

“Master, look this way.”

I turned around to find a view of the outside through a round glass window.

Witches flying past the tower on wooden Pegasi paused to wave at Arisa and Mia.

“That’s quite a magnificent sight.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful.”

I was talking about the scenery, of course.

By no means was I referring to the witches’ impressive cleavage or the way their skirts fluttered in the wind.

So why, I ask you, did Mia and Arisa have to say “guilty” and shoot me accusing glares from either side?

As we watched, our elevator completed its ascent and we arrived at the floor where the Tower Master was waiting.

The hall had a vaulted ceiling some three stories high, with several high-level

mages and magic swordsmen standing on guard.

While none of them were as powerful as my companions and me, a few had levels in the high 40s.

A young man who was introduced as the Tower Master's aide guided us up a spiral staircase to the Tower Master's office.

"Tower Master, presenting Goddess Karion's Apostle."

Waiting in the office were a friendly-looking old man with white hair and a busty woman who looked stunning in a tight skirt.

Normally, you'd assume that the old man was the Tower Master and the woman was the secretary, but my AR display told me otherwise.

"It's an honor to meet you, Tower Master."

I bowed to the pretty woman, who burst out laughing.

Honestly, even without my AR display, I could tell from the gleam in her eye that she was clearly no ordinary Tower Master.

"Very impressive. I didn't think you'd be able to see through what I concealed with a top-class recognition-inhibiting item."

The beautiful woman crossed the room in a few long strides, had the old man stand up, and sat down in the luxurious chair. She crossed her legs in a decidedly sexy gesture. They were so long and lovely that I had the urge to give her a pair of stockings.

"Welcome, Apostle. I am indeed Rama Kalisork, the Tower Master. This bearded fellow is my top apprentice, Karyuu. Since he's so sagely-looking, I let him take care of most of the public-facing work. If you have any problems, you can come crying to him, not me."

It was strange to hear the youthful Ms. Rama refer to the elderly Mr. Karyuu as her apprentice, until I noticed her real age. Although she looked like she was in her mid-twenties, my AR display informed me that she was over three hundred years old.

Incidentally, both Ms. Rama and Mr. Karyuu had the title of "Sage," just like Sorijeyro from Parion Province. Ms. Rama was level 57 and used Practical Magic

and Wind Magic. Mr. Karyuu was level 49 and could use Practical Magic and Lightning Magic. In short, they were both seasoned sorcerers in their own right.

“May I ask why you’d like to see the forbidden shelves?”

As she asked her question, Ms. Rama radiated a violent aura at us.

I didn’t react in the slightest, and thanks to the Spirit Magic resistance equipment Arisa and Mia were still wearing to deal with the goddess, they didn’t seem to be fazed, either.

“I promised to help some people.”

“I see… So the three of you aren’t as young as you look, either.”

Ms. Rama nodded thoughtfully at my response, along with my unbothered expression.

“You have a keen eye,” I answered.

It was true that our ages weren’t as we appeared, after all.

I heard a thud behind me and turned to see that the serious priest had fainted. A servant had heard the noise and came to look after him.

Turning back, I noticed that Mr. Karyuu was looking pale as well. Ms. Rama ought to show more respect for the elderly.

“Very well. I’ll grant you permission. But you are forbidden from spreading any information you gain here to the outside world. Traditionally, you would be bound with Contract Magic, but I’m not so conceited as to think I can bind a God’s Apostle. If you’ll swear on your god to uphold the rules, then I’ll take you at your word.”

“Swear.”

“I swear, too.”

*Who is my god, exactly?*

*I’m not really religious, so I don’t have any particular god to swear on…*

“And you? Do you swear to Goddess Karion?”

“Yes, I swear.”

*Oh, right, my backstory here is that I'm an apostle of Karion.*

"All right, Karyuu, take 'em to the forbidden shelves… Don't let 'em near the mass-killing spells or the research that falls under divine taboo or anything like that."

Ms. Rama gave Karyuu an order, though the latter part was whispered so quietly that even my "Keen Hearing" skill barely picked up on it.

While I was a little curious about this "divine taboo" research, it could be a big problem if I learned about it and Karion found out. I decided to reluctantly let it pass me by this time.

"Mrr."

"Nothing."

"There's a few that are close, but not quite…"

There were plenty of fascinating documents, and loads of magical encyclopedias, rare spellbooks, alchemy textbooks, and other such material that Arisa, Mia, and myself had hoped to read. Other must-reads included a book about the monster materials of the western continent. However, our most important goal—a method to cure the chimeras—was nowhere to be found.

"Might I inquire what you're looking for?"

"We're looking for documents from the era of the ancient Kingdom of Lalakie. Is there anything here like that?"

I figured it was worth asking Mr. Karyuu, even though my map search already indicated that there was nothing of the sort.

"Ah, that would be in the great library or the Tower Master's personal collection. I'm afraid most Lalakie-related documents are simply transcribed from inscriptions found in ruins, with precious little support to back up their theories."

We proceeded to the Tower Master's library and found the book we were looking for.

"It's exactly like what the expert said."

What I really wanted to know was what came next. Unfortunately, there was nothing on the most important subject.

Just to be sure, the three of us searched through the other documents; Ms. Rama and Mr. Karyuu even took an interest in our quest and shared their knowledge. But even then, we still didn't find any way to turn chimeras back into humans.

In the process, I also found some research on otherworld summoning. However, since it was largely based on conjecture, I didn't get much out of it. It seemed like I was still going to have to investigate the Hero Summoning circles in Saga Empire myself if I wanted to learn more.

The sun began to set while we were knee-deep in research, so we had no choice but to leave the tower and rejoin the rest of our group.

"Master, my egg, my egg…"

Pochi came running over and clung to me teary-eyed, so distraught that she even forgot her usual "sir."

*Her egg…?*

Looking down, I saw that her egg belt was gone from her waist.

"A pickpocket stole it in the market. We managed to catch the culprit, but…"

While they were capturing the pickpocket, he threw the egg to the ground in a moment of desperation and broke it, the girls explained.

"Where's the thief now?"

"Master, calm down. Your face looks scary." Arisa reached up and prodded my brow.

"We've already handed him over to the guards."

Apparently the culprit would have to pay a fine or become an indentured slave.

"Tama couldn't protect the egg…even though I'm the big sister…"

Tama looked heartbroken, too.

I learned later that she'd been preoccupied with a beautiful picture book

when the thief stole Pochi's egg.

"Don't cry, Pochi. I'll get you a new egg."

"I don't want a new egg, sir. Pochi's Mr. Egg is gone now, sir."

Pochi wept even more.

"I'm sorry, Pochi."

I guess that was a little insensitive of me.

We went to the park, where I let Pochi cry as long as she needed to.

When her sobs started to subside into sniffles, Liza knelt down in front of her and spoke to her gently.

"Pochi, a life that's been lost will never return."

Pochi looked up at Liza with red-rimmed eyes.

"So what do you think you can do about it now?"

"What can Pochi do, sir?"

Pochi tilted her head.

"That's right. Is crying all you can do for the broken egg? Isn't there something else?"

"A graaave?"

"A grave, sir…?"

"Exactly. We'll bury the egg and mourn for it."

"Good idea, sir. Pochi will make a grave for Mr. Egg, sir."

Pochi rubbed her tear-swollen eyes and stood up.

We dug a hole at the base of a large tree in one corner of the park and gently buried the egg, which Arisa had recovered.

"Good-bye, sir."

Each of us scattered a fistful of dirt over the egg, followed by a small gravestone that read HERE LIES MR. EGG.

We held a moment of silence around the gravestone, and I placed flowers and

a stick of incense there at Arisa's request.

"…Young master? What're you up to in a place like this?"

It was Pippin, the former Phantom Thief who worked as an intelligence operative for the Echigoya Company.

"It's been a while, Pippin. What brings you to Kalisork?"

"Just a little errand."

Behind him was a pretty young girl with red hair, clad in a black robe. My AR display told me that she was named Serena, a pupil of Sorijeyro the Sage. She had the Unique Skill Safety Hibernation. Since she didn't have any other skills typical of a reincarnation, she probably wasn't one. Most likely, she received the skill from a reincarnation in the "Aptitude Transfer" ceremony.

"'Here Lies Mr. Egg'…?"

I explained the situation to the confused-looking Pippin.

"Gotcha. Sorry to hear it." Pippin patted Pochi's head, then paused. "Hey, I know. You wanna raise this one instead?"

Pippin produced an egg from his Item Box and held it out to Pochi.

"No thank you, sir. Pochi's egg is gone forever, sir."

Pochi pushed the egg back toward Pippin.

"C'mon, don't be like that. This little egg's lost and alone. It got separated from its mom, y'see."

"It doesn't have a mommy, sir?"

Pochi looked up at Pippin.

"Yeah. So can you look after it till we find the mommy?"

Pochi's gaze fell back to the egg.

*…Uh-oh.*

My AR display revealed its true nature.

"Pippin, is this real?"

“Whoops, you caught on quick, huh? Yep, it’s a genuine ‘White Dragon’s Egg,’ the real deal and no mistake. Some real pieces of work are after it, though…”

*I see, so yet another group is up to no good.*

“Hang on, are you trying to drag us into trouble or what?” Arisa raised her eyebrows.

“That’s not our intention.”

“Hang on, Serena. Let me do the talking.”

Pippin gestured for the girl to step back when she started to explain.

“See, I can’t get into the details, but some nasty fellas are trying to use dragon eggs for their evil deeds. We’ll take care of them—we just wanna ask you to keep this egg safe until the dust settles.”

“You don’t need help with that?”

“Nah, we got this. If it gets out of hand, I’ll just go crying to Lord Kuro.”

“All right. Let me know anytime if you need help.”

With that, I gave Pippin a rough outline of our schedule and the places we were planning on visiting next.

Besides, he also had an emergency communication device, which meant he could send Kuro a call for help anytime.

According to Pippin, some of the sage’s students were running wild, and he was working with the female student Serena to stop them.

“That’s the short version anyway. So will you take care of it for me?”

Pippin turned back to Pochi, who was still holding the egg.

“Okay, sir. Pochi will take care of this egg, sir,” Pochi responded, speaking as much to herself as Pippin. “This time, I promise I’ll protect Mr. Egg no matter what, sir.”

“Tama will help, too.”

Pochi clenched her fist, and Tama too gazed at the egg with determination.

“Great, thanks. Sorry for the trouble.”

After that, Pippin and Serena disappeared using “Short-Range Teleportation.”

I decided that I would make a more serious egg protection belt that night, perhaps using orichalcum fibers or silver hide, to make sure it didn’t get stolen or broken this time.

That being said, it might not even be necessary: The Dragon Egg’s shell was harder than a mithril alloy or even a grown dragon’s scale.

◆

“Transfer complete.”

The day after Pippin gave us the Dragon Egg, I was visiting Paradise Island for the first time in ages. The rest of the group was with me, too, of course.

“Hmm? What happened over there?”

“The pier is broken, I report.”

“Maybe there was a storm or something?”

Arisa pointed out evidence of destruction at the harbor.

“Mr. Satou! Everyone!”

“Hey, Rei.”

Reiaane, a little girl who was actually the former queen of Lalakie, came running over happily from the field.

Behind her in the distance, waving wildly, was her younger sister Yuuneia, as well as a transport golem. Although Yuuneia looked older, Rei was really of a race called “half-ghosts” and could freely change her age from a small child to a beautiful young woman.

“Have you been doing well, larvae? I inquire.”

“Yes, of course.”

Rei looked flummoxed when Nana lifted her up.

“Please, come in. I’ll make us some tea. We have delicious dried fruit, too!”

We all filed into the house at Rei’s prompting.

“Here, we brought you some gifts.”

“An adorable plushie and an illumination magic tool?”

“Ooh! Sister, look, it transforms!”

I gave Rei and Yuuneia the souvenirs we bought them, including a transforming light from the Joppentelle workshop and a stuffed toy from the Kingdom of Dolls Lodolork.

“Hey, the harbor looked awfully messed up. Was there a storm?” Arisa asked.

“Ohh, that? Yes, I suppose you could say it was a storm.”

“A kraken did that. The storm swept it in near the island. Right, Sister?”

The elves of Bolenan Forest had put up a barrier spell called Wandering Ocean to protect Paradise Island. However, since it wasn’t a physical wall, evidently the kraken was still able to get in by mistake.

“Were the larvae injured? I inquire.”

“We’re fine, Miss Nana. Yuuneia and I evacuated to the main island of Lalakie.”

The mystical floating island of Lalakie was sunken beneath this island—or rather, this one was at the peak of a mountain on Lalakie itself.

“It’s a good thing your house wasn’t damaged.”

“Yes, I think the kraken must not have liked it here because there’s so little miasma. As soon as the storm ended, it left right away.”

That was a lucky break, at least.

“Master, we must reinforce protections of the larvae, I insist.”

“You might be right. Maybe we should upgrade some of the defense equipment here a little.”

“We’re fine, really. If anything happens, I shall protect my big sister!”

“Thank you, Yuuneia. You all don’t need to worry so much—we can always evacuate to Lalakie again.”

Despite what Rei and Yuuneia said, I couldn’t help but be concerned. So I installed a Fortress-producing device like the one on our airship to protect their home and fields, connecting it to the Holytree Stone Furnace that provided power for the house.

“All right, let’s test it out.”

Since it was backup equipment for the airship, the device activated without any issues.

“Wow, amazing!”

“Oui, oooui?”

“Master’s magic devices are the best in the world, sir!”

When Yuuneia jumped up and down excitedly, Tama and Pochi immediately joined in.

Seeing the egg belt shift with her motions, Pochi quickly stopped jumping and held it close.

“It reminds me of Lalakie’s Heavenslight Protection. It’s not quite the same, though, is it?”

Looking at the Fortress produced by the activation test, Rei noticed it was different from the protective barrier she knew.

“This is called a ‘Fortress.’ It’s not as powerful as the Heavenslight Protection, but of course it would be theoretically impossible to miniaturize such a thing.”

“Oh, I see.”

Rei tilted her head slightly, looking like she didn't quite understand the details.

"This will protect you even if a kraken or a demon slips in."

"Thank you, Mr. Satou."

"We appreciate it, Master Satou."

I taught the grateful Rei and Yuuneia how to use the Fortress and what to be mindful of.

Although it's basically maintenance-free, Fortress does consume a ton of magic.

"Lunch is ready, everyone."

When Lulu called for us, we returned to the house to eat *nigiri* sushi and clam soup with a clear broth.

"Your cooking is delicious as ever, Miss Lulu."

"Your cooking is great, too, though, Sister."

"Thank you, Yuuneia."

The sisters were as close as ever.

"By the way, Mr. Satou, did you just come to visit today? Or was there some business that brought you here?"

Rei brought this up when we were drinking green tea after lunch.

Most of the time, I just visit by myself on my way to Bolenan Forest.

"Actually…"

I explained that I wanted to search underneath Paradise Island in Lalakie for materials about chimeras.

"You ought to go to the Lalakie Central Core, then. All of the knowledge of Lalakie is stored in there."

I headed down to the Central Core with Rei, where I was able to acquire a possible treatment for the chimeras. The idea was to extract something called the "human factor," cultivate it, and inject it into the subjects, which seemed

rather unscientific. It would've made more sense to me if it said to grow clones of their bodies and transfer their minds somehow.

Still, it did include an experiment log complete with the specific magical theories and successful results, so I trusted that it was real.

Unfortunately, it would be impossible to implement with the equipment in Lalakie. However, I realized I could achieve it by modifying the elf-made regulation tanks that we used to adjust Nana and the other homunculi.

"Thank you, Rei. This is going to help a lot of people."

Rei smiled happily. "Hee-hee, I'm glad I was able to be of use to you."

While we were at it, I decided to ask Rei about how best to interact with goddesses, since she had experience with it as a descendant of the Lalakie dynasty.

"Dealing with goddesses? Central, do you have anything?"

"Queen Reiaane, I recommend equipping the Queen's Attire to defend against psychic interference from gods and goddesses. There is also the simpler equipment that those in high positions in Lalakie wore, though it is not as effective as the Queen's Attire."

The Central Core referred to Karion's divine commands as "psychic interference."

I guess my instinct to have my friends wear anti–Psychic Magic equipment was right on the money, then.

"Does that answer your question, Mr. Satou?"

"Very much so, thank you."

"What brought this on, anyway?"

I explained the visitation of Goddess Karion to the curious Rei.

"Why, that's incredible! There are hardly any records of goddesses descending to the mortal realm even in the long history of the Lalakie era."

When I asked if she wanted to meet Karion, Rei humbly declined that she wasn't worthy.

“In that case, you’ll need accessories that defend against psychic interference, won’t you?”

With that, Rei offered me items called Lugo’s Bracelets with just that effect, enough for everyone in our party. She tried to give me the most effective one, too, the Queen’s Attire, which I politely declined.

“Thank you, Rei. Now we can interact with Karion without any fears.”

Then we returned to the surface.

There was still plenty of time, so we told Rei and Yuuneia about our travels in the western regions thus far, and cooked the western-region dishes that caught their interest for them to try.

“Hot…! Sister! Be careful, this one is quite spicy.”

“Thank you, Yuuneia. You should try this one, it’s very sweet.”

“The honeyed yam is sweet and yummy, too, sir.”

“Shrimp yummyyyy?”

“Really, every last one is delicious.”

“Larvae, I will remove the shrimp shells for you, I declare.”

Rei and Yuuneia seemed to be having a great time with the girls.

*We should really visit them a little more often.*

I reflected a little as we enjoyed the rest of the day at Paradise Island.

# Judicial State

***Satou here. Even countries that have a reputation for bad-tasting food are sure to have plenty of delicious dishes. Sometimes, you might think something tastes gross at first, until your tongue gets used to it and it comes around to tasting good by the end of your stay.***

"Are you sure it was all right to leave without saying a word?"

"Aye. Gods shalt not be swayed by the circumstances of man."

We set forth from the City-State of Kalisork along with Goddess Karion, taking a sea route around the coast of the peninsula toward Sherifardo State.

Two days after we visited Paradise Island, Karion awoke; she promptly silenced the priests with her divine commands and left the kingdom entirely. At my request, she used another command to tell them not to say a word about me and my companions joining her to anyone, which meant we had nothing to worry about.

Just to be safe, we borrowed some priest robes and cloaks from Karion Central Temple to wear when we were hanging around on the deck of the ship.

"I would've liked to spend a little more time on the forbidden shelves and the great library."

"Mm. Disappointing."

"We can always come back again."

In the time between our return from Paradise Island and Karion's awakening, I'd thoroughly photographed plenty of the books that intrigued us in the library shelves, so I could read a good third of the collection anytime.

We were so busy in Kalisork that we didn't have a chance to eat the famous gelatin dessert "holy font of knowledge, lava style, flower garden flavor" during our stay. Next time we visited, I would have to make sure we all got to eat it

together.

“Master, when will we start treating the chimeras?”

“We’d better do some animal testing first.”

I was scared to jump right to the real thing.

“Mew!”

Tama’s ears stood up straight.

“A dragon! The red dragon is coming!”

A lookout shouted from atop the main mast.

Just a moment later, I saw the red dragon approaching rapidly on my radar.

It passed by the high-speed boat in a flash, then circled around in the distance to stare at us.

“Wh-what’s goin’ on?! Why would the red dragon attack us?!”

“I never heard of the guardian of the inland sea going after a ship!”

The captain and merchants trembled and shouted in terror.

“Maybe it’s because of Pochi’s egg?”

“Could be.”

Pochi’s egg was a White Dragon’s Egg, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the fact that it was a dragon egg was enough to attract a different dragon’s attention.

If we weren’t in full view of other people, I could use “Skyrunning” to fly up and talk to the red dragon myself…

“Oh no, sir!”

“Emergencyyyy?”

Startled by Arisa’s statement, Pochi curled up around the egg to protect it. Tama drew out a Buckler from her Fairy Pack and equipped it, standing over Pochi defensively.

It was clear that they were both determined to protect the egg no matter what.

“Here it comes!”

The red dragon sped closer.

I started to step forward, figuring I could use Phalanx to defend the ship if it came to that, when someone stopped me.

Goddess Karion.

She stepped in front of me, a crimson aura blazing around her.

“Such insolence. Thou shalt withdraw at once.”

She didn’t shout it, nor did she say it as a firm command. She simply stated it as a matter of fact.

“GYZABBBBSZZZZZZZZZZ.”

The red dragon howled as it flew away.

“What did it say?”

“That wasn’t dragon language. It was just a scream.”

The red dragon circled a few times at a slight distance, then took off far away into the sky.

I guess even dragons back down from the authority of gods?

◆

“I can see a shore. Is that the tip of the peninsula?”

“Yeah, it’s the tip of the Twin Peninsula that comes down from the north coast. You can see land on the other side, too, right? That one’s the Heroic Peninsula that comes down from the south coast.”

The day after our close encounter with the red dragon, we were approaching one of the rough spots in the inlet between the two peninsulas.

“This is a rough spot?”

As soon as Arisa spoke, the ship rocked violently.

“Eek!”

“Mrr.”

Lulu and Mia stumbled, and I quickly caught them.

“Kyaaa, the shiiiip…”

Arisa gave a deeply unconvincing shriek and clung to me.

Okay, that was clearly on purpose, but I figured I’d let her stay like that until the ship settled.

“That was an unnatural movement, I declare.”

“Could there be a monster under the ship?”

“Meeew?”

“There’s nothing down there, sir.”

Nana and the beastfolk girls peered down into the sea.

Since Pochi couldn’t climb onto the railing because of her egg belt, she got Liza to lift her up.

“No need to worry. It was just a big wave.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t be so sure. The young lady with the scales might be right.”

A sailor who was adjusting the sail called down to correct a nearby merchant.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s an old seafaring legend. They say there’s a big, giant monster called a leviathan below the depths, so large that it covers the entire bottom of the inlet sea from one end to the other.”

The merchant laughed this off as a superstition.

“Très bieeen?”

“If it’s that big, we’d never be able to eat it all, sir!”

Both the sailor and the merchant grinned at Tama and Pochi and their awakened appetites.

“Goddess Karion, do you know whether the leviathan is real?”

Evidently uninterested in my attempt at starting a conversation, Karion only responded with a muttered “hmm.”

Despite her curious nature, she could be remarkably dry when it came to topics that didn't pique her interest.

"Hey! Quit yer chatterin' or the leviathan'll swallow ya whole! Focus up!"

"Yessir! Can't have us running aground 'cause of a rookie mistake."

The scolded sailor shouted out a local version of "aye-aye, sir" and got back to work.

From what I gathered, this area had several reefs as well as sudden waves, like the one we just experienced, making it dangerous to let one's guard down.

And on top of that…

"Pirates! We got pirates!"

We ran into pirates in the slim island-dotted sea route between peninsulas. They charged at us with an alarmingly fast galley.

"Master, it is time for pirate hunting, I declare."

Nana's eyes glinted.

Beyond her, I saw the captain turning pale.

"S'no use. The magic furnace ain't workin' right. We'll never get the barrier up in time."

If that was the case, the Magic Cannons for defending the ship probably wouldn't work, either.

Since the sailors seemed desperate, we decided to lend a hand.

"Satou."

"Mia and Arisa, use magic to keep the pirate ship from getting too close. Lulu, take out the drummer who's setting the rhythm for the rowers. Liza, Pochi, Tama, be ready to fight back in case we get boarded. Nana, you and I will defend against attacks on the ship."

At my orders, the group jumped into action.

Lulu's sniping destroyed the drum, ruining their rhythm and slowing their speed, while close hits from Arisa and Mia's magic accidentally capsized the

ship.

Just as the sailors started to cheer, they were interrupted by the lookout on the main mast shouting out a new threat.

“Wyverns! It’s a flock of wyverns!”

First pirates, now a flock of wyverns?

They weren’t kidding when they called this a rough spot.

“Not to worry. The wyverns are after the pirates in the water, not us.”

Just as the captain said, the wyverns dove toward the pirates.

I used my Magic Bow to shoot a wyvern right through the eyes just before it could grab a pirate with the talons of its hind legs.

“No way, how the hell’d he hit that from here?”

“Damn, that’s crazy, even if it was just a lucky shot!”

While the sailors exclaimed in surprise, I shot down a second and third wyvern.

“The hell are you thinking?! What if the wyverns come after us instead?!”

“Yeah! It’s just vermin who infest the route devouring each other. Leave ’em to it!”

The captain and one of the merchants turned on me.

Karion looked like she couldn’t care less.

“It’d be setting a bad example for the children.”

With that, I shot several more wyvern heads in succession.

Eventually, they learned their lesson and switched their approach to diving at high speed into the water to grab pirates with their beaks, instead of slowing down to use their talons.

When a few tried to fly my way, Liza and company’s “Spellblade” and Lulu’s “Sniping” shot them down, and Arisa set off a huge Fire Magic spell in the air to scare them away.

The captain decided to overlook my disobedience, probably because it ended

without any casualties.

“I didn’t know you were such an impressive mage, little lady.”

“Hee-hee, you could say that.”

Arisa’s big finale spell left a big impression, prompting the captain and the merchants to shower her in praise.

As I collected the wyvern corpses floating on the water nearby, a battleship appeared on the horizon.

“Captain! That’s a Sherifardo battleship!”

“Guess we’ll let them deal with the pirates, then.”

The captain relayed the information to the battleship using signal flags, and we continued onward.

“It’s meat, sir!”

“Wyvern meat ain’t hardly worth eatin’, kiddo.”

“That’s not truuue?”

“Yes, wyvern meat does have an unusual flavor, but the chewy mouthfeel is wonderfully satisfying.”

“Y-yeah? Maybe we’ll join ye for some once we land, then.”

The beastfolk girls’ wyvern discussion caught the captain’s interest.

“Intriguing. Thou shalt provide the unknown morsels.”

“I can’t say I recommend it much…”

Now even Karion was eager for a taste.

“The morsels.”

“Oh, all right.”

I couldn’t say no when her face was so full of hidden determination.

Somehow, it felt almost as if my kids were influencing her and bringing out even more of her gluttonous tendencies.

We gazed at the distant Heroic Peninsula as we crossed the island belt, then

traveled alongside the coast of the Twin Peninsula until we reached Sherifardo State.

◆

“So this is Sherifardo State…”

Lulu looked around at the people in the harbor.

It gave a similar impression to Parion Province. Although the style here was closer to ancient Greece than the Middle East, most people were still clad in simple, undyed cloth. Even the soldiers and higher-ups wore clothes in plain colors, giving the impression of an ash-gray kingdom.

According to my map information, humans made up more than 80 percent of the population, with the likes of beastfolk and birdfolk filling out the rest. There were more people here with the Urion-granted gift “Eye of Judgment” than in most places, which might be because Urion Central Temple was here.

“Damn, that’s tough. My normal butcher knife can’t make a single scratch on it.”

“Should I bring a broadsword or an ax to cut it?”

“Don’t even joke about that. We’ll never see such perfectly intact wyvern corpses again. I’m gonna buy ’em up no matter how many gold coins it takes!”

The merchants were gathered around the unloaded wyvern corpses. Wyvern hide does make for good armor, after all.

“Lulu, would you break those down for them?”

“That scrawny little girl could never—”

The fisherman shut his mouth abruptly when he saw the huge tuna knife Lulu produced from her Pack.

Of course, it was a specially made true–steel alloy knife that looked like ordinary iron at a glance, not the golden orichalcum one.

“Hi-ya…!”

With a cute little cry, Lulu easily sliced up the wyverns.

Watching the scene unfold made me think that Lulu might be able to handle

close combat pretty well, after all.

“Will this do?”

“Erm, y-yes, that’s perfect. Thank you very much, ma’am. Madam. Mademoiselle.”

Witnessing Lulu’s expert knifework up close left the fisherman with no idea how to address her.

I felt a tug on my sleeve and turned around, expecting one of my younger kids, only to find Karion instead.

“The tasty morsels. Thou shalt offer them at once.”

Apparently she still wanted to eat that wyvern.

With no other choice, I got the merchants to share some of the perfectly sliced wyvern meat and wound up borrowing a stove from the intrigued fisherman to cook it up.

“Would you mind helping me, Lulu?”

“You can count on me!”

Lulu flexed her skinny arms, which was adorable.

I decided to start with two dishes: simple meat skewers and a tomato stew that might mask the taste.

Since wyvern meat was sinewy with a gamy taste, I cut the meat across the grain and massaged herbs into it to help with the flavor, then let it rest for a bit.

“Thou shalt remove miasma.”

Karion glowed with crimson light, and with a wave of her hand the miasma that remained in the wyvern meat was instantly gone. It was even more dramatically fast than when I used my spirit light at full throttle.

“The soup is ready to start.”

“Okay, then use these for it, please.”

I handed Lulu the parts that might work best in a stew, while I turned my attention to the skewers.

I decided to offer two different kinds: thick chunks and rolls of thin-sliced meat. The former was meant to highlight the chewiness, while the latter should be easier to eat.

When the first round of skewers was done, I handed them out to Karion and the girls.

“Meat is the strongest ever, sir.”

“Tough and yummyyyy.”

“The chewiness of wyvern meat is such a joy.”

The beastfolk girls were delighted by the wyvern meat as always.

“…So-so.”

Karion took a bite with an eager expression, which quickly turned to the face of a child who’s been made to take bitter medicine. Yeah, I expected as much.

When I offered the wyvern skewers to the curious harbor crowd at their request, most of them reacted similarly to Karion, with a few exceptions. I think the thin-sliced meat was better received, if not by much.

“Master, could you finish this off, please?”

At Lulu’s prompting, I checked on the seasoning of the tomato stew. I barely needed to make any changes, aside from adding a little more salt to pull it all together. Taste testing the meat, I found it was perfectly edible and lacked the gamy taste.

“The meat still has a lovely mouthfeel, and the acidity of the tomato complements the flavor nicely.”

“Yummyyyy?”

“Wyvern tomato stew is super-yummy, too, sir.”

The beastfolk girls reacted as I expected.

“Huh, not bad.”

“Yes, Arisa. It no longer tastes like wyvern meat, I report.”

Arisa and Nana liked this version better, too.

Mia made an *X* in front of her lips with her fingers, so I offered the last helping of tomato stew to Karion.

“Here, this one is a lot tastier.”

“…’Tis better without the meat.” Karion paused, then added, “Thou shalt be praised for thy improvements,” and ate the rest of her dish.

Maybe she was actually trying to encourage me?

◆

“Even the buildings are gray.”

Entrusting the auctioning of the broken-down wyvern corpses to the harbor staff, we followed Karion’s lead down the main street toward Urion Central Temple.

“It must just be the color of the building material.”

“No, I think they started out as white stone.”

The houses currently being built were still white as snow.

It must be something about the climate that turned them ash gray over time.

“There is little in the way of entertainment, I declare.”

“Grumpy.”

All of the stores on the main street were focused solely on practical products, and as Mia pointed out, the people walking around and shopping all looked rather surly.

“You’re right,” Arisa agreed. “This place could use some smiles.”

Most of the passersby reminded me of Japanese people bustling to work during rush hour.

“I don’t see a lot of seasoning or sauces, but there are plenty of vegetables I’ve never seen before.”

“Mushrooms.”

Lulu giggled. “Yes, there are a lot of different kinds of mushrooms, too. We should buy plenty of them.”

Even though Sherifardo State was on the other side of the harsh mountain range that bordered Kalisork on the same peninsula, there was no sign of the cassava-like squirreltail yams that were a staple food there. Instead, their primary crops were skinny tubers called Sherifa yams and dark-brown beans called Lifa beans.

“Master, what do you think they’re doing over there?”

There was a gathering of people in a park alongside the road having some kind of meeting.

At the center of the circle of people were a few important-looking figures, a handful of guards, and a man in shabby-looking clothes.

“We hereby sentence Bagga, the accused, to three years of hard labor. The charges…”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on this declaration.

“Sounds like it’s a trial.”

“Like an analyst arbitration?”

“No, not quite.”

According to my map information, there was no analyst here. Most of the city’s analysts were working in the central justice hall, the majority with the “Exhaustion” condition.

“Well, are they using ‘Eye of Judgment’?”

“No, not that either, apparently.”

There was no one here with the “Eye of Judgment” skill, a gift from Urion.

“I guess it’s just a normal trial, then. Do you think they shout ‘OBJECTION!’ and everything?”

That didn’t seem likely to me, but I guess Arisa also knew about a certain court game famous for its turnabouts and ace attorneys.

“Outdoor trial.”

“Master, another trial sighted, I report.”

As we strolled down the main street, we spotted several more court hearings being held at crossroads and parks.

“Maybe they’re all fond of trials, and that’s why it’s called the ‘judicial state’?”

I wouldn’t want to live in a land of lawsuits like this.

*We should just do some quick sightseeing and move on to the next nation.*

“Ha-ha-ha, it’s because this is the domain of Goddess Urion.”

A passing gentleman explained to us that Urion was the goddess of “judgment and justice.”

The main street led to a lush green park, beyond which we could see a building like the cut-off tip of a pyramid.

“Mew-mew?”

“Mr. Ruins spotted, sir!”

Tama and Pochi’s surprise was probably due to the building in question.

According to my AR display, it was called the **central justice hall**. My Ministry of Tourism notes explained that it was the political heart of the judicial state, as well as the headquarters of their justice administration department.

“Is that our destination?”

“Nay. Urion’s temple lies hence.”

On the left-hand side was a solemn-looking building.

Ignoring the outdoor trials that were taking place throughout the park as well, we headed toward the temple.

When we emerged from the park, we arrived directly in front of the temple. Now that our view wasn’t blocked by the trees, I could see that there were strange angular decorations sticking out of the buildings, giving it a rather avant-garde appearance.

Above the large gate was a statue of Urion made out of red stone, confirming that this was indeed the Urion Central Temple.

“The inside is just a normal chapel, huh?”

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Arisa.”

Lulu pointed at a group of people in judge’s robes, the same kind we’d seen at the outdoor trials, all walking through an iron door at the back of the temple.

“Hmm, wonder what’s going on in there?”

While Arisa looked at it curiously, Karion wandered forward, playing by her own rules as usual. She was headed straight for the door that Arisa and Lulu were looking at.

“Stop right there. Only participants in the divine trial and spectators who made reservations to attend in advance are permitted beyond this point. If you are a spectator, we’ll need your reservation slip.”

The priests on guard in front of the iron door stepped forward to block Karion’s way.

“Such insolence. Let it be known that thou shalt be punished for disrupting a goddess’s hallowed path.”

Karion’s words sent the priests to their hands and knees at once. Apparently her divine commands worked just as well on priests of the Urion faith.

I glanced around and saw that while my kids looked meek, they weren’t prostrating themselves despite the divine command. Everyone else who was within hearing range of Karion’s voice was on the floor.

The Lugo’s Bracelets Rei gave us must be working well, then.

We walked past the prostrated priests and through the iron door.

“Aww, man, it’s just a regular old courtroom.”

Despite what Arisa said, there was nothing normal about the size of the courtroom.

It was on a far larger scale than any courtroom I’d ever seen—big enough to hold a parliament meeting.

Karion looked a little disgruntled; maybe this wasn’t where she wanted to go.

“Above.”

“Master, something is floating, I declare.”

“What do you think that is, Master? It sort of looks like a scale…”

Mia, Nana, and Lulu were looking up at a golden balance scale encased in a transparent sphere. While it appeared to be floating in midair, my AR told me it was actually supported by four nearly invisible structures.

The ruby-like gems decorating the scale were an unfamiliar variety called “scarlet law stones.”

“Is this your first divine trial? What you’re looking at is Goddess Urion’s Sacred Treasure: the ‘Scale that Weighs Sins’ Urirulave.”

A gentleman, whose short mustache suited him perfectly, approached behind us to explain. His occupation column read “spectator critic,” while his titles included “Pro Spectator.” I was surprised that his job was “spectator critic” and not “trial critic”… I guess there are all kinds of jobs in a parallel world.

“Golden scales—like Libra, the old master… Although these days there might be a younger version or a female version or something.”

Arisa muttered nonsense to herself.

I recognized the saintly source material she was referring to, but come on, have a little self-respect.

“If it’s a divine trial, does that mean they’ll use that scale for the trial?”

Come to think of it, there was something in my Ministry of Tourism documents about the “judicial state” Sherifardo having an unusual method of judgment.

“Precisely. The Divine Treasure can judge sins that even an analyst’s ‘Perceive’ skill or the gift ‘Eye of Judgment’ cannot.”

The critic crossed his arms and nodded sagely, as if to indicate that this concluded his explanation. I was kind of hoping he would get into a little more detail.

“That’s impressive.”

I gave an equally vague response.

As far as I could understand, the scale was probably used for difficult trials in

cases where “Perceive” couldn’t see through a lie or “Eye of Judgment” couldn’t accurately determine whether an act was evil or not.

I decided to get more information from the temple priests later once we finished whatever business Karion had here.

“The head priestess?”

“I’ve never heard of a head priestess participating in a divine trial.”

“I wonder if something happened?”

The crowd began murmuring amongst themselves.

I followed their gaze to see a line of priestesses and shrine maidens arriving.

Leading the way was a woman in her forties with the icy air of a winter morning. She must be the Urion Central Temple head priestess.

The procession of priestesses stopped in front of Karion and dropped to their knees before the goddess even said a word.

“O exalted one,” said the priestess. “Goddess Urion calls for thee. Would you do us the great honor of proceeding to the temple sanctuary?”

“Aye. Thou shalt guide me at once.”

Completely ignoring the chaos that filled the courtroom crowd, Karion walked in the priestess’s stead.

“The rest of you, wait here, please.”

A beautiful temple knight stopped us at the entrance.

What a shame. Evidently we couldn’t enter Urion’s sanctuary.

“Nay. Thou art necessary.”

“As the exalted one wishes. Come along, then.”

In deference to Karion’s words, the high priestess beckoned us through.

It was similar to the sanctuary in the holy woman’s shrine in Parion Province.

“We will now begin the consecration ceremony. Wait here a moment, please.”

“No need. I shall perform the purification myself.”

Karion glowed with vermillion light and waved her hand, and a veil of light appeared and poured down on the priestesses.

Even after the sparkling light vanished, the priestesses still retained a faint white glow.

“O goddess, we who worship thee and thy justice…”

The head priestess looked to the sky and began the ceremony.

When her lengthy invocation concluded, red light rained down from the sky.

It was a vivid crimson, darker in color than Karion’s holy light.

*{Query} {Karion} {Manifestation}*

A strange sensation formed, a message with multiple meanings that went deeper than words.

“A vessel. I can manifest at a low cost.”

Karion looked up at the red light and responded with a smug smile.

*{Request} {Vessel} {Manifestation}*

“Aye. Thou shalt prepare a vessel.”

“You mean like the statue I made of you, Goddess Karion?”

Karion nodded at my question.

“Very well. I can make that if you give me a little time.”

I got enough World Tree branches from Bolenan Forest to make a whole fleet of arcs, and I’d already cut down plenty of statue-sized pieces. I could probably make plenty more vessels like the one I inadvertently sculpted for Karion.

*{Anticipation} {Vessel} {Manifestation}*

With that statement, Urion’s red light vanished back into the sky.

Apparently that was the end of our contact with the goddess for now.

“Is there somewhere I can work, or…”

“Thou shalt work here.”

Despite the priestesses' consternation, they couldn't argue with a goddess and reluctantly nodded.

Still, I felt bad, so I insisted that it wasn't a convenient location for sculpting and requested a different room for the task.

There were about three hours until lunchtime. I figured I could finish the sculpture by then.

"So I guess I'll be working here for a bit. What do you all want to do?"

"We wouldn't want to get in your way. We can wander around near Urion Central Temple."

"Tama will sculpt, tooooo?"

Pochi hesitated for a bit, ultimately giving in to Arisa's promise that they would find someplace selling snacks.

For a while, Tama and I chiseled away at our sculptures.

I used the same basic design as the first one, which made the process simple enough.

In all of the myths I'd read in picture books, Urion's name always came up before Karion's, so I tried making this one look a little bit like an older sister to the one Karion used as her vessel. While the facial features were largely the same, I redesigned the body to have a slightly more grown-up figure.

"That ought to do it, I think?"

I gave the mostly finished statue a once-over.

Since she was worshiped in a judicial state, I decided to go for a serious expression.

Next to me, Tama was muttering "mew-mew-mew" as she carved her statue. It came out very charming, with an almost unbelievably lifelike sense of movement, possibly due to the attribute stone ninjutsu she incorporated in her process.

The statue was holding a dish that overflowed with light… No, wait, that was actually *yakisoba*. There were even pieces of cabbage and meat leaping from

the dish. Which meant what I took for a short staff in her other hand was actually…chopsticks?!

A maiden dancing while eating *yakisoba*—now that was a daring subject for a statue indeed.

“Hrm, so these are the limitations of humans. Fascinating.”

I heard a voice and turned to see that the statue I made had turned into a moving, flesh-and-blood girl.

“Goddess Urion, I take it?”

“Aye.”

Urion touched her hair with a glow of red around her hand, and a length of it was cut away, turning it into a bob.

The pure white hair that fell to the floor stayed as hair instead of turning back into wood.

If an Urion Central Temple priest saw that, they might start worshiping it as a relic. I used my Magic Hand to put it away in Storage for now, figuring I could give it to them as a present later.

“Thou shalt become my apostle. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou art delusional, Urion.”

Karion teleported into the room in time to disagree with Urion.

A moment later, Arisa told me via Telephone that Karion had disappeared; I let her know that the goddess was here now.

“He is best suited to being my apostle. Thou shalt desist, Urion.”

“Nay. We shall both make him an apostle. Thus the matter is settled.”

It turns out even gods can bicker like children.

Since the models they were both based on were so similar, they really looked like twins, especially while arguing like this.

“I’m really not worthy of being any goddess’s apostle anyw—”

Apparently my protests were too late.

**> Title Acquired: Karion's Apostle**

**> Title Acquired: Urion's Apostle**

*Please don't give me titles like it's a competition.*

"Thou shalt state thy name. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. But I concur, Urion."

"I am Viscount Satou Pendragon, Vice-Minister of Tourism of the Shiga Kingdom."

I'm pretty sure I introduced myself to Karion before, but I went ahead and did it again anyway.

◆

"What is that?"

Once we met up with the rest of my group, we walked around Sherifardo State to satisfy the newly manifested Goddess Urion's curiosity.

"The outdoor trial, you mean? Sounds like it's about…wow, a panty thief."

"'Tis well to expose misdeeds and hand down justice."

Urion nodded, her face serious.

I guess they don't call her the goddess of "judgment and justice" for nothing.

"I sense tasty morsels."

"The smell's coming from that way, sir!"

Pochi reacted to Karion's words and led everyone toward a food stand.

She seemed to have gotten into the habit recently of holding the egg belt against her stomach before she started running.

"Right here, sir!"

The food stall Pochi stopped at was selling Lifa beans.

"It's like edamame stewed and served right in the pod, huh?"

"The pod has salt content, so it's cheaper to cook them all together."

*Wow, pre-salted plants? Parallel worlds really are wild.*

“They’re one shemil per sprig.”

“Shemil…?”

“A copper coin. They’re called ‘shemil coppers’ here. And silver coins are ‘emil silvers.’”

“I didn’t know that. Thank you.”

I used some of the copper coins I exchanged at the harbor to buy a few.

One sprig had plenty of bunches of pods, so buying a sprig per person would leave us with a lot of leftovers.

Since apparently you weren’t supposed to eat while walking around the street in this nation, we went to sit behind the street stalls to eat the beans together.

“These are delicious. It’s just the right amount of salt.”

Yeah, they really were good. It made me wish I had an ice-cold beer.

We watched the passersby on the street as we snacked.

“So this is taste. Very intriguing.”

“This is a tasty morsel. Thou shalt learn the proper expressions, Urion.”

The goddess girls seemed to like the beans, too.

Feeling eyes on us, I turned to see some hungry children watching from a small distance away, so I shared the extra sprigs with them.

Evidently begging was also against the law in this state; if a guard spotted a beggar, they’d be sentenced to labor without even a trial.

“Mew!”

Tama, who was chewing on a pod, suddenly looked up at the street.

“Please stay back, Master.”

Liza stepped in front of me, holding a sprig of Lifa bean pods in place of her spear.

In front of her were two figures in cloaks, one small and one large. Their hoods were pulled low over their faces, though the fanged mouths that protruded from them suggested lizardfolk. The large man was carrying a battle-

ax wrapped in cloth.

*“ARE THESE THEY?”*

As soon as the large man spoke, I learned a new skill.

**> Skill Acquired: “Dragu Language”**

I was able to understand it somewhat even before getting the skill because it sounded similar to the Inland Sea Common Language.

Still, the accent was a lot harder to understand than most of the locals’. I added some skill points and activated it just to be safe.

“<Yes, Warrior Taran. One of these people has it.>”

According to my AR display, they were from a northern land called Dragu Kingdom. My Ministry of Tourism documents said that it was one of three nations on the other side of a long and treacherous mountain range that stretched so far to the east and west it was visible from here. It was famous for being protected by a green dragon.

*A green dragon, huh?*

We really seemed to be dealing with dragons a lot lately.

“<Hey, you there.>”

The large man shook out his battle-ax so that the cloth around it dropped to the ground, stepping closer to us.

“<Give back what you stole, and I’ll make your deaths painless.>”

Yikes, that got violent fast.

“<Nice to meet you, Warrior Taran.>”

“<I have no business with cowards who hide behind women.>”

The man’s rude remarks sparked a murderous flame in Liza’s eyes.

I forgot that the others could also understand them thanks to the elf-made translation rings.

“<I like that look in your eye.>”

The large man was level 42, high enough to back up his swagger.

He didn't stand a chance of beating Liza, of course, but we couldn't very well start a fight in the middle of the street.

I stepped up next to Liza. "<We haven't stolen anything. Could I ask what it is you're looking for?>"

"<You're really gonna play dumb now?>" The man sneered viciously.

In the blink of his eye, he swung down his ax.

"…Too slow."

Liza dodged the ax and smacked him upside the head with the sprig.

*"Guh!"* The large man tried to pull back his ax, but that was easier said than done. His huge swing had buried it deep in the ground, and I was stepping on it so that it couldn't be budged.

"<That's enough. If you insist on attacking us any further, I'll show no mercy.>"

Liza produced her Magic Cricket Spear from her Fairy Pack and pointed it at the man's throat.

"Communication through both words and violence is inefficient. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. But I agree. Satou, thou shalt inform them that thou dost not have the Green Dragon's Egg at once."

The goddesses, who were munching away on Lifa beans without a care in the world, offered a few words of assistance.

Pochi covered the White Dragon's Egg in her egg belt protectively, and Tama stepped in front of her as a shield.

"<It's got nothing to do with your egg,>" Arisa reassured them.

I tried searching my map but didn't find the Green Dragon's Egg in any area I'd visited.

The bean stall owner and some nearby rubberneckers started muttering curiously about "a dragon egg?" so I used the Wind Magic spell Secret Field to block any more sound from reaching them. For some reason, the words of the

goddesses seemed to reach people no matter what language they spoke.

“<Aha, the truth comes out! If you’re not the thieves, then how would you know we’re looking for a Green Dragon’s Egg, huh?!>”

The large man crowed triumphantly.

Great. This time, the fact that everyone can understand the goddess’s words majorly worked against us.

“Thou art insolent. Let it be known that those who call a goddess a thief shall not go unpunished. Karion is mad, too.”

“It is as Urion says. Thou must atone for thy sins.”

At Karion’s words, the two lizardfolk dropped to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the ground through no will of their own.

The large man couldn’t even speak, though the shock was clear on his face.

“Forgive my intrusion, goddesses, but could I please question them before you proceed with the punishment?”

“Very well. If you must.”

Urion granted her permission despite looking obviously annoyed. I decided to address the smaller lizardfolk, not the large man. This one was a woman, apparently a priestess of the Green Dragon Temple.

“<As you may have heard a moment ago, we do not have the Green Dragon Egg that you seek. May I ask why you thought that we were the culprits?>”

“The woman has a magic item called a dragon dowser. I am not here to translate thy thoughts. Thou shalt answer Satou’s questions at once.”

Karion revealed the answer when the dragon priestess wouldn’t speak to me.

“<Is a dragon dowser an item that locates dragon eggs?>”

“<…I-it locates…dragon…parts.>”

Unable to resist the goddess’s divine command, the woman reluctantly responded with an anguished expression.

“<This must be what you were detecting, then.>”

I reached into my breast pocket and produced a black dragon scale from Storage.

Most likely, what they actually detected was the White Dragon's Egg. Showing them that just seemed like asking for more trouble, though, so I figured I'd cover our tracks with a different item instead. *Help me out here, "Fabrication" skill.*

"<Oh no…>"

"<A grown dragon's scale? That would explain the dragon dowser's reaction… >"

The two lizardfolk looked frustrated.

"<Do you have any idea who stole the egg?>"

If they knew any names or affiliation, I could locate the thieves with my map search and share that information with them.

"<No. They were wearing all black. There was a man who used flashy magic and a woman who went on a rampage with a magic whip that looked like it came from a labyrinth. While they were causing chaos, some other black-clad bastard stole the Green Dragon's Egg from our shrine.>"

Black-clad, huh…

Maybe it was the same apprentices of Sorijeyro the Sage that Pippin and Serena were chasing after?

Still, a White Dragon's Egg and a Green Dragon's Egg… Based on how the red dragon was behaving, I wonder if a Red Dragon's Egg was stolen, too.

"What would they steal dragon eggs for anyway?"

"Tasty morsels?"

Yeah, I seriously doubt that.

Who would anger a grown dragon just for gourmet purposes?

"Maybe they're planning to hatch the eggs and have the dragons imprint on them like baby chicks so they get dragon servants?"

"That's a possibility."

An individual apprentice of the sage might not be able to do much, but having a pet dragon would definitely increase their mobility and firepower.

“<Do you two have any idea what their purpose might be?>”

“<Arrogant though it may be, I believe that girl is right.>”

The large man jerked his head toward Arisa, and the priestess gave a small nod as well.

“Enough questioning. Time for punishment.”

Urion waved a glowing red hand, and a blade of light appeared over the pair’s necks like a guillotine.

The passersby and the stall owner who were watching from the sidelines all flinched and stepped back.

“Wait a moment, please, Goddess.” Arisa gently stopped Urion. “It would be a waste to use your precious divine power on these buffoons.”

Urion nodded for her to continue, looking curious. It looked like she could tell that Arisa was trying to spare their lives in a roundabout way.

“Why not have them pray and give thanks to the goddesses instead? Every time a bell rings, perhaps?”

“That is no punishment. ’Tis a necessary duty for anyone living in the mortal realm.”

“What about punishing them with labor, then? Have them preach of the gods’ greatness and encourage other people to pray.”

“That is the noble duty of priests and priestesses. ’Tis no role for criminals.”

“Then maybe, um…”

“What about assigning them a quest?”

Since Arisa was running out of ideas, I offered a helping hand.

“A quest?”

“Yes, you could give them a quest… A holy trial, you might say. Give them a mission and let that be their atonement.”

“A trial…,” Urion repeated, frowning slightly.

Maybe giving them a trial seemed like too much of an honor?

“Thou shalt decide quickly, Urion. The tasty morsels await.”

“…Tasty morsels. Yes, that is important.”

The two goddess girls nodded at each other gravely, then turned a cold stare on the lizardfolk.

“I shall give thee a trial. Thou shalt expose misdeeds and hand down justice.”

With that declaration, Urion vanished the guillotine.

Then, as if this concluded the matter, both goddesses started strolling away.

As I stood there wondering what to do, they turned around and declared “Tasty morsels!” in unison.

“<O great Goddess! What kind of misdeeds are we to expose?>”

“I have already given thee thy quest. Thou shalt find it on thy own.”

Urion brushed off the man’s rather desperate-sounding plea.

Feeling rather bad for the man, I used “Ventriloquism” to whisper in his ear, *“<It seems some villains are plotting evil deeds with dragon eggs. Perhaps you could expose them?>”* This way, they could complete their trial and search for the Green Dragon’s Egg they were after at the same time.

“The tasty morsels!”

Both goddesses snapped at me impatiently, so I hurried after them.

“Thou shalt disperse at once,” Urion ordered the crowd of rubbernecks, sending them all packing immediately.

We toured the city’s sightseeing spots as we gathered information about the best restaurants from the locals.

Once the pair from Dragu Kingdom were out of sight, Pochi finally let out a sigh of relief. She’d been covering her egg with her hand the whole time.

“’Tis dry. The moisture in my mouth is being sapped away. Is this truly a tasty morsel?”

“I bet that potato dish would go better with the bean stew.”

“’Tis too salty. The flavor lacks depth. The chef here ought to learn from thee and improve at once.”

We were at a long-standing fancy restaurant with a large gate. However, the people of Sherifardo State must not have much interest in cuisine, because the food was poorly seasoned and not especially good.

Come to think of it, when the cardinal of Parion Province treated me to a full course of dishes from around the inland sea, the only part that came from Sherifardo State was a kind of alcohol called “God’s Mercy.”

“Next,” Urion declared, and promptly stood up and trotted out. We paid our bill and followed after her. Reluctant to leave any food behind, the beastfolk girls devoured the rest of it in short order.

After that, we stopped at several more restaurants and dining halls, but none of the food was to the goddess girls’ liking.

“The cuisine of this nation disappoints me.”

“The beans were yummy, sir…!”

Pochi quickly defended the food.

“Agreed. But the rest was terrible.” Urion shook her head grimly. “We must depart for another nation to find tasty morsels. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But I concur, Urion. Satou, thou shalt prepare a ship.”

The goddess girls seemed fed up.

“All right. Are you sure you don’t want to visit the central temple, though? I imagine the priests are preparing a festival to celebrate your arrival…”

“Nay. Thou must learn that gods shalt not be swayed by the circumstances of man.”

She was more determined than I expected. I guess she really hated the food.

“You know, when there’s a festival, people usually make special dishes and perform offering dances and such.”

Arisa threw in a helpful comment at just the right time.

“…I shall give them a chance. Let it be known that this is to be the last.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the chefs at the temple.”

Thank goodness. I’d checked with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance earlier and saw that the priests and priestesses were frantically running around getting a festival ready.

Just to be safe, I told the higher-up priests via Telephone about Urion’s declaration and what happened in the restaurants. I couldn’t help but say something—the lineup of food they were preparing in the kitchen looked exactly like all the dishes Urion had rejected earlier.

“It’ll probably take until evening for the festival to be ready. Why don’t we wander around the city until then and see some of the famous sights?”

The goddess girls accepted my proposal, and we went around to some of the sightseeing spots while looking for Sherifardo State souvenirs in the market.

While we were shopping, I bought up tons of the dry Sherifa yams and the filling Lifa beans.

I looked for the “God’s Mercy” liquor that I’d drank before, too, but there were barely any shops that sold alcohol, and even the ones that did had no “God’s Mercy” available whatsoever. I eventually learned that it was made in the Urion Central Temple distillery; maybe I could get them to share some during the festival.

“Most of these books seem very…dense.”

The bookstore we entered primarily carried heavy law and history books, so I just bought some of the more popular titles.

Pochi and company found a few picture books, but the contents were far too difficult to be aimed at children, so they didn’t buy any. According to Pochi, “that wouldn’t be good for Mister Egg’s eggucation, sir.”

“No spellbooks.”

“There aren’t any cookbooks, either.”

While there were mountains of legal casebooks, there were virtually no books of any practical use for daily life.

The shop owner explained why there weren't any spellbooks.

"You need permission and reservations from the central justice hall to purchase spellbooks."

This was supposedly to prevent crime; only mages registered with the state could get permission.

While there certainly wasn't much crime, the owner said that the city didn't even have enough Everyday Magic users to go around.

With all those restrictions on spellbooks, the magic scrolls that could be used by anyone weren't for sale anywhere in the city.

"Tasty morsels."

"Those are dried potato slices soaked in honey."

Though they were very expensive, I was glad the goddesses finally found food they liked.

We came across several more outdoor trials while we were touring the city. In one case where a woman was suing against a stalker, Arisa agreed with her so passionately that she joined in to advocate for her; in a case of workplace bullying that caused a beastfolk employee to fall into a trap, we helped resolve the unfair dismissal and wage fraud; at one point, Urion even uncovered collusion between a judge and a plaintiff.

"It looks like the festival is just about ready."

A priestess approached us from the other side of the street with a palanquin at the ready.

She had a great deal of priests and temple knights in tow.

The rest of us pulled our hoods down over our faces and blended in to join the procession.

◆

"Tasty morsels. Provide more tasty morsels."

"Thou shalt watch the dance, too, Urion."

The festival in the cathedral to celebrate Urion's arrival (as well as Karion's

visit) was in a delighted uproar at the sight of the pleased-looking goddesses.

I was relieved that the food seemed to have pleased Urion, after all. It was totally worth sticking my nose in their business via Telephone.

“Please partake of a cup as well, good Apostle.”

An old bishop handed me a cup of liquor.

I recognized the sweet-smelling golden liquid right away.

“This is ‘God’s Mercy,’ is it not?”

“You know of it? Very impressive. No drink is better suited to celebrate a goddess visitation.”

I agreed with the bishop wholeheartedly and took a sip of the first-rate mead.

“Something smells sweet. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But the flavor does intrigue me.”

While the priestesses and bishops were warmly welcoming Urion and Karion, they suddenly teleported in front of me.

“Would you like a drink as well?”

They didn’t look old enough to drink, but being gods and all, it was probably fine.

Just in case, I chose cups no bigger than shot glasses for them.

“Aye. Provide the tasty morsels at once.”

I held out the small glasses, and Urion and Karion took them and drained them immediately.

“Tasty. The brewers art worthy of praise. Karion says so, too.”

“I concur, Urion… ’Tis strange, though. I feel light and fuzzy. This is my first experience of intoxication.”

The little goddesses turned bright red and swayed unsteadily.

Despite the low alcohol content of mead, a tiny cup was evidently enough to get them drunk.

“How pleasant. So this is intoxication. This is the sensation known as ‘fun.’ Karion is having fun, too.”

“Agreed. I find myself smiling whether I will it or not. Drunkenness is fascinating indeed.”

The goddesses kept drinking.

Every time they finished their cups, the shrine maidens sensed their wishes and poured them more mead, getting them drunker by the minute.

“All of thee, drink. Thou shalt enjoy the intoxication. Karion says so, too.”

“No, I do not. Thou art delusional, Urion. My body feels light; I wish to dance.”

Urion’s divine command made the nearby priests drink large amounts of mead, while other priests, priestesses, and shrine maidens started dancing to follow Karion’s lead.

“Spinny spiiin?”

“Pochi is an all-luring dancer, sir.”

Pochi and Tama danced along with Karion, and Mia started playing a lively tune. Arisa and Nana convinced Lulu to join in shyly. Pochi had transferred the egg belt to her head, which made for a comical dance.

Liza was quietly eating by herself, but her tail tapped along happily to the rhythm.

*Maybe divine commands aren’t so bad if you use them like this?*

But just as that thought crossed my mind—

“’Tis hot. These constraints hinder me.”

“G-Goddess Urion?!”

Uh-oh. Urion suddenly took off her outerwear.

“Thou shalt all remove thy clothes. The outside air feels good on warm skin.”

“Thou shalt all dance as well. Dancing increases the sensation of intoxication.”

Karion took off her clothes, too, swinging them around in the air and grinning.

Their divine commands compelled the priests and priestesses to take their

clothes off and dance as well. It was like a witches' sabbath.

Luckily, my kids were fine—they were dancing, too, but kept their clothes on. Pochi, Tama, and Nana started to strip down when they noticed other people doing it, but luckily the other girls stopped them.

I used "Warp" to approach the goddesses, who were flying around the site of drunken revelry with teleportation.

"Goddess Urion, Goddess Karion, I brought you tasty morsels."

I gave the goddess girls a honey-flavored magic potion to sober them up.

The duo drained their potions in one gulp.

Once it looked like their drunkenness had faded, I gave the girls jackets from Storage.

"Such shameful behavior we displayed. Thou shalt all forget everything you just saw. Karion says so, too."

"Aye. Thou shalt erase thy memories of our drunken display."

The crowd's faces went blank at their divine commands.

"Goddesses. Please put the men to sleep and order the women to put on clothes, okay?"

Urion complied with the request. Once the women got dressed and left, they awoke the men to have them dress as well. Of course, out of consideration for the unconscious men, I covered up their most crucial parts with clothes using my Magic Hand.

As it turns out, even goddesses feel shame; we left Sherifardo State early the next morning.

Luckily, since they thought I was Urion's Apostle, I was able to buy up big casks of "God's Mercy" even though it wasn't normally sold to the public.

I guess things worked out pretty well, despite that last part being exhausting.

# Land of Music

***Satou here. I don't have a musical bone in my body, but I used to go to a lot of concerts and recitals with friends or my girlfriend. Although my friends said my singing was so bad that I usually just listened when we went to karaoke.***

"The breeze feels really nice."

Arisa leaned against the main mast and closed her eyes.

After leaving Sherifardo State, we were traveling by sea toward Myusia Kingdom, which covered most of a large island off the southeast coast.

This time, in hopes of avoiding trouble, we left discreetly using a sailing ship of mine.

"Are you sure it doesn't matter to you where we go?"

"Aye. Thou shalt take us to any land of tasty morsels and happiness."

Karion nodded at me.

To my surprise, the two goddess girls were happy to go anywhere with fun things to do and food to eat. I was expecting her to request one of the nearest nations with central temples—either Pialork Kingdom, home of the Zaicuon Temple, or Aubehr Republic, home of the Tenion Temple.

"Music is a splendid thing. It soothes the soul. Thou shalt listen, too, Urion."

Karion was listening raptly to Mia's musical performance.

"It's the greatest achievement of human culture," Arisa commented, snickering. I knew she couldn't resist the chance to reference a famous anime, although the face she made while she did it was a little off-putting.

"Tasty. Alcohol soothes the throat. Thou shalt drink, too, Karion."

Urion, meanwhile, was drinking down some rum.

She seemed to have somehow acquired a higher alcohol tolerance, no longer turning bright red whenever she drank.

“This fruit juice is more delicious, I declare.”

“The banana juice is yummy, too, sir!”

Nana and Pochi recommended their favorite drinks.

“Tasty. Thou shalt drink, too, Urion.”

“If Karion sayest so… Mm, tasty.”

Urion pressed the bottle of rum she was holding into my hand.

I guess she liked the fruit juice better.

“Isn’t there alcohol and juice in the divine realm?”

“No. ’Tis a world filled with light, unlike the mortal realm that is bound by matter.”

“So it’s like a higher dimension?”

“There is no ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ dimension. The number of dimensions and components are simply different.”

“Huh. Well, whatever that means, it sounds like you don’t have food in the divine realm either, huh?”

“We’ll have to introduce you to lots of delicious meals, then!”

Arisa looked sympathetic, while Lulu rolled up her sleeves.

“Fishiiie?”

“A big fish, sir!”

Liza, who was fishing at the stern of the ship, reeled in a huge skipjack tuna.

Tama dashed over and dove onto the tuna, flopping around along with it. Pochi came later since she was holding onto her egg and reached out to pin the fish down as well. However, the diminutive pair couldn’t quite hold it down on their own.

“I shall assist you, I declare.”

Nana held the big fish down, and Lulu ran over and made quick work of it.

*I guess we're having some tuna dishes for lunch.*

◆

"So this is Myusia Kingdom?"

"Yep. That big building over there is the famous great concert hall, or so I gather."

The great concert hall was where Mia wanted to go most.

True to the kingdom's reputation as the "land of music," there were street musicians even at the pier, being paid for their performances in daily installments.

When we first arrived at the island, Pochi declared that the music was "good for the feeties, sir," only to quickly give in to the temptation of tasty scents and run over to a food cart selling baked goods. Food really is the way to that girl's heart.

"Mystical sound."

Mia strained her ears, listening to a distant note.

"Just hearing it makes you feel happy, you know. It's really quite amazing. It's true, you know? I wonder what kind of instrument it is. Arisa, Satou, do you know?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I'd guess a string instrument…? It sounds oddly familiar."

"It reminds me of a harp, but a harp wouldn't make such a deep sound… What could it be?"

The sound seemed to be coming from the great music hall, so rather than using the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to peek at the answer, we decided to go see for ourselves.

The two goddess girls were too focused on the baked goods they'd bought with Pochi and Tama to listen to it closely anyway.

"Hm-hm-hmm, hm-hmm…"

Mia seemed to be enjoying the Myusia Kingdom, where musicians were

performing on almost every street corner. Ever since we'd set foot on land, she was clearly in a great mood, humming to herself as she skipped along.

Her hood slipped off in the process, though she didn't seem to mind.

"The Musical Saint…?"

"Say, isn't that Saint Solulunia?"

On seeing Mia's face, the passersby murmured to each other.

If they were mistaking Mia for her, this "Musical Saint" must be an elf.

"Candy cart."

"Pochi will buy some, sir!"

"Baked good seller."

"Tama will buuuy?"

There were stalls, stands, and vendors selling sweets all over the place. Baked goods and candy must be popular here.

"This sweetness doesn't quite taste like sugar. It's not cloying even if you eat a lot of it, and the aftertaste is very mild. Maybe they don't use butter for the batter?"

Lulu was completely focused on cooking research.

"Looks like there's a shop over there. Why don't we take a quick look?"

Lulu and I went to check out a place that sold groceries.

"Sugar? We've got the kind from sugar coral, sure. We're a wholesale store, so it only comes in big bags here. There are shops by the town center that sell 'em in smaller units—maybe that'd be more your speed?"

The salesperson was nice enough to let us taste test the sugar-coral sugar and point us toward other buying options, but it seemed like a great option for making pastries, so we bought a bunch of bags. Apparently it was subject to a heavy tariff if you brought it out from the harbor.

He went on to explain that sugar coral was a poisonous coral that only grew around this island. The royal family had a tight hold on the refining method that

nullified the poison; if you wandered too close to the refinery, you'd be arrested by the guards. Whew, that was close—I might've gotten lured into trouble by following my nose, like I did with the sugar mill in Lalagi.

"What is that?"

Wandering around after we left the wholesaler, Karion spotted something.

"It's a candy house, sir! I can tell because it smells sweet, sir!"

"Cuuute?"

It really did look like a house made of candy.

"Looks like it's a café."

"Why don't we stop in for a bit?"

The goddess girls were already charging into the shop before I even started speaking.

As always, once something caught their interest, there was no stopping them.

"Hm-hm-hmm."

"Wow, there's music in here, too."

In one corner of the adorable café, a musician was playing a relaxing tune on a contrabass-looking stringed instrument. According to my AR display, this was the owner of the shop.

Evidently it was a popular spot—there were lots of customers enjoying pastries and tea.

Many of them were young women, though there were a decent amount of older folks and male customers, too.

"Tasty morsels."

The waitress looked confused by the goddess girls' extremely vague demand. I placed an order for a big platter of the most popular pastries.

Many of them were the same kind of pastries we bought from the food carts and vendors, but the higher prices here also meant higher quality: There was plenty of butter and cream that gave them a nice moist texture instead of the

slightly disappointing dryness of the street versions.

The crepes and galettes filled with local fruit preserves were delicious, although I did find myself wishing they were topped with whipped cream.

Just then, the pièce de résistance was brought to our table.

“Fantasticooo?”

“Wow, a sugar sculpture? It’s almost too pretty to eat.”

The carefully spun sugar shapes were as delicate as any work of art.

“Sugar sculptures aren’t meant to last, so please do eat them once you’ve admired them with your eyes.”

The waitress who’d brought over the sugar sculptures giggled and left.

“Tasty. Blessings be upon this shop. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But I agree. ’Tis worthy of many blessings indeed.”

The goddess girls waved their hands, glowing vermillion and crimson, and curtains of light rained down on the café and the kitchen.

The customers, waitresses, and the owner all blinked in surprise at the sudden miracle.

I wasn’t sure what effect the light might have, but if word got out to the worshippers of these two goddesses, the place would be even more swamped with customers. At least it would definitely stay in business.

◆

“Great concert hall.”

Mia gazed up at the large dome-shaped hall, her face full of anticipation.

After enjoying our fill of pastries at the café, we decided to make our way to our main destination in this kingdom.

There was a big crowd gathered outside the great concert hall.

“I’ll go buy our tickets, Master.”

Liza set off on her mission.

Tama followed after her, swift and silent as a shadow, probably as part of her ninja training.

“…Canceled? What do you mean, the concert is canceled?”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up murmurs from the crowd.

“You’re kidding me! I was so looking forward to this concert, too…”

“Apparently the saintly instrument isn’t tuned properly.”

“Dear me, is that right? I know the tuning officiant is away with the Musical Saint at the moment, but the officiant has plenty of apprentices, no?”

“I heard the Fantasmic Tuning Fork was stolen.”

“Oh my, how dreadful.”

*It would be a damn shame if we couldn’t see a concert at the great concert hall after coming all this way.*

With that thought, I used my map search to look for the Fantasmic Tuning Fork. Unfortunately, it was nowhere to be found in this or any of my previously visited maps. I would bet that the culprit was stashing it inside an Item Box, a Magic Bag, or something of the sort.

“Master…”

Liza returned with the same information I’d just learned via my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“Satou…”

I felt tugging on both of my sleeves. One was a disappointed-looking Mia, while the other was Karion, looking more annoyed than anything.

“Thou shalt resolve this at once. Urion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou shalt not imitate me, Karion.”

It was another outrageous demand from the goddesses, albeit with the usual roles reversed.

“I’ll go see if I can be of any assistance, although I’m pretty tone-deaf myself.”

Hopefully my “Tuner” title and maxed-out skills like “Magic Tool Tuning” and

“Musicianship” would allow me to help somehow.

“Mia, can you help me?”

“Mm. Got it.”

The help of the music-loving Mia should be more than enough.

Together, we all headed for the staff entrance that led to the executive offices of the great music hall.

“Pardon me, but this area is for authorized personnel only. If you’re looking for a ticket refund, please line up at the ticket booth over there.”

A security staffer stationed at the entrance politely stopped us from entering.

I didn’t want to get too dependent on the goddess girls’ divine commands, so I figured I’d make it work with my “Fabrication” skill somehow.

“Let us in.”

Before I could open my mouth, however, Mia lowered her hood and spoke up.

“M-Miss Musical Saint!”

“Wh-what is Saint Solulunia doing here?!”

“Wro—”

“Please, do come in. Everyone! The Musical Saint has returned!”

Before Mia could correct them, the security staff members opened the door and hustled us inside.

“Okay.”

Without hesitation, Mia started walking down the hallway.

*Well, I guess that saves us some time, at least.*

“Saint Solulunia… No, you’re not, are you?”

“Mm. Mia.”

Mia calmly introduced herself to the pretty woman who came running down the hall.

“I take it you are an elf, at least. Are you perhaps from the same homeland as Saint Solulunia, by any chance?”

“No.”

Mia shook her head, much to the woman’s consternation.

“Hello, my name is Satou. This is Misanaria of Bolenan Forest. We heard there might be some issues with the tuning of the saintly instrument, so we came running to see if we could help in any way.”

“Bolenan Forest…,” the woman murmured. “Very well. Yes, an elf may be able to tune it. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated.”

Somehow, the combination of my “Fabrication” skill and the elves’ reputation won out.

“Pardon me for not introducing myself sooner. I am Lalabel, director of the concert hall.”

The woman introduced herself as she led the way.

“Sounds like a magical girl name,” Arisa muttered.

“This is the saintly instrument, Bellaluula.”

The director led us to the hall containing the saintly instrument in question.

I ignored Arisa’s whispered “So close!” since I had no idea what she was referencing this time.

“Très bieeen?”

“It looks like a spiderweb, sir.”

“A spiderweb would have crosswise threads, I observe.”

The saintly instrument turned out to be a sort of harp with long strings radiating outward.

The longest string looked to be around fifty yards long. There were five points where the strings converged; a harpist sat at each of them, adjusting the sound.

The person holding a baton in the front must have been conducting the tuning, I guess?

“There are twenty-five strings on each. The sound changes not just from the tension of the string but from the amount of magic flowing through it as well,” the hall director explained.

“No, no! I give up! It’s impossible to tune all five seats!”

The man conducting the tuning clutched his head and shouted in despair.

“He passed out.”

“Oh no, sir!”

The man hit the floor with a thud.

An assistant hurried to his side.

“Take him to the doctor’s office, quickly!”

At the director’s command, staff members carried the man away.

The harpists who were working on the tuning slumped down in their seats, looking equally exhausted.

After ordering other staff members to take care of the harpists, the director turned her attention to us.

“I apologize that you had to see this sad state of affairs. We’ve always depended on the Fantasmic Tuning Fork to tune the saintly instrument. Without it, I’m afraid we can’t tune it to a satisfactory level at all.”

“Speaking of which, I heard the Fantasmic Tuning Fork may have been stolen?”

“Yes, the culprit was wielding a whip and dressed all in black.”

*Wielding a whip, wearing all black…*

That matched the description of one of the thieves who stole the Green Dragon’s Egg in Dragu Kingdom.

“Was this whip-wielding person a woman by any chance?”

“Do you know who it is?!”

“No, it’s just that a similar incident occurred in Dragu Kingdom. I thought it might be the same culprit.”

*Multiple dragon eggs and a Fantasmic Tuning Fork…*

Whatever these people were up to, I couldn't help being increasingly concerned since they seemed to be causing trouble everywhere we went. Hopefully Sorijeyro the Sage didn't leave some terrible legacy behind…

"Satou."

Mia tugged on my sleeve.

It looked like she wanted me to hurry up and tune the thing already.

With a few words to the director, I walked up to the now-abandoned saintly instrument.

"The saintly instrument Bellaluula must be played with these gloves—the Instrumentalist's Touch."

The director sat down and demonstrated how to play the harp.

It had a profound, beautiful sound.

"Now then, if you could begin the tuning…"

At her prompting, I sat down and donned the white gloves.

I had a faint feeling of the gloves absorbing a small amount of my magic power. They seemed to be the conduit to set off the magic power stored in the strings and create a magical vibration.

With the help of my "Musicianship" and "Magic-Tool Tuning" skills, I tried playing the harp.

Although I didn't pick up on the blockage that often caused problems with Magic Swords, tools, and items, there was inconsistency in the quality of the strings. I wasn't sure if that was intentional or a result of deterioration over time.

"Mia, can you play this?"

"Mm. Got it."

Mia manipulated the strings of the saintly instrument with ease; she must have learned the knack just from watching the director.

After plucking each string experimentally like I did before, Mia began playing an elf tune that she frequently performed on her lute—then stopped abruptly.

“This string, this string, and this string. And when you play these two at once, this string…”

She pointed out the same few lower-quality strings that I’d noticed, as well as a few other strings that sounded slightly off during certain chords.

“There’s no problem with this combination, though?”

“Mm. On purpose.”

Thank goodness I asked Mia for help.

Otherwise, I might’ve messed with a part that didn’t need fixing and made things worse.

Based on the information Mia gave me, and with help from my maxed-out skills, I set to work tuning the harp. It probably would’ve gone much faster if I had any sense of pitch whatsoever, but since nothing can change the fact that I’m terminally tone-deaf, I managed it with Mia’s cooperation instead.

“I think that should do it. Mia, test it out, please.”

“Mm.”

The rest of us sat in the audience at the director’s request while Mia played the harp.

*Oh, wow.*

When I was tuning it, all it produced were deep tones that resonated deep in your belly. Under Mia’s hands, however, it turned into a different beast entirely.

*Incredible. So this is what the saintly instrument is supposed to sound like…*

Each note rang out with perfect clarity, yet they never clashed with each other, echoing in harmony to create music with unmatched depth and dimension.

The smooth sequence of sounds washed over my body like waves, wrapping me up in a satisfying rhythm.

At some point during the performance, other players sat down at the

remaining four seats and began to play in time with Mia's melody.

No doubt the ability to improvise to an elven melody they'd probably never heard before was unique to only the most skilled professional musicians.

Pochi, Tama, and Nana began humming along with the familiar base tune, while Arisa led the others in singing along with them.

Soon, clear voices rang out from behind us, vocalizing in harmony with the others. Judging by their outfits, they appeared to be a children's choir.

Though this lacked some of the solemn grandeur of the initial performance, the lively chorus was a better fit for the original melody's cheerful tone.

At some point, even Karion and Urion started singing along. Their spellbinding voices coupled with Mia's captivating performance was deeply moving to all who heard it.

*So this is a musical collaboration between gods and mortals…*

I sank deep into my seat, listening closely to the wonderful performance with all my heart.

*Yeah, this is one experience I'll never forget.*

◆

"Buh-byyye!"

"See you next time, sirs!"

As our ship set sail, we waved back at the people waving to us from the harbor.

"Lady Miaaaaa!"

In the distance, a group of Mia's fans were waving a big flag.

For three days after we finished tuning the saintly instrument, the director convinced Mia to perform as the star of several concerts; she was praised throughout Myusia Kingdom as the second coming of the Musical Saint. They even formed a fan club for her.

"The sweets were delish, but the sightseeing left something to be desired."

“Nah, I wouldn’t say that.”

I thought this kingdom was fun. The street performances were great, and eating fine pastries while listening to live musicians was a pleasant combination.

And even when Mia was just playing an improvised tune, nearby children would join in singing in chorus, which was always nice.

“Where to next?”

As soon as the harbor of Myusia Kingdom was out of sight, Karion demanded to know our next destination.

Her serious expression lacked a bit of gravitas, given that she was also licking a giant lollipop from Myusia Kingdom.

“Good question. The closest stop on our route would be Valauris, the pleasure city…”

“No.”

“Yeah, absolutely not!”

I mentioned it because I was intrigued by the name, but the iron pair immediately shot down my proposal.

“Intriguing.”

“I require a detailed explanation of this ‘pleasure.’ Thou shalt answer at once.”

The goddess girls looked very interested indeed.

“No, no, you two wouldn’t like that sort of thing at all.”

“Mm. Lots of miasma.”

Arisa and Mia frantically tried to talk them out of it.

Alas, their argument convinced the goddesses, and we wound up charting a course away from the pleasure city of Valauris.

As our journey continued, we bought up tons of mithril in a mining nation, found an island full of sea birds and seaweed and cooked a delicious dish of both served with ponzu dipping sauce, and fended off the occasional pirate

attack.

“Puff, puuuff?”

“There’s smoke coming out of the mountain, sir!”

A volcanic island came into view up ahead.

“Yeah, that’s our next stop.”

It was Blacksmoke Island, the rumored home of the samurai general Pochi said she wanted to meet.

Since we didn’t get to meet the master swordsman who lived on Titan Mountain, which was north of the mining nation, I was hoping things would work out better with the samurai general.

Avoiding the reefs and whirlpools that obstructed our approach, our ship finally approached the harbor of Blacksmoke Island.

# Blacksmoke Island

***Satou here. According to a friend who used to live in a place where you could see smoke coming out of a volcano nearby, aside from the obvious danger of a possible volcanic eruption, there was also the day-to-day problem of which way the wind was blowing. If it came in from the direction of the volcano, the ash could ruin any clean laundry you put out to dry.***

"There's battle damage around here, too."

"I guess the people who live around the inland sea really do go to war with each other rather often."

There were burn marks, holes likely made by cannons, and other such traces of war dotting the buildings near the harbor.

This island was effectively self-governed by the samurai general from Saga Empire and his militant group.

According to the information in my Vice-Ministry of Tourism papers, they made a strategic resource of the fire stones that were plentiful in the mouth of the volcano, as well as a few gold veins. While they didn't have a lot of crops to harvest, there was enough bounty from the sea to make the island self-sufficient if they wanted.

"'Tis due to Parion's indiscriminate love," Urion murmured.

"Sometimes protecting people only results in fostering conflict amongst them," Karion added.

*Parion, love, protecting people… Wait, do they mean Parion's Lampfire?!*

The goddesses were probably saying that the Lampfires that warded monsters off from the ships sailing the inlet sea were giving rise to wars between human nations.

I don't think that's Parion's fault, though—it's the idiots who start wars of aggression out of greed who are to blame here. This might even be part of the reason that Parion Province was always mediating disputes between nations.

"Master, a small ship is approaching."

A little boat with four or five rowers was approaching us rapidly from the direction of the harbor.

At first, they looked like some kind of small-scale pirate crew, but my AR display informed me that they were the harbor staff.

"Kimono."

"You're right, those are some very Japanese-style clothes. They're wearing *tasuki* cords to tie up their sleeves and *hachimaki* headbands, too."

While I had heard that there were a lot of samurai who immigrated here from the Saga Empire, I wasn't expecting them to be wearing traditional Japanese garb and everything.

*"This is Blacksmoke Island, a place of carnage! Only the strong are permitted to come ashore!"*

*What is this, a manga?!*

I couldn't help poking fun at the dramatic declaration in my head.

Spare me the kind of setup you might see in a postapocalyptic battle manga, please. I'd much prefer to stick to the heartwarming fantasy route. Arisa looked so excited she was practically speechless, which wasn't helping matters.

"They call me Liza Kishreshigarza! I am a vassal of Viscount Pendragon of Shiga Kingdom and a mithril explorer who defeated a floormaster in the Celivera Labyrinth! All of us aboard this vessel are the mightiest of warriors!"

Liza held up her Magic Cricket Spear and shouted back enthusiastically.

I was so impressed with this rare side of Liza that I couldn't help recording her heroic moment with the Picture Recorder and Sound Recorder spells.

*"Well met! I am Sir Gonrock, first vassal to the samurai general and master of the Tennenrii Sin Style! Throw down a rope, and I shall test your strength*

*myself!”*

The middle-aged samurai shouting up to us from the small boat had a name similar to the famed samurai Gonroku.

“Is that all right?” Liza asked me; I nodded.

We lowered a rope, and the middle-aged samurai climbed it as nimbly as a monkey, coming up onto the deck of the sailing ship. Although he seemed surprised to find it entirely full of women and children other than myself, he didn’t comment on this as he turned to face Liza.

“It’s a samurai, sir!”

Pochi seemed excited to see the man up close.

“En garde! Duel one, begin!”

Dressed in an all-black getup like a stagehand from traditional Japanese theater, Arisa took charge of refereeing the fight between Liza and the samurai.

I had no idea when she changed into this outfit, which was probably a cosplay from a certain series of showdown games.

*“But how?!”*

In the split second that I looked away, the fight was already over.

Liza had closed the distance between them in a flash using “Blink,” and pierced the sword’s guard with her spear before the samurai could finish his sword-drawing technique.

*“I have never been so soundly defeated by anyone but the general or the master swordsman!”*

The samurai guffawed heartily.

*“They are strong!”* he called down to his comrades, and the small boat rowed away from our ship and let us pass through. Evidently the middle-aged samurai was going to ride with us.

“You can’t use sword-drawing when you fight Liza, sir! Pochi always gets stopped, too, sir.”

*“Oho, you can already use sword-drawing, little one?”*

“That’s right, sir! Kwandoh taught me, sir!”

*“Kwandoh? You mean the Sin Kaage–style prodigy, Kwandoh the ‘Protean’?!”*

I didn’t know Kwandoh, a Saga Empire samurai, had a nickname like that.

*“If Sir Kwandoh was willing to teach you, then you must have real promise, young one.”*

“Mr. Kajiro and Rudoruu taught me, too, sir.”

*“The imperial Zi-Gain-style user Sir Rudoruu and the original Zi-Gain-style user Sir Kajiro?! Both are incredibly famous masters of Zi-Gain!”*

Sounds like the world of samurai is a small one.

The middle-aged samurai taught us about the different sword styles and their famed users as we made our way into the harbor.

Since none of the piers were equipped for seafaring ships, we anchored our sailing ship near the harbor and came ashore on a smaller boat.

Unlike the other cities we’d visited recently, where the climate felt like spring to early summer, this harbor was laden with midsummer heat.

I took off my robe and rolled up the sleeves of my shirt. The others put their coats and such away in their Fairy Packs as well.

“Aside from the storehouses, most of the buildings around here look like huts.”

“There are only a few nice wooden structures throughout the town. Maybe building materials are expensive on Blacksmoke Island.”

The middle-aged samurai led us through the maze of narrow streets.

Our destination was the samurai general’s mansion.

“There’s piles of sand on the street, sir.”

“Oh, you’re right. Are there dunes nearby or something?”

*“That would be volcanic ash. Normally the wind blows in the other direction like it is right now, but occasionally it blows toward the town.”*

Ah, so that was fallen ash that drifted in from the volcano, not accumulations

of smooth sand like I first assumed.

*“It makes a good polishing agent, so sometimes inland sea merchants come to buy it.”*

That was an unexpected local specialty.

“Provide the tasty morsels.”

“All I see is grilled fish and squid. Is that all right?”

The only food stands around to satisfy the goddesses’ request were all serving simple grilled seafood.

“Aye. They may taste different, though they look the same.”

“I concur, Karion. Tasty morsels have great depth.”

Thus, we let Pochi’s nose guide us to the yummiest-smelling stands and bought up food while the middle-aged samurai generously waited for us, snacking on it while we continued toward the mansion.

◆

“Welcome, strong ones. I am Siingen, the samurai general.”

An older man with a kimono and a topknot introduced himself in a dignified voice.

We were in the formal Japanese-style guest room of his mansion, which was styled after a samurai house built on a low stone wall. Even the customs here seemed to have Japanese influence; we removed our shoes at the entrance, which confused everyone but Arisa and me, who were of course used to the practice. We were seated on straw woven rugs, too.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Excellency. My name is Satou Pendragon, a viscount of Shiga Kingdom.”

I introduced myself, then Liza and the rest of our group in simple terms.

“So this scalefolk girl is the one who made short work of Gonrock…”

The samurai general looked at Liza like a predator who’d found its next prey.

“If you’re going to spar, do it in the garden. Nuume will be furious if you

damage the dojo or the walls again.”

Leaning against the sliding paper door that opened onto the adjoining deck was an older woman with her white hair in a bob cut, wearing Western-looking clothes.

According to my AR display, her name was Blume Juleburg. She had titles like **Master Swordsman** and **Follower of the Hero**, and aside from an array of “Close Combat” and “Swordsmanship” skills, she also had Lightning Magic and “Holy Magic: Parion Faith.”

This woman must have been the very same master swordsman that we weren’t able to meet on Titan Mountain.

Based on her family name, she was also obviously related to Sir Juleburg, the “Unstoppable” leader of the Shiga Eight Swordsman.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. Come along, Liza.”

The samurai general stood up.

Liza turned back to me for permission, so I nodded again.

“Very well.”

“Pochi wants to do a duel, too, sir.”

“Tama toooo?”

“I also request a match with the samurai master, I declare.”

As Liza stood up, the rest of the vanguard eagerly followed suit.

“Pochi, if you’re going to be moving around a lot, I can hold your egg for you.”

“Thank you, sir. Please be super extra careful with my superspecial egg, sir.”

“Okey-dokey, no prob!”

“…Are you really, really sure, sir?”

“Aha-ha, don’t worry, I’m sure.”

Still looking concerned, Pochi removed her egg belt and handed it over to Arisa.

*Maybe I should take over carrying it from tomorrow on. It’ll probably get in*

*the way if she's going to be training.*

"And what of the tasty morsels?"

Karion tugged on my sleeve expectantly.

"What, are you hungry, missy? Nuume! Some food for our guests!"

Already heading out into the hall with his katana in hand, the samurai general bellowed into the back of the house.

"Okaaaay!" a woman's voice called back cheerfully.

"And the alcohol?"

"Wait a while. That comes after we've had our duels."

"Very well. I shall observe the battle."

Urion sat down on the edge of the deck with an exaggerated gesture.

You would never know she was really a goddess from the way she swung her legs back and forth over the side.

"You first, Liza."

"…Understood."

The samurai general drew his katana and held it steadily.

He was level 51, high enough that even Liza would have to be careful.

"There she goes."

Just as a falling leaf drifted between them, Liza moved at lightning speed.

The general just barely managed to parry her powerful blow.

"Hrm…!"

He grunted in surprise at her unpredictable attack.

Liza had feigned a retreat for a moment, only to use her tail to sweep his legs just as she turned away.

Somehow, the general reacted in time to dodge backward.

The pair traded positions in the rather small garden as they fiercely exchanged blows.

Though Liza threatened to overpower him, the general read her movements just in time to counter, creating an opening for a counterattack.

Liza had the advantage in speed and power, but the samurai general had an even greater advantage in his countless years of battle experience. For now, at least, it seemed like he might have the slight edge in their battle.

Just like when I battled Elder Dohal in the dwarf dominion, I was reminded that there was a lot to learn from an experienced veteran warrior.

“That girl’s very good.”

The master swordsman came over to stand beside me.

Between her perfectly straight posture and her remarkable vitality, nothing about her would suggest that she was eighty-eight years old.

“You lot came from Shiga Kingdom, eh? You must know the Shiga Eight, then? If she can beat Siingen, I’ll write you a letter of recommendation.”

*Sorry, we don’t need one.*

“Bet she can knock some sense into that son of ours. He’s gotten a big head with all that ‘Unstoppable,’ ‘strongest in the kingdom’ nonsense.”

Ah, so she meant a letter of recommendation for a duel, not to join the Shiga Eight.

She seemed every bit as combat-obsessed as her son Zef.

“So you’re Sir Zef Juleburg’s mother as well as the master swordsman, ma’am?”

“Oh, no need to get all formal or call me ‘ma’am.’ I don’t go by Juleburg or any of that nonsense, either. Just call me Blume.”

Ms. Blume spoke in an easygoing tone.

“Ahem.”

I turned around to see Karion looking up at me in obvious displeasure.

Behind her was a stressed-looking girl who I didn’t recognize. According to my AR display, this was **Nuume**, the samurai general’s daughter.

She had placed a small table with brown rice balls and a clear soup in the tatami room.

“I’m sorry. If our head chef Mr. Ladpad was here, we could make something a little more elaborate. Unfortunately, he went to the seashore to look for ingredients…”

“Would you mind if I borrowed your kitchen, then?”

“Go right ahead. As long as you don’t mind that we don’t have many ingredients to work with…”

Permission secured, I invited Lulu along with me to the kitchen.

Just to be safe, I used the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience to keep an eye on Liza and the others.

“Hmm, the stove is made with fire stones. For seasonings, we have salt, sake, and…this black paste must be miso. Is this tamari soy sauce, maybe?”

“It’s a strained fish sauce that Mr. Ladpad made. The taste is really nice and clean.”

Lulu checked the kitchen over with enthusiasm.

I was planning to use our own ingredients and seasonings, but since she seemed so excited I decided to let her take the lead.

“Who dares go scrounging for food in *my* kitchen?!”

A half naked man burst into the room.

“Mr. Ladpad! Welcome back.”

“Grrrr! Are you the culprit, Nuume?!”

“I’m not a ‘culprit.’ You weren’t here, so our guests were about to make some food for themselves.”

Apparently the hot-tempered, heavily toned, muscular man was the chef Mr. Ladpad.

I couldn’t quite decide whether the seaweed atop his head was a fashion statement or a byproduct of his trip to the seashore.

“Guests?”

“Yes, from the Shiga Kingdom.” Nuume turned to us. “Sir Satou, this is our personal chef, the ‘Kaleidoscopic Chef’ Mr. Ladpad. I’m told that many people also call him the ‘Deviant Chef,’ but I assure you he’s perfectly normal aside from his appearance and behavior. Please look kindly on him.”

Nuume introduced Mr. Ladpad with a decidedly insulting defense.

“Nuume! That just makes it sound like you’re saying I’m a weirdo!”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

As the pair’s little comedy act played out, the match between Liza and the samurai general ended in a draw. I could hear cheers from the garden. Liza looked very frustrated that she hadn’t quite managed to win despite coming so close.

“Well then, Mr. Ladpad, please make something for our guests to eat.”

“If they’re just a bunch of bumpkins going around looking for fights, you might as well give them the leftover broth and rice balls from lunch. Those meatheads don’t care how their food tastes as long as it fills their bellies.”

“Nay,” Karion interrupted. “The cold soup was just barely a tasty morsel. ’Tis lacking in depth of flavor.”

“You’re one of the guests? Seems like you’ve got a decent palate, missy.”

“Provide tasty morsels.”

“Sounds like a challenge to a chef! Just you wait! I’ll make ya something so good you won’t be able to say another word!”

Karion nodded, looking satisfied by Ladpad’s declaration.

“W-wait a minute, Mr. Ladpad! Aren’t those the ingredients for tonight’s dinner?”

“So what if they are?! If we can’t even satisfy a guest’s palate, no one else in the house deserves to eat either, right?!”

“They most certainly do! Don’t you realize how hungry everyone will be after all their training and hard work?!”

Ladpad couldn’t protest any further. Miss Nuume must have been in charge of the kitchen budget.

“If you’re short on any ingredients, we’d be happy to go stock up for you.”

“That right?! I’m counting on ya, then! Help me out here, Nuume.”

“We shouldn’t be making our guests do something like that…”

“I don’t mind at all.”

Since Lulu seemed interested in Mr. Ladpad’s cooking, I decided to go buy the needed ingredients alone.

“Satou.”

Mia ran up to join me on my shopping trip as I headed toward the front gate.

“A lot of idiots are bound to bother you if they see a stranger walking around these parts. I’ll send an errand boy with you to carry your things and clear the way for you, eh?”

The guard was kind enough to give us an escort, a mischievous-looking young man who joined us as we headed to the fishermen’s pier to buy ingredients.

The boy was wearing a casual kimono and straw sandals. The rope belt around his waist held the wooden sword of a student, not a real blade.

He seemed to have developed an immediate crush on Mia; he kept glancing over his shoulder at her, his face flushed bright red.

“Hey, mister, is your master strong or what?”

As we proceeded down the rocky path toward the pier, the boy got bored enough to try and talk to me. I assume the question was directed at me, anyway, although his gaze kept flicking back toward Mia.

“I’m the head of the family, so to speak. The young ladies practicing with Mr. Siingen are my companions.”

The boy must have assumed I was a servant or something.

“Whaaat? Do they send bigwigs out shopping in Shiga Kingdom? The masters of our house would never run their own errands.”

He was so shocked that he stopped glancing at Mia and stared at me openly.

“It’s the same way in Shiga Kingdom.”

“You’re a pretty weird guy, huh?”

His expression shifted to one of genuine bewilderment.

Fair enough. I guess you could say my attitude is pretty far removed from the norm in this continent.

Thanks to the boy’s presence, we didn’t run into any major issues as we bought the required ingredients. Some other youngsters were drawn in by Mia’s sophisticated charm and cuteness a few times and started trying to talk to her, but the boy blushed and chased them off each time.

“Hey, you sure you shoulda bought that many maelstrom sea bream?”

“It’s no trouble. You want to eat some, too, don’t you?”

“I mean, yeah. Even us errand boys get to have miso soup made with sea bream bones for New Year’s, you know.”

The boy sounded pleased.

“Mrr. Mushrooms.”

“You can get mushrooms in the mountains. Since anyone can go pick ’em, no one sells ’em in the village. If you wanna eat some, I’ll go grab ’em for ya.”

His excitement at finally getting to talk with Mia showed in the way he suddenly started speaking much more quickly.

“Please.”

“No problem! I’m on it! I’ll find some wild veggies for ya, too!”

The boy turned bright red and dashed off to the mountains, forgetting about his job of escorting us. Mia’s charm is truly powerful.

I didn’t want to ruin his chance to show off his skills by offering to help him, so we just headed back to the mansion.

“Welcome back. I thought I sent Heiske with you… Ah, he ditched his job, did he? Cheeky little bastard.”

The guard at the mansion seemed annoyed at the boy for abandoning his task, until I reassured him that we'd sent the kid off on an errand.

The vanguard had finished sparring with the samurai general, and now Blume the master swordsman was instructing them.

"The speed of your charge is great. But you need to pay more attention to your surroundings!"

"Yes, sir!"

Blume parried Pochi's attack with graceful ease.

"Cat-ears, you're paying attention, but your attacks are too light. If you're going to increase your options with two blades, you'd better learn a better variety of attacks to go with it!"

"Aye!"

Blume's blade knocked away Tama's duel-wielding attack from her blind spot.

Although Pochi and Tama were higher-level than her, Blume was many times more skilled in combat.

"We're not done yet, sir!"

"One more tryyy?"

Pochi and Tama kept at it with determination.

"Tasty. The stew is perfectly seasoned. The white rice isn't quite as well-cooked as Satou's, but 'tis even tastier with the broth."

"The white rice, eh… My only choice is to buy it from Garleon Alliance trade ships, since you can't grow rice on this island. You got any better rice you could share?"

Karion was feasting off the small folding table next to the garden.

Next to her was Mr. Ladpad, who directed the latter question at me.

"Sure, I don't mind. Would rice from the Ougoch Duchy in Shiga Kingdom be all right?"

"Oho! That's as fine as they come! No one'd complain about getting rice like

that!”

Lulu gave me a small bowl to taste test the meal they were currently eating. Long-grained rice seemed to be the norm around here.

“The cloudy sake has too strong a taste. The rice wine is a little bitter but still tasty. Mead and rum are still better.”

“You want some? We’ve got *shochu*, too.”

“Aye. I shall allow thee to pour it for me.”

The samurai general, who was sweaty and stripped to the waist, was drinking alcohol with Urion.

“Mr. Ladpad, quit playing around and start cooking dinner! At this rate it won’t be done until after sundown.”

Miss Nuume came out from the kitchen.

“I know, I know. Didja get the ingredients, Young Master?”

“Yes, they’re right here.”

I handed the Magic Bag full of foodstuff over to Mr. Ladpad, who was posing and flexing to show off his muscles.

“Oho-ho, you got a good eye there. Not a damaged ingredient in sight. And on top of that, you even got six whole maelstrom sea breams! Now this is a feast worth cooking!”

Still half naked, Mr. Ladpad ran off into the kitchen with a delighted grin, leaving Nuume to hurry after him.

Lulu followed them to the kitchen to offer her help.

“So eepyyy?”

“I’m beat, sir.”

Tama and Pochi flopped face down onto the deck.

They must have wrapped up their training with Ms. Blume.

“Here you are, Pochi.”

“Thank you, Arisa, sir.”

Pochi accepted the egg belt from Arisa and wrapped it around her waist.

Despite her exhaustion, Pochi looked pleased as she patted the egg through the belt.

Then she looked up at me. “Master, Pochi is going to get even more stronger, sir.”

“Tama, too, more strongeeer.”

As they went on muttering, a loud growling noise emitted from their stomachs.

“It’s almost time for dinner. Have this to tide you over till then.”

I popped a piece of whale jerky into each of their mouths.

“I’m powering up, sir.”

“Yummyyyy?”

The pair chewed on their jerky even as they started nodding off.

“Unknown tastiness.”

“Provide the morsels.”

Karion and Urion appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

“That looks good. Could I have some, too?”

Even the samurai general came over and stuck out his free hand, the other one already holding a sake cup. I passed out the jerky to everyone who wanted some.

“Huh, that’s got a nice kick to it. I bet it’d go well with wine, too.”

Blume gulped from a tankard of *shochu* to rehydrate and followed it up with a big bite of jerky. Talk about a wild woman.

“Master, exhaustion levels critical, I report. I require direct magic power supply, I request.”

Nana, who had been working with Blume last, slumped against my back.

She seemed extremely worn-out.

“Guilty.”

“H-hey! Nana! No hanging all over Master allowed!”

The iron wall pair jumped into action immediately.

“Replenishing supply of Master essence. Charging will be complete in thirty-six hundred seconds…”

“Come on! That’s way too long!”

“Mrr. Magic potion.”

Since it was rare for Nana to be so needy, I supplied the magic she requested.

By now, I’d gotten used to it enough that I could do it even in an unnatural position like this as long as our bodies were in contact.

I heard soft snoring from beside me.

“Young Pochi and Tama fell asleep, eh? Those two youngsters will be very strong someday, Satou.”

The general seemed to have taken a liking to Pochi and Tama.

“I have returned. Please instruct me for another round of sparring.”

Liza returned from the back gate.

The samurai general had sent her for a run in the mountains.

“We’re done for today. Starting tomorrow, you’ll study under Granny Blume. You can learn more from her than you can from me. Nana, you’ll be under Granny Blume, too.”

“Granny, is it? You’ve gotten too big for your britches, little boy.”

“Pshh, you’ve been a granny since I was still in diapers, and you know it!”

“Don’t lie. I was still in my thirties when we first met.”

The samurai general and Blume ribbed each other good-naturedly.

“Madam Blume, could I ask you to spar a round with me?”

“Don’t go working an old lady to the bone. I’m worn out from spending the day with those little girls and the blonde over there. I’ll work with you

tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Liza looked uncharacteristically disappointed. Even her tail was slouching.

She must have really enjoyed getting to fight to the fullest for the first time in a long while.

“Liza, would you like to go a round or two with me, if I’ll do as a sparring partner?”

“Would you really?!”

Liza perked up excitedly, like a flower suddenly blooming.

“Only until dinner.”

“Yes! Thank you, Master!”

I borrowed the garden to have a light sparring match with Liza.

Even with my level being several times higher than hers, not to mention using my “Foresight: One-on-One Battle” skill, I couldn’t let my guard down without a close call from one of Liza’s expert attacks.

We sparred to our hearts’ content until the setting sun stretched our shadows long on the ground.

“Liza…”

I offered a hand to Liza, who had dropped to her knees from exhaustion.

“You’ve become even stronger than I realized.”

Liza took my hand with a beaming smile of satisfaction, which she quickly stiffened back into a straight face.

“Thank you, Master. But I still have a long way to go. I couldn’t even push you enough to break into a sweat.”

Liza was always the stoic type.

I lent her my shoulder and helped her back to the deck.

*Hmm…?*

Last I checked, there were only a few spectators aside from our group members. At some point, though, a huge crowd had gathered to watch us.

All of them were chatting amongst each other in obvious excitement.

I'd been so pleased about Liza's growth that I forgot we were being watched.

"I see. So you weren't just flattering him when you said your master is stronger than you, eh? You really meant it."

"You and I are having a sparring match tomorrow, got that?"

"You'll be facing me, too, of course."

Apparently I was now locked in to spar with Blume and the samurai general the following day.

◆

“Sir Satou, the bathing area is this way.”

Although I hadn’t particularly worked up a sweat, there was a naturally free-flowing open-air bath at the samurai general’s mansion, where I decided to take a bath before dinner.

The samurai general and most of the other youngsters didn’t want to take a hot bath in the summer, opting to bathe in a nearby river instead.

The steaming hot bath was decorated with natural stones and protected by a bamboo fence. It really did feel like being in Japan.

“Mm, a hot bath in the summer feels great, too…”

As I sank into the rock-lined hot spring, the feeling of relaxation was so strong that I couldn’t help letting out a murmur of contentment.

Just then, a dot approached on my radar. Not everyone had gone to the river, after all.

“Mind if I join you?”

I managed to resist the instinctive urge to turn toward the source of the unexpected voice.

“Aaah, that’s the stuff. Can’t imagine why anyone would go all the way down to the river when there’s such a great bath right here.”

Settling into the water a short distance away with a contended sigh was the master swordsman Blume. Evidently she was a fellow hot springs appreciator. Judging by her shoulders, she was wearing a simple bathing dress (I was relieved that she wasn’t a stark-naked bather).

“Master’s heeere?”

There was a flurry of footsteps as my companions arrived. They were all wearing bathing dresses, too.

Pochi had wrapped her egg belt around her head so that the egg wouldn’t

end up in the hot water.

“G…guilty…?”

“Give me a break, Master! I know you like older women, but this age gap is ridiculous!”

While Mia sounded unsure, Arisa didn’t hesitate to lodge a complaint.

“No, Arisa. Aaze is even older, I declare.”

Nana offered a defense that I didn’t entirely understand. Even if Aaze was millions of years old, she was still cute.

For that matter, Mia was technically older than Blume, too.

“Don’t worry your little heads. I’ve no interest in a whippersnapper young enough to be my great-grandchild.”

Blume didn’t seem particularly bothered.

“’Tis strange to immerse oneself in all this water. Karion thinks so, too.”

“I did n— Urion, thou shalt not fake me out. I suspect that immersing in hot water improves human circulation.”

The goddess girls came in as well.

Apparently neither of them had bathed since they took human form.

The two goddesses splish-splashed into the water and sank down in front of us.

“This slimy water feels quite pleasant.”

“That’s because it’s a hot spring. It wouldn’t feel like that if it was just heated water.”

I explained this to Karion as she scooped the water in her hands.

Unlike Urion, who was furrowing her brow, Karion seemed to be enjoying the experience.

“The clothes clinging to my body feel most unpleasant.”

*Gah!*

Urion stripped off her bathing suit.

Much to my dismay, the nude body of a young girl filled my vision.

I averted my gaze from Urion with no need for the iron wall pair's intervention. I know from stories like the one about the Greek goddess Artemis that nothing good ever comes of peeping on a goddess while she's bathing.

"Much better. 'Tis as if the water is massaging my body. Thou shalt strip as well, Karion."

"Aye. Thy wisdom is great, Urion. 'Tis better to enter a hot spring nude."

As much as I agreed with the goddess girls, I wished they would have the good manners to keep their bathing suits on in a mixed bath.

After a nice long bath in the hot springs, we changed into *yukata*-like garments provided by a servant girl and went back to the tatami room.

◆

"I'm sorry. Did we keep you waiting?"

The serving trays were already set up in the room, with the unfed samurai eagerly awaiting our arrival like schoolchildren who missed their lunch.

Pochi and Tama sniffed the air, still looking drowsy.

It was clear that their hunger and tiredness were battling it out in their brains.

"No, we just got back as well."

As soon as we took our seats, the samurai general picked up a sizeable sake cup and stood.

"Now, let the banquet begin!"

"Cheers!"

With the general's toast, the feast began.

Liza woke Pochi and Tama for dinner. At first they were still half-asleep, but when a whole-roasted wild boar was carried into the room, they snapped awake at once. I guess meat really is the fastest way to stir their souls.

"Tasty morsels. Tastier than before. Praise be to the chef."

“The wine is tasty, too. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou shalt know that grape juice is sweeter and tastier, Urion.”

The Japanese-style fare prepared by the “Deviant Chef” Mr. Ladpad was just as delicious as Karion said.

“Where does this dish originate from?”

“This one? It’s a regional dish from Higashino Island, home to the long-eared folks’ dominion of the Saga Empire. They say it was created by a hero hundreds of years ago who wanted to recreate a dish from his homeland.”

Just as I suspected, it was a Japanese dish passed down by a hero. While I’d heard that there was a sanctuary for the long-eared folk before, I didn’t know that it was on an island.

Although this wasn’t quite the same as the Japanese cuisine I remembered, it was probably just a difference in the available seasonings and cookware.

“Made it with the help of the high-quality soy sauce and miso that Miss Lulu was kind enough to share.”

Lulu had given him other ingredients, too, like mirin, pepper, and wasabi, in exchange for teaching her some of his cooking techniques.

“You should hurry up and eat, too, Master. Everything is delicious.”

“Right, right. I’ll dig in now.”

There were three serving trays jam-packed with various dishes that utilized the bounty of the sea and the mountains.

The stew Karion praised was delicious, too. Putting the simmered fish on top of rice made for a particularly heavenly bite.

The samurai, too, could barely control themselves in the face of this rare feast.

“Is it good? That’s got the mushrooms and veggies I picked in the mountains.”

“Mm.”

The boy who’d accompanied us shopping earlier was trying to impress Mia with his contribution.

Despite Mia's relatively disinterested reaction, the boy seemed content just to see her eating the food he'd found for her. When a bearded samurai threatened, "Heiske! Eat yer food or I'll eat it for ye!" he hurried back to his seat in a panic, protesting all the while. I guess a growing boy needs to care for the needs of his stomach more urgently than his heart.

"Lady Liza! Your skills with a spear are truly remarkable! I should like a chance to duel you tomorrow as well, if ye'd be so kind."

"Your swordsmanship was most impressive, too, Lady Nana. We are both swordsmen, though you may not fight like a samurai. Let us work together to polish our skills to the highest degree!"

When the dining settled down, the samurai-in-training started drinking sake and talking to Liza and Nana. While the pair politely declined the alcohol they were offered, they were quick to accept the sparring requests.

"A tasty morsel. What is this?"

"It's *botamochi*, made with red beans. The green ones are *zundamochi* made with boiled green soybeans. Figured I'd make you young lasses some desserts with the sugar Miss Lulu gave me."

"'Tis tasty indeed. Blessings be upon thee."

When Karion said this, a red light surrounded Mr. Ladpad. The sweat on his muscles sparkled blindingly.

According to my AR display, he'd gained the title **Blessing: Goddess Karion**. That must be Karion's way of showing her thanks.

At Karion's prompting, Urion tried the *wagashi*-style sweets as well and liked them at once. Both goddesses blissfully snacked away on the mochi.

The rest of my group partook as well, although Pochi and Tama passed out in the middle of eating the roasted wild boar. They must have been really tired. At my request, Nuume saved some of the food for them to eat the following morning.

From the next day on, a long training period began.

The samurai general took a liking to Pochi and started training her one-on-

one, while Liza and Nana learned techniques from Blume the master swordsman. When Tama initially joined Pochi, the head ninja of the household was amazed by her ninjutsu and brought her to the mountains for secret ninja training.

Aside from sparring a few times a day, mostly with the general and Blume, I spent the rest of my time reading the secret samurai spellbooks that the samurai general lent us along with Arisa and Mia. This so-called Samurai Magic referred to magic of various attributes that the samurai invented to use in combat. Sadly, there was no actual “Samurai Magic” skill in existence.

Lulu continued trading cooking techniques with Mr. Ladpad. Hopefully she wouldn’t pick up any of his deviant habits in the process.

The goddess girls seemed to have taken a liking to the hot springs; they spent their days soaking in the outdoor bath, taste testing the food Lulu and company made in the kitchen, checking out the mines deep in the mountains, gazing at herds of mountain goats, and generally enjoying life on the island however they pleased.

*I guess we’ll leave once they get bored of island life?*

Just as this thought idly crossed my mind one day, trouble came to us instead.

◆

“Generaaal! There’s been an attack at the harbor!”

A bloodied samurai came barging into the mansion.

“Mia!”

“Mm. ■■…”

I checked my map and saw a swarm of red dots at the harbor. Most of them were common mercenary or ronin types below level twenty, although there were a few stronger foes mixed in with levels ranging from the high 30s to the mid-40s.

And they were charging up the hill toward the mansion with alarming speed.

“General! The thieves are coming this way!”

A samurai shouted down from the watchtower.

“We’ll fight them off at the gates!”

“General! They’ve split into three groups!”

“Gonrock, you take squad one and go left! Granny, you go right with squad two! The rest of you, with me!”

The samurai donned their armor and split into three directions to head off the thieves.

“What should we do, Master?”

I used my map to ascertain the locations and skill compositions of the highest-level enemies.

Blume and the general’s squads should be able to manage their sides, but it would probably be difficult for them to fight while giving commands. Blume’s squad especially, since they would be dealing with a high-level mage.

“Liza, you go with Sir Gonrock. Nana, you’re with Ms. Blume. Pochi, head for the front gate!”

Since they were clad in their silver armor, I sent the vanguard girls who were in the mansion to support each of the squads.

“Understood!”

“Yes, Master.”

“Roger, sir. Arisa, please watch Mr. Egg for me, sir.”

“Okey-dokey, I’ll take care of it!”

Once Pochi handed off her egg, she joined the other samurai following the general.

“Lulu, Arisa, Mia, you three come with me to the watchtower.”

“Okey-dokey. Will Tama be all right?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. The head ninja is with her, and they’re in the mountains in the opposite direction from where the attackers came from.”

Tama was still deep in the mountains doing ninja training.

“Oh, it’s a barrier.”

A defensive barrier had been deployed around the mansion to protect it.

Apparently there were large magic furnaces underground to support the barrier.

“The general sent us. We can take care of things here.”

“All right. If you see enemy reinforcements, ring the gong to warn everyone.”

We took over for the samurai in the watchtower to carry out some magical assistance and sniping.

Since we were dealing with people this time, I had Lulu use the Fire Rod Gun instead of the Gold Thunder Fox Gun, while I stuck with a low-powered short bow.

“Mia, summon a sylph and provide air support. Arisa, use magic to help out however you see fit.”

“Mm.■■…”

“Since there’s already a barrier, maybe Strengthening Magic would be best—”

There was a flash at the gate, and part of the barrier was shattered.

A moment later, more attack spells hit the surrounding areas of the barrier, creating increasingly large cracks.

“Lulu, shoot through the openings in the front barrier. Aim for the attackers with bows and magic staffs.”

“I’m on it, Master!”

I went after the mages as well.

Pochi had Phalanx for an emergency, but since its effect range was so small, a ranged attack spell could still injure some of the samurai.

“You people aren’t the only ones who can use magic! ■■ ***Heat Laser Nessen!***”

Practically shooting from the hip, the samurai general sent out a red Fire Magic laser from the palm opposite his sword hand.

“YES! That’s exactly the kind of magic a samurai should use! D—”

Arisa’s excited shriek was drowned out by a loud explosion.

I recognized the reference, so I’m pretty sure I know what she was going to say.

“The katakana is a warrior’s soul—it’s a waste to use it on such rabble! Follow the general’s lead! Samurai squad, fire!”

The samurai general’s men used similar spells to attack the enemies at the gate.

Those who couldn’t use magic attacked with longbows instead.

“Looks like they’ve got things handled there.”

“Satou, the right.”

There were explosions and dust clouds rising from the right side of the mansion.

The barrier must have broken there.

“It looks like they used attack magic as a smoke screen while they climbed over the walls.”

Evidently the enemy had already broken through.

The high-level enemy who’d broken the wall was fighting against Ms. Blume and Nana.

“Those samurai are pretty good.”

“Yeah, they should be able to manage the melee-based mobs without our help.”

As I talked strategy with Arisa, I kept taking down the enemies who had bows, Fire Rods, and so on.

Otherwise, their long-distance attacks could land a lucky hit and injure someone.

*“…* ■ ***Create Wind Spirit*** *Fuu Seirei Souzou.”*

Mia’s Spirit Magic activated, and a wind pseudo-spirit called a sylph manifested by her side.

“Have it split into small sylphs and provide healing support, please. Could you ask a few of them to monitor the skies?”

“Mm. Got it.”

On Mia’s command, the sylph divided itself into smaller sylphs, and they whooshed away like the wind to aid the samurai.

“Master, on the left!” Lulu called.

A black-clad broadsword user had broken through the wall, barrier and all, and was wreaking havoc on the samurai.

It looked like the general’s top vassal Gonrock was facing him now.

“Oof, that looked painful…”

A diagonal slash broke Gonrock’s katana and sent him crashing into a nearby hut.

The broadsword user moved to give chase, but Lulu’s sniper fire stopped him.

He glared up at us, looking infuriated.

“Ooh, the broadsword transformed!”

Arisa sounded delighted.

The jet-black blade split vertically down the center, a red light glinting within.

I never expected to see such a manga-or anime-like cliché in this world with my own eyes.

“That guy kinda seems like trouble…”

“Wait.”

Mia held out a hand to stop Arisa from preparing Deracinator.

And in the next moment…

“Blink—‘Helix Spear Attack’!”

Liza leapt at the broadsword user, leaving a trail of red light in her wake.

The broadsword user turned his weapon toward Liza immediately and fired a red laser—too late. The spiraling spear attack knocked the sword upward, and the heat ray scattered harmlessly into the sky.

The broadsword user still didn’t give up and tried to toss the sword aside and jump back even as the helix attack chipped away at his defense barrier.

“…Burst!”

Liza shouted with a burst of energy, and the magic power that was swirling around her spear scattered like shots and pierced the surrounding area.

The magic shots struck the broadsword user repeatedly, completely destroying the cracked defense barrier and tearing through his robes and armor.

I’d never seen this move before—it must be a new one she put together during her training here on Blacksmoke Island.

Even battered and bloodied, the black-clad swordsman pulled out a spare broadsword from his Item Box and faced off against Liza.

But the fight was over in seconds.

Liza and the broadsword wielder both jumped forward using “Blink” and exchanged their final blows with a burst of red sparks.

After a moment, the broadsword broke, and the man dropped to the ground, his shoulder and both knees pierced by Liza’s Magic Spear.

That’s Liza for you. She never disappoints.

“Looks like the other side’s black-clad thief lost to Ms. Blume and Nana, too.”

Their opponent had been a powerful user of advanced Ice Magic, but Nana and Blume closed the distance using “Blink” and knocked out the mage’s guards in a matter of seconds. The mage switched to lesser magic that activated faster to try and prevent the pair from getting any closer.

It was the right call, but no use against these two women.

As impressive as it was that the mage could fire off magic attacks in rapid succession just as quickly as a Fire Rod, Blume and Nana cut the shots down like arrows and kept closing in.

And while the mage courageously kept chanting magic until the very end, there was a look of despair on his face as the pair knocked him out. I have to admit, I felt a little bad for him.

“And the samurai general defeated the black-clad thief at the front gate.”

Pochi looked a little disappointed that she didn’t get to fight the black-clad figure.

She was the one who defeated all the other powerful foes there, though.

“Satou.”

Mia pointed at the rear gate.

I couldn’t see it from here, but I quickly realized that the showy attacks from the other three directions had been a distraction while they successfully broke in through the back.

I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to get a bird’s-eye view of the situation.

“Want me to teleport us to a spot where we have a good line of fire?”

“No, it’s under control.”

I’d already seen Tama returning from the mountain in time to drag the invaders into the shadows.

The ninja leader who was training with her in the mountains snuck up on the other attackers who were on lookout outside the mansion and assassinated them. People in this world have no mercy for thieves and criminals.

“Looks like the fighting is just about over?”

Sensing their imminent defeat, the majority of the thieves, who seemed to be hired hands, started fleeing from the mansion.

The samurai squads grouped up and began to give chase.

“Satou. Coast.”

The small sylphs who were keeping an eye on our surroundings had spotted a giant golem approaching from the coast.

It was shaped like a walking four-legged fortress, not a humanoid form.

I rang the gong to alert the samurai.

“The Giganto is here. You fools are finished.”

The broadsword user who Liza defeated made a triumphant declaration.

Then the “Giganto” golem in question was wracked with a chain of explosions, blowing off its limbs and destroying all of its cannons and other structures in turn.

Finally, there was one last massive explosion that enveloped the entire giant golem, and it stopped moving entirely.

◆

“Young master!”

Two figures suddenly appeared on the watchtower.

Lulu reflexively pointed her gun at them.

“W-wait! It’s me, it’s me!”

The frantic figure was none other than the former Phantom Thief Pippin, who

worked for the Echigoya Company as a spy of sorts. The girl with him appeared to be the same sage's student who was there when he left the White Dragon's Egg with us before.

"Did you two destroy that giant golem, Pippin?"

"Yeah, she did most of the work."

Pippin nodded toward the girl.

"I'm sorry we were late. I wanted to stop them before they attacked this place, but dealing with the Giganto took longer than I hoped."

The girl wanted to apologize to the samurai general, so I brought her and Pippin down with me.

"Satou, is that girl another captive?"

"No, she—"

"Serena! This was your doing, damn it all! You warned the samurai we were going to attack, didn't you?!"

My conversation with the general was interrupted by the black-clad Ice Magic user who Blume and Nana defeated.

"Kamusim…where's Bazan, then?"

I didn't know that name.

Assuming Kamusim was the Ice Magic user, who could Bazan be?

"Bazan is the sage's student who Serena's been chasing," Pippin explained quietly.

"Bazan went to undo the seal. Help me, Serena. It's only a matter of time before Bazan deviates from the great sage's teachings. I came here to get my hands on the Floating Fort so that I could deter him."

"Floating Fort…? You mean the legendary fortress that's said to have been invincible in the Lulukie era is here?!"

Serena and the defeated mage launched into a serious-sounding conversation.

“No, it’s not.”

“…Huh?”

“There’s nothing like that on this island.”

At this statement, both former students of the sage stared at the samurai general.

“You can’t fool me that easily! We know from a rumor that spread in the criminal underworld that the Floating Fort is hidden on this island, and there’s indisputable proof—”

“I’m the one who spread that ‘proof’ around in the first place. I ordered my ninjas to spread the rumors in the underworld personally.”

“B-but why would you do that…?”

“Why, you ask?” The samurai general smirked. “Because I knew some criminals would believe the rumors and attack us. Best way to get stronger is to fight to the death against other strong warriors, eh? And it’s no sweat off my back if we cut down some common thugs who’d try to steal from us based on a rumor.”

“As if you’d ever feel guilty about anything like that, you shameless boy.”

“Pipe down, Granny.”

The Ice Magic user called Kamusim was so shocked by the samurai general’s words that he was numbly repeating things like “No…it can’t be…” under his breath.

“Preeey?”

Tama poked her head out of the shadows at my feet, then hauled out a glamorous black-clad woman with a little “Heave-ho!”

She looked shaky, like being in the shadows had weakened her.

Even so, just to be safe, I removed her mask and tied her hands and feet. The woman was strangely sexy, if not drop-dead gorgeous. She might be popular if she worked in a nightlife district.

“You joined Bazan, too, Kelmareite…?”

“I guess I’ve lost my edge, if I’m at the mercy of a Goody Two–shoes like you, Serena.”

This woman was apparently a pupil of the sage as well.

Although I only knew three of their names now, I had a feeling that the black-clad thieves were all problem children, including the ones I didn’t know yet.

“Give it up, Kelmareite. As long as we have one of the eggs, Bazan will never be able to gather all three that he needs for the ritual.”

“Aha-ha-ha! What a laugh riot!”

“What’s so funny?!”

“You are, you silly girl. At this point, Bazan will have all of them collected already. I got my hands on the Green Dragon’s Egg in Dragu Kingdom. My subordinate has probably handed it off to him by now.”

“N-no…!”

*Is it dragon egg–laying season right now?*

*Or do dragons stay in their eggs for years at a time?*

Unfortunately, now was not the time for contemplating the ever-deepening mystery of dragon biology.

Serena ran over to the samurai general, her face serious.

“General, I am entirely to blame for my failure to stop my former friends. Is there any way you would allow me to deal with them personally?”

“What a selfish request. You must know I would never approve such a thing.”

The samurai general scoffed at Serena.

“Your Excellency, please…”

“Enough. Open your mouth again and I will show no mercy, not even for a friend of Satou’s.”

At the general’s firm tone, Serena reluctantly backed down with an anguished expression. I guess she couldn’t protest any further.

“Hey, you there. The kindly-looking boy.”

The glamorous woman twisted herself toward me, and the cord binding her chest came undone, exposing a generous amount of cleavage.

This must be some kind of seductive technique she used when captured.

Despite myself, my eyes were drawn toward the tantalizing sight.

***—Sense Danger.***

The woman pressed her breasts together with her bound arms, and a jet-black liquid spewed from her cleavage.

I dodged it easily thanks to my "Sense Danger" skill, but the liquid sprayed down on the Ice Magic user lying behind me instead.

"Gaaaaah!"

"Kamusim!"

Serena cried out when the mage screamed.

"Aww, so much for my precious ace in the hole… Then again, if it hit Kamusim, I guess that still counts as a win?"

"Damned fool!"

The samurai general's blade cut off the woman's head.

*Please don't do such violent things in front of me. I hate blood and gore…*

"Master!"

Liza's tense cry prompted me to turn around.

I was so distracted by the beheading that my reaction was delayed.

The Ice Magic user's body was torn open from within, turning inside-out with his black clothes and all so that his muscle fibers and bones were laid bare.

*Black lines.*

Darkness shot out from the man's ruined body like black bolts of lightning. My AR display showed his condition as **Corrupted**, which meant this must be the same Evil God's Curse that attacked the hero: the remnants of the Evil God's Spawn that was once summoned in Shiga Kingdom.

"Dammit, it's the Purgatory Curse…!"

Serena jumped away from the Ice Magic user's body.

This "Purgatory Curse" must be some kind of hex developed from the Evil God's Vestiges.

If I'd carelessly let it hit me, instead of dodging it because there were only red dots on my radar behind me, I might've wound up with another situation like my blackened arm from last time.

"SUEREEEEEEENWAAAAAAAH!"

The grotesque monster that was once the mage screamed, its fingers and hair growing unnaturally long and flailing around like tentacles, knocking people and buildings away.

"Keep your distance!"

My companions, Blume, and the others nearby heeded my warning.

A few of the samurai who didn't get away in time were cut down by tentacles that had formed icicle-like blades; I saw the vestiges of the Evil God trying to enter through the slash wounds.

*You think I'd let that happen?*

I used the Magic Hand that I constantly keep activated to pull the samurai away toward me, then grabbed the Evil God's Vestiges to tear them off.

"Nnngh…!"

An unpleasant sensation filled my entire body, like a cold blade had been stabbed into my back.

The Evil God's Vestiges were trying to corrupt me through my hands.

"Master!"

"Take that, sir!"

More tentacles tried to attack me as I froze in place. Luckily, Liza and Pochi cut them down, and Tama and Nana carried the samurai to safety, so I managed to survive the danger intact.

While we were distracting the monster, Ms. Blume and the samurai general unleashed lethal attacks on it from behind.

The monster's head rolled to the ground and its body was torn asunder. Yet despite this major damage, it quickly healed itself back to normal like a movie playing in reverse.

"A-are you all right?"

"…Don't worry."

I reassured Arisa as I put Holy Sword around my hands to resist the Evil God's Vestiges.

In the corner of my vision, I saw my AR menu turn on of its own accord and activate something from my skill list.

Although I couldn't afford to look more closely at that in the moment, the unpleasant sensation eased all at once, and the darkness trying to encroach on my body gathered into my fingernails, which fell off on their own.

I quickly put the blackened nails away in Storage so they wouldn't start corrupting the ground.

"Master! The monster has grown gigantic, I report."

The creature lost all human form and expanded into a huge, unstable mass.

Even the fearless samurai general and Blume moved some distance away so they wouldn't be swallowed up by the monster.

"Master, shall we go to the aid of the general and Ms. Master Swordsman?"

"No… I don't think normal attacks are going to work on that thing."

As I caught my breath, my mind raced, trying to decide whether I should use a Divine Blade in front of everyone.

"Discordant Ones."

A voice echoed from somewhere.

"How repulsive. That dost not belong in this world. Karion says so, too."

"Aye. They contaminate the world and corrupt reason. They must not exist in the mortal realm."

The two goddess girls stepped forward to confront the monster—stark naked,

with hot spring water dripping from their hair.

Normally aloof, the pair were grimacing in disgust at the sight of the monster.

“Lewd.”

“Put on some clothes before you try to act cool, will you?!”

Mia and Arisa hurried over to put *yukata* on the two girls.

“Clothes are but a decoration.”

“’Tis far more urgent to erase that thing.”

“O warriors, a divine message for thee.”

“Thou shalt eradicate the filth that dost not belong in this world.”

Urion raised her right hand with a crimson glow, while Karion’s raised left hand shone vermillion.

“O warriors. In the name of Urion, I grant thee a blade of judgment to destroy the filth.”

“O warriors. In the name of Karion, I grant thee holy defense to protect thee from the filth.”

As the goddess girls spoke, the weapons and armor of all the combat-capable fighters present were bathed in crimson and vermillion light.

According to my AR display, they’d all been imbued with **God’s Protection**.

“Oooh, I feel stronger than ever before!”

“Amazing. It’s as if I’m in my prime again.”

The samurai general and Ms. Blume charged toward the monster.

They cut down the tentacles that slashed at them without hesitation, pressing closer.

There was no sign that they were being affected by the Evil God’s Vestiges. That must be the God’s Protection at work.

“We should back them up, Master.”

“Master, current fighting strength is insufficient, I declare.”

Despite Liza and Nana's urging, I didn't want to risk leaving the rear guard undefended.

"They are all perfectly safe. All that can break through Karion's protection is the dragon god."

"Thou sayest too much, Urion. But 'tis true, there is nothing to fear. Even if I am only a partial spirit, such small vestiges shall not pierce my protection."

Urion and Karion gave their seal of approval.

In that case, I had no doubt it would be fine.

"All right. Let's go."

I drew the dragon-fang short sword from the scabbard at my waist and joined in on the battle against the monster with Liza, Pochi, and the others.

I was imagining a fearsome battle like a demon lord fight. However, Urion's "Blade of Judgment" was so incredibly powerful that the monster couldn't regenerate from it, and we were able to purge and destroy it with the Evil God's Vestiges and all.

This might be rude, but the goddesses were much stronger than I expected.

Just as I'd thought on occasion before, I had to wonder why summoning heroes to defeat demon lords was even necessary in the first place. If they sent heroes to fight imbued with the powers of goddesses, I feel like they'd be able to defeat a normal demon lord easily enough.

◆

"O great goddesses. We thank you for your much-needed assistance."

Young Serena bowed politely to the goddess girls.

"'Tis a goddess's duty to protect the world from foreign enemies."

"But we shall accept thy thanks. Thou shalt continue to give us gratitude and pious prayers. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. Thou art too superficial, Urion. Thou shalt behave with more dignity."

This wasn't exactly convincing coming from Karion when she was constantly

demanding snacks.

Although Blume and the samurai were shocked that the two girls really were goddesses, they quieted down with a simple divine command. Those divine commands really are handy. I almost wish I could use them myself.

“Young master, if you don’t mind, could you hang onto that egg a little longer?”

“That’s fine. But what are you going to do now, Pippin?”

“Me and Serena are heading to Pialork,” Pippin told me. “That other student, Bazan, is probably headed there from what I hear.”

“Want me to come with you?”

As much as I hate to get mixed up in other people’s problems when I can help it, I did owe Pippin for his help in the Parion Province incident.

“Your Excellency, this is my and my fellow students’ problem. Pippin is so nosy that I’ve given up trying to stop him joining me, but I’d prefer not to have anyone else involved.”

“The girl-child speaks true. Thou art our apostle. Thou shalt not leave our side without permission. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But I do agree that we require our guide.”

Serena didn’t want help, and the goddesses seemed determined to keep me.

“But wherever this Bazan person is, there might be more individuals with those Evil God’s Vestiges, too.”

“No need to worry,” Karion announced confidently. “If there is a disaster that mortals cannot contend with alone, a divine Oracle will descend.”

“Very well. Then I suppose I won’t come with you.”

If Karion insisted, it was probably fine.

“Let us handle things in Pialork Kingdom. Although I guess there is a possibility it might be Garlelork City or the Aubehr Republic instead.”

“Well, we were planning on going to the Aubehr Republic. We’ll keep an eye out.”

“All right, thanks. Once this whole thing is over, I’ll treat ya to all the beer you can drink.”

“Just make sure you contact Lord Kuro before you face off with Bazan. If something like what we saw earlier shows up again, ordinary folks like you and I wouldn’t be able to handle it alone.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Although…I don’t know how ‘ordinary’ you are, young master.”

With that, Pippin headed back over to Serena.

This way, he would hopefully contact me before they fought the rogue student. If worst came to worst, I could show up as Nanashi and save the day.

I’d be fine even without the goddesses’ help in that case, since I could use the Divine Blade as Nanashi without a problem.

“Your Excellency, I promise to make amends for my fellow students’ actions one day.”

Then Serena and Pippin left the house.

“Young Pochi, it seems you’re connected by fate with some troublesome folks.”

The samurai general placed his large hand on Pochi’s head.

“Technically, it’s our friend who just left who’s connected with them, not us _”

“If your pal’s got a fateful connection, that means you’ve got one, too,” Blume interrupted.

She was swinging the sword that was no longer imbued with the God’s Protection, evidently trying to remember how it felt.

“And you wouldn’t wanna need goddesses to take care of things for you, eh?”

My companions all nodded at this.

“Well, maybe we can help you with that. Right?”

“Hrmm.”

Blume and the general exchanged meaningful looks.

“We’re training in the mountains, young Pochi! I’ll teach you my special attack for defeating foul beasts.”

“Liza and Nana, you come with me. How ’bout I teach you my area attack techniques for destroying barriers and disrupting magic?”

“What about Tamaaa?”

Tama looked a little concerned that she’d been so sneaky that the samurai general and Blume forgot about her.

“Miss Tama, I shall instruct you in all of my most secret ninjutsu techniques.” The ninja master appeared in front of Tama. “In exchange, I’d like you to teach me your ninjutsu as well. Do we have an accord?”

Tama looked to me for permission. I nodded.

“Aye.”

“Then let us go at once.”

The two ninjas vanished into the mountains.

For three days and nights, the three groups tirelessly trained in their secret techniques.

It wasn’t just the vanguard training, either. Arisa and Mia learned new spells that I had personally improved, while Lulu was hard at work in cooking research with Mr. Ladpad.

The goddess girls, meanwhile, indulged in the hot springs and taste testing Lulu and Ladpad’s new dishes.

Soon, the secret training was finished, and it was time to leave Blacksmoke Island.

We stood in front of the small boat that was waiting for us at the pier, saying reluctant farewells.

“Keep getting stronger, young Pochi.”

“Yes, sir. Pochi will get more and more stronger, sir!”

The samurai general exchanged a stiff handshake with Pochi.

“Liza, Nana, don’t go dying on me out there. There’s still plenty I want to teach you. Make sure you survive and come back in one piece.”

“Yes, Blume. I will enact the aggressive defense you taught me, I declare.”

“I swear to master the techniques you showed me and make them my own.”

Blume hugged Nana and Liza tightly.

It was a touching scene, in stark contrast to their violent demeanor after they returned from training the night before.

“Miss Lulu, let’s meet again in Shiga Kingdom!”

“Yes, please come visit us at our house in the labyrinth city or the royal capital.”

Lulu, too, seemed sad to leave Mr. Ladpad as he continued flexing half naked.

I was glad she’d bonded with a fellow cook, but I still hoped she wouldn’t pick up any of Ladpad’s stranger habits in the future.

“Goddess, these are the hot springs eggs and steamed buns you enjoyed so much. You can eat them as snacks on your journey.”

The samurai general’s daughter Nuume gave the goddess girls a parting gift.

“M-Miss Mia…!”

The young samurai-in-training Heiske ran up to Mia nervously.

Behind him, the older samurai were holding their breath as they watched over him.

“I…I’m gonna get way stronger. Even stronger than Sir Gonrock, or even Sir Siingen.”

“Mm.”

“S-so, um…come back and visit again, yeah?”

At this, the samurai let out a collective sigh.

They must have assumed the pure young man was going to confess his love to Mia.

“Promise.”

“Okay!”

Mia held out her pinky, and the boy’s face bloomed into a smile as he exchanged a promise with Mia to meet again.

“All right, everyone, let’s go.”

At Arisa’s prompting, we boarded the small boat, and it left the pier.

It carried us to our sailing ship, and we climbed aboard. Our friends from the samurai house kept waving to us until the harbor was out of sight.

“Where to next, Master?”

I had an answer ready for Arisa this time.

“We’re heading to the land of love and flowers—Aubehr Republic, home to the Tenion Central Temple.”

# Land of Love and Flowers

***Satou here. The first place that comes to mind when I hear 'city of flowers' is Paris, but according to a friend of mine, the title suits Florence best. No matter how worked up my friend got about it, though, I don't think it's all that important to decide which one is the better city of flowers. I'm sure they're both wonderful cities, after all.***

"Lots of islands."

Our sailing ship traveled at full speed, and we reached the archipelago that was home to the Tenion Republic—also known as Aubehr Republic—the day after we left Blacksmoke Island. I used the Search Entire Map spell to get information about Aubehr Republic, the "land of love and flowers."

The sage's students we were on the lookout for were nowhere to be seen on the map, nor were there any demons, demon lord cultists, or reincarnations.

Privately heaving a sigh of relief, I looked over the rest of the information.

This nation's population consisted primarily of humans, birdfolk, and finfolk—in other words, mermaids. The gender ratio was also of note: There were ten times more women than men, like the setting of a harem manga for young men. Most of the men were sailors or foreign merchants.

According to my Ministry of Tourism documents, this was because most of the men worked abroad since the agriculture and industry here weren't very strong.

"Smells gooood?"

"There's lots of different flowers, sir."

Tama and Pochi gazed around the flower-filled islands, their eyes crinkling contentedly.

"This isn't like those islands on the sugar route where they lured creatures in

with the scent and trapped them to absorb their nutrients or plant seeds, is it?”

“Don’t worry, these ones are all normal flowers.”

I smiled at Arisa reassuringly.

“It seems like all of the islands here have a spring climate.”

“Yes, Lulu. It is pleasant, I declare.”

Lulu and Nana seemed to like it here, too.

“Tama, go up to the crow’s nest to keep watch. Pirates might attack us from behind the islands.”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

“Pochi will go, too, sir! Pochi is a lookout pro, sir!”

Tama and Pochi struck a salute pose at Liza’s command and ran over to the mast.

While Tama climbed up it nimbly right away, Pochi moved her egg belt to her head before following suit, squeezing into the crow’s nest together.

As I looked up at them, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Provide the morsels.”

It was the ever-hungry goddess pair.

“Since the breeze is so nice out here, why don’t we fry up some crepes on the deck?”

I asked Lulu to get things ready to make crepes and poured a glass of the honeyed fruit water Karion liked and one of the sweet mead Urion favored.

“Tasty.”

The goddess girls tilted their glasses back in high spirits.

*If I’m going to ask them, this is as good a time as any.*

“…The Discordant Ones.”

As soon as I murmured the phrase, the goddesses reacted almost overdramatically.

They stared at me with eyes that seemed to see into my soul.

“You mentioned that phrase when we saw someone afflicted by the black corruption back on Blacksmoke Island. Is that what those things are called?”

“That is taboo.”

“Humans should not know of it.”

Taboo, huh… Come to think of it, stuff like radio towers, railroads, and printing presses are all considered taboo as well, aren’t they? That’s an awfully wide range of forbidden knowledge.

“I see… You also said that it’s ‘a goddess’s duty to protect the world from foreign enemies.’ Are these ‘Discordant Ones’ attackers from outside our world?”

“Thou hast many questions. Thou shalt not pry into affairs that humans should not know of. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou art delusional, Urion. But that question does fall under taboo.”

“Karion!”

Urion interrupted Karion sharply.

*Ahh, I see.*

Urion’s reaction made it clear to me. It might sound like Karion’s “taboo” was referring to the “Discordant Ones,” but she must have actually been talking about whether they’re “foreign enemies.” Perhaps Karion was telling me in a roundabout way that the “Discordant Ones” are outside invaders, beings that harm our world.

“I’ve been told that the likes of radio towers, railroads, and printing presses are all taboo as well. Is that for the same reason?”

“…Do not make me say it again. Mere mortals need not know the affairs of the divine realm. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But I agree. Anything that is taboo is such for a reason. Let it be known that to learn the reason is akin to violating the taboo in some cases.”

Knowing is as bad as violating the taboo?

In other words, if I learned the reason, it would have as severe an effect as having violated the taboo? What do radio towers, railroads, and printing presses all have in common…?

Karion clapped her hands sharply, making a loud noise.

“Thou shalt cease this line of thought. Thinking about it any further will cause harm to the world. We do not wish to invoke divine punishment, either. Urion says so, too.”

“I concur, Karion. We must take great care to avoid wasting our divine power.”

*I had better put this line of inquiry aside until after we part ways with the goddesses.*

*Whatever “divine punishment” might involve, I certainly don’t want to experience it firsthand.*

“Big islaaand?”

“Lots of ships, sir!”

Tama and Pochi called down excitedly from their post atop the match.

As I turned my attention away from the goddesses, I saw my companions looking at me with concerned expressions.

I guess I must have worried them a little.

◆

Even after returning to a normal sailing speed, we reached the harbor of Aubehr Republic before we could finish all the crepes.

“I guess oceangoing ships have to wait to enter this port, too.”

“It looks like ships that don’t have cargo to unload are supposed to drop anchor in the bay and go ashore in small boats.”

When we lowered our dinghy and hopped inside, a group of mermaids gathered around it and pulled us to the pier. They requested one copper coin apiece once we arrived, which seemed reasonable enough to me. Since I hadn’t

exchanged my currency yet, they were coins from another nation, but the mermaids didn't seem to mind.

Although the Inland Sea Common Language worked with the mermaids well enough, I acquired an "Aubehr Language" skill during our conversation, so I put skill points into it and activated it just in case.

"Let us go to Tenion Temple."

As soon as we stepped onto the pier, Urion made a short declaration and tottered off.

Tenion Central Temple was located on a low cliff overlooking the harbor, so it was clearly visible from here.

"Is that it up there?"

"Prettyyy!"

"It's pretty like a jewel, sir. I want to show Mr. Egg, too, sir."

Pochi removed the egg belt from her waist and wrapped it around her chest.

"No wonder it looks like a jewel. It's made out of jade."

I asked Arisa and Liza to take care of business with the harbor officials while the rest of us donned priest robes, pulled the hoods over our eyes, and followed the goddess girls.

"Hey, Mr. Priest, how about some flowers?"

"Care for a flower candy, Priest?"

"The flower sake is divine, too, Mr. Priest."

Beautiful flowers were in bloom all over the stalls that lined the street, while pretty women called out to me with sparkly smiles.

"Mrr."

"Master, if we stop here, we'll lose sight of the goddesses."

Mia and Lulu dragged me away from the temptation of the local specialties.

Come to think of it, it was rather unusual that the goddesses weren't distracted by the sweets and sake on their way.

“Pretty.”

Mia spotted a big building at the end of the street.

According to my map information, the white palace at the center of the city was the Aubehr Republic parliament hall.

It was an elegant building, befitting the heart of the “land of love and flowers.”

Once we passed by the palace, we headed up a slightly sloping road, where Tenion Central Temple came into view.

“Welcome to Tenion Central Temple.”

“May you be favored in your fortunes in love.”

“Blessings of Goddess Tenion be upon you.”

The lovely young priestesses greeted us in lilting tones as we entered the temple.

Since we were wearing the robes of Karion Central Temple, I felt oddly out of place.

“Pardon me, please. Only authorized personnel are allowed beyond this point.”

A handsome young priest stopped the goddess girls as they strode toward the inner sanctum of the temple. He had a beguiling charm about him, even more than the good-looking priest at Garleon Temple.

“Such insolence. Thou shall not hinder a goddess’s way.”

“Hallowed be our names. Thou shalt bow down and beg forgiveness.”

The goddess girls’ divine commands prompted the handsome young priest to prostrate himself and let them through.

The other priests who appeared in their path were met with a similar fate, dropping to their knees like dominoes.

“Will Goddess Tenion need a wooden statue as well?”

“Nay,” Karion responded shortly. “’Tis unnecessary. We are only here to give

her a report.”

A report… They probably wanted to tell her that the “Discordant Ones” had appeared.

The Tenion statue I’d already carved in secret was for nothing, then. Well, I could always just offer it up at Tenion Temple next time I went to visit Sara and the head priestess in the old capital.

“We have awaited your arrival, o sacred ones.”

As we approached an area with a particularly pure atmosphere, some priestesses in suggestively semitransparent robes were waiting for us.

I couldn’t help but notice that the priests and priestesses in this temple were almost universally beautiful, regardless of gender.

“Please, come this way.”

The head priestess spoke in a pleasant and clear voice, leading the goddess girls into the holy sanctuary.

When her veil fluttered, I realized with surprise that the head priestess was of the long-eared tribe, not a human. People of the long-eared tribe were a very rare sight outside of their sanctuary in the Saga Empire; I felt oddly lucky to have met so many recently, including Weeyari from the hero’s party and the depressed Demon Lord Shizuka.

“We shall meet with Tenion.”

“Yes, of course.”

The goddess girls proceeded into the sanctuary of Tenion Central Temple.

We were stopped by the priestesses and made to wait outside. Unlike in Sherifardo State, Karion didn’t call for me to come with her this time.

*“O great goddess who watches over us…”*

I faintly heard a call to the goddess from inside.

After a while, a green glow shone through from the other side of the door. It was a pure, soothing light.

“Satou,” Mia called to me.

As we bathed in the holy light, the door opened from within.

“You, the black-haired boy. Come with me.”

A different priestess came out to summon me.

“Quickly. The head priestess cannot commune with Goddess Tenion for long.”

The priestess grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the sanctuary.

“Provide the statue. The vessel for Tenion.”

Apparently Karion knew about the statue I’d been carving in secret.

I had mixed feelings about this so soon after she’d proclaimed it unnecessary. Still, it seemed better than letting it go to waste, so I produced the statue from my Item Box.

Since Tenion had a more grown-up image than the goddess girls, I had carved her as a beautiful woman, like an adult version of Sara from the old capital.

At the goddesses’ prompting, I carried the statue to the center of the sanctuary.

“Tenion.”

“Ready.”

The goddess girls looked up toward the sky at the point where the green light was descending from and called out to their fellow goddess.

The particles of light multiplied until it was too bright to see in the sanctuary even with the “Light Intensity Adjustment” skill.

“So this is a human body…”

The room was still full of light, but my vision returned a little sooner than that of the people around me thanks to “Light Intensity Adjustment.”

There stood a beautiful woman draped in a veil of green light that floated around her. She was so thoroughly my type that if this was before I’d met Ms. Aaze, I might have proposed to her on the spot. It wasn’t just her appearance, either; she had an entrancing air about her as well.

“Hrm. A little plain, perhaps.”

The woman ran a hand down her teal hair, and it took on luscious waves, braided itself together, and formed into a complex bun. It was the kind of attractive look that would have all the men swooning over her at a fancy cocktail party.

“Thou art skillful, Tenion.”

The woman smiled at Urion’s murmured words.

So I was right: This beautiful woman was Goddess Tenion herself.

“It was that human over there that prepared this vessel for me, was it not?”

“Aye. He is an excellent craftsman.”

“And a good chef, too.”

I wasn’t sure whether I should answer that directly, so I stayed silent until Urion and Karion answered instead.

“I appreciate your efforts. Do you wish for a reward of some kind?”

Tenion spoke politely even to humans, it seemed. She must be polite by default.

“Well, if you would allow it, I wouldn’t mind some information about the ‘Discordant Ones’ or taboo in general—”

I lowered my voice so the priestesses wouldn’t hear.

“Nay. We have told thee that this is forbidden.”

“Thou shalt accept that discussion of taboo is not allowed by its very nature.”

The goddess girls rejected my request before Tenion could even answer.

“The Discordant Ones…? You told him about this?”

“’Twas a slip of the tongue. But we have not told him any details. Karion says so, too.”

“No, I didn’t. That was thy mistake, Urion. Thou shalt be scolded by Tenion.”

I see, so it was Urion who said that phrase.

“You there, human…”

“Please, call me Satou.”

“Forget all you heard.”

Tenion ignored me and gave me an order.

I could feel somehow that it was a divine command.

“’Tis no use. Divine commands do not work on this one.”

“Even if one uses extra divine power, there is still no effect. ’Tis bizarre.”

The goddess girls sounded annoyed. *Could you not diss me while I’m right here?*

“That is a problem…”

Tenion dismissed the priestesses with a wave of her hand.

“If you would prefer that I not tell anyone else, I will gladly keep it a secret. But is there any way you could tell me what those things are? I’ve encountered the so-called ‘Discordant Ones’—the Evil God’s Vestiges and Evil God’s Spawn—several times already.”

I didn’t mention that I’d defeated them, since that’s all Nanashi the Hero’s doing.

“Very well.”

““Tenion!”” both goddesses protested.

“It matters not. Though I cannot share too many details that fall under taboo. Is that still acceptable?”

I nodded at Tenion.

“They are foreign enemies.”

*That’s not seriously the whole explanation, is it?*

“Yes, that much I know. In other words, the Evil God and those who borrow its power, like demons…they are ‘Discordant Ones,’ or foreign enemies, correct?”

“No.”

*Huh? That’s not right?*

“Demons are still an element of this world. And the Evil God is still one of its gods.”

“’Tis unpleasant to be put in the same category as that thieving god. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. ’Tis taboo to use a derogatory name for the Evil God. Let it be known that discrimination lessens the divine.”

From the sound of things, maybe Urion hated the Evil God, and Karion was defending it?

It was an interesting tidbit that “thieving god” was a derogatory term for the Evil God.

“Then the ‘Discordant Ones’ are not an element of this world… Meaning they’re invaders from a separate world?”

“It would be taboo to provide definitions or details regarding the ‘Discordant Ones.’”

Even without Tenion answering me, I had a feeling I was right based on all the information I’d gathered so far.

If Arisa was here, she’d probably be grinning ear to ear thinking about a certain super-famous light novel character who came from the future to “shake up the world.”

“So are things like radio towers, railroads, and printing presses restricted as taboo because they would interfere with your job of eliminating those invaders…?”

“The answer to that is forbidden,” Tenion replied coolly.

“Is there any way you could tell me if there’s other technology like radio towers, railroads, and printing presses that would be considered taboo?”

“The answer to that is forbidden.”

Darn. I was hoping I could avoid accidentally bringing divine punishment down on myself.

To summarize my theories so far…

There are invaders from another world that the gods call “Discordant Ones,” and the gods have a duty to protect the world from them. I think that’s pretty clear by now.

Things like radio towers, railroads, and printing presses are considered taboo and strictly forbidden. There’s a good chance that this is because they would have some kind of negative impact on the gods’ ability to carry out that duty, although I don’t know that for sure just yet.

…And that’s about it for now.

“I take it you have no further questions?”

“Just one more. Would it be possible for me to visit the divine realm?”

Before Tenion wrapped things up, I thought I’d take the opportunity to try and get an answer to something that I’d been wondering for a while.

“It is possible.”

*Whoa, for real?!*

“However, you would need to earn the approval of all of us in order to do so.”

“’Tis effectively impossible. ’Twould be crueler to give thee false hope. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. It has been achieved before.”

“That was a god. ’Tis no comparison to this mortal.”

So the only person who’s ever succeeded at this task was some kind of god, huh?

Given the context, I got the impression that it wasn’t any of the seven main gods, which would most likely mean it was the dragon god or the Evil God.

“Goddess Tenion, what must I do in order to earn approval?”

“The gods must assign you trials, and you must surpass those trials and acquire a mark as proof. Acquiring the mark means you have earned their approval.”

This was starting to sound like a questline in a game.

*Wait…a mark?*

Come to think of it, I remembered getting a “Mark of Parion” title in Parion Province.

I checked the title list in my menu, and sure enough, it was there. Which meant I just needed to collect six more.

“Would you be so generous as to give me a trial, Goddess Tenion?”

“There are no trials I would like you to fulfill at this time.”

Tenion gave me a warm smile and a cold response.

“This discussion is over. Mortals’ lives are short. ’Tis foolish to waste them on impossible dreams. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. ’Tis up to thee how to use thy time. A wasted life is still a life. Thou art too obstinate in the belief that all things must have significant meaning, Urion.”

“I am not obstinate. Thy way of thinking is dangerous, Karion. Tenion says so, too.”

Tenion looked on fondly as Urion and Karion teased each other.

It was like she was their mother, or maybe a much older sister.

◆

“Glory to the great Goddess Tenion!”

“Praise be to her name!”

“Give thanks to the Goddess!”

A festival began at the Tenion Central Temple to celebrate Tenion’s arrival.

Since the temple was facing the ocean, there were a number of boats and ships floating off the coast nearby, giving praise and thanks to Tenion along with those lucky enough to enter the temple grounds.

“Glory to Goddess Urion!”

“Glory to Goddess Karion!”

Urion and Karion were sitting on either side of Tenion, being worshiped as

well.

After the head priest and priestess begged us to join as apostles of the goddesses, we sat with the clergymen in the sacred seats on the tiered platforms behind the goddesses. At first, they pressed us to sit next to the goddesses, but I insisted that they take those seats instead. I imagine it's not often that they get to have a conversation with their goddess.

"The Musical Saint Solulunia will perform a song of gratitude for Goddess Tenion."

As soon as the priest made an announcement with Wind Magic carrying his voice, a sublime song began to play.

"Elf."

"Looks like she's from the Bulainan clan."

The Musical Saint played a heart-shaped double harp similar to the holy instrument from the Flue Empire era that we saw in Parion Province.

While the musicians we met in Parion Province were very talented, she was on another level entirely.

Her performance was even better than the players in Bolenan Forest.

When the song for the goddesses ended, Mia stood up enthusiastically.

"Must talk to her."

"Wait a second, Mia. I'll take you to meet the Musical Saint."

Even though Mia's Spirit Vision would probably guide her there eventually, I was afraid she'd get lost on the way and give up.

"There."

We found the saint right away.

Because no one was allowed to get close to her.

Some of her apprentices tried to stop Mia from walking up to her, until I lifted her hair to give them a good look at her pointed elf ears, which made them assume she was a friend of the other elf and let her through.

“Who?”

“Mia.”

“Bolenan?”

“Yes.”

Apparently the songstress was also an elf of few words.

What unfolded next was a high-speed volley of single-word statements.

Even a certified Mia interpreter like me couldn’t entirely follow what they were saying. All I know is they were both very excited.

At the Musical Saint’s prompting, Mia played a song on her harp.

For a while, the saint just listened. Then she got a mischievous look on her face, reached out, and started playing a duet with Mia on the other side of the holy harp. Mia was confused at first, but quickly began to enjoy the duet.

Some of the saint’s students listened blissfully, some stared at Mia rather enviously, and some others focused intently on the performance in hopes of stealing their techniques.

“Fun.”

“Again.”

“Mm.”

Mia and the Musical Saint shook hands.

That was probably a promise to play together again someday.

“Amazing.”

“Not yet.”

“Another?”

“Teacher.”

“Hmm.”

*I wish I had subtitles for this.*

My best guess is that the Musical Saint was saying that she still wasn’t as good

as her musical mentor.

“Aaaaaah!”

There was a sudden scream, followed by a spreading wave of dismayed voices.

…A dragon.

A massive yellow dragon was flying across the sky above Aubehr Republic.

“Silence.”

“Let it be known that thou art in the presence of gods.”

The goddess girls’ divine commands settled the panicked crowd down.

The yellow dragon circled around the distant sea and came back this way at a lower altitude.

No doubt it thought that the White Dragon’s Egg in Pochi’s possession was its own.

“Mia, stay with the saint!”

Without waiting for Mia’s answer, I used “Warp” to weave through the crowd while everyone’s eyes were on the dragon, quickly reaching the rest of my group.

“It’s Master, sir!”

Pochi was the first to notice my arrival.

“I need to borrow this, Pochi.”

“Okay, sir.”

Pochi looked a little worried as she handed over her egg belt, and I used Return to teleport back to our ship.

Then I set sail at high speed, drawing the yellow dragon’s path away from the central temple.

If I had somewhere to teleport that was a little less obvious, I could’ve transformed into Nanashi the Hero and used “Skyrunning” to go up and talk to the dragon directly. Unfortunately, I could do no such thing with so many other

people at sea.

“Good, I managed to lure it away from… Oh, come on.”

There was a single small boat between my ship and the dragon.

My “Clairvoyance” spell told me that the person on the ship was a woman in the prime of her youth. Although a veil covered her face, it was clear from the outline of her body.

*“…■* ***Create Leviathan****.”*

The veiled woman raised a staff, and the surface of the ocean roiled until a massive sea serpent burst into view.

“O Leviathan! Strike down this enemy mine! …Vortex!”

The giant serpent of water—the Leviathan—spun in time with her voice and created a whirlpool that torrented toward the yellow dragon.

“CWLOROOOOOUN!”

As it howled, the dragon unleashed a lightning-like “Dragon Breath” from its jaws.

The two earth-rending attacks collided in midair. There was a boom so loud it hurt my eardrums as splashes of water and lightning scattered in all directions, the sea churned as if a storm and a cyclone had struck at the same time, and the seawater that had been flung up into the sky formed into dark clouds and brought down a torrent of rain and lightning.

While my ship was tossed around like a leaf in a fierce current, I searched for the veiled woman who had been on the small ship.

She was next to the Leviathan, her boat lifted to safety by a pillar of seawater, unaffected by the violent storm.

I breathed a sigh of relief and assessed the rest of the situation.

The yellow dragon was hovering in midair, glaring at the Leviathan from some distance away.

Maybe my voice would be able to reach the dragon in this moment.

I changed into Nanashi the Hero and used “Flashrunning” to make my way up

in front of the dragon's face under cover of the storm.

I changed my title not to "Hero" but to "Friend of the Black Dragon."

*"<O Great Yellow Dragon! I am a friend of the Black Dragon Hei Long of the eastern continent and fought alongside the sky dragons of the sacred Fujisan Mountains against the Evil God's Spawn!>"*

I spoke to the yellow dragon in Dragon Language with the help of my "Ventriloquism" skill.

Since I didn't think Nanashi's casual speech would be very convincing, I used a more normal tone instead.

*"<The sky dragons have a strange habit of supporting humans, but that violent black dragon called you a friend?>"*

A deep, ringing voice blew away the storm clouds.

Without the "Dragon Language" skill, I might have thought it was threatening me with that terrifying sound.

*"<What you sensed was the White Dragon's Egg that the great White Dragon entrusted to me! Try and sense it again! Do you detect anything aside from this egg?>"*

I held up the White Dragon's Egg as proof.

*"<…I do not. Then where is my egg?>"*

*"<I'm afraid I don't know.>"*

I felt bad, but I couldn't throw out the name of Pialork Kingdom based on an educated guess.

"CWLOROOOOOUNN!"

The yellow dragon let out a roar of rage, dropping a massive lightning bolt on the ocean.

*"<Farewell, friend of the Black Dragon. If you find my egg, come and bring it to me. I will reward you handsomely.>"*

With that, the dragon flew away as furiously as it had arrived.

I used Return to go back to my sailing ship and removed my Nanashi the Hero disguise.

“In the name of Urion, I command thee. Storm, hasten away.”

“In the name of Karion, I command thee. Sea, be calm at once.”

The goddess girls’ voices rang out from far away, and a clear sky and calm seas spread out in concentric circles from Tenion Central Temple. Apparently gods can control the weather as they please, too.

By the time I looked back, the Leviathan was gone, and the small boat was back on the surface of the sea.

The little vessel passed by my sailing ship, heading toward the harbor.

I caught a glimpse of the woman’s face in profile as her veil fluttered.

“…Miss Aaze?”

When I blurted out the name without thinking, the woman looked up sharply.

It was an instinctive reaction because her face looked so similar to Aaze’s, but on closer inspection, her hair color and style were completely different.

The woman leapt off the little boat and landed on the deck of my ship, moving as if gravity didn’t apply to her.

“Aaze? As in Aialize of Bolenan?”

Her voice was imposing and dignified.

Although her face looked just like Aaze’s, the overall impression she gave was completely different.

“Do you know Lady Aialize?” I asked.

“I do. She is an old friend of mine. We met when I was in charge of the World Tree.”

*A high elf.*

My AR display revealed her race to me.

“I am Niyuniciize, a high elf born of Bulainan Forest. You may call me Nyuuze.”

*Huh. Why “Nyuuze” and not “Niize”?*

“I never thought I’d have the honor of meeting a high elf outside of the forest.”

If I remembered correctly, Bulainan Forest had the standard number of eight high elves.

“The only oddballs you’d encounter like this are Silumfuuze and myself. Though I am a high elf, my connection to the World Tree has been broken. I left the forest behind and chose to live as guardian to Leviathan, who sleeps at the bottom of the inland sea.”

“By ‘Leviathan,’ are you referring to the pseudo-spirit you created earlier with Spirit Magic?”

“No. That was only modeled after the real Divine Beast Leviathan.”

“There’s really a Divine Beast down there…?”

It didn’t show up on my map.

The bottom of the ocean must be a separate map, like it was in the south sea.

I’d be a little curious to meet this Leviathan.

“So are you always traveling around the inland sea by boat?”

“No. I normally lead a quiet life on one of the islands in the seas of the Aubehr Republic. I came here today because my student sent word by carrier pigeon that the gods had descended for a visit.”

*Ahh, so she’s on her way to meet Tenion and the others.*

Since it was such a rare opportunity, we chatted on our way back to the harbor of Aubehr Republic.

◆

“Satou.”

My companions came to greet me, accompanied by the Musical Saint.

“Aaze?”

“Teacher!”

When they saw Miss Nyuuze, Mia and the saint both exclaimed at the same

time.

Just as I suspected, the student who summoned Nyuuze was none other than the Musical Saint.

“Another elf? I don’t recognize you. You’re not from the Bulainan clan, are you?”

“Mm. Bolenan.”

“I see. I am Niyuniciize, a high elf born of Bulainan Forest. You may call me Nyuuze.”

When Miss Nyuuze introduced herself, Mia straightened up and bowed her head.

“My name is Misanaria Bolenan, youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

It had been a long time since I last heard Mia introduce herself in a complete sentence.

“Spirit, amazing.”

“My teacher.”

“What spirit?”

“Leviathan.”

Mia and the saint exchanged words rapidly.

“I, Misanaria of Bolenan Forest, entreat you, Niyuniciize of Bolenan. Please instruct me in the ways of your magnificent Spirit Magic.”

“You want to know the secrets to my Spirit Magic?” Nyuuze gazed at Mia. “… How odd. Your level is plenty high enough. If you are from Bolenan, can you summon Behemoth?”

“Mm, I can. Garuda, too.”

“You can use the Beliunan clan’s Garuda as well? So you’ve earned the approval of another clan, then.”

“No. Satou.”

Mia shook her head and pointed at me.

“This boy?”

“Mm. World Tree.”

Mia’s explanation left a lot to be desired. Nyuuze looked at me questioningly.

“When I visited Bolenan Forest, swarms of Evil Jellies had infected all eight World Trees. I assisted the elves in removing them.”

“Evil Jellies… I see. That makes sense. Then out of gratitude for the one who saved my homeland, I will gladly teach you the secrets of using Create Leviathan.”

“Thank you.”

Oh, good. Now Mia would gain another variation on her Spirit Magic.

◆

“I hope Mia is doing all right…”

“Yes, Arisa. Mia will be fine, I declare.”

Since the day we met Nyuuze, Mia had been training with her to learn a new Spirit Magic spell on the hidden island where Nyuuze lived.

Even though Nyuuze had come to see the three goddesses, she only played a song for them before whisking Mia back home with her the very same day. Though we tried to go with them, she told us we would only get in the way of their training.

“I’d love to hear Miss Nyuuze play again once Mia’s training is done.”

“Me too. The Musical Saint is wonderful too, of course, but Miss Nyuuze’s performance was really extraordinary.”

It made me realize that there’s always a higher level of greatness, even when you think you’ve found perfection.

“Are we going to leave once the goddesses’ festival is over?”

“Hmm… Let’s do some sightseeing in Aubehr Republic for a few days, then resume our journey. The goddesses said they don’t mind stopping along the

way as long as we're heading toward the Garleon Central Temple in the Garleon Alliance."

According to the duo, they wanted to show off their vessels to Goddess Garleon.

They'd ordered me not to make a statue for Garleon under any circumstances, so I held off on carving one in secret this time.

"Master, today's meal is a 'flower bouquet'! All of the dishes are cooked with flowers!"

Lulu carried out a tray excitedly.

Even though we were guests here, she was helping out in the kitchen so she could learn Aubehr Republic cooking techniques.

"Masteeer?"

"We won again, sir!"

"They've stopped for a lunch break at the moment. I swear we will bring back the championship flag for you, Master."

The beastfolk girls were competing in Aubehr Republic's famous arena in a tournament called the Three Goddess Cup.

"I wish Mr. Egg could see me in action, too, sir."

Pochi patted the egg belt that was wrapped around my waist.

I was taking care of it for her while she was fighting.

"Did you fight Aubehr's Three Musketeers? They're a favorite to win, from what I've heard."

"No, I believe they'll be joining in the finals this afternoon."

"I guess the local champions get the seed treatment."

Arisa was surprisingly knowledgeable about all this. The "Musketeers" she mentioned were a branch of the Aubehr Republic army that specialized in Magic Guns, she told me.

"We'll come cheer you on in the finals."

“Will you really?! In that case, simply winning won’t be enough. We’ll be sure to dominate the competition completely so that you can see us utterly victorious!”

Liza was blazing with excitement.

*Just make sure you hold back so you don’t kill anyone, please.*

“Apostle, the goddesses send for you.”

While we were all dining on the flower cuisine and discussing our plans for the afternoon, a priest in training came to get me.

“What is it? Did they tell you why?”

“No, they only said to bring their apostle.”

I had a feeling it was Karion or Urion who asked for me. If it was Tenion, she probably would have given a reason.

What could they need now? I imagined them requesting some sweet alcohol or pastries as I headed toward their altar.

*Hmm?*

No one was there.

The festival was on hold, probably because the guests of honor were missing.

“This way, Apostle. They are all in the sanctuary.”

Was there an emergency or something?

I hurried into the sanctuary.

“…Thou art late.”

Urion scolded me as soon as I entered.

The only people inside were the goddesses and me. The priest who brought me and the head priestess and company were all sent to wait outside.

“Did something happen?”

“Silence.”

It was only when Karion hushed me that I realized Tenion was standing stock-

still, gazing up toward the heavens while a green light rained down on her.

*“Tenion is receiving a message from her true self.”*

Karion silently mouthed to me to explain the situation.

It must be a pretty delicate process.

“…It is done. My self in the divine realm has warned me of a danger to the world.”

Beads of sweat trickled down Tenion’s forehead as she tried to catch her breath.

“Has another demon lord appeared?”

“No. Demon lords are a danger to the mortal realm, yet they are still a part of the world. Their threat could not lead the world to destruction in the truest sense.”

More dangerous than a demon lord… Could it be the Evil God’s Vestiges, what the gods called the “Discordant Ones”?

“Your guess is mostly correct. Pray do not speak it aloud.”

Tenion stopped me before I could say anything.

She seemed to be dead set against letting me say the phrase *Discordant Ones*.

“Urion and Karion, take the apostle to the land that is home to Zaicuon’s temple.”

“What of thee, Tenion?”

“I did not provide this vessel with much divine power. In a matter of hours, it will likely run out of power and disappear. You also agreed that we should send you there. You understand, do you not?”

“We do.”

The goddess girls nodded.

It took me a second to figure it out, until I remembered that the vessels were being moved by the goddesses’ spirit avatars—basically, they were copies. Their real selves in the divine realm must have made the decision to send us out.

“Must we make haste?”

“The laws of cause and effect have not yet come together.” Tenion shook her head in response to Karion’s question. “We must not hurry overmuch and upset the balance of cause and effect. The best timing would be…”

Tenion gave Karion and Urion information in a compressed language I didn’t understand.

**> Skill Acquired: “Hallowed Language: Compressed”**

I wasn’t sure if I’d need it again after this was over, but since I had plenty of extra skill points lying around, I activated it anyway.

It might even end up being useful for something besides communicating with gods someday.

“All right. We shall go.”

“We will not make it in time by sea. We need an airship.”

“Very well. I will arrange for one.”

After Tenion said this, the dots of light on my radar moved away from the entrance to the sanctuary.

She must have given her worshippers an order through Telepathy or something of the sort. It felt rude to mention that we could just use my airship after the priests had already left to get one ready for us, so I kept that to myself.

The goddesses’ words had remarkable influence. In less than an hour, a small high-speed airship was ready for us.

Although they also arranged for a flight crew, I thought it best to only borrow the vessel rather than put anyone else in danger on our journey. Nana and I could fly it anyway.

“Faithful believers, I am pleased by your festival of welcome. Do not forget to continue your pious prayers. Love one another, bear and raise children, and live prosperous lives from this day onward.”

Tenion returned to the altar and made this statement to the people, then

waved a hand glowing with green light. A veil of light rained over her followers, blessing them all.

Weeping tears of gratitude, the people all praised Goddess Tenion and thanked her devoutly.

“I wish you happiness, my beloved children…”

Tenion’s body glowed even brighter, then disappeared with a flash.

There was a heavy thud, and white smoke rose from the place where the goddess had been standing.

It was salt.

Now that she was gone, the body and clothing that served as Tenion’s vessel had evidently scattered into salt instead of turning back into a statue.

Was that another holy relic, I guess?

The priests and priestesses held back tears as they collected the salt.

“Let us go.”

We followed Urion onto the airship and soon left the Aubehr Republic.

“Do you all want to wait at Miss Nyuuze’s island?”

“No, we’ll go with you.”

“I would never be so arrogant as to assume I can fight by your side, Master, but I will strive to be of use to you.”

Arisa shot down my suggestion that they stay behind, while Liza politely insisted on accompanying me.

The other girls all seemed to feel the same way.

“All right. But I don’t want you fighting on the front lines. Even the hero and the sage couldn’t handle those things.”

Even knowing they’d probably be fine with Karion’s protection, I’d rather be safe than sorry.

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact Mia.

*“Mia, something came up and now we’re heading to Pialork Kingdom. If*

*you're still in the middle of your Spirit Magic training, would you rather stay there with Miss Nyuuze?"*

*"Wait…"*

I heard Mia asking Nyuuze for permission.

*"…I'll come."*

I guess she must have gotten it.

We picked up Mia from Miss Nyuuze's island and turned the airship toward Pialork Kingdom.

Our first visit to Pialork Kingdom was shaping up to be a rocky one.

*I'll have to make sure Pochi puts the egg in her Fairy Pack.*

# Land of Transformation

***They say that everything happens for a reason, but such trite words could never comfort those who lost their homeland and their brethren due to the actions of fools, nor convince them to forget their rage and give up on revenge. It is only by striking down our enemy once and for all that we can find a way forward. (Bazan, descendant of the dragonkin)***

"It doesn't look like anything's started happening yet."

Satou peered outside through the front observation window of the airship as it flew over the ocean, gazing at the richly covered roofs of the houses in the royal capital of Pialork Kingdom, the "land of transformation."

"Master, where should we land the airship?"

"Bring it down anywhere you see a landing area."

"Yes, Master."

Nana steered the airship toward a landing area facing the ocean.

A birdfolk soldier flew up from the lighthouse on the cape to receive them.

"Mew!"

Tama, who was curled up on the couch, suddenly sat up.

"Fool…!"

Urion shouted, looking furious.

"What's the matter?"

Though Satou's "Poker Face" skill kept it from showing in his expression, his "Sense Danger" skill was already blaring a severe warning.

"The seal has been undone. The destruction begins."

Karion glared in the direction of the Zaicuon Central Temple.

“The seal is not completely broken yet. We can still make it in time.”

“I concur, Urion. Let us cover the temple with a barrier. Then we shall put a stop to it. Bring the airship over there.”

“Yes, Karion.”

Nana turned the airship toward Zaicuon Central Temple.

The birdfolk soldier who was guiding the airship down for a landing called out a sharp warning, but Nana ignored it, bringing the airship up to top speed.

Seeing this, the birdfolk soldier blew a sharp note on a flute, and a bell rang out from the castle walls warning of an emergency situation.

“Oh dear, now we’ve started a whole scene.” Arisa sighed.

“It’s better that way.” Satou shrugged, then turned to the goddesses. “Is there any way you could evacuate the citizens with your divine commands?”

“Nay. ’Tis possible, yet trivial compared to the task at hand. We must take great care to avoid wasting our divine power. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. ’Tis not ideal to decrease the population, but most of them are Zaicuon’s followers. ’Tis an acceptable sacrifice for the preservation of the world.”

The goddess girls gave a decidedly inhuman response.

Their top priority was protecting the world and their own believers; it seemed they had little concern to spare for those who worshipped other goddesses.

“Then at least let me advise the citizens to evacuate in the name of the goddesses, please.”

“Very well. If such an action might preserve the stability of human resources, thou shalt take it at once. Karion says so, too.”

“I concur, Urion. Thou may pretend to speak for Zaicuon.”

Despite their suggestion, Satou gave the names of Urion and Karion in his warning to evacuate.

He sent the message to the royal family of Pialork and the heads of all the temples in the royal capital.

“Master, we have landed in front of the Central Temple, I report.”

In front of the airship was a temple built with yellow stone, gaudy enough that it was almost an eyesore.

Priests and worshippers were running out of the temple’s main entrance in a panic.

A moment later, the heart of the large temple exploded, and something swathed in jet-black mist oozed onto the roof of the temple and began absorbing the building.

“Bring us down in the front, please.”

“Yes, Master.”

The airship began lowering on Satou’s command.

“Karion, the barrier.”

“Aye.”

At Urion’s prompting, Karion produced a bright vermillion light and surrounded the temple with a spherical barrier.

Urion’s crimson glow followed as she waved her hand and produced a veil of light above the temple that trapped the black fog inside the building.

“Master, look!”

Arisa pointed at a large group of priests—the former Phantom Thief Pippin was leading them out. Hidden in their shadows was the sage’s student Serena who’d been working with him.

“Be right back. I’m going to find out what’s going on!”

Satou jumped down from the airship and ran over to Pippin. During their journey to Pialork Kingdom, “Kuro” had gotten a message from Pippin that they’d tracked down the sage’s student who was causing problems and infiltrated Zaicuon Central Temple to intercept him.

“Pippin!”

“Young master! Did you make this barrier?”

Pippin turned around to see that the black fog that had been chasing them was trapped inside a crimson barrier.

It was recoiling from the barrier like a person who'd touched hot metal, shrinking back to keep a safe distance.

"That was one of my traveling companions. It's the strongest barrier you can imagine, so we don't need to worry about that thing causing any harm outside of it."

"You sure? Looks like the priests can get out just fine."

"It probably just isn't closed completely yet. For now, just tell me what happened, please."

"All right. So Serena and I figured out that that troublemaker Bazan was after something kept underneath Zaicuon Central Temple…"

Pippin began to explain what had occurred in Zaicuon Central Temple.

"Doesn't look like they've caused any trouble just yet."

Pippin appeared in one of the spires of the temple, whispering to Serena, who'd teleported in with him.

Their view of Zaicuon Central Temple was remarkably peaceful, without any signs of caution or panic.

"I doubt even Bazan can do anything with just the key, the Fantasmic Tuning Fork, no matter how good he is at breaking seals."

"You said he also needs three Dragon's Eggs, right?"

"No, technically it's three dragon souls to be sacrificed.'"

"Same thing. You think anyone in the world could take down a dragon? Not even a hero would…"

…*Stand a chance*, Pippin was about to say. Then he remembered his employer, Kuro, and Nanashi the Hero, who defeated the overwhelming terror of the Evil God's Spawn.

"Okay, there might be *someone* who can do it, but this Bazan guy's not all

that, right?”

“I doubt it. If he was powerful enough to defeat a dragon, he wouldn’t need help from anyone else in the first place.”

“Exactly. Anyway, the young master’s got the White Dragon’s Egg, so Bazan should only have the two he stole from the red dragon on Redsmoke Island and the green dragon in Dragu Kingdom. There aren’t any other dragons around here, are there?”

“Only lesser dragons. Rumor has it that there’s a yellow dragon in the south, but no one has ever seen it.”

“Why wouldn’t he have just gone for the lesser dragons, then? That’d be way easier than trying to outwit a fully-grown dragon, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m sure he would do that if he could. But Kamusim told me before his betrayal that a lesser dragon or its eggs wouldn’t count as a sacrifice.”

“I guess that means we should be all right for now, then…”

Pippin wiped the cold sweat from his neck and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’d still prefer to stay here and keep a close eye on Bazan for a few days. As much as I’m concerned about the other places, too, I’m almost positive that his main target is the seal here in Pialork Kingdom, where the gods have less influence. What do you think, Pippin?”

Pippin didn’t answer Serena’s question.

“Pippin? What—?”

Before Serena could ask what was going on, Pippin pressed his hand to her mouth.

“We screwed up. They’re already inside.”

Pippin pointed down at a hedge. The body of a priest had been dumped behind it.

“Have they forgotten the sage’s teachings?!”

“Save the righteous anger for later. Let’s go.”

Quieting Serena’s outburst, Pippin teleported down to the ground with her in

tow, heading through a door that looked to be the intruders' route inside.

"I believe there's a hidden door that leads underground up ahead. It's behind a white statue."

"Must be that one— Serena!"

Pippin sharply stopped Serena in her tracks.

A priestess was collapsed near the hidden doorway, covered in blood.

"Damn it! Are you alive, priestess?"

"F-forget about me, just…please, catch those thieves. Stop them…before they touch…the Godstrial Prison…"

With that, the priestess collapsed in Pippin's arms.

"This way."

Serena stepped over the unconscious priestess and entered the passageway.

"Hey, wait a minute! We gotta take care of the wounded first!" Pippin called out to Serena, then produced an Echigoya-made intermediate potion from a pouch on his belt and poured its contents down the priestess's throat.

"Sorry I can't stay around till you wake up."

He lowered the priestess to the floor, then ran after Serena.

"Damn, she got ahead of me fast."

Pippin used "Short-Range Teleportation" a few times as he hurried down the dark corridor until he saw a purple light up ahead.

Spotting Serena right in front of the light, Pippin closed the rest of the distance with one more teleport.

The light was pouring out from beyond a broken wall; on the other side was a pitch-black altar, a magic circle glowing with purple light on the wall behind it. The circle was crackling with strange purple lightning and slowly producing black mist.

"No one's here?"

Whoever had activated the magic circle was no longer in the room.

“Did they finish their business here already?”

Pippin and Serena cautiously entered the room.

“Serena, on the altar.”

A tuning fork had been placed atop the altar.

“The Fantasmic Tuning Fork…”

“That’s the key they stole from Myusia Kingdom, huh?” Pippin sounded suspicious. “But where the hell did Bazan and his lackeys go?”

Ignoring Pippin’s muttering, Serena walked toward the magic circle.

“I’ve seen this somewhere before…”

“Hey, don’t touch it without— Serena!”

As soon as Serena touched the magic circle, she disappeared as if she’d been sucked inside.

“Argh… To hell with it!”

Pippin steeled himself and jumped into the magic circle.

Several pieces of information flooded his wavering field of vision at once.

A group of black-clad sage’s students like Serena, a huge magic circle drawn on the floor—and one Dragon’s Egg placed at each of its three points.

“Don’t do it, Bazan!” Serena shouted.

Her voice brought Pippin’s muddled thoughts back into focus, and his swimming vision began to clear.

“You’ve caught up to me, Serena?!”

Bazan spread his arms wide in the center of the magic circle.

There was a barrier produced by some kind of artifact, preventing Serena from entering.

It even blocked Pippin from teleporting inside.

“It’s not too late! You have to stop this, Bazan!”

“Why should I?! This was the dying wish of your beloved sage—that *monkey*.

His ambition was to travel around the land and undo all the gods' seals!"

"If you undo the seal, you'll never make it out alive!"

"So be it. I no longer have any living brethren thanks to the war started by those foolish politicians. I will become one with the Divine Beast of Destruction and take down every last one of those fools along with me."

"Won't that make you just as bad as the politicians who start pointless wars?!"

"You wouldn't understand. My only desire is revenge."

Pippin was only half-listening to the exchange between the students bound to each other by fate as he surveyed the room and wracked his brains for a way out of this mess.

*I can't believe there was another egg…*

Pippin and company had secured the White Dragon's Egg, the Red Dragon's Egg was stolen at Redsmoke Island, and the Green Dragon's Egg was taken from Dragu Kingdom. But apparently there was one more dragon that still had an egg, after all.

Pippin's "Analyze Goods" skill told him that the last egg was the Yellow Dragon's Egg.

Black fog was twining around the egg, and the purple lightning produced by the magic circle was crackling violently.

Pippin suspected that the seal was about to break.

*(This doesn't look good. If I could just teleport into the barrier, I bet I could do something…)*

Pippin's eyes fell on a delicate magic device on the outer edge of the magic circle. That was probably the artifact producing the barrier.

Pippin pulled out a dagger from his bag.

*(I didn't expect the dagger Lord Kuro gave me to come in handy in a place like this…)*

Pippin focused his teleportation power on the small dagger and managed to

teleport it into the barrier successfully.

It struck the artifact and destroyed the barrier, just as he'd hoped.

"Serena!"

"I know! ■ ***Tile Dagger*** *Tan Fu Ha!*"

A pure-white talisman shot from Serena's hand, transformed into a blade, and pierced Bazan's chest.

"…Curses."

Evidently, the Defense Magic and delay runes that had once protected him from Serena's Tile Magic had been deactivated to focus on the major magical task of destroying the seal.

Bazan crumpled to the floor.

"Shoulda worn a little more armor."

No one responded to Pippin's casual remark.

Though he didn't know it, the black robes that the sage's students wore had much higher defense power than the average metal armor. It was just that Serena's spell had been prepared specifically to strike her comrade down.

"You can stew in your emotions after we retrieve these eggs."

Pippin picked up one of the eggs from the magic circle.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

A woman's voice rang out just as several whips lashed forward and stole the egg out of Pippin's hands.

"Bazan was even wimpier than I thought if he went down to a softy like you, Serena."

A glamorous woman appeared in the room.

If Satou or the samurai of Blacksmoke Island were here, they might have noticed that her face was that of the black-clad thief who was beheaded by the samurai general.

"Ohohohoho!"

Her whips danced around effortlessly, forcing Pippin and Serena away from the magic circle.

Pippin's thrown dagger was knocked away. Even when he teleported behind her and thrust his blade through her heart, she seemed unaffected as she counterattacked him.

"Uuurgh, are you immortal or something?!"

Pippin clutched his broken arm as he teleported away, then healed his wound with a magic potion.

"Wake up, Bazan."

"…Kelmareite."

At the woman's words, the previously dead Bazan stood up.

On closer inspection, there was a jagged scar on the woman's neck, like it had been clumsily sewn back together.

"I'll deal with these bozos. You hurry up and undo the seal!"

"I won't let you! ■■■ ***Fall Slip*** *Rousoufu!*"

Serena unleashed a rain of charmed tiles down on the Dragon's Eggs that served as the crucial key to the magic circle.

"Not a chance, sweetheart!"

The woman's whips protected the eggs from the spell.

"Kelmareite!"

At Bazan's warning, she realized that Pippin had stolen one of the eggs.

Pippin was nowhere to be seen in the room. He must have grabbed it and fled.

"Bazan! Time to use our last resort."

"Very well."

Bazan teleported himself to the former position of the stolen egg.

"Stop! Do you have a death wish, Bazan?!"

“Oh, be quiet, softy! You already killed Bazan yourself, remember?!”

The woman’s whips lashed out to stop Serena from interfering.

“The ancient blood that flows through my veins, the ancient soul that shapes my heart… I offer it all as sacrifice. Let my body, that of the last living dragonkin, be the martyr that completes the ceremony to undo the seal.”

“Bazaaaaaan, stooooooop!”

Serena’s cry fell on deaf ears, as Bazan pulled his heart out of his torn-open chest and held it aloft.

The black fog trickling from the magic circle became a torrent.

“O ancient one, sealed away by the gods. Emerge from the depths of the Godstrial Prison.”

Blood frothed from Bazan’s mouth as he laughed triumphantly.

The eggs were devoured by darkness, then Bazan himself, along with his offered heart. When they had all been absorbed, the darkness overflowed and covered the magic circle entirely.

“Looks like it’s high time to make myself scarce. Later, loser.”

The woman threw a netlike object over Serena, then sped out of the room.

“I suppose throwing myself into that darkness would only lead to a pointless death…”

Serena hesitated, then passed the magic circle to flee the room as well.

The black fog burst out after her, as if giving chase.

She ran through the passage as fast as she could, but the fog moved faster.

“I can’t get away…!”

Wherever the black fog touched the tips of her red hair or her cloak, they crumbled away into ash.

Just as Serena had lost half her hair and her cloak and was about to give up on getting out alive— “Serena! Over here!”

“Pippin!”

Pippin was waiting right in front of the stairs.

Just before the fog caught up to her, Serena's hand brushed Pippin's.

*Teleportation.*

Pippin and Serena returned to the ground floor of the temple, grabbed the still unconscious priestess, and headed outside.

There was a sound behind them like something breaking. Pippin looked back to see something appear, engulfed in black fog.

Writhing like a serpent, a tentacle of fog touched a fleeing priest, and the man's body tore open from within and seemed to turn itself inside out, exposing his fleshy muscle fibers and spilling his guts onto the ground.

"Oh shit…!"

Pippin warned everyone to leave the temple, collecting as many people as he could along the way until he tumbled safely out through the gates.

"…So yeah, on that note, you'd better get out of here. I'll call for Lord Kuro. Even if we can't handle it, Lord Kuro or the hero will probably find a way."

Pippin left the priests and priestesses he'd brought out with him in the care of a priest who'd run away from elsewhere.

"Nay. We shall not flee. Karion says so, too."

"I concur, Urion. Let it be known that this is now a holy war. All living things in the relevant area shall comply with the will of the gods."

Urion and Karion glowed with crimson and vermillion light respectively, sending out ripples of light in the same colors.

The people who had been trying to flee stopped abruptly, and readied their staffs and weapons with looks of determination.

"Goddess Urion, the masses will only get in our way. We can handle the fighting ourselves."

"Nay. There is strength in numbers. I shall summon the knights and soldiers of this kingdom."

“But surely the priests who have no battle experience won’t be of any use.”

“Nay. Their Holy Magic shall aid us.”

Satou tried to convince the goddesses to avoid needless sacrifices, only to be firmly rejected with unwavering logic.

“Say, goddesses,” Arisa cut in. “Couldn’t we have the priests and civilians pray for our victory in a safe place? Prayers produce divine power, right? Wouldn’t that be more efficient?”

“’Tis worthy of consideration. Karion, thy opinion?”

“Aye. The young one’s proposal is sound.”

Karion nodded, and the priests took off like horses freed from their yokes.

The goddesses must have released them from the control of their divine commands.

But while the priests were set free, the goddesses’ powers were spreading to the faraway barracks of the Pialork Kingdom army and the mercenary camps.

“All hands, prepare for battle! Rapid reaction force on duty, move out! Order the mages to activate the heavy golem squad!”

On the general’s orders, the soldiers began getting ready at once.

They were all moving as feverishly as if there had been a surprise enemy attack.

But not everyone was as fired up as the general and his men.

“General! What the hell is this?!”

“We have a fight on our hands, Commissioner. You should have your troops prepare for battle as well.”

“A fight? And where is the enemy, exactly?! This is why I said we should never hire commoners as generals!”

A military commissioner who was the nephew of the current king, and who himself was a duke of noble lineage, was deriding the commoner-born general.

“Cease this foolish horseplay at once! Are you planning to rebel against His

Majesty the King?!”

“Do you not understand, Commissioner? This is a request from the Most Honorable Ones!”

“Most Honorable? What in the blazes are you—”

The soldiers restrained the commissioner in the middle of his sentence.

“Ensure that the commissioner does not interfere until our holy war is over.”

The general gave a heated command to the soldiers, then returned to his work without a second glance at the commissioner, whose face was so bright red that steam was practically coming out of his ears.

Word of this soon reached the royal castle.

“Your Majesty! There’s been suspicious movement from the soldiers at the garrisons.”

“Enough of this commotion. Leave such business to the imperial guards or the military commissioner. More importantly, will you not appreciate this painting with me? It’s the latest work of Toppentolle, who’s said to be the second coming of the Master Painter.”

In stark contrast to the panicking minister, the gaudily-dressed king was more interested in admiring his recently acquired painting.

“Your Majesty! Urgent news, sire!”

“You too, old man? Between this and the imaginary voices from earlier, it seems everyone’s half lost their minds today.”

The foolish king had apparently dismissed Satou’s warning and those of his family, who had heard it as an auditory hallucination.

“We noble few who lead the people must remain calm at all times, you see. Why, when the previous king was a child—”

Since it would be a grave offense to interrupt the king, the old chamberlain had to wait for him to finish his story before he could relay his urgent news.

Outside, the priest of Zaicuon Central Temple who had sent the chamberlain to relay the message was fretting impatiently in the waiting room.

“Hey, you! Don’t just leave your post!”

As he waited, the priest heard angry shouting outside the room.

“Let me go! We have a sacred mission!”

“What could be more sacred than an imperial guard’s duty to protect His Majesty?! And you call yourself a noble?!”

“Shut up! Are you saying that those of us who don’t hold court rank like you aren’t real nobles?!”

“There’s no point arguing! If you insist on trying to stop me, I’ll have to use force!”

The imperial guards drew their swords on one another in a tense standoff.

Evidently only some of the kingdom’s combatants had received the effects of the goddesses’ divine commands.

“You morons! Why are you squabbling in the castle?! ■ **Authority Aura** *Ken’i Koji!*”

The enraged military minister used a City Core spell by way of the glowing blue terminal in his hand.

The blue light washed over the imperial guards, who knelt down on the spot, trembling with fear.

“Wh…what was I doing…?”

“Looks like you’ve come to your senses. Gather all the imperial guards. If anyone else is acting up like you were, restrain them and bring them here. Try not to kill them if you can help it, though I don’t care if you injure them a little. Now go!”

The imperial guards ran off to follow the minister’s orders.

“What the hell is going on in this kingdom…?”

The military minister felt an indescribable sense of dread as he stood in the now-empty hallway.

And indeed, this situation was far beyond the imagination of any mere mortal.

Meanwhile, in front of the temple…

“Mew!”

“Satou.”

Tama was on high alert, and Mia spoke a warning.

Humanoid shapes shrouded in black mist burst out through the walls and doors of the silent temple, appearing one after another.

Something tried to come out through the main gate as well, only to be blocked by a stone wall that appeared in their way. It must have been a priest who could use Earth Magic.

“They’re getting out of the goddesses’ barrier!” Arisa cried.

“Such cunning. They used the barrier’s settings against us. Those things are made from humans.” Urion looked grim.

The misty humanoids were apparently taking advantage of the fact that the barrier was designed to let humans pass through.

“Those are the Dissentients. Grasping tentacles sent to encroach on this world.”

Karion’s expression was grave. In Satou’s vision, the mist-cloaked humanoids were labeled as **Dissentients** by his AR display.

“Karion, that is taboo knowledge.”

“Aye. Thou shalt all forget what I just said.”

Karion evidently had a tendency to be careless at times.

“Is it possible to turn them back into humans?”

“Nay. Even if the amount of factors are few, ’tis impossible to return them to normal once they have been completely transformed.”

“I concur, Karion. It can only be fixed before they have transformed. Individuals that have been fully taken over are no longer beings of this world.”

“I see…”

Satou’s shoulders slumped at this answer.

“My Magic Hand goes right through them…?”

When he tried to toss the emerging Dissentients back into the temple, he couldn’t get a hold of them.

“Master, the local army has arrived.”

Lulu reported from the airship deck, where she was preparing her Sniping gun.

The army was led by ten small golems around ten feet high with flashy decorations on their heads, followed by Magic Cannons and ordinary soldiers. There were a few midsized golems roughly twenty feet in height, although those were on standby protecting the royal castle.

When the Pialork Kingdom army arrived, they began to attack the Dissentients before Satou and the others could stop them.

“Wooow, powerfuuul?”

“What an amazingly amazing attack, sir.”

With a resounding boom, the Pialork Kingdom army fired their Magic Cannons and attack spells, shooting the Dissentients full of holes.

“…Hmm? They’re weak?” Arisa blinked.

“Of course,” Karion replied. “They have only received the minimal amount of discordance factors in order to pass through the barrier.”

Satou and company watched with an air of slight disappointment as the Dissentients anticlimactically went down without a fight.

Once the first volley was over, a squadron of knights on horseback launched a mounted charge on the Dissentients.

“It’s almost too easy.”

The knights’ charge made short work of the Dissentients, quickly reducing their numbers.

In their wake, foot soldiers charged at what was left of the swarm.

“Meeew?”

“Something’s not right here.”

Tama and Pippin were the first to notice the strangeness.

The soldiers who were mowing down the Dissentients suddenly doubled over in pain, frantically throwing aside their shields and weapons, and desperately stripping off their armor as they began to flee.

The rest of the royal army supported their retreat with long-distance attacks and the shield-bearing golems.

“Are the Dissentients corrupting them?”

“Aye. Their corruptive power is low, but staying in contact with them for an extended period of time is ill-advised.”

Sure enough, the knights who had only briefly trampled through the Dissentients’ ranks looked unaffected.

“They have revived, I report.”

“Tough.”

The Dissentients who’d been immobilized by the first attack gathered back together like liquid and swelled up.

Since the attacks had broken their host bodies, the reformed Dissentients couldn’t maintain a humanoid form, instead moving jerkily toward the army like something in between a zombie and a slime.

Some of them absorbed the soldiers’ abandoned armor and weapons as part of their vessel or began to fuse with others to create larger Dissentients.

Appearing to be either threatened or frightened by this, the royal army unleashed a wave of attacks even more intense than the first.

“Ah…”

A few stray shots from this volley broke the walls of the temple, and one of them struck the main body of black fog that was still sealed inside Urion’s barrier.

This roused the misty creature out of its stagnant state into thrashing around actively, striking tentacle-like tendrils of fog against the red barrier.

“Warning. The barrier is in danger of being destroyed. Estimated twenty-seven hundred units of time remaining.”

“You mean we have to destroy it from outside the barrier before the countdown ends!” Arisa exclaimed delightedly, readying her staff. “It’s a classic boss battle mechanic!”

“Nay. The barrier will break before thy chant is finished.”

Even as Urion spoke, a slight crack formed in one section of the barrier, and one of the fog tentacles stretched into a thin whip, mowing down the royal army in a matter of moments.

The golems were smashed to pieces like poorly constructed papier-mâché models, while the soldiers were slaughtered in a spray of blood.

It all happened so quickly that even Satou and company couldn’t intervene in time.

Still, Satou quickly jumped into action.

“Over here!”

Satou teleported away from his companions instantly using “Warp,” firing repeatedly at the misty tentacle with a Magic Gun.

The light bullets appeared to strike the tentacle, but they actually passed right through it without causing any damage.

“I can’t let you have all the fun, young master!”

Pippin teleported around repeatedly as he attacked with throwing knives and a Fire Rod.

“Goddess Urion! Reinforce the barrier while we keep it busy, please!” Satou shouted.

“Nay. ’Tis impossible now that the boundary has been infringed upon. I shall break it into small pieces instead. I entrust thee with taking care of the rest. Karion, put up another barrier.”

“The cost of maintaining two barriers is too great. I shall temporarily remove the outer barrier. Mortals, thou shalt ensure that those things do not lessen the

number of civilians.”

“All right. Liza! Bring the vanguard with you and go fight off the Dissentients! Make sure you don’t stay close to them for too long! Arisa and Mia, you’re on support!”

Satou immediately agreed to the goddess girls’ lofty requests and gave orders to his party.

“Begin.”

Urion sliced off the tentacle with crimson light, while Karion took over maintaining the interior barrier.

The tentacle undulated in midair, and Urion sliced it to pieces on the upswing of her blade. After she’d shredded the Dissentient, Urion added her own barrier on top of Karion’s to ensure the main body of fog would never break through again.

“Uh-oh!”

“Look up there!”

Mia and Lulu were the first to notice the problem.

The shredded tentacle had merged with some of the Dissentients on the ground and formed a much larger mass.

“Being bigger just makes you a better target for the amazing Arisa!”

Arisa shot off an advanced single-target Fire Magic spell at the enormous Dissentient. The huge ball of flame pierced through the giant being’s torso and blew off a large chunk of the temple.

“It went straight through?”

“My Magic Spear doesn’t seem to affect it, either.”

“Spellblade Shots pass right through, too, sir!”

“Ninjutsu, too?”

“My physical bullets and the Fireburst Gun don’t have any effect.”

*Normal Magic Swords and spells are one thing, but even Liza’s Magic Cricket*

*Spear with the dragon fang coating doesn't work on it?*

Internally, Satou was surprised by his companions' report.

"Our attacks don't touch it even though its attacks can hurt us? Give me a break!"

"'Tis a shadow from another dimension," Karion responded to Arisa's complaint. "Unless one aims for the core it uses as its vessel, no mortal means of attacking will affect it."

"Then if we just blow the whole thing away…"

"Don't, Arisa! You'll destroy the city behind it, too."

Lulu stopped her sister as she rolled up her sleeves.

"Watch out! Quick!"

Satou yelled a warning as he saw the giant Dissentient produce a mass of tentacles and spring at his friends.

"Fortress!"

"Fallinks, sir!"

Nana activated her Fortress, and Pochi used Phalanx, but the giant Dissentient's tentacles passed through them effortlessly to attack the girls. They didn't notice that the core part of the Dissentient, the only part with a corporeal form, dissolved into sparks when it touched the Fortress.

*"■* ***Stack Tile*** *Juukabefu!"*

The sage's student Serena tried to support them with Tile Magic, which the tentacles only passed through just as easily.

When Satou tried to use "Warp" to go to their aid, another giant Dissentient blocked his path.

"Out of the way!"

Without hesitation, Satou boldly hurled himself directly at the creature.

Although a horrible terror assailed his heart, one of his many resistances protected him.

In the moment he passed through the Dissentient's body, he pulled out a Divine Blade from Storage and slashed upward, defeating the giant creature without anyone knowing his method.

Satou burst through the remains of the Dissentient to see a vermillion barrier shining between his companions and the tentacles.

"Karion's barrier!" Satou accidentally exclaimed with relief.

Evidently even the Dissentient's attacks that could pass through physical and magical obstacles still couldn't pierce a goddess's barrier.

"See how you like this!"

Serena tossed some kind of artifact.

It broke over the giant Dissentient's head, and chains made out of light bound the creatures hand and foot.

"Not bad, lady."

"It's Serena. Looks like the Evil God's Chains the sage gave me work on these things, too."

The corner of Serena's mouth twitched upward at Arisa's praise.

"Can you use it again?"

"Sorry, they're single-use only. There were many found in the Evil God's Prison, but I only have two more left."

Serena bound the second giant Dissentient coming toward them in the same way.

The remaining giant Dissentient seemed to sense that Serena was a threat and lumbered away from the front lines to come after her as well.

"Gotcha… Goddesses, is there any way you can strengthen our weapons and armor like you did on Blacksmoke Island while still maintaining the barriers?"

"I have little divine power remaining. For a few people, perhaps. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. But I am low on divine power, too. The mortals are too frightened of the giant Dissentients. Their prayers cannot supply enough power. If I use too

much now, I shall not have enough left to reseal the main body."

The goddess girls grimaced.

"Then we'll just have to fire them up again! Manipulate the masses with a moving speech!"

Arisa looked up at Satou triumphantly, as if she'd struck on a genius idea.

"I take it you have a plan?" Pippin looked at her, then turned to Serena. "Serena! You and me are gonna buy them some time!"

"Got it!"

Pippin grabbed Serena and used "Short-Range Teleportation" to lead the giant Dissentient that was chasing Serena around on a merry chase.

Keeping one eye on them, Arisa explained her plan to Satou.

"Master! I've got an idea! Project the image of that monster big enough that it can be seen from anywhere in the city. The one that's not chained up!"

Satou used his Illusion spell to display the giant Dissentient.

He even went above and beyond Arisa's request by adding a frightening roar with his "Ventriloquism" skill.

The citizens were already anxious from the purposeful march of the armed forces through the streets and the frightening booms that followed. Then they saw the gigantic beast looming over the center of the city near Zaicuon Central Temple.

"Wh…what…? What the hell is thaaat?!"

A horrifically large monster glared down at them and let out a terrifying roar.

"M-MONSTEEEEEER!"

"R…run…run for iiiiit!"

The masses flew into a panic, pushing and shoving as they ran away.

*"Be not afraid, mortals."*

Just then, vermillion light gathered above the main gate of the city and formed the floating image of a young girl.

*“I am Karion. I shall protect you from this harbinger of doom.”*

The girl waved her hand, and a wall of red light blocked the monster’s way as it tried to stomp toward the city.

The monster struck the wall furiously, the echoing boom shaking the hearts of the people.

*“Mortals, you must not give in to fear, for it only gives the monster more power.”*

A different girl appeared over another gate in a flash of crimson light.

*“I am Urion. I will bind the fearsome beast with the power of the gods.”*

The second girl raised her hand, and chains of red light appeared and wrapped around the thrashing monster.

Although this wasn’t how the goddess girls normally spoke, the people of Pialork Kingdom were unlikely to realize that.

*“Pray, mortals. Your inner strength will give us the power to defeat the monster.”*

*“Have hope, mortals. That you will once again live peaceful lives. Your pious prayers will grant us the strength to destroy the evil.”*

The goddesses spoke directly to the masses.

Although the rest was all an act put on by Satou, the final word that followed came directly from the goddesses’ lips.

***“Pray.”***

It was only one short word, yet it was imbued with the power of a divine command. The masses lowered their heads and prayed, for themselves, for their families, and, most of all, for the sake of a peaceful life.

“…Ooh. Now this is a surprise.”

“Aye. I did not expect to receive such powerful prayers. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou art delusional, Urion. But with this much prayer, we can grant thee enough power to destroy the filth.”

The goddess girls applied divine power to Satou and his party's weapons.

"Arisa, Lulu, Mia, you three take down the giant Dissentients that are already chained up. The rest of us will go defeat the free one that Pippin is leading around."

With that, Satou ran up to the giant Dissentient, holding a Magic Gun and a self-made Magic Sword.

"Get back, Pippin!"

Pippin and Serena moved out of the way with "Short-Range Teleportation." Just as the Dissentient lost sight of its target, Satou jumped into view.

"First, a little test-drive is in order."

Muttering to himself, he shot a bullet from his Magic Gun.

Glowing with vermillion light, it pierced through the giant Dissentient.

Unlike before, the part that the bullet had passed through scattered, and a hole formed in the creature's mist-like body.

Satou dodged a counterattack from a tentacle with as little movement as possible, then used his crimson-glowing Magic Sword and gauntlet to parry it.

"Looks like it can't corrupt my weapons or armor now."

The overprotective Satou was ensuring that there would be no danger to his companions before he gave them the signal to join the fray.

"Liza, go!"

"Yes, sir! 'Blink—Helix Spear Attack'!"

Glowing with both crimson and vermillion light, Liza thrust her spear into the giant Dissentient's knee.

"'Akilleez Hunter,' sir!"

Pochi's sword flashed vermillion as she sliced through the heel of the being's other foot.

"'Shield Bash,' I declare!"

Nana struck the giant Dissentient's shin, her shield glowing crimson.

“Nana, duck!”

Nana dodged on Mia’s warning as the Dissentient lost its balance and swung its tentacle back down toward her.

“Aim…and fire!”

Lulu’s attack blew through the tentacle just before it could strike Nana.

“Nin-niiin?”

Tama’s ninjutsu sank the being’s arms into shadows.

“Let’s sync up.”

“Yes, Liza! Zero strike, ‘Blast Fort,’ I declare!”

Nana used an attack she’d learned on Blacksmoke Island, an updated version of “Blast Armor.”

Her special attack scattered the mist from the giant Dissentient’s face, revealing its hideous true form.

“First striiike? ‘Vorpal Shadow Biiite!’”

Tama’s two Magic Swords slashed up the Dissentient’s exoskeleton, then shadow blades followed closely behind, opening the wounds wider. The addition of ninjutsu made her special attack far more destructive than before.

“Second strike, sir! ‘Vanquish Slicer!’ Sir!”

While Pochi’s “Spellblade” whirlwind had long been part of her repertoire, the sword-drawing techniques she learned from the samurai general increased its speed several times over.

The magic blade grew physically larger, completely shattering the part of the exoskeleton that Tama had damaged.

“Liza! Now, sir!”

“Right! Third strike—‘Draco Buster!’”

As the exoskeleton quickly began healing itself, Liza leapt into the gap, delivering a volley of strikes to the swirling darkness with her Magic Cricket Spear.

The mist around the vortex sharpened into evil fangs to try to chomp down on Liza.

But Liza fearlessly twirled around to shake off the mist that threatened to close in on her, then used the momentum to strike deep and true.

In that moment, the fangs that were about to bite down on her broke and shattered.

When she saw this, Liza realized that Satou was suddenly standing beside her. He had jumped right into the face of danger to protect her.

“Oh no! Master, it’s getting away!”

The giant Dissentient that the rear guard was fighting turned into a cloud of countless bats, like a vampire, and flew up into the air. A few of them turned into wolves and fled over the ground instead.

“Aim…and fire!”

“Get them!”

“You won’t get away from the amazing Arisa that easily!”

Lulu’s Fireburst Gun shot down the mist bats one after another, while Mia’s summoned Behemoth’s lightning strikes and Arisa’s Fire Magic mowed them down.

Satou kept pace with Lulu, shooting at the bats with a Fireburst Gun in each hand, but there were simply too many.

The handful that turned into wolves tried to attack the rear guard and were promptly blocked by Nana’s Fortress.

“We’ll defeat the wolves.”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

“Roger, sir!”

The beastfolk girls worked together steadily to take down the mist wolves.

“Shoot, at this rate, it’ll get away…!”

Despite the rear guard’s valiant efforts blasting away the bats, some number

of them were starting to get out of range.

Just as Satou was about to transform into Nanashi the Hero, a streak of red flame sizzled across the sky.

"'Dragon Breath,'" Mia murmured.

A moment later, a yellow laser-like beam scoured the sky from another direction.

Following close behind, the gigantic forms of the red dragon and yellow dragon flew over the royal capital of Pialork Kingdom.

"The dragons are here. Always so eager for a fight. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. 'Dragon Breath' can harm those things. We can entrust the rest to them."

The goddess girls looked up at the dragons as they relentlessly mowed down the mist bats.

The bats formed back together into several mist wyverns, fleeing for the horizon as fast as they could.

The dragons gave chase, still burning them with fiery breath.

"Doesn't look like those ones will be getting away…"

Satou turned his attention back to the vanguard's fight against the mist wolves.

There was still one left, but not for long.

*"■■■* ***Fall Slip*** *Rousoufu!"*

Serena, the sage's student, had returned from hunting down the smaller Dissentients in time to finish off the last mist wolf with her Tile Magic.

"…Erm, I'm sorry. Did I just steal the best part…?"

"Not at all. We appreciate the assistance."

Liza gallantly thanked the apologetic Serena.

"Young master, we wiped out the last of the small fry."

"Thank you, Pippin."

Satou turned his gaze back toward the main body of the mist, which was still trapped inside the two barriers.

“May I ask you to finish off the last part?”

He tried to pass the baton off to the goddess girls.

“Goddesses?”

Arisa looked at the unresponsive pair.

“…Oh dear.”

“’Tis most unexpected.”

The goddess girls gazed up at the image that was still being projected into the sky.

The performance they’d put on had brought hope to the masses despite their fear, inspiring them to pray to the goddesses piously and sincerely in a way that helped turn the tide of the battle. There was no doubt about that.

But at the same time, it also inspired more fear in them.

The stress that tormented them as they prayed created miasma, which strengthened the fog that produced the Dissentients—the main body of the “Discordant One.”

If Arisa and Satou knew that miasma strengthened Discordant Ones, they might have chosen another method, but the goddesses told them no such thing. After all, that fact was common knowledge to the divine.

“…Master, turn off the projection…”

Satou realized it, too, as Arisa spoke, and made the image disappear.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

The misty monster broke through the goddess girls’ barrier and emerged onto the ground.

“ZZZXXXZBBB.”

A disturbing roar, like a mix of low-pitched tones and a high-pitched screech, distorted the world.

“So that’s its true form…”

A single bead of cold sweat trickled down Satou’s brow as he realized that an even bigger fight was ahead.

# The Discordant One

***Satou here. There are always going to be people who disobey the leaders of the time, but I'd prefer for them to resist peacefully if at all possible. I really don't think indiscriminate violence is the answer to anything.***

"The seal has been completely broken. We cannot defeat it with these vessels. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. But 'tis true that we cannot win. Let it be known that in this condition, resealing it would be difficult as well."

Urion and Karion looked uncharacteristically tense.

"Is it really that strong?"

All of the information about the "Discordant One" in my AR display simply read **UNKNOWN**. I wished it would give me clear details like it did with the Dissentients.

Although I thought my Divine Blade might be able to beat it, I was reluctant to use my "God Slayer" title and everything in front of the gods themselves.

"Our true selves could reseal it easily. Karion says so, too."

"Aye. But descending to the mortal realm in our true forms consumes far too much power. It would be unwise to allow the egg that protects the world to be weakened, even temporarily."

"But there are no other options. We shall proceed at once."

"…Aye. Let us return to our true selves in the divine realm. Be wary of our supply of divine power running out."

"Wait a minute!"

I called out to stop the goddesses from going back to the divine realm.

“Time is of the essence. Let it be known that a second’s delay could mean the world’s end.”

“Please order the people in the city to evacuate first. The army, too.”

“Thy request is accepted. ’Tis better not to waste human resources.”

Urion waved her hand with a crimson light, and the determined-looking Pialork Kingdom army abruptly turned around and began to retreat.

According to my map information, the people in the city had started to flee, too.

“We shall return now. Good luck to thee.”

The goddesses sent a pillar of crimson and vermillion light into the air.

Instead of dissolving into salt like Tenion’s had, the pair’s vessels turned back into their original statues and tumbled to the ground.

“There go the goddesses.”

Arisa looked up at the sky.

The dragons probably wouldn’t be back anytime soon, as they were still chasing down the mist wyverns. Given that they had come here looking for their eggs, though, they would probably return eventually.

“Pippin, help people evacuate, please.”

“What are you guys going to do?”

“We’re going to evacuate, too, of course. It looks like Lord Kuro and Sir Nanashi the Hero will fight that thing for us until the goddesses come back.”

I took out my Kuro puppet in midair, using my Magic Hand to make it float.

“Lord Kuro really came?! All right, then! Let’s go, Serena!”

Pippin looked delighted.

I felt a little embarrassed that he trusted “me” so completely.

“Wait a second, Pippin. I can’t let other people deal with the mess that my own students made and that I failed to prevent.”

“It’ll be fine now that Lord Kuro’s here. Besides, if we stick around, we’ll only

get in his way.”

“I agree,” I added, trying to help Pippin convince Serena.

“All right. I’ll do whatever I can.”

Serena hesitated a moment, then left to help Pippin guide the evacuation.

“The rest of you, go with them.”

Arisa and the others weren’t moving an inch.

The misty monster had yet to move from the spot where it emerged, either, but it might start at any moment now.

“They don’t need our help evacuating. Thanks to the divine commands, the other civilians are assisting anyone who’s in trouble on their way out. Nobody’s being stupid enough to block the roads or gates with carriages full of stuff, either.”

Apparently Arisa was checking on things with Space Magic just like I was.

“No. Not this time.”

I looked around at my companions, who all had unyielding determination on their faces.

Even though they were strong enough to fight against a demon lord, this was one battle I couldn’t let them join.

“This thing is so bad that even the gods can’t handle it unless they use their full strength. And we don’t have any useful information, either. It could even be as dangerous as the Evil God’s Spawn that showed up in Shiga Kingdom.”

Based on the reaction from my “Sense Danger” skill, I suspected it was weaker than those. Still, that wasn’t a good reason to let my guard down.

“Then it’s even more important that we join you! We can’t let you fight it alone, Master.”

“Yes, Arisa. I shall protect Master with my shield imbued with the strength of the gods, I declare.”

“I agree with Arisa and Nana. We shouldn’t depend too much on the power of the gods, of course, but please at least allow us to watch your back.”

Arisa, Nana, and Liza looked desperate.

“Tama will fight hard, too?”

“Pochi wants to help Master, too, sir!”

“My spirits can help suppress the Discordant One, really. I swear I’ll be useful no matter what, you know. So you can count on us, Satou. Okay?”

“Master, I’ll help, too.”

Pochi, Tama, Mia, and Lulu all clearly felt the same way.

“You guys…”

*At least as long as they have the protection from Karion, I won’t have to worry about them being affected by that thing, although I didn’t know how long that blessing will last…*

I deliberated for a moment.

“…All right. But you have to be extra careful not to do anything reckless or overconfident, okay?”

“Yaaaay! Now you’re talking!”

“Whoo-hooo?”

“Hooray, sir!”

Arisa and the others pumped their fists in the air triumphantly.

Lulu watched them with a smile, then exclaimed suddenly, “Master, look!”

Something was happening in the royal castle, which was covered by a dome of light.

“Popping uuup?”

“A new Mr. Tower, sir.”

“Is that a Magic Cannon? It’s much bigger than the ones we saw in Muno Castle.”

My AR display labeled it as a **Heroic Cannon**.

It was technically a giant Magic Power Gun, not a Magic Cannon like the ones

from the ancient Lalakie era.

“Wait a minute, they’re not going to try to *shoot* that thing, are they?”

“Looks like that’s exactly what they’re doing.”

No matter how high-powered this gun might be, I seriously doubted it could defeat a Discordant One whose true form was in another dimension. I could only see this resulting in their drawing the thing’s attention and inciting it to attack the city.

“Honestly, how stupid is the king of this country?”

“Save the anger for later, Arisa. For now, teleport us to the peak of that mountain, please.”

“Okey-dokey!”

Without asking for a reason, Arisa immediately agreed and teleported all of us to the mountain towering behind the royal capital of Pialork Kingdom.

“Whew, we made it. I was worried it might be too far.”

Arisa was almost out of magic power. I used Mana Transfer to refill her gauge to the brim.

Then I transformed into Nanashi the Hero with the help of my “Quick Change” skill and took out our small airship from Storage, placing it on the side of the mountain.

“Time for Nanashi the Hero and his Golden Knights to take to the battlefield!”

◆

*“Master, the castle’s getting ready to fire the cannon.”*

As I stood on the deck of the airship, Arisa spoke to me using “Tactical Talk.”

“I’m going on ahead. Just follow me with the airship, please.”

I hopped off the deck and used “Flashrunning” to get into the cannons’ line of fire.

Activating “Flexible Shield” from my magic menu, I slanted it upward and knocked aside the enormous fireball from the Heroic Cannon.

“Huh, it’s stronger than I expected.”

One of my Flexible Shield was about to shatter just from redirecting one shot.

If I’d tried to block it head-on instead, the shield might have broken entirely.

*“Master, behind you!”*

***Sense Danger.***

I took a Divine Blade from Storage and slashed through the tentacle that was closing in from behind with a blade-drawing technique. The shredded tentacle turned into black mist and evaporated.

*Looks like a Divine Blade can damage it even without using a scripture.*

In fact, my single attack had reduced the volume of the mist by almost a third.

***Sense Danger.***

My skill reacted yet again.

This time, it was intense enough to give me a headache.

The main body of mist that had been flopping around on the temple grounds suddenly erupted like a volcano.

“Oh crap…!”

I used “Flashrunning” to get away from it.

As it burst upward into the sky, the main body split off into five differently-sized fragments of mist, fleeing in all directions.

…Yeah, that’s right.

It was fleeing.

Probably from my Divine Blade.

*“Master, the target is moving oddly, I report.”*

*“You’re right. It’s almost as if it can’t get too far away from the temple.”*

As Nana and Lulu pointed out, the split-up Discordant Ones were maintaining a set distance from the temple as they flew around in the air.

But that didn’t mean we should be relieved. Because that distance was slowly

but steadily getting bigger.

*“We don’t need to hold back if we’re fighting in the air! Let’s destroy it with a forbidden spell!”*

*“Mm. Full power. To the ocean.”*

*“Yes, Mia.”*

Nina navigated the small airship over the nearby ocean.

Arisa and Mia began a chant.

*“Aim…and fire!”*

Lulu used her Acceleration Gun to fire a Holy Bullet at one of the fragments, piercing right through it.

However, the huge hole it created in the misty orb quickly closed itself up.

*“Shooom?”*

*“Spellblade Shot, sir!”*

Tama fired a barrage of small Spellblade Shots to limit the fragments’ paths of escape, while Pochi and Liza hit them with more powerful Spellblade Shots.

Although their shots did a fair amount of damage, those too healed up quickly, just like Lulu’s Acceleration Gun shot.

I aimed at one of the fragments that none of the others were going after, closed in on it instantly with “Flashrunning,” and sliced it in half with my Divine Blade.

“…It just makes more, huh?”

While it did reduce the amount of mist quite a bit, I couldn’t go around making even smaller ones.

If I used the Divine Blade’s scripture, I could probably take them all out at once, but I wanted to avoid using that if at all possible.

*Implosion.*

I blew up one of the smaller fragments that had lost most of its mass after splitting up again.

Hrmm, so the small ones could be defeated with magic. Considering that the separated clumps overreacted to the Divine Blade, it might be best to put my sheathed Divine Blade away in Storage and deal with the rest using a Holy Sword and magic. I changed my title to “True Hero” and took out the Holy Sword Durandel.

While I worked with the beastfolk girls and Lulu to defeat most of the smaller mist fragments, Arisa and Mia finished their chants.

*“All right, here we go!”*

*“Mm… **Create Leviathan**.”*

Mia’s Spirit Magic activated.

*“Get them.”*

The Leviathan rose out of the ocean and used a giant swirling spear of seawater to pierce one of the fragments.

The sheer force broke the fragment into several smaller ones.

*“Catch them.”*

The Leviathan roared in time with Mia’s command, and the spear that had pierced the fragment collapsed back into seawater, reshaping itself into a large net and rounding up all of the smaller fragments at once.

*“I’ll finish them off! It’s my new spell’s world premiere! …**Dimension Eater**!”*

Arisa used a forbidden Space Magic spell.

The air around the fragments that were caught in the seawater net warped.

*Whoa.*

The space swelled for a moment, then swirled into a vortex that formed a hole in space itself, sucking the fragments inside.

It was as if they’d been swallowed by a black hole.

“ZZZXXXZBBB.”

Perhaps feeling threatened as so many of its brethren were being destroyed, the unharmed fragments changed shape from an unstable mass of misty

tentacles to resemble living creatures.

There were three types: Some took the shape of dragons, some were golems, and some were possessed buildings that began crawling around.

I guess we'll call them mist dragons, mist golems, and mist buildings.

*"Ah! Sir!"*

The incorrigible Hero Cannon shot out another fireball from the castle, blowing up one of the mist buildings.

It destroyed the mist building in an explosion of rubble, but the mist itself only split into smaller fragments and was largely unharmed. Each of the smaller mist fragments fused with a piece of rubble and grew legs like a wolf, then promptly began sprinting toward the castle.

On top of changing form, they'd also gained a wider range of activities.

*"Pochi, Tama, let's go!"*

*"Aye-aye, siiir?"*

*"Roger, sir!"*

The beastfolk girls jumped down from the small airship, used "Skywalking" to hop through the air and land on a roof, then chased after the swarm of mist wolves using "Blink."

*"I'll help with the counterattack, too! Endless Deracinator!"*

*"Aim…and fire!"*

Arisa blocked the mist wolves' path, while Lulu sniped them with her Fireburst Gun.

It looked like they could handle things over there.

"Whoa there, you're not getting away!"

I spotted a mist dragon fleeing through the sky and used a barrage of the Implosion spell to destroy it over the ocean.

When a few remaining traces tried to turn into fish and escape, Leviathan controlled the ocean waves to catch and crush them all.

The girls worked together to defeat all the mist wolves, and when the mist golems dug a tunnel underground to try and escape, I jumped in after them and used an intermediate attack spell to wipe them all out.

◆

*“Victoryyy?”*

*“We won! Sir!”*

Tama and Pochi raised their swords triumphantly.

*“That wasn’t nearly as bad as I expected.”*

*“Mm. Easy.”*

*“I was ready for a hard fight since the goddesses said they ‘cannot defeat it with these vessels,’ but I guess I was worried for nothing.”*

It was only when Arisa said this that I wondered if something was amiss.

*That’s right…*

The goddesses certainly did say that.

Even if I hadn’t used my Divine Blade to do some major damage at the beginning, surely we would’ve been able to defeat those things with the goddesses’ help.

Oh well. My map confirmed that there was nothing left underneath Zaicuon Central Temple, so it was probably fine.

*“Master, someone is approaching from the gate, I report.”*

I checked that part of my map and saw that the sage’s student Serena, who had gone to the main gate with Pippin, was coming back this way on her own.

She appeared to be chasing another student of the sage.

“Give it up, Kelmareite!”

“Oh, back off already!”

Two black-clad figures burst through a wall and came running out. Sure enough, it was the glamorous whip-wielding woman Kelmareite and the Tile Magic user Serena, both the sage’s students. The former was somehow alive

and well despite the fact that I definitely saw her get beheaded by the samurai general before.

I was curious about how she'd managed that, so I might as well help Serena catch her…

*"Mew!"*

***Sense Danger.***

At the same time as Tama's cry, my "Sense Danger" skill pummeled me with an intense warning.

It was coming from the place where the Zaicuon Central Temple had been. Thick miasma, enough that it was visible to the naked eye, was gushing from the ground.

There was a red dot there on my map now, even though I didn't see anything when I checked before.

*"Someone's coming out of the miasma!"*

Lulu's warning was right: A shadowy figure emerged into view.

The figure had a slender body with strangely long arms. Wings shaped like hands grew from his back. A large round lump pulsed visibly in the middle of each main wing.

"B…Bazan?!" Serena cried out when she saw the figure.

Bazan, the sage's student who broke the seal, must have been taken over by the Discordant One.

"ZZE…SzeREna…annnd…KelgmaREIde…"

Bazan spoke. Though his pronunciation was poor, he still seemed to have some memories from before he was possessed.

I mentally corrected his hard-to-understand pronunciation.

"Been a minute, Bazan. That's some look you've got going—"

Before she could finish speaking, the woman collapsed in a spray of blood, her head gone from her body.

“Ngh…!”

Serena quickly jumped back and used a talisman from her breast pocket.

The space where she had been standing warped, and a black wing sprouted there.

*“He’s bending space!”* Arisa cried through “Tactical Talk.”

On closer inspection, Bazan’s wing was partially thrust into a nearby warp in space. That meant that he must have bent space to behead the woman with his wing before.

*“■* ***Stack Tile*** *Juukabefu!”*

Serena blocked the wing attack with a wall of Tiles.

But the black wing easily broke through the wall and sent Serena flying.

I quickly used Magic Hand to try and slow her momentum, but I couldn’t stop it completely. Serena wound up leaving the same way she’d arrived, crashing through the wall of a building.

I was alarmed to see that her HP was at zero in my map information until I noticed that her condition read **Suspended Animation: Reviving**. This must be a result of her Unique Skill Safety Hibernation.

*“Arisa…”*

*“I know, I know! I won’t let him get away with that in front of an expert Space Magic user!”*

Arisa neutralized the warp Bazan had created in space.

“It’zz SEALED…but no MATTerrr.”

Bazan spread his wings and swooped to attack my friends.

*Not on my watch.*

I used “Warp” to close in and sliced off one of his wings with my Holy Sword.

“You can HOLD yourrr own, eh…”

Bazan stopped in his tracks and struck with a flurry from his wings, five on each side.

As much as I wanted to dodge them and close the distance between us, I couldn't do that without risking one of my friends behind me getting hurt.

*"All set, Master!"*

The girls all hurried onto the small airship that had landed nearby.

*"We're all safe on the airship now."*

The small airship took off without even bothering to close the hatch.

*"Wa-wa-waaah, Mr. Egg popped out of the Fairy Pack, sir!"*

I heard Pochi panicking over "Tactical Talk."

*"It's flashiiing?"*

*"Wait! It's at the same time as the lumps on those wings!"*

*Does that mean what I think it means?*

I used the help of my "Foresight: One-on-One Battle" as well as a plethora of other skills at full throttle to get as close to Bazan as I could.

"GrrRGH?!"

Ignoring his surprise, I sliced off both of his main wings with a single intense slash from my Holy Sword.

I blocked the needlelike spikes that burst out of Bazan's stomach to attack me, chasing him closely as he tried to back away.

"Trying to cut off the eggs to weaken me, eh…"

Just as I suspected, the lumps on his wings really were the Dragon's Eggs that were used for the summoning.

They did have the vague look of an energy source or a weak point.

"But this TOO matterrrs not!"

Bazan raised his arms, and each of his wings took the shape of dragons or winged snakes and flew up into the air.

"We are all ONE, even when apart! I won't let the likes of YOU stop our RRRREvenge!"

Bazan sneered, laughing triumphantly.

“Could I just mention one thing?”

“Now what? Spit it OUT.”

Bazan jerked his chin at me, still looking overconfident.

Instead of answering out loud, I simply pointed upward.

The mist dragons and mist snakes that were circling around in the sky had been snapped up in the jaws of a dragon that came flying from far away in a matter of seconds.

“Wh…whAAAAAAT?!”

The dragon’s unstoppable fangs pierced the mist, devouring the pulsating bumps.

Another breath attack burned away the rest of the mist all at once.

“Damn YOU, drrrraGOOOONS!”

Bazan sped up to the small airship as quickly as if he’d teleported.

*“Gaaaah!”*

*“Evasive action!”*

I heard my companions shrieking.

*“No worriiiies?”*

Tama’s easygoing drawl overlapped with their screams.

She was right, of course.

I used “Flashrunning” to chase Bazan and kick him high up into the heavens.

“That’s for scaring my friends.”

I fired a volley of the Implosion spell at Bazan in midair.

As far as I could tell from my map information, these attacks wouldn’t be enough to take him down entirely.

“NnngaAAAAAH!”

The smoke from the explosion was blown away from within, revealing Bazan

looking burned and tattered.

He was already nearly done regenerating. Clearly, half-hearted attacks weren't going to make a difference.

"In that case…"

I made the magic circles for the Acceleration Gun from my magic menu, forming a huge barrel that pointed straight at Bazan.

The Implosion spells were just a distraction—this was the main event.

An overcharged Holy Bullet shot through far more acceleration circles than even Lulu's Acceleration Gun, speeding toward the target.

Bazan didn't have the slightest chance to react before the attack pierced right through him like a blue laser beam, destroying his body, which turned into three black rings.

*"Awwriiiiight!"*

*"You did it, sir!"*

*"Not yet."*

Tama sharply interrupted the excited Arisa and Pochi.

My "Sense Danger" skill told me the same thing. Bazan was still alive.

He revived himself almost instantly, turning a smug glare on me.

"It is no USE. I exist in a higherrr diMENSION. You sniveling MORRRRTALS cannot truly kill me in A WAY that matterrrs."

He sneered down at me and cackled with glee.

Apparently his true form was a lot more tenacious than the Dissentients and wings and such.

But still…

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"…What?"

I used "Flashrunning" to teleport directly in front of him.

Bazan turned both arms into black blades to intercept me.

“Fall into endless DARRRKness.”

“No thanks…”

I changed my title.

“…But you go on ahead.”

I used the sword-drawing technique I honed during our practice with the samurai general to draw the Divine Blade, which I produced in my hand with lightning speed.

The even deeper darkness that was condensed into the Divine Blade slashed through Bazan’s black blades, slicing his body in two.

“I’m not…reGENERRRating?”

*He can still talk? Better pull out all the stops, then.*

*“…<Ruination>.”*

The Divine Sword’s scripture manifested true darkness.

“Wh…what? What the hell…is THAAAAAAAAT?”

Bazan tried to teleport away.

*I don’t think so.*

My Divine Sword flashed, destroying the space between it and Bazan.

The transfigured Bazan’s inhuman face appeared before my eyes, and it was full of despair.

“Check…”

The blade swathed in ruination plunged Bazan into the depths of darkness.

“…and mate.”

The traces of mist that remained were sucked into the Divine Blade.

I put it into its scabbard and stashed it away in Storage.

*Whew, that was exhausting.*

**> Defeated Discordant One: Bazan.**

**> Title Acquired: Protector of the World.**

**> Title Acquired: Destroyer of Outer Gods.**

## Epilogue

***Satou here. Work is important and all, but I think it's equally important to take breaks, if not even more so. It's only by getting enough rest and relaxation that you can tackle your next job with the best performance possible. In other words, it's vital to enjoy vacations to the fullest whenever you can.***

*"Good work, everyone. Looks like we beat it."*

When I relayed this to everyone, I heard exclamations of relief through our still-connected "Tactical Talk."

I changed my title from "God Slayer" back to "True Hero."

*"Mew? Mew-mew-meeew?"*

*"Tama, what's the matter, sir?"*

*Don't tell me…*

I looked up at the sky and saw a small section that had cracked to let out intense light.

My "Light Intensity Adjustment" skill revealed what was within the blazing brightness.

As soon as I saw it, I relaxed my guard.

I recognized those crimson and vermillion lights.

When the light subsided somewhat, Arisa murmured in wonder.

*"Are those the goddesses' true forms, do you think?"*

*"Most likely."*

At the center of each light was a perpetually shifting geometric pattern.

That must be what gods looked like to the mortal realm.

*"I'll be right back."*

I used “Flashrunning” to approach the gods.

The red dragon and yellow dragon that had been circling around in the sky gave them a wide berth, gazing at the light from afar.

I realized on my way there that I was still disguised as Nanashi the Hero. It was too late for that now, so I just kept going.

*{Hero} {Filth} {Where}*

*{Request} {Filth} {Subjugation}*

The goddesses sent words directly into my head, using a sort of compressed language that held multiple meanings. Come to think of it, it was like this when we first interacted with Parion, too.

This must be different from the “Hallowed Language: Compressed” skill I got, since it was no different now from when I didn’t have the skill before.

“If you’re referring to the Discordant One that was within the man called Bazan, I just defeated it.”

*{Taboo} {Filth} {Name}*

*{Unbelievable} {Filth} {Destroyed}*

The goddess girls peppered me with surprised-sounding words.

Honestly, it was difficult to hold a conversation like this.

“Since there’s no longer an enemy that needs defeating, would you be willing to return to your vessels by any chance?”

*{Approval}*

A single drop of light separated from each shining mass, coming to rest in the statues that had been drawn up from the ground.

As I watched, the statues turned to flesh and took on the familiar shape of the goddess girls.

*“Guilty!”*

*“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?! Have a little modesty, remember?!”*

Mia and Arisa flew off the handle at the sight of the naked goddesses.

Noticing that the sky had darkened a little, I looked up and saw that the goddesses' true forms had vanished from above. They must have returned to the divine realm.

"Well done. The world is saved. I praise thy efforts, mortals."

"'Tis not sealed but destroyed. The power of the dragons?"

While Urion congratulated us, Karion seemed skeptical.

Somehow, they were clothed all of a sudden.

"We all worked together to destroy them."

"I see…"

While I used my "Fabrication" skill to gloss things over, the red dragon and yellow dragon stuck their noses in front of me impatiently.

*"<Gods, remove the filth.>"*

*"<Gods, purify my child at once.>"*

The dragons held out their eggs, which were pinched delicately between their claws, no longer pulsating in Bazan's wings.

Looking at them like this, I thought the eggs seemed strangely small.

"Thou art insolent, dragons. Thou shalt take the proper attitude when requesting a favor. Karion says so, too."

"I did not. 'Tis foolishness to expect manners from dragons. Thou shalt remove the filth, Urion. The very thought of a dragon corrupted by filth repulses me."

"I concur, Karion. I shall remove the filth."

Crimson light gathered around Urion's hand, and she sent the light into the eggs.

The dark stains faded from the eggs under the light. The corruption must have been cleansed.

"GWROW, GWROW, GWLOROOOOOUNN!"

"YWROW, YWROW, YWLOROOOOOUN!"

The red and yellow dragons roared with joy.

*“Dragon song.”*

I heard Mia’s voice.

*“Master, look! On the ground!”*

At Arisa’s prompting, I looked down to see that the blackened ground was turning back into its original earthen color, and vivid greenery was sprouting from the soil.

Now that I thought about it, the black dragon made some strange plants grow with a song, too.

“The dragon’s song is good. Karion says so, too.”

“I concur, Urion. ’Tis healing the ground without need for divine power.”

The goddess girls nodded at each other, satisfied with their entirely practical assessment.

Evidently unbothered by the goddesses’ motives, the dragons promptly flew away far off into the sky.

The goddess girls began walking without a second glance at the dragons.

*“Where are they going, I wonder?”*

“To check on the seal, maybe?”

Sure enough, the goddess girls headed to the ruins of the temple and began their descent.

The rest of my group teleported down to join us.

“Miasma.”

“Indeed,” Karion responded to Mia’s murmured remark. “The filth from within the Godstrial Prison is leaking out.”

“If left unchecked, it could corrupt the world.”

“What?! That sounds really bad!”

“Thou shalt understand the meaning of a god’s words.”

Karion sighed.

“Arisa, Karion said ‘*if* left unchecked.’”

“Indeed. Thou art listening properly.”

Karion gave a small nod.

“You mean you can reseal it, then?”

“Aye. That is why we came. Let the work commence.”

Urion glowed crimson with divine power coursing through her veins, and Karion followed suit, her body bathed in vermillion light.

“Domain Settings.”

The goddess girls raised both hands, and their light overflowed and consecrated the room.

“Seal.”

The crimson and vermillion light took the shape of the gods’ holy seal and burned itself into the floor of the seal room.

“So now it’ll be fine unless the seal gets broken again?”

“Be not afraid. We shall delete the sealed space from the divine realm. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. That used a little too much divine power. Let us entrust that job to Garleon or Heraluon.”

As she spoke, Karion swayed a little.

Urion supported her, and we moved to the space where the Zaicuon Central Temple sanctuary had been.

*Oh, right. I have to ask the goddess girls something before they go back to the divine realm.*

“If the Evil God’s Prison in Parion Province or one of the other sealed spaces gets exposed, like the Godstrial Prison here did, would we be able to ask the gods for help?”

“Be not afraid. ’Tis impossible. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. Thou shalt explain a little more clearly, Urion.”

Urion gave a beleaguered sigh at Karion’s prompting, then went on.

“Very well. Humans can never undo a god’s seal, as long as that god’s power does not weaken. The seal here was broken only because of Zaicuon’s foolishness. Karion says so, too.”

“I concur, Urion. Zaicuon is a fool.”

Goddess Zaicuon was getting dissed on her own turf.

Their reasons raised more questions, but there was something else I had to clarify first.

“There may still be other ‘impurities’—vestiges of the Evil God’s Spawn that yet remain on this continent. If someone were to use them, wouldn’t that be a threat even to a god’s seal?”

“Nay. But thou shalt destroy any ‘impurities’ thou might find.”

Karion dismissed my concerns shortly. *If she says it’s fine, I guess I can’t complain.*

I was tempted to ask about Zaicuon while I was at it, but then Karion tripped and fell toward me, so I had to hurry and catch her. Urion seemed to be having trouble walking, too.

“We are nearly out of divine power. Thou shalt carry these vessels to the temple. Karion says so, too.”

“I concur, Urion. ’Tis all I can do to maintain consciousness.”

Since they really did seem to be in a bad way, I carried the goddess girls to the sanctuary.

“Thanks to thy service, we have cleansed one source of impurity. Here is thy reward. Thou shalt be grateful and offer us pious prayers.”

As I held her, Urion produced a ruby-like stone called a “scarlet law stone” in her hand.

I recognized it as the same gemstone that decorated the Sacred Treasure Urirulave, the “Scale that Weighs Sins.” I accepted it as she shoved it into my

palm.

“Here.”

Karion barely seemed able to speak as she dropped a vermillion stone into my hand.

Hers was smaller than Urion’s stone. It was a “wise spring stone,” like the ones that decorated her Sacred Treasure in Kalisork: the Book of Wisdom Karisefel.

The goddess girls must have crystallized their remaining divine power to give to me.

**> Title Acquired: Blessing: Goddess Karion**

**> Title Acquired: Blessing: Goddess Urion**

**> Title Acquired: Favored by Urion**

**> Title Acquired: Mark of Karion**

**> Title Acquired: Mark of Urion**

If I remembered right, those last two were what Tenion described as being given to someone who has passed a god’s trial.

I guess defeating a Discordant One counted as a trial, then.

“Farewell, human child. Thou shalt return these vessels to our temples. Karion says so, too.”

“I did not. But thou must indeed deliver our vessels.”

Faint light spilled out of the goddess girls’ bodies and vanished into the sky.

I put their statues, which were in different poses from before, away in Storage.

“Shall we get going, too, then?”

We helped a little with the cleanup in Pialork Kingdom before taking our leave.

Just as the goddess girls requested, we anonymously delivered their statues back to Urion and Karion Central Temple. I later heard through the grapevine

that the statues that the goddesses had possessed were officially treated as holy relics.

Good thing I delivered them anonymously. I might've gotten stuck being treated like a saint.

◆

"Hey, Master. Are you sure you don't want to stop by Aubehr Republic?"

Arisa sipped out of a glass with tropical fruit wedges on the rim.

Since I felt like we'd overworked ourselves a little, we were now on a vacation in Garlelork City, the city of water in the Garleon Alliance.

I got us rooms in a high-class hotel with a private beach, so we didn't even have to worry about noise.

"Shoooom?"

"Pochi can run on water, too, s—*blublubub*…"

"Pochiii?"

Tama and Pochi were running around on the calm surface of the sea, until a mischievous fish whacked Pochi in the face and she plunged into the water.

Good thing I was holding onto the egg belt while she played.

"Retrieve."

*Splish.*

On a quiet word from Mia, who was splashing around peacefully with a dolphin floatie, the tiny undines that were supporting her dolphin underwater controlled the waves and carried Pochi back to the surface.

"Phwaaah, sir."

"You okiiie?"

"Pochi is fine, sir! Thank you, Mia and Mr. Undies, sir."

"Mm."

*Splish.*

The mini undines nodded along with Mia.

“Master, we completed a castle, I report.”

“It’s our best work yet.”

Nana, clad in a bold bikini, and Lulu, wearing an adorable swimsuit, grabbed me and led me down the beach.

I took care not to react to the soft and squishy sensations against both my arms.

If the iron pair got tipped off, they’d react right away no matter where they were.

“What kind of castle did you… Whoa!” I exclaimed despite myself.

The sandcastle Lulu and Nana made was the real deal—roughly ten feet tall.

Standing nearby with a shovel in hand, Liza wiped her brow, looking satisfied. She must have helped gather a big supply of sand. No doubt she turned it into some kind of training exercise.

“Young masteeer!”

The bald head of the former Phantom Thief Pippin came bobbing toward us from the castle.

How he found us here, when I didn’t even tell him in Pialork Kingdom that we were going to Garlelork City, I have no idea.

“I came to hold up my end of the bargain.”

Pippin held up a bottle of alcohol. Next to him was the lovely young Serena, the former sage’s student.

Although she’d been mortally injured in Pialork Kingdom and entered a state of suspended animation, she appeared to have revived safely thanks to her Unique Skill Safety Hibernation.

I led them to our summer house by the beach.

“Erm… ‘Young master,’ is it? I apologize for the trouble my fellow students caused before.”

Serena bowed her head so deeply that her forehead nearly bashed into the table.

“I’m sorry, too. I didn’t mean to drag you into that mess.”

“It’s fine. Besides, Lord Kuro agreed to take care of some things for me to make up for it.”

I was using this as an excuse to bring the transformation expert Mr. Joppentelle and the other researchers in Kalisork City all the way to the royal capital of Shiga Kingdom. Once I talked to the manager of the Echigoya Company and got everything ready for them there, I was planning to transport them myself.

“That makes me feel a little better.”

Pippin poured a drink into my glass.

It was hard cider, a popular beverage throughout the Garleon Alliance. Apparently it was made from “ragon,” which was a fruit, not a giant monster.

“Mm, that’s good.”

“This ham is great, too.”

Serena placed a platter of ham on the table.

It was a snack popularly served with drinks in Garleon Alliance, made from Regar pigs. Pippin cut off a generous piece with a battle knife and passed it to me. Evidently the Regar pig was selectively bred from the Yaguu pigs of the Saga Empire.

“Wow, this goes great with cider.”

“Right? I discovered it when I was barhopping.”

Pippin had only brought glasses for the drinks, so we ate the ham barbarically with our hands.

“Did everything get sorted out in Pialork Kingdom?”

“Yep, after you lot left for the Aubehr Republic, we took care of some stuff. Lord Kuro gave me instructions to sell them a bunch of reconstruction materials on the cheap in exchange for letting the Echigoya Company open up some

branch locations, hiring people there who lost their jobs because of the disaster and stuff like that."

I normally would have taken care of all this in secret myself, but since Pippin happened to be there I left most of the work to him.

I figured Serena would probably help since she wanted to atone for the trouble her former friends caused.

"I can't thank you or Lord Kuro enough. It's only because of him that Pialork Kingdom and Parion Province aren't going to war right now."

"You really think that woulda happened? No one knew who Bazan really was. How would Pialork Kingdom people figure out that there was any connection to the sage?"

"No, they would have. Bazan visited Pialork Kingdom as a representative of the sage many times. Besides, he apparently made contact with people from Zaicuon Central Temple several times leading up to the incident."

Even so, I still felt like the odds that they would have started a war over the connection to a guy who started a rebellion in Parion Province were low.

"So what are you going to do next?"

Since this didn't seem like it was going anywhere fun, I tried changing the subject.

"I intend to chase down the other students."

Despite the fact that I was trying to ask Pippin, it was Serena who answered.

"Are there others like Bazan and his cronies out there?"

"Bazan is the only one who was that extreme. But there are others who betrayed the cause, like Kamusim and Kelmareite. So I'm going to try to go see each of them in turn."

"Do you know where they are?"

"Most of them are near the inland sea, but a handful of the strongest ones were dispatched to labyrinths around the world."

*Labyrinths…?*

“Does that include Celivera Labyrinth?”

“No, that one wasn’t part of the investigation. Neither were the Hero’s Labyrinth in Saga Empire nor the Sacrificial Labyrinth in Yowork Kingdom. The sage was investigating the Blood-Sucking Labyrinth in the south of the Saga Empire, the Wilde Labyrinth in the Gray Ratfolk Emirate, the Illusion Labyrinth in the Weaselman Empire, the Devil’s Labyrinth in the north of Shiga Kingdom, and the Jungle Labyrinth in the south.”

*Huh? What’s with the extra one?*

“I’m not familiar with the Jungle Labyrinth. Was it made recently?”

“First I’ve heard of it, too. I thought there were six labyrinths in the world—seven if you count the Devil’s Labyrinth that popped up in Seiryuu City recently.”

“What? That can’t be— Oh, right. I remember hearing that there’s a popular theory in places like the Shiga Kingdom and the Saga Empire that the Jungle Labyrinth isn’t a real labyrinth, or something…?”

“Is it different from other labyrinths?”

“Unlike all the others, that one isn’t underground. It’s the only one of its kind in the world—a huge forest that became a labyrinth.”

*Ah, so it’s what some games call a “field dungeon.”*

“Is that really a dungeon, though?”

Pippin tilted his head.

All of the labyrinths and dungeon ruins I’ve seen so far have been underground. It would make sense if the people of this continent considered that a part of the definition of a labyrinth.

“Yes, it is. According to the sage’s research, there are several conditions required to define a labyrinth. The biggest is the existence of a dungeonmaster. The sage said that he had met one before through a collaborator he called Lord Green.”

Lord Green—that must be the green greater demon.

Which kind of called the credibility of this story into question.

“So where are you going to go first?”

“I can skip the Illusion Labyrinth that Kelmareite was in charge of and the Jungle Labyrinth that I was headed toward. I’m planning on visiting the other students around the inland sea first, then going to the other places in order of which ones are closest.”

“Would it be possible for you to start with the Devil’s Labyrinth in Seiryuu City, then?”

“Sure. I’m happy to go by your request, even though that’s not nearly enough to repay what I owe you.”

Serena agreed without even asking my reason.

I had a lot of friends there, and most of all, it was Miss Zena’s hometown.

I put a marker on Serena so that I could come to the rescue if she got into serious trouble.

“Are you going with her, Pippin?”

“No, I’ve got an important job straight from Lord Kuro. Once we’re done opening branch locations around the inland sea, I’m gonna ask him for permission to go to Dragu Kingdom.”

“Dragu Kingdom? Why’s that?”

“I wanna return the Green Dragon’s Egg that I stole back from Bazan.”

*Oh, speaking of which…*

“What should we do with the White Dragon’s Egg you left with us?”

“About that… I’m honestly not sure what to do with it.”

“How do you mean?”

“As much as I’d like to return it, I don’t even know where the white dragon lives. I asked Lord Kuro, and even he and the Hero had no idea.”

Come to think of it, I remembered him asking that before we left Pialork Kingdom.

While the red and yellow dragons came to get their own eggs, the green dragon sent a priestess, and the white dragon hadn't done anything at all. I guess different dragons have different personalities.

"I see. We'll hang onto it until we find the white dragon, then."

Pochi seemed pretty attached to it anyway.

"You sure? Thanks a lot."

Pippin chugged the rest of his hard cider as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Come to think of it, we said we'd go barhopping together, but we hadn't had much of a chance to make it happen yet. *Maybe I can explore the city's nightlife with Pippin tonight.*

"I'm sorry for putting you out like this, young master. Here's a book and an artifact we found in Bazan's last hideout. I don't know how useful they'll be, but maybe they could help you deal with the dragon egg."

Serena handed me two objects from her Item Box: a necklace called a "Dragon Cradle" with a pendant shaped like a bird's nest, and a written record of hatching and raising a dragon from an egg.

According to the record, which was written in Dragu Kingdom, a Dragon's Egg can be dormant for anywhere from a few years up to a hundred or more before hatching. There were also notes about the Dragon Cradle, which was described as a magic item that helped dragons safely through their hatchling period, which they would mostly spend sleeping. It was probably a Space Magic tool of some kind.

"Masteeer!"

"Satou."

Just as we were finishing up our conversation, Arisa and Mia came running in.

"Are you done talking now? Let's hurry up and go swimming, then! Want to join us, Pippin, Serena?"

"I'm all good. Serena, you want to entertain the young master in a swimsuit?"

“A sw-swimsuit? You want me to wear such a shameless getup?”

Serena stood up, turning bright red.

I couldn’t blame her; most people in this world wore modest one-pieces if they wore swimsuits at all. In fact, since dangerous monsters lived in the ocean, most people didn’t even think about playing on the beach.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, no! If my meager body can be of use to you…!”

“H-hey! Don’t start getting undressed *here*!”

“Not your underwear! That’s inappropriate, you know? Swimsuits are different from underwear. It’s like a uniform for swimming. If you swim in your underwear, it’ll get see-through. It’s true, you know?”

Arisa and Mia hurried to stop Serena from stripping her clothes off.

I turned away immediately, while Pippin stood there cheering with obvious amusement.

“Masteeer?”

“Over here, sir!”

Ignoring the raucous scene behind me, I headed over to the coastline where Tama and Pochi were waving to me.

*We’ll spend the day swimming and work up an appetite, then have a barbecue on the beach with fresh-caught seafood.*

Thus, we enjoyed a summery day at the beach with a sea of smiles.

# EX: Fruits of Her Labor

“Sister, what are you doing in the central control room?” Yuuneia asked her adopted older sister Reiaane, also known as Rei, on their way to the control room of Lalakie.

“There’s something I want to look into a little.”

“Oh, a mission! What fun!”

Yuuneia clung adoringly to Rei’s arm, although in Rei’s very young form, it looked like Yuuneia was the older sister.

Rei gazed at her sister with a gentle smile.

Finally, they reached the end of the long hallway, and a heavy door appeared.

*“Queen Reiaane detected. Unlocking the central control room.”*

A synthesized voice, the Lalakie central core, spoke from the darkness.

As it did so, the door opened soundlessly, and soft light shimmered down from the ceiling and walls.

*“How may I assist you today, Queen Reiaane?”*

The voice was completely monotonous.

“I’d like to see all our materials about the Heavenslight Protection.”

*“Displaying materials.”*

Several documents flickered into view in midair.

Rei scanned the endless flow of information, her expression intent.

“Wow, that’s a lot! They all sound very complicated, too. Do you understand these, Sister?”

“Yes, to a certain extent,” Rei responded absently to Yuuneia’s innocent question.

“…Hmm, I don’t see anything. Perhaps there really is no way to miniaturize it, just like Mr. Satou said?”

Rei had evidently taken note of Satou’s casual comment that “it would be theoretically impossible to miniaturize” the Heavenslight Protection and decided to do more research on the subject.

*“Request accepted, Queen Reiaane. Searching materials… It is impossible to miniaturize the Heavenslight Protection. Displaying search results.”*

The central core took Rei’s murmured comment as an order and pulled the information she was seeking from the lengthy materials, displaying the results.

“Even with different verification methods, the results are all the same.”

Rei’s brow furrowed as she skimmed the words.

“Sister, your forehead’s wrinkling up.”

Yuuneia innocently poked the spot between her sister’s eyebrows.

Rei gently moved her hand aside, putting a smile back onto her stiffened features.

“You don’t like the materials, Sister?”

“It’s not that, exactly. It’s just…”

As she responded to Yuuneia, several memories suddenly flashed through her mind.

*My younger self. I was crying. Mother protected me. A terrorist attack. A powerful magi bomb. Mother defended us. A powerful wall that kept Mother and me safe. A barrier given to us by the gods. It could only mean one thing…*

“…When I was younger, Mother used the Heavenslight Protection in front of me. That’s right—I saw it with my own eyes!”

“Sister?”

“Central core! Display the accessories belonging to my mother the queen! There should be one that protected her!”

*“Searching materials… Displaying relevant Artifacts and Sacred Treasures.”*

Forgetting to explain things to the confused Yuuneia, Rei quickly looked over the images.

“Yes! There it is! Display the details about this necklace!”

*“Displaying information about the Heavenly Necklace.”*

It was a Divine Treasure that the gods bestowed on the Lalakie royal family.

Unlike the delicate necklaces popular in modern Japan, this one was heavily laden with majestic decorations.

“There’s no doubt about it. This necklace can use the Heavenslight Protection. Do we have research materials about this necklace? Display all of it.”

*“Theoretically impossible. And yet, it exists in reality. Does not compute.”*

Normally, the central core responded to the queen’s requests right away. Now, however, it seemed confused by the contradictions found in its own information.

“Central core?”

*“…Queen Reiaane, I have inspected the contradictory points.”*

“Did you figure anything out?”

*“According to my analysis, the Lalakie royal family may have deliberately hidden this truth.”*

Rei frowned at this revelation.

“If it was hidden, does that mean there’s no information about it left?”

*“Searching materials.”*

Several lights flashed rapidly on the small tower that was essentially the central core’s body.

“You can do it!” Yuuneia cheered for the hardworking machine.

“Good idea. Let’s cheer for it.”

Rei smiled and joined her sister in encouraging the central core’s processing.

*“Search complete. Research materials located.”*

“Great work, central core!”

Yuuneia’s praise was sincere.

*“The research materials are located in an encrypted file in the royal family’s private archive.”*

“Why would they be in a place like that? Display them, please.”

Rei tilted her head as she gave the order.

*“Due to the high security level of this document, I cannot permit anyone but Queen Reiaane to view the file. Requesting all other company to exit the room.”*

“…Okay. I’ll wait outside, Sister.”

Yuuneia’s face clouded for only a moment. Then she forced a smile and started to leave.

“You don’t need to go anywhere. Stay here, Yuuneia.”

“Sister?”

Yuuneia looked puzzled as Rei called her back.

“By the authority of the queen, I grant Yuuneia temporary viewing permission.”

*“Authorization accepted, Queen Reiaane. Displaying documents.”*

The central core projected the materials in front of the two sisters.

Evidently, during the golden age of Lalakie, the researchers of the time were studying Sacred Treasures under the queen’s orders.

“This says it’s made using the divine stones bestowed by the ‘Eight Gods,’ like the ‘sun stone’ and the ‘wise spring stone.’”

“Stones…from the gods…”

Doing her best to be of use to Rei, Yuuneia wrote down Rei’s mutterings on a memo pad brought to her by living dolls.

“Yuuneia, write down the names of the stones, too, please.”

Rei smiled lovingly at Yuuneia and gave her an additional request.

“Of course, Sister.”

Yuuneia’s smile beamed brightly back at her. She was obviously happy to have her sister rely on her.

For a while, Rei continued to read the documents while Yuuneia took down notes. She even drew accurate copies of the complicated blueprints and circuit diagrams. She had a surprising knack for note-taking.

◆

“We’re done. Close the documents, please.”

*“…Queen Reiaane. That top-secret information has now been registered in my search index. If someone else were to visit, there is a possibility that they would find the information that the royal family was concealing.”*

“I see…”

Rei thought for a moment, then decided to put the information back into hiding.

“Then please erase the search index and the cache data.”

*“I shall erase my own related memories as well.”*

The central core’s lights blinked furiously, then turned off as if there was a sudden power outage.

After a surprisingly long silence, the central core reactivated.

*“How may I assist you today, Queen Reiaane?”*

It was the same question the central core had posed when they first entered the room.

“Oh, I don’t need anything. We were just taking a little walk.”

*“Very well. If you require any assistance, please let me know.”*

“I will, thank you.”

Rei felt vaguely guilty as she left the central control room with Yuuneia in tow.

“Hmm, this is very difficult.”

Rei stretched, taking a break from her careful reading of the complex

documents.

“Sister, we still have the pastries Lulu left for us. Let’s eat them together.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

Yuuneia, who’d been waiting for the right time, placed a tray of tea and pastries on the table.

“How’s your mission going?”

“It’s a little tough, but I’ve figured out the most important points.”

While the theory was so complex that she could only follow about half of it, Rei had compared the regular Heavenslight Protection and that of the Heavenly Necklace. She determined that the latter included special amplification circuits, and at the center were the gems from the “Eight Gods” that the documents called “divine stones.”

“The problem is…”

She had no way of getting her hands on the divine stones.

And the Heavenly Necklace that Rei’s mother wore was lost in the destruction of the Lalakie dynasty.

“…I don’t have the materials it requires. If I had even just one kind…”

As far as she could tell from their notes, it would still work with a single kind of divine stone. It just meant that the device would need to be bigger, and it would require more magic power per unit of time.

“Not to worry, Sister. This is Master Satou. I’m sure all he needs is the method and he’ll find a way to make it work.”

“Good point, Yuuneia. You’re right.”

Knowing Satou, the diagrams and notes would be plenty useful, even without all the resources required.

Rei could say that with total faith in Satou.

“You look happy, Sister.”

Yuuneia was delighted to see Rei smiling.

“I hope Master Satou comes to visit again soon.”

“I agree, Yuuneia.”

In their house on Paradise Island, the sisters smiled at each other fondly.

# Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you very much for picking up Volume 22 of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

I don't have much room for the afterword this time, so we'll keep the highlights short.

In this volume, we finally return to a heartwarming sightseeing-centric story.

I kept the basic setting and characters from the web version of this western-regions touring arc and changed everything from the situations to the season to the circumstances, restructuring it into a completely different story. There are new characters, too, and almost all the prose is completely new as well, so I'm confident that those who have read the novels will still find plenty to enjoy here.

The goddesses' roles have also changed significantly from the web version, too. I hope you can come into it without any preconceptions and have as much fun as I did.

Since I'm running out of lines already, it's time for the usual thank-yous! To my editors Mr. I, Mr. S, and A, and of course shri, as well as everyone else who was involved in the publication, distribution, sales, marketing, and tie-ins for this book: thank you so much!

Finally, to all of you readers. Thank you so much for reading this volume all the way to the end!

Let's meet again in the next volume for the first half of the Arcatia arc!

*Hiro Ainana*

# Copyright

Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 22

Hiro Ainana

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DEATH MARCH KARA HAJIMARU ISEKAI KYOSOKYOKU Vol. 22

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