

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody 15.





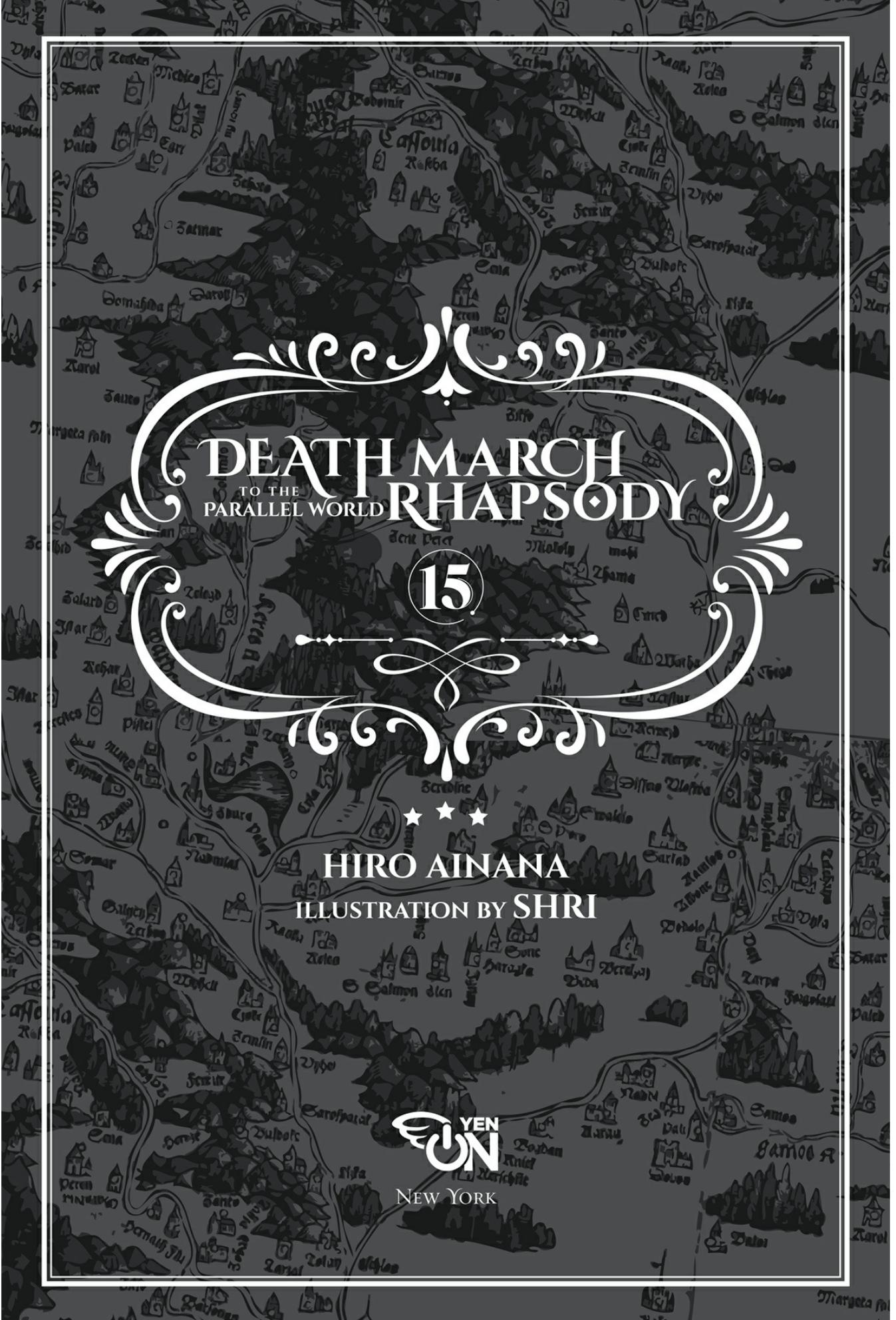
DEATH MARCH ¹⁵
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY





As Karina
hides out
in her room,
Satou
approaches...

“Sorry, did I
startle you?”



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

15

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI



NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 15

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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Zena's Training

Satou here. Taking the first step of a new venture can be intimidating, at least to some degree, don't you think? Personally, I believe if you gather your courage and take that step anyway, you'll find an exciting new experience awaiting you.

“Satou, I...”

Miss Zena Marienteil, a Seiryuu City magic soldier with her brilliant golden hair in a braid, was blushing bright red and clenching her fists tightly as she gazed up at me.

We were standing at the gate of my mansion in Labyrinth City.

“...I...um...I have a request for you!”

“What is it? I'd be more than happy to help, if I can.”

I didn't know what she wanted, exactly, but I wanted to be of use to Zena if her request was reasonable.

“I want to get stronger. Strong enough to protect someone...”

I was bracing myself for a confession of love, but I guess that was just me being full of myself.

I guess she wouldn't have come in her army uniform if she was really going to confess.

Zena wore a serious expression as she continued. “So please teach me! I want to know how to get stronger like you and your party!”

“...How to get stronger?”

My response ended up sounding a bit incredulous.

It seemed that my companions watching from the entrance hall felt the same way: I could feel a wave of relief coming from their direction.

At first I thought she wanted me to power level her, but the ever-diligent Zena just wanted to know the best methods for getting stronger on her own.

A few days ago, while Zena was exploring with Labyrinth City Celivera's Elite Training Corps, she'd been attacked by a sword ax mantis and had suffered serious injuries.

She was rescued by the vampire progenitor Ban, a reincarnation who happened to be in the area, but since he was disguised as a cloud of mist at the time, there was an uproar about her being kidnapped by a mysterious monster.

In the end, Kuro brought her back to the surface under the pretense that I'd sent him to rescue her, but if Ban hadn't happened to be there, there was a good chance Zena could have died.

After such an experience, it was no wonder Zena would want to get stronger.

"Yes, I know it's a lot to ask..." Taking my tepid response as a rejection, Zena lowered her gaze, her tone sinking, but then looked up and pressed on with renewed determination. "But please! I'll do anything, I swear..."

Looking at her earnest expression, I remembered when I first arrived in Seiryuu City.

Back then, I think she made a declaration along the lines of "*I swear on the Marienteil family name that I will find a way to thank you!*"

"Don't worry, Miss Zena. I would be happy to teach you." I patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Besides, a young lady your age shouldn't make promises like, 'I'll do anything.'"

"I—I'm so sorry."

I was warning her jokingly, but Zena ducked her head when she realized her misstep.

"Let's see. How to get stronger..."

"Yes, please. Could you at least tell me whatever you're comfortable sharing?"

"We don't do anything so unusual that it needs to be kept a secret."

With that, I explained my method of training my companions.

“As you know, Liza, Pochi, and Tama raised their levels a decent amount in the labyrinth below Seiryuu City, but the other girls have slowly built up experience by training with experts we met on our journey, fighting monsters and bandits we ran into on the road, and so on.”

I think Lulu is the only one who did any power leveling on our travels to the old capital, right?

I made sure the haunted fortress in the Muno Barony was safe, but other than that I think our group has fought most things normally.

“Once we reached Labyrinth City, we started staying in the labyrinth for days on end, constantly fighting monsters around the girls’ level or slightly higher. It seems like the best way to make the most of the experience is to fight lots of different kinds of strong enemies.”

While training my group, I figured out that they leveled up after defeating around twenty enemies around their own level. Against enemies of a lower level, they would have to defeat far more of them to level up.

However, elves require almost twice as much experience as humans do to level up, so I power leveled Mia some to keep her experience on par with the others.

“E-erm, Satou...Silverlight told me that most explorers don’t attempt to battle enemies as strong or stronger than themselves and that they only fight enemies they can defeat safely, since it would be a huge loss if they were injured. Was that wrong?”

Zena was referring to the mid-level all-female explorer group Silverlight, with whom her group trained recently.

“No, that’s true.”

At my seemingly self-contradictory response, Zena’s face clouded.

I got the feeling I wasn’t explaining myself very clearly, so I continued.

“Which is why I made adjustments so that they could fight stronger enemies, too.”

Zena waited for me to explain.

“I equipped my group with the best armor possible so they wouldn’t get hurt, stocked up on potions and recovery methods in case anything went wrong...”

At this point, I think the equipment I’ve made would keep my girls alive even against a greater demon.

“...and gathered information.”

“Information?”

“That’s right. I studied the terrain of the labyrinth and the distribution of monsters, investigated the monsters that would appear in the area we were entering, and shared all that information with my group. We also made advance preparations to ensure that they wouldn’t have to fight multiple enemies at once.”

It’s not much to brag about, since all I really did was use “Search Entire Map” and read the detailed information that came up as a result.

But gathering information is important for labyrinth exploration, too, so I decided to exaggerate.

“...That’s very impressive.”

“You can get information at the explorers’ guild about monsters that normally appear in the first section of the labyrinth, and there are also some mapmakers who keep track of what kind of monsters appear in other parts. I would recommend talking to veteran explorers to get advice on where to find the best maps.”

I also recommended that she stop by the newbie explorers’ classes I had organized.

That way, I could supply her with the maps used for the newbie explorers’ practice runs and eventually could even draw some for new sections.

“In fact, the girls’ first teacher is working at the explorers’ school now, so I could introduce you if you’d like.”

“Oh, master, don’t be silly!”

Arisa rushed over with a cheerful shout, a blond wig covering the lilac hair that was considered unlucky in this world.

She'd been watching all this time from the entrance, but I guess she couldn't resist jumping in any longer.

"If you need teachers, we're right here!"

"We've got thiis?"

"Pochi can teach, too, sir!"

Arisa pounded her chest confidently; the white-haired, cat-eared girl Tama lined up on her left, while the brown-haired, dog-eared Pochi stepped up at her right.

Their tails swishing, the two younger girls struck their signature poses, trying to show Zena their willingness to help.

"Forgive my arrogance, but perhaps I could help to teach you spear techniques, how to handle monsters, and so on."

Liza, who came running after Tama and Pochi to make sure they didn't do anything foolish, volunteered her services to Zena, who once saved their lives.

Her orange-scaled tail flicked toward the sky, reflecting her earnestness.

"I could provide shield-related teachings, I declare."

The busty, stone-faced homunculus Nana stepped out from behind Liza, her blond ponytail bobbing.

"Magic."

Mia spoke a single word from behind me.

She was likely volunteering to teach Zena magic.

Her slightly pointed ears, identifying her as an elf, peeked out from beneath her aqua-green pigtails.

"All I can really offer is 'Self-Defense' and 'Marksmanship,' but if that's all right, I'd be happy to help."

This modest offer came from Lulu, who was so beautiful that she could bring

down a fortress with a single smile, in my unbiased opinion.

Her glossy black hair was as silky as ever, even in the dusty air of the Labyrinth City, Celivera.

“What do you think, Miss Zena? We’re no expert instructors, but would you like to try joining in on my group’s training for a while?”

“Y-yes, please! I would love to!”

Zena nodded her head rapidly.

My original plan for today was to take Zena out for a delicious meal somewhere, but there was probably no harm in delaying that for now.



“Miss Zena and company are going to train at the explorers’ school today. Would you like to join us, Lady Karina?”

“...Training at the explorers’ school?”

A frown crept across the lovely face of Karina, the second daughter of my employer, Baron Muno.

“No, thank you,” she declared, flipping her luxurious golden ringlets over her shoulder.

She was probably still a bit scarred from being expelled after half a day’s trial lessons at the explorers’ school.

“Come with uuus?”

“Pochi is going, too, sir!”

Tama and Pochi tugged on Karina’s hands.

They seemed to be trying to treat the much older girl as a younger sister.

“I most certainly shall not. Didn’t you two say yourselves that the best training is real combat?”

At that, Tama and Pochi trembled dramatically.

“Oopsie-daisy?”

“Th-that’s right, sir. I’ve become a hippo-critter, sir!”

I think Pochi was probably trying to say “hypocrite.”

That seemed excessive to me, but maybe she felt guilty because she hadn’t fought a strong monster in the past two weeks or so.

“As long as we’re clear! Then we shall go to the labyrinth! That’s all right, isn’t it?”

Having successfully persuaded Tama and Pochi, Karina crossed her arms beneath her impressively ample chest and stared at me triumphantly.

It took all of my willpower to resist the powerful forces drawing my gaze toward her bust.

“Sure, that’s fine. Are you going after plunderers again?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Right, Lady Karina?”

Instead of Karina herself, it was her guardian maids, Erina and the newbie, who responded.

For some reason, nobody ever called the poor newbie by her name. But since it didn’t seem to bother her, I was going to stick with it until Erina mentioned her actual name.

“But of course!”

Karina nodded agreeably, but the maids’ boss, Pina, was quick to scold them for their overly pushy behavior.

For some reason, instead of the maid outfits Arisa popularized in the Muno Barony, Pina was wearing a battle outfit and some secondhand leather armor and carrying one of the large baskets often used by carriers in Labyrinth City.

“Hmm? Are you going into the labyrinth, too, Pina?”

“I am. There’s not much to do if I just stay around here, and I can help carry maze ant materials and such.”

It sounded like a noble enough reason, but the dollar signs in her eyes belied her true intentions.

The last time Miss Karina explored the labyrinth, she had to leave behind a

great deal of maze ant materials she couldn't carry. Pina must have seen that as an enormous waste.

I had already told my companions not to carry monster materials in their Fairy Packs, in order to avoid drawing attention to the unusual bags.

"Just be careful not to get hurt. If things get too dangerous, drop the materials and run."

As a precaution, I made sure to warn Pina, too.



"Young master, Lady Marienteil and company have arrived."

After Karina's party left for the labyrinth with Pochi and Tama as guards, Zena and her friends arrived less than an hour later.

The head maid, Miss Miteruna, led me to the parlor, where Zena was waiting with the three female soldiers from her squad—her best friend, Lilio the scout, the lovely broadsword user Miss Iona, and the stocky shield user Lou.

For some reason, there were three more people along with them: Sir Hence, who was the young commanding officer of Labyrinth City Celivera's Elite Training Corps, and two civil officials.

They were here with the Labyrinth Elite to research how to manage the labyrinth that had recently emerged in their own Seiryuu City, so they were investigating Celivera's peacekeeping and guild management, among other protocols.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Sir Hence. And I don't believe I've met you two. I am Satou Pendragon, honorary hereditary knight and vassal of the Muno Barony."

When I introduced myself, the two civil officials did the same: The middle-aged man with the receding hairline was Toril, and the straitlaced woman in her late twenties was Karana.

"I heard that you gave Zena and her squad some valuable magic potions the other day. Were it not for those potions, several of my soldiers might have been lost. I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Sir Pendragon."

“I’m just happy to have been of help.”

I gave a harmlessly generic response to Sir Hence’s thanks.

He was probably referring to when I gave Zena some middle-grade magic potions, cure-alls, and such when she went into the labyrinth.

“Sir Pendragon, I must also thank you for your efforts in rescuing our magic soldier Zena.”

After Sir Hence, the male civil official gave his thanks as well.

It seemed that the three of them had come along with Zena and friends to thank me for the other day.

“It isn’t much, but this is a small token of appreciation from Seiryuu County’s Labyrinth City’s Celivera Elite Training Corps.”

The man nodded, and the female official placed a wooden box wrapped in cloth on the table.

When I opened it, I found a valuable-looking knife made from a wyvern’s talon and two small jars.

According to my AR, one of the jars contained already-processed white dragon stone powder, one of the key ingredients to an all-purpose antidote, while the other contained a fragrance called “flying dragon spice.” Both were fairly expensive in Labyrinth City.

“This is a splendid knife. Is it made from a wyvern talon, by chance?”

“Yes, it’s a masterpiece by Seiryuu County’s finest craftsman, Toreban.”

The male official sounded rather proud.

“Simply remarkable. Thank you very much, I’ll use it with care.”

Wyvern talons are very solid, so it should come in handy for breaking down monster bodies.

That was probably the end of their business, but it wasn’t considered polite to leave immediately after finishing what you needed, so we chatted about nothing for a while.

“...Well, if you’ll excuse us. Zena and our soldiers are in your care.”

“Thank you.”

Once the conversation dried up, Sir Hence excused himself, and we waved good-bye to the three of them.

Sir Hence and the male official were going to the viceroy’s residence, while the female official was heading to the explorers’ guild.

Once they left in their carriages, I walked with Zena’s squad to the explorers’ school near the mansion.



“Satou, are you sure it’s all right if we borrow such expensive-looking equipment?”

“Yes, of course. They’re just some pieces of my party’s old equipment that I repaired, so please don’t worry.”

Zena and her squad had damaged a lot of their equipment in their recent battle against the sword ax mantis, so I gave them some refurbished weapons and armor that my group had been using.

It wouldn’t be quite strong enough to fight an areamaster, but the defense was high enough to take on a lesser demon without a problem. At the very least, it should protect them from fatal injuries against something like a sword ax mantis.

“You call this ‘old’...?”

“This stuff looks brand-new to me.”

Lou and Lilio looked at each other, but Miss Iona scolded them quietly.

“Lou, Lilio, mind your manners. It’s impolite to make such comments as thanks for Sir Knight’s kindness.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“This is good stuff. Seem like monster parts, but they’re light and sturdy.”

“They seem quite impact-resistant as well.”

“Iona! Don’t test it by punching me in the stomach!”

I had never seen the coolheaded Iona joke around before.

She must have been excited about their new equipment, too.

“Honestly! Couldn’t you thank Satou first?”

Zena appeared to be pleased, too, as her scolding voice was much lighter than usual. I was glad that they all seemed to like it.

Once the squad all thanked me again, we discussed the schedule.

“As far as the training period, we have to go to the royal capital by airship in eight days, so we can only train with you until the day before we depart. Is that all right?”

“Yes, that’s fine!”

Once Zena agreed, Lilio looked at me curiously.

“What’re you going to the royal capital for?”

“We’re being conferred medals for defeating a floorlord.”

“Wow, very impressive.”

“Zenacchi, your man’s moving up in the world again,” Lilio whispered to Zena.

“Baron Muno, whose house I serve, is also going to the royal capital to participate in the kingdom meeting, so we’re going in order to escort his daughter, Lady Karina, as well.”

“Lady Karina is that super-pretty lady with the blond curls, right?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

At that, Lilio continued teasing Zena. “If you’re not careful, that pretty lady’s gonna steal your boy toy away!”

Zena looked genuinely worried, so I quickly assured her that I had no such relationship with Karina.

“Right, because he’s already got us!”

“Mm, fiancé.”

Arisa and Mia chimed in to make things worse.

After that small digression, we finally started the training.

“Shall we break up into the vanguard and rear guard, then?” Arisa proposed.

“I’m a scout, so which group should I go with?” asked Lilio.

“Tama would be best equipped to teach you about scouting, but she’s in the labyrinth with Lady Karina, so maybe you should join in with the vanguard for today?”

“All right, sounds good. Later, Zenacchi.”

Lilio nodded at Arisa, waved lightly to Zena, and went off toward Miss Iona and the others.

“All right, Zenny, we’ll teach you all about being in the rear guard.”

“Mm. Trust.”

“Thank you very much.”

“We’d get in the way of Liza and the others if we stay here, so let’s do it over there.”

Arisa and Mia led Zena over to a shady area nearby.

Since Lulu wasn’t included, she joined me in observing.

“Nana will be your sparring partner first. There’s no need to hold back—please attack with all your might.”

I heard Liza’s voice and turned to see that the vanguard contingent was already starting group battles.

“Allow me to be the first challenger, then.”

Iona readied her own shield and stepped toward Nana.

“All three of you may attack at once, I declare,” Nana informed her expressionlessly.

“I think you’re underestimating us.”

“Right, we’re not some greenhorn soldiers. Even vice captain Leelo couldn’t take on all of us at once.”

Nana tilted her head to the side at Lilio and Lou.

She could probably handle them easily, but since they hadn't witnessed Nana's genuine strength, it was understandable that they wouldn't accept it without proof.

"Very well. Then let me begin by demonstrating that no restraint is necessary."

Liza seemed to reach the same conclusion as I did and stepped up to Nana with her spear.

"Here I come, Nana."

"Whenever you're ready, I declare."

Liza used "Blink" to attack Nana with a series of spear strikes.

The spearhead jabbed in all directions, tracing red lines in the air as it tried to break through Nana's defenses.

"Whoa."

"What in the world...?"

"I must admit, that is impressive."

Zena's squad all exclaimed in surprise.

Listening to Arisa and Mia's lecture, Zena glanced at me, clearly worried about the aggressive attacks.

"S-Satou, are they all right?"

"It's fine," I assured her, watching Liza and Nana's sparring match.

Powerful as she'd become, even Liza couldn't break through Nana's defenses without Pochi and Tama to assist her.

"Your defense really is remarkable."

"It will be difficult to break through with only spear attacks, I respond."

Nana seemed to feel that it was easy to defend against Liza when she wasn't attacking with her tail, feinting with "Spellblade Shots," and so on.

If she used a special attack, she might be able to push through, but that would probably cross the line beyond a sparring match.

"So, as you can see, your attacks will not harm Nana. Please don't hold back when you're attacking her."

With that, Liza stepped aside for Iona and company to take on Nana.

"Understood. I apologize for being presumptuous earlier. Lou, Lilio—let's go."

"Yeah, let's do it."

"Coming!"

With Lou in the front with her shield, Iona as the main attacker, and Lilio doing hit-and-run attacks, the trio began sparring with Nana.

Liza was looking on to provide guidance.

It looked like Liza had things under control, so I turned my attention to Zena.

"So, you're proficient in attacks, defense, surveillance, support, obstruction, and communication, right?"

"Yes, but wind magic users are often in a supporting role in the army, so I don't use attack magic much in actual combat."

According to Arisa and Zena's conversation, Zena was a bit of an all-rounder type as a wind magic user.

In this world, normal people have to memorize long chants to use spells, so many people can't use magic outside of their area of expertise without consulting a spellbook.

"As long as you've got an individual attack spell for backup and a wide-range attack spell for wiping out small fry, you're golden."

"Mm. Wide range, important."

Mia nodded and agreed with Arisa.

Without a wide-range attack that can blow away a bunch of monsters at once, it can be a huge pain to take on amorphous monsters that are difficult to attack with weapons, monsters that travel in packs, and other types of obstacles.

"Enemy detection is really important in the labyrinth. Zenny, can you do other things while maintaining a detection spell?"

“What do you mean?”

Zena tilted her head in confusion.

“Exactly what it sounds like. Even though a detection spell tells you the area is safe for now, that could change at any moment in a place like the labyrinth.”

“Detection, important.”

Mia agreed with Arisa again.

“What did you do with the army?”

“Since Lilio’s the scout, she did enemy detection and monitored the area and such.”

“Makes sense. But ideally, it’s more efficient for the scout to separate from the party and pull the next monster toward the end of the battle, so it certainly wouldn’t hurt for you to learn it.”

At Arisa’s recommendation, Zena nodded and began practicing.

“...Ah, did it break?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so... It’s difficult to keep it up while doing things like chanting or using Magic Items.”

After a half hour or so of observing, it seemed like Zena was having difficulty maintaining a detection spell while doing something else at the same time.

It can be pretty hard to multitask when you’re not used to it. Adding a second spell while maintaining a continuous spell is especially difficult.

“Arisa, you can’t expect her to get it right away.”

If anything, it’s impressive that Arisa and Mia were able to master it so soon after I taught them.

I went over to the group and took over as teacher for a bit.

“Zena, try using detection magic, then focus on the rest of your squad practicing in the yard.”

“A-all right. ■■.....”

I used my “Magic Power Vision” to watch the flow of wind and magic as

Zena's spell activated, then concentrated on Lilio and the others.

> Skill Acquired: "Wind Reading"

It seemed like I should already have that skill by now, but I wasn't complaining, since it'd probably be useful for using bows and such.

"Now expand the range of your detection, and try to count the number of students and teachers on the school grounds."

"All right. One, two, three..."

Zena closed her eyes to concentrate on the magic, and I waited for her to finish counting.

"Great. Now try to picture all of that from a bird's-eye view."

She wouldn't be able to analyze each individual, but I figured it'd be good if she could keep a vague idea of all their positions in the bigger picture.

"Liza, do a light dash toward Zena, please."

"Understood."

Next, I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to stealthily give Liza a request.

"...Huh?"

As Zena was using detection magic to monitor everyone, she raised her head in surprise when Liza suddenly started approaching.

"Focus on the detection spell."

"R-right!"

I prodded her attention back toward the wavering detection spell.

"Now, try to keep up that bird's-eye view until noon, please. Liza or I will act like we're charging once in a while, but just stay calm, track our locations, and tell Arisa and Mia who's approaching and from what direction."

"Okay, I'll try."

Zena nodded firmly.

"Aww, that's aaall?" Arisa sounded disappointed, but she would have to wait a little longer. In the afternoon, their special training would really begin.

“Tch, blocked again!”

“Shield attacks must only be used when one of the opponent’s feet is off the ground, or when their center of gravity is off-balance, or else they will simply be blocked, I inform.”

Nana gave some advice to Lou after neatly parrying her shield bash.

Meanwhile, Iona’s broadsword swooped in from the opposite side of Nana’s shield, but Nana quickly knocked it aside with her one-handed sword.

“Heh-heh, you’re wide open!”

Lilio jumped in from her blind spot, only for Nana to block her attack with her sword without turning around.

“H-how? I made sure to come from an angle where you wouldn’t see my shadow...”

“I could tell from the tremors in the ground and the air, I report.”

Nana continued parrying Iona and Lou’s attacks as she responded to Lilio.

A lot of monsters attack in tricky ways, so Nana had picked up skills like “Presence Perception” and “Spatial Awareness,” which were probably coming in handy here.

Although more importantly, I’m pretty sure a surprise attack from even the perfect angle won’t work if you yell “you’re wide open!” while you do it.

After about an hour of exchanging blows, the three of them were near collapsing from exhaustion.

While all three of the attackers were drenched, Nana hadn’t broken a sweat.

“Once we’ve taken a break for a while and you’ve caught your breath, I’ll take you on next.”

“The shield babe is one thing, but there’s no way a spear user can block three attackers at once, right?”

“I should hope so, if you’re to protect Lady Zena.”

While Lilio grumbled, still panting, Liza responded with a calm smile.

Once the break was over, it was her turn to train the trio.

“If that’s all it takes to knock aside your shield, you’ll bring shame upon shieldmaidens everywhere. Don’t just depend on muscle—use your body weight and the ground itself to stand up to such blows.”

After Liza’s spear attack knocked Lou to the ground, she used the Magic Spear to catch Iona’s swinging broadsword and toss it aside, then used the momentum to lightly strike Iona’s forehead with the butt of the spear.

“A swinging broadsword with centrifugal force is certainly powerful, but it’s easy to dodge and therefore to counterattack, so please be careful.”

As she gave this warning, she turned to face Lilio, who was approaching from behind Lou.

The scout attacked from her blind spot, but Liza deflected each of her thrusts directly with a jab of her own spear.

“Whoa, whoa! W-w-wait a sec—”

Lilio’s short sword was knocked out of her hand, and she tumbled to the ground, pursued by a rain of attacks from Liza’s spear.

“Hold up! I’m a scout, so I can’t keep up with a long rally like that...”

“Then you should be sure to retreat right after a single strike to keep your opponent on their toes.”

As Lilio made excuses, Liza scolded her lightly and turned back to Lou.

Iona seemed dazed for a moment after the blow to her forehead, but Liza had been holding back, so she quickly recovered.

The training continued until the lunch bell rang, at which point Iona and Lou collapsed to the ground as soon as Liza declared the match over.

Lilio was wobbling too, but she didn’t seem quite as exhausted as Iona and Lou, who’d been fighting Liza and Nana head-on the whole time.

“So there’s a shooting range here, too?”

“Yes, we built it for children who are interested in scouting.”

Drinking the cold veria water that Lulu handed to everyone, Lilio gazed at the

four-lane shooting range in one corner of the schoolyard.

“You used a crossbow in Seiryuu City, right, Miss Lilio?”

“Uh-huh. I’m actually one of the better shots in our army, y’know.”

Lilio looked proud.

“Would you like to try some shooting, then?”

“Yeah, sure. Once I’ve got enough strength to draw a bow again, maybe I’ll take you up on that.”

Lilio’s hand was still shaking too much to pull the bowstring, so I pulled it for her instead.

“Whoa, Zena’s man! How strong do you gotta be to be able to pull that so easy?!”

For some reason, Lilio seemed surprised.

I learned later that the normal method of using a crossbow is to put the tip of the bow on the ground and hold it in place with one foot before pulling it taut.

“Oh, I was using ‘Body Strengthening.’ It’s very convenient.”

I didn’t actually use any such skill, but I figured it was better to say I did.

“Well, since you pulled it back for me, I guess I can pop a bolt in there and shoot it myself.”

Lilio readied her crossbow at the shooting range.

This lane had white lines every ten yards, with targets at the twenty-and fifty-yard marks. Instead of simple bull’s-eyes or human shapes, they were shaped in the silhouettes of monsters. The highest-scoring areas were the monsters’ respective weak points.

The practice area for slings had some pretty worn-down targets, so I set up different ones.

“...Hmm, I can hit the close one pretty easy, but the faraway one’s tougher.”

Lilio modestly played down her achievements, though she looked pleased.

Though she said the faraway target was tough, she’d hit the one that was

barely within range without a problem, which was definitely more than good enough for a scout.

“Who does the long-distance stuff in your party? I’d love to see a mithril explorer’s skills.”

“Mia and I can use bows, but Lulu usually handles the long-distance attacks.”

I turned to Lulu, who looked a bit uncertain.

“Erm, the Fire Rod Gun would burn the targets, and the regular rifle is awfully loud. What should I do?”

“Rifles? A Fire Rod’s one thing, but you guys use antiques like that as weapons?”

Lilio seemed to be familiar with rifles.

In the Shiga Kingdom, they were generally considered old-fashioned weapons with lots of drawbacks.

“Yes, since there are a lot of enemies in the labyrinth that are resistant to magic attacks.”

“Gotcha. Why not try a crossbow, then? It’s a little different from the rifles I’ve seen in the castle, but it’s still just pointing at a target and pulling the trigger, yeah?”

Lulu looked to me, so I nodded.

“All right, I’ll give it a try.”

Lulu steadied her aim on the faraway target and pulled the trigger of the crossbow.

Her shot was a little off from the center of the target.

“Whaddaya think?”

“I think I understand now. I’ll hit it this time.”

“Huh? Wait, you’re not...” Lilio trailed off mid-sentence. “Seriously...?”

Lulu had pierced the center of the target with several shots in a row.

“It’s crazy enough that you hit a bunch in a row when you’re using a crossbow

for the first time, but it's even more amazing that you did it at this distance without aiming for more than a second. You're a total prodigy!"

"A-a prodigy? Oh, goodness, no. Master is much better than I am."

As Lulu deflected Lilio's praise with a blush, she ended up turning the attention toward me instead.

"Is that true, Zena's boy?"

Lilio stared at me with great interest, so I wound up agreeing to just one shot.

I thought about missing on purpose and laughing it off, but I couldn't bring myself to betray Lulu as she gazed at me eagerly, so I decided it was worth causing a little bit of a fuss.

"All right, then, here goes."

I had a good idea of how Lilio's crossbow worked from watching Lulu, so I just notched a bolt and pierced the target right away.

"Not even a test fire first?"

"Amazing as always, master!"

"This is a very good crossbow." Smiling at Lulu, I handed the weapon back to Lilio.

Arisa stood off to the side, crossing her arms and grinning smugly as she remarked, "Nice 'GG Master' moment, Lulu!" I decided to ignore her stupid comment, as usual.

"Shall we have lunch now, then? Zena, please try to keep up your magic while you're eating, too."

"O-okay, I'll do my best."

"Talk about Spartan," Arisa muttered, but I figured it was a good ability to have even outside the labyrinth, so I was trying to harden my heart and keep pushing her anyway.



"So, Zena's boy toy, where's this explorer you said could teach me some scouting tips?"

After lunch, I brought Zena and Lilio to the west guild.

For a scout like Lilio, it was extra important to get experience in the field, so I was planning to ask Mr. Dozon or Mr. Koshin to let her train with their party.

Both Dozon and Koshin had a lot of connections, too, so if I introduced them to Zena and Lilio, they might make good allies for the girls in case anything happened while I was away from Labyrinth City.

“He’s usually around here somewhere... Aah, there we go.”

I knew everyone’s locations already from my map, but I made sure to act like I’d just spotted him.

“...and the usual tamers Behin and Lahin got poached by some damn nobles, so now the labyrinth village is short on beasts of burden.”

Dozon appeared to be exchanging information with another explorer.

Located in the Upper Stratum of the Celivera Labyrinth, the labyrinth village was a small settlement that functioned as a stopover point for explorers. The village also offered rentals of tamed monsters that couldn’t be brought aboveground, for carrying items and exploring the labyrinth.

“So has the price gone up?”

“Better believe it. Most monsters that’ve been trained by proper tamers have gone up thirty, forty percent.”

“That much...?”

“Yeah, at this rate we’ll get stuck renting sketchy monsters tamed by that Kannoke bastard.”

As we approached Dozon, he noticed me and waved.

“Hey, young master. You’ve got some new arm candy today, eh?”

“Good afternoon, Lord Dozon.”

I greeted the explorer who Dozon was talking to as well. We’d never been introduced, but I was fairly sure this was the scout from the Hellfire Fangs, a famous garnet-badge explorer party led by the Magic Sword user Zarigon.

“Lord Dozon, this is Miss Zena Marienteil, a magic soldier from the Seiryuu

County army who once saved Liza's life, and Miss Lilio the scout."

"You saved that powerhouse, eh? You look like a sweet little lady, but you must have some serious strength."

"I see. So she's walking around using enemy detection Wind Magic as some kind of training, eh?"

"That's right. You're very observant."

Wow, the veteran scout noticed Zena's magic.

I introduced Dozon and company to Zena and Lilio, too.

"Any friend of the young master's is a friend o' mine. If anything happens while he's not around, come see me anytime."

"Thank you very much."

Zena bowed her head deeply to Dozon, who seemed to have figured out my intentions.

"So, didja come here just to introduce them or what?"

"Nothing gets past you, Lord Dozon. You see, I was hoping you might be able to set up Miss Lilio here with someone who can teach her how to be a scout in the Celivera Labyrinth."

"Huh? Why don'cha just have your scouts—oh, I getcha. The little cat-eared girl in the bean armor is a natural, so maybe she ain't so good at teaching others."

Dozon had never gone into the labyrinth with Tama before, but he seemed to know her pretty well.

"In that case, I can teach you. You've been a great help to our captain, and you saved my comrades from being eaten by the lightning elder stag, too."

Remembering the incident when I helped them with the areamaster, the scout offered to be Lilio's teacher.

"Oh-ho, learning the basics straight from Poes, one of the best scouts in Labyrinth City and a member of the elite Shadowfangs? You oughtta teach my scouts, too, then."

"You never do miss a beat, Dozon. Then I suppose I can teach the Hellfire Fangs' scouts-in-training along with her."

The scout paused to ask if that was all right with me; Lilio didn't seem to mind, so I agreed to his proposal.

As part of her scout training, he immediately offered to teach her new skills like how to tell a good flash bomb or smoke bomb from a dud and how to use the maps and materials in the guild, so we left Lilio with him. They would be training in the labyrinth for two days, and we'd reconvene after that.

"...So that's about it."

I introduced Zena to some well-connected veteran explorers, the guild workers, and others, explaining who was best at what roles.

"That was a lot of introductions in one go. Are you keeping up all right?"

"Oh...yes... I'm fine."

Zena nodded, although she looked dizzy with information overload.

I made sure to tell her beforehand which people's names and faces were especially important to remember, but I guess it was a lot to ask her to memorize all at once.

Maybe it would be best to imitate my friend Tolma from the old capital, make a little notebook containing the names and information of important figures, and give it to Zena later.

"You certainly know a lot of people, Satou."

"Oh, it's nothing, really."

Although I guess I do have a lot of acquaintances these days.

"Um...Satou?"

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about people with blue skin?"

I nodded. "I believe so. I've never met them directly, but you mean the Blue People, who are said to appear in the labyrinth village or to those who get lost in the labyrinth, yes?"

I also knew they were really the vampires who lived in the Lower Stratum, like the progenitor Ban Helsing and his wives, but I decided to avoid mentioning that, since I was the only person who knew. I didn't want to cause an uproar.

"So it would be possible to meet them in this labyrinth village place?"

"If you're lucky, yes. Why, did you want to meet them?"

"Yes, before Sir Kuro saved me from the labyrinth, they healed my wounds."

The progenitor really did heal Zena's serious injuries.

"But I came back without ever thanking them properly, so I want to apologize."

Since I was the one who had assumed she'd been kidnapped and stole her from the vampire lord's castle disguised as Kuro, that was technically my fault.

I apologized and thanked the progenitor on her behalf, so there wasn't really a problem, but of course I couldn't tell her that.

"Why not try writing them a letter, then?"

"A letter?"

"Yes, since there's no telling if you'll actually be able to meet them in the labyrinth village, I think it might be best to write a letter and give it to a representative in the village instead. If a letter doesn't feel like enough, you could always offer some of the Blue People's favorite wine, too."

"Perfect! I'll try doing that, then!"

I told her the brand of their preferred wine.

It was a little difficult to find in Labyrinth City, but I could always give her some extra when I went to pick up more, since Ban had asked me for some directly.

As we were walking along, talking about stopping by a bar to see if they had any of the wine, Zena suddenly stopped.

"...Miss Karana?"

Zena had spotted a woman standing glumly in the shadow of a pillar.

Sure enough, it was the civil official who had come to my mansion with Zena earlier.

We approached her, and she told us the situation with a bit of complaining mixed in.

“...I see. So you asked to audit the newbie explorers’ course at the guild, and they turned you down?”

“That’s right. I begged and pleaded with the clerk, but they just shut me down over and over, saying the class is only for explorers.”

When I helped organize these newbie courses, I did add the requirement that the class was for explorers only.

This was kind of my fault, so I felt like I should probably help her a little.

“Why not get your wood badge and participate, then? Just getting an explorer’s badge doesn’t mean you have to go into the labyrinth or anything.”

If one got a wood badge and never entered the labyrinth, the badge would expire in two months, but that shouldn’t be a problem if her only goal was taking the introductory course.

Karana blinked and murmured, “Good point.”

Oh, I know.

“If you’re interested in explorers’ education, would you like to observe the explorers’ school, too?”

“D-do you have a connection with some important person at the explorers’ school? Because if so, please introduce me!”

The civil official jumped on my casual offer so intensely that it was a little jarring.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d call myself important, but...”

With that, I revealed that I was actually the owner of the explorers’ school and returned to discussing the observation.

“As long as you’ll obey the instructions of the teachers there, I’ll gladly allow you to observe the explorers’ school classes. I’m sorry to say you won’t be able

to participate in the hands-on training in the labyrinth, but as long as that's not a problem..."

"Of course! I'd happily accept those conditions. Thank you."

She wanted to invite her captain, Sir Hence, and her superior, the male official, too, so for the time being, we parted ways near the guild.

"Masterr?"

"And Zena, sir!"

As soon as I heard Tama's and Pochi's voices, I turned and saw the pair of them supporting a very pale-faced Karina.

Looking at my AR display, I gathered that she was suffering from level-up sickness.

Her entourage of Pina and the other two maids were behind her, but they hadn't leveled up enough to be afflicted.

Judging by their maze ant material-filled baskets, Karina must have taken the lead in battle, while the others supported her and broke down monster parts.

"Doctorrr?"

"Master, is Karina all right?"

"Yes, she's fine. Just let her rest someplace cool for a few minutes and she'll be back to normal in no time."

I wiped the sweat from Karina's brow with a handkerchief as I pretended to assess her condition, then reassured the worried Tama and Pochi that she would be fine.

It was a little far from here to the mansion, so I got a guild employee's permission to let Karina rest in the shade of a tree in the courtyard.

While Karina was asleep, there was little evidence of her usual awkwardness, so she had the elegant air of a secluded sleeping beauty.

The effect was promptly ruined, however, when Tama and Pochi opened their lunch boxes and started feasting right next to her.

"All right, once Lady Karina awakens, be sure to have her drink this nutritional

supplement potion.”

“Yes, Sir Knight. Thank you very much.”

After Pina thanked me, I left with Zena to head toward the area with artisans and alchemists.

Along the way...

“Satou!”

With her enemy detection magic, Zena sensed a horse and carriage that came flying around a corner, grabbed my arm, and pulled me out of the way.

Of course, I was already aware of its approach, thanks to my radar, but I decided to keep walking in order to test the results of Zena’s training.

“Thank you very much, Zena. You saved me.”

“Oh no, not at all!”

Zena blushed at my thanks.

“It looks like you’ve gotten used to keeping enemy detection magic active at the same time, so once we’ve talked to some artisans, we can take things to the next level.”

“A-all right. Please be gentle with me.”

Confused by Zena’s nervous expression, I nonetheless introduced her to some magic tool craftsmen and alchemists I knew by way of Baronet Dyukeli, armorers I’d met while selling extra monster parts from the labyrinth, and other helpful figures.

This way, while I was away from Labyrinth City, Zena would be able to get by just fine.

Returning to the explorers’ school, I found that the officials and Sir Hence had already arrived, and I introduced them to the principal before participating in my group’s afternoon training.

I left Mia and Arisa in charge of Zena’s training as originally intended.

She still couldn’t quite maintain enemy detection magic while chanting, but she was able to keep it up without a problem while dodging Arisa’s and Mia’s

toy hammers.

Iona and Lou were facing off with Liza and Nana, drenched in sweat but determined to keep training.

I always thought of Iona as a beautiful, coolheaded woman, but she was clearly a gutsy hard worker as well.

I gave them some stamina recovery potions and nutritional supplements to cheer them on.

For some reason, Iona and Lou looked like they'd been saddled with despair when I gave them potions that would let them keep training, but I'm sure that was just my imagination.

After another day or two of tough training, they should be able to join us in the labyrinth to level up against monsters.

“Oh, right.”

That reminded me to use the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to check on the breeding area I built in the labyrinth for power leveling.

The holding wells I'd created for breeding were full of a disturbing amount of monsters.

It was a little sooner than I expected, but maybe tonight... No, that would still be too soon. I could start training the Echigoya Company top brass tomorrow night or something.

In between Zena's and the others' training, I went to the Echigoya headquarters in the royal capital and told them my power leveling plan for the following night.

The elves had warned against this kind of overprotective leveling up, but that was only because the participants wouldn't properly learn their battle techniques, so they would end up weaker than other people around the same level.

I was only power leveling the Echigoya staff to improve their base stats, mostly stamina, to help them handle their difficult work, so that wouldn't be a problem.

They might end up learning some pointless skills along the way, but I'd warned them to start studying and practicing anything they found interesting a few days in advance, so it would likely be fine.

What Lurks in the Darkness

Satou here. "If you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you" is a pretty famous quote, but not as many people know the warning that precedes it: "He who fights with monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster."

"S-sorry to keep you waiting, Lord Kuro."

Eluterina, the blond noblewoman and manager of the Echigoya Company, looked and sounded uncharacteristically nervous as she greeted me.

But having just arrived in the Echigoya headquarters in the royal capital by way of the Return spell, I was so taken aback by the unexpected sight that greeted me that her nerves were the last thing on my mind.

The top staff of the Echigoya Company were all gathered before me.

That much made sense; I was the one who had summoned them, telling them I had a special task for them.

...But why are they all half-naked?

Miss Manager was wearing a sheer nightgown, with the most important areas just barely covered by layers of lace, but still skimpy enough that it might easily reveal everything if she made one wrong move.

The other girls behind her wore similarly revealing clothing, albeit a bit more mature than Eluterina's.

Polina, who I had transferred to the royal capital office as the future factory manager, was wearing somewhat more reasonable clothing than the others, but the thin and delicate-looking one-piece dress still clearly highlighted her figure; it definitely didn't look like an outfit one would wear to work.

The small-statured noblewoman who was always riding around on a stone wolf was wearing a two-piece getup that looked like modern pajamas. It

wouldn't normally be a particularly alluring look, but the current context gave it a certain eroticism.

Tifaleeza... Well, I couldn't quite look at her directly.

Her usually icy features were flushed red, and she was covering herself up in an embarrassed way that was ridiculously tantalizing. If she pulled something like this while we were alone in a room, I'd have a difficult time not buying whatever she was selling.

Honestly, sometimes this world seems like a ridiculous adults-only dating sim.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

...Calm down, Satou. I mean, Kuro.

I've been bravely sticking with an abstinent existence, but if I were to get caught up in this unexpected atmosphere and lay a hand on my employees, I'd be ashamed to look my beloved high elf Miss Aaze in the face.

"Miss Manager, you're all very...boldly dressed today."

"Of course. Since you asked for us, we all put on our best."

...I did what now?

I racked my brains at Miss Manager's statement.

If I remembered right, I first told them about this "special task" the same day Zena and company started their training.

I thought back to our exchange at the time.

Yes, I believe I wrapped up my business at the Echigoya Company and gathered the top staff girls before I went home...

"Listen carefully, ladies. I'm giving you a special task tomorrow night."

A murmur ran through the room at that, but for some reason they all fell dead silent as I continued.

"We'll start at the first cycle of night and wrap up by the second, but there's a good chance you won't be able to work the next day. Try to finish up your duties for that day early. If any of you won't be able to make it that night, let me know, and we'll make other plans."

The first cycle of night is about three hours after sundown.

It felt cruel to give them late-night duties after warning them not to overwork themselves beforehand, but they didn't seem too bothered by it. In fact, they seemed almost pleased.

Honestly, what a bunch of workaholics.

Miss Manager asked what sort of clothing would be best for the occasion, so I told them that whatever they wanted to wear was fine.

They usually wore fairly standard clothing at work, so it seemed strange to ask. Power leveling in the labyrinth might sound intense, but it was really just a matter of pulling a trigger from a safe place; their normal work clothes would be fine.

At the time, Arisa called me away with the Space Magic spell World Phone, so I left the Echigoya Company after that.

Once I remembered all this, I realized I may have forgotten to mention that the special task was power leveling in the labyrinth.

Apparently, they'd taken this to mean that the special task was referring to certain nighttime services, and that my warning they might not be able to work the next day because of level-up sickness meant they would be too exhausted to move afterward.

“E-erm...Lord Kuro?”

Miss Manager nervously addressed me.

I felt bad letting them go on worrying, so I tried to resolve the misunderstanding right away.

“...It seems I wasn't clear enough. I would never force any of you to join me in the bedroom. The special task is something different. Go change into more normal clothing, please. And wear shoes that are easy to walk in.”

Miss Manager and company looked incredibly embarrassed, so I left to check on the progress of the Echigoya airship building yard and the factory we'd bought from a company that was closing its doors.



“A-are we in the labyrinth?!”

“That’s right. This is an unexplored section of the Upper Stratum.”

When I answered Miss Manager, everyone’s faces froze.

I can’t blame them for being frightened about being deep in the labyrinth without proper equipment at around level 10 or less.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already gotten rid of any dangerous monsters.”

Once I reassured them, all of them collapsed to the ground.

I guess their legs gave out from the shock. I should probably stop surprising them like this.

“I’m going to have you shoot the monsters in these breeding pits to raise your levels.”

As I spoke, I peered through one of the windows I’d built into the covers of the pits.

At the bottom, the maze cockroaches I’d thrown in for breeding purposes were devouring the monster corpses I’d tossed down as bait.

Honestly, it was the stuff of nightmares.

“It might not sit well with your pride from when some of you were explorers, but it’s necessary to strengthen your physical health. If anyone absolutely doesn’t want to do it, though, you can sit out. Just say the word.”

I produced weapons from my Item Box and handed them to Miss Manager, Tifaleeza, and Polina.

“What’s this? A staff...?”

“It’s sort of like a Thunder Rod, but you use it a bit differently. All you have to do is charge it with magic and pull the trigger, and it will shoot out lightning in a straight line.”

“Like this?”

“No, point the thin end at the enemy. Think of it like you would a rifle... I mean, a crossbow.”

They probably didn't have any familiarity with rifles, so I switched my example and gave a demonstration.

I was calling this magic tool a projection gun; it looked sort of like a shotgun with a shorter barrel.

It shot iron powder electrified with small lightning stones, propelling them straight forward with wind produced by wind stones.

I deliberately kept the ammo loose so that it would spray out the electrified iron powder in a wider range, making it easy for even a beginner to hit the mark.

I developed it for power leveling, so its lethality was incredibly low.

It might be handy for mob suppression, too.

"I'll have each of you fire into the center of the pit, one at a time. Once you've fired, step to the back of the line."

"""Yes, sir!"""

With surprisingly enthusiastic responses, the girls accepted their projection guns and held them at the ready as I instructed.

I opened the small window in the lid of the pit, using Magic Hand to ensure the cockroaches wouldn't try to come flying up from the pit.

The girls who had once been explorers or carriers, like Polina and some of the other noblewomen, didn't react to the sight of the cockroaches with much more than a wrinkled nose. Tifaleeza had no experience with the labyrinth or monsters, though, so she turned pale and trembled.

"Lord Kuro, it doesn't appear to be doing much."

"Don't worry about it. That's fine."

I gestured for Miss Manager to step back and allow the next person to take over.

Before they started firing, I had each of them put a hand in my Item Box. It would be a lucky break if any of them managed to get the skill, but there was no harm in trying.

For the handful of girls who had practice with magic, I also let them use some of my extra spell scrolls.

Maybe they would even learn attack spells and the corresponding magic skills.

“Lord Kuro, we’ve all had a turn.”

“All right. This’ll be dangerous, so everyone step back a little.”

Once I confirmed that they all had backed away, I held up the fake artifact that I used for Kuro’s teleporting magic and spoke the Hallowed Language words for *ice* and *wind* while I unleashed some magic.

I used Icicle, an Ice Magic spell we often used to cool off, to encase the cockroaches in a pillar of ice, then used the Wind Magic spell Wind Shot to break them up into powder.

Wind Shot is a lesser attack spell I got in a scroll from the old capital, but it rarely sees the light of day because it’s not very user-friendly.

“Wh-what incredible ice and wind...”

“Was that greater magic?”

Ignoring the exclamations of the staff for now, I opened my map and checked all their statuses.

...Shoot, I overdid it.

Each of the maze cockroaches was only level 7 or so, so I assumed it’d be fine even though there were a lot of them, but their numbers must have increased more than I realized.

The boost in power leveling was lessened a little, since there was such a large group of staff members, but they had still all reached close to level 20.

“...I feel a bit woozy.”

“Yes, I feel strange, too...”

Tifaleeza was the lowest level to start, so she was the first to comment that she felt ill, but the others still followed.

Well, of course they would get level-up sickness from leveling up that much in one training session.

Using Magic Hand, I supported the girls who looked like they might collapse, and then I used Return several times until we were back in the royal capital's Echigoya headquarters.

"Good work. That's it for today's special training."

"Lord Kuro, my body feels strange..."

"That's just level-up sickness. You'll be back to normal after a good night's rest."

The smallest noblewoman sounded energetic despite her frown.

"S-so level-up sickness isn't just a tall tale drunkards tell..."

"Then...does that mean we got all the way up to level fifteen or so?"

"No, surely not...right?"

The other top staff looked exhausted too, but they couldn't hide their excitement about leveling up.

If we did this a few more times, they would reach around level 30. At that point, even a bit of hard work over the course of several days shouldn't affect their health much.

Five of the leveled-up girls learned magic skills, and one even got the "Item Box" skill. These results were even better than I could've hoped for. Even at level 50, none of my girls had managed to learn "Item Box" yet, so having one worker who did was a stroke of luck.

I couldn't just leave the girls alone when they could barely move, so I ended up carrying each of them upstairs to their rooms.

For some reason, they all wanted to be carried bridal-style, so I obliged. I'm not sure why they were acting so eager, though. Is being carried bridal-style really all that exciting?

Finally, I carried Tifaleeza, who'd been lucky enough to learn "Item Box," up to her room, and our work was done for the day.

"...Lord Kuro..."

Tifaleeza murmured in her sleep as I put her to bed and left the room.

“...you spineless coward.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a strange mutter on my way out, but I pretended not to hear it and headed back to my mansion in Labyrinth City.

Taking a Breather

Satou here. It's great to work really hard at something, but it's important to know your limits, too. If you assume you'll be young forever, then you might find you've pushed yourself too far without even noticing.

“■■■■■ **Wind Shield Fuujun!**”

Zena's quickly chanted Wind Magic spell blocked the arrow Mia fired for practice.

Without missing a beat, she charged her Fire Rod with magic and aimed a Fire Shot at Mia.

“■ **Water Mizu.**”

Mia used Spirit Magic to throw a ball of water at Zena's Fire Shot, canceling it out.

“Mm, you pass.”

Mia held up both arms to form a big circle, nodding with satisfaction.

Once she saw Mia's signal, which indicated she'd defeated the surprise attack from an imaginary monster, she looked back toward the rest of her squad.

“Zenny's coming along nicely,” Arisa commented.

“For sure.” I nodded.

She'd gotten the hang of continuously using enemy detection magic, and her quick decision-making in magic left nothing to be desired.

Following her gaze, I saw her comrades in yet another mock battle with Liza and Nana.

“Ooh, that was a good defense from Lou-Lou.”

“She's starting to get used to Liza's speed.”

“Well, only because Liza’s holding back...”

“No need to point that out,” I responded blandly.

Their levels were too different to have a fair fight, so they were practicing defense against Liza and attacking against Nana.

Just now, Lou had dodged one of Liza’s attacks, and Iona was practicing counterattacking.

Lilio had returned from her scouting research as of this afternoon, and was back to joining the others in training, currently assisting Lou to make defense easier.

“Hiyaaaah!”

Liza blocked Lou’s “Shield Bash” with the back of her leg, using her knee to lessen its impact before jumping back with a light kick.

“.....■■■ **Wind Hold Kaze Shibaru.**”

At that moment, Zena’s Wind Magic spell wrapped around Liza’s body.

Liza resisted the Wind Magic, though, and scattered the spell with a light flick of her spear.

Lilio immediately threw a smoke bomb, but Liza swung her spear like a bat and knocked it away.

“...Damn, for real?”

Exclaiming in surprise, Lilio nevertheless followed up with a throwing knife, and hid herself behind a nearby bush.

She was practicing avoiding counterattacks from monsters, since it was easy to get hit with a nasty backlash if one dawdled after attacking a monster.

This was all part of what Lilio had learned in her scouting lessons, so I incorporated it into her training. I figured I might as well throw it into the explorers’ school classes for some feedback, too.

“Aah, she blocked it...”

Arisa sounded sympathetic.

Iona had thrust her broadsword in perfect time with Lilio's throwing knife, but Liza knocked the sword aside with the butt end of her Magic Spear.

While Iona was recovering from the block, Liza struck, and soon Zena's whole squad was down.

Iona's favored broadsword was great for fighting larger monsters, but it wasn't nearly as well suited to a nimble opponent like Liza. She would need to have around level 30 stats or the "Strength" skill, at the very least.

"All right, time to break down the battle."

Having closely observed the match, Arisa took over the proceedings to give a play-by-play of the fight.

It'd be great to have a magical screen to replay the fights, but I've held off on making such a thing since it seems a bit too high-tech for this world.

The sun was starting to set, so we wrapped up the day's training after the play-by-play analysis.

"We should try putting all your training into practice next."

"Do you mean in the labyrinth?"

I nodded at Zena. "Would you like to try staying two or three nights? You can help me develop a new hunting ground in the process."

Judging by what I'd seen in today's training, it seemed like it would be more effective to raise her level in actual battle at this point.

"So we're finally going into the labyrinth tomorrow, huh? Damn, I can't wait."

Lou smacked her fists together.

I was glad she was so enthusiastic, but...

"No, we'll take the day off tomorrow."

"A day off?"

"Yes, since it would be dangerous to go into the labyrinth while you're still exhausted from training."

According to my AR display, all four members of Zena's squad had the

condition **Exhaustion: Severe**. At this rate, it would become “Enervation,” and they would get a negative debuff-like effect.

“Then let’s take tomorrow to gather food and supplies for going into the labyrinth.”

“Good thinking, Zenacchi!”

Lilio whistled enthusiastically at Zena’s proposal.

“Yes, good idea... Would you be able to help us, by any chance, Sir Knight?”

Iona chimed in, too, directing a proposal at me.

The corners of her mouth were turned up just enough that, for a moment, she wore an expression that almost looked plotting or mischievous.

It was the kind of face a meddlesome high school girl might make if she was planning to give her friend a little push.

In a weird way, I felt like I was back in my school days.

“Yes, of course. If you could all take the morning to rest, we can head out to pick up provisions in the afternoon.”

I agreed to Iona’s suggestion, and we ended training for the day.



“Master, what are you making?”

After dinner, I was doing some work in the research lab of the Ivy Manor when Arisa came to visit using teleport magic.

Lelillil, the house fairy who manages the Ivy Manor, was upstairs in the kitchen making dinner.

“It’s just a little magic tool for defense.”

“Ooh, what’s it do?”

“That prototype there should be usable, so try putting it on your arm like a gauntlet and charging it with magic.”

It was a gauntlet-style guard that only went up to the wrist, like the kind a lot of magical soldier girls used to wear in old anime.

“Oh nice, it makes a transparent shield!”

“It’s about as strong as a Shield spell from a level-thirty mage, give or take.”

A transparent kite-shaped shield floated above Arisa’s wrist.

Since Zena’s Wind Magic spell Wind Shield used the air as its base materials, it wasn’t great at blocking heavy, fast attacks, so I tried making an off-the-cuff personal shield.

“Is this Practical Magic?”

“That’s right. Remember that ring we found in the shipwrecks in the southern seas that could produce Shield? I made this prototype using the same magical circuits.”

With lightweight maze ant materials as the base, I used the prototype magic equipment I made in the elf village to carve magic circuits into the light material.

It wasn’t nearly as effective as Nana’s equipment’s Space Magic Floating Shield or the automatic self-defense shields I built into Arisa’s and the others’ armor, but it could be made a lot more cheaply.

“It uses a lot of magic power, though.”

“I know. It’s about twice as much as the magic needed for the Practical Magic spell Shield.”

At the moment, I was fine-tuning the circuits to reduce the amount of magic needed.

I should have been able to make it work if I used a lacquer made from materials of a monster that absorbed mana to create the Absorption rune. But even in places with lots of mana or magic saturation, the prototype could only gather enough magic for one Shield in an hour, so it wasn’t much help.

“But since you don’t need a chant for it, like Fire Rods and such, it might be useful for Zena or Lilio, don’t you think?”

It left out the variables involved in magic, which meant it always appeared in a fixed place and followed the user in the same way, but it wouldn’t take long to activate as an emergency shield.

“True. But should you really be giving them fancy magical equipment like this?” Arisa looked worried. “It’s definitely going to attract attention, you know?”

“I’ll just say it’s a promotional gift from the Echigoya Company.”

This product wasn’t being sold to the public, but I had a lot of links to the Echigoya Company Celivera branch, so it shouldn’t be too big of a problem.

“Well, in that case, I want one, too!”

In the case of Arisa and the other girls, it’d be more for self-defense than battle, so maybe I could make it into an ordinary item they could wear with their everyday clothes?

“Sure. While I’m at it, why don’t I make it into a cute accessory?”

“Yaaay!”

Arisa jumped up and down with glee.

“I’ll make enough for the whole group, then.”

I could make something similar to Arisa’s for Mia and Lulu and alter the ones for the vanguard to make the Shield more like their signature weapons.

“Do you think you could design the accessories for me?”

“Oh, but of course!”

With a weirdly old-fashioned response, Arisa popped back to the mansion with teleport magic.

Oh, I know.

This item might be popular for nobles’ bodyguards, and I could easily mass-produce the simple one that just resulted in the Shield, so maybe I really should add it to the Echigoya Company’s lineup?

That way, even if Arisa and the others used it in public, they wouldn’t get targeted by any weirdos.

This Shield was probably too strong; I didn’t want the company to become overwhelmed with orders like it had with the mass-produced Magic Swords, or have the product fall into the wrong hands, so I should probably downgrade it

to the kind of Shield that a newbie Practical Magic user could produce.

Once I finished making equipment for Zena, I headed toward the area where we would be developing the hunting grounds for a few nights.

“I guess around here?”

I picked the border between area nineteen and area eleven, near where the explorers’ school students did their hands-on training.

Area nineteen was a popular hunting ground for popular monsters like mantis and beetle types, but the part of it that connected with area eleven was full of dangerous poison monsters, and getting to the best hunting spots required passing through a large dangerous cavern where areamasters and their spawn sometimes lurked, so this section was rarely used.

I had avoided doing much work in area eleven so it could serve as a good practicing ground for the students, but since Zena and some of the graduates would be hunting here now, I wanted to modify it to be fairly easy to use.

“First of all, let’s get rid of those pesky poisonous monsters...”

I used my “Map Searching” skill to mark all of the poisonous monsters, then used no less than five rounds of Remote Arrow to take them all out.

As I watched nearly 500 dots vanish one by one on my radar, I used Magic Hand to put any monster corpses within reach into my Storage.

“That ought to do it for poisonous monsters.”

Next, I thinned out the monsters that would be too strong for Zena and the others to train against and prepared a few areas with Earth Magic spells like Wall and Stone Object to serve as good bases for hunting.

While I was doing all that, Arisa contacted me with the Space Magic spell Telephone.

“Hey, I finished those designs you asked for. Where are you?”

“Sorry, I won’t be back from the labyrinth for a while. Could you just leave them on the workbench in the Ivy Manor?”

“Okey-dokey. I dunno what you’re up to in there, but don’t wear yourself out

too much.”

“*I’ll be careful,*” I reassured the worried-sounding Arisa and went back to work.

“It’d be good to have a few restrooms and watering holes.”

I used my map search to find and capture some harmless slimes, and put them at the bottom of the pits beneath the toilets and trash bins I made using Stone Object.

They were at the bottom of very deep holes, but I’d hate for someone to get bitten on the butt by a slime, so I used the “Animal Training” skill to tame them just to be safe.

Remembering how Nana’s sisters had tamed a giant spider and made it into a mount, I tried it and found I could do it quite easily. Once a monster was tamed, its master’s name would appear in its status, so I changed my name to my fake labyrinth alias, Tsarayuya, first.

Finally, I used the “Disguise” skill to make it look like all these facilities had been abandoned for many years.

Incidentally, the labyrinth vacation home and the labyrinth hot springs have flushing-toilet-style magic equipment made by the elves.

“So this is the only source of clean water nearby...”

The short waterway that fed into the dangerous cavern from an underground source provided a good deal of water.

There were a few other water sources, but they all had their own issues: Some were little more than a small trickle of water, others were extremely muddy, and still others were puddles that likely had water purity issues.

“Well, if there are no good sources, I guess I’ll just make a new one.”

I created a safe zone for lodging in an area that physically couldn’t produce a spawnhole, and used the ever-convenient Stone Object to form a spring and a drainage channel.

The man-made fountain had a water stone at the bottom, and made contact with the labyrinth’s underground mana vein, so it would automatically produce

a fixed amount of water. I used a fairly large water stone, so it would probably hold for a good ten years or so.

While I was working, it occurred to me that the water stone could get stolen, so I buried it far enough underground that it would be difficult to retrieve.

“Now I just need to leave some stones nearby that could be used to make a stove and create an area near the watering hole that’ll make it easier to build a shower room and such.”

If I recessed the nearby walls slightly, it would probably be easy to set up water pipes, right?

I was planning to leave this part of the work to the explorers who would actually use it.

They would probably feel more attachment to it if they developed it DIY-style than if everything was already made for them.

“Oh, I know...”

Next to the watering area—near the toilets—I made a vegetable garden of labyrinth plants for emergency rations.

I chose plants that would produce fruit and nuts that, while not very pleasant-tasting, would keep people from starving. It also could serve as food for the slimes during the times of year when explorers didn’t come.

“And while I’m at it, I might as well set up a few bonus items.”

There were only three treasure chests in the area, so I added a few more containing veria magic potions, equipment made from monster materials, and a few other amenities.

None of it was particularly valuable, but it’s always good to make things more comfortable.



“Pochi, Tama, come here for a minute.”

After breakfast, once Karina and her maids had set out, I decided to wrap up some secret business.

I gave the pair the new and improved power limiter tools I'd finished the night before.

Creating an AI to determine when to switch them on and off proved a little too difficult, so I decided to give up on making high-spec Raka clones for now and sought a different approach.

For now, I set it up to detect when Tama and Pochi entered the labyrinth, the mansion, and other limited-access places, and warn them if the mode wasn't changed.

I built in a micro-sized signaling magic tool to give a weak alert that would flash on the bracelet.

With this simple setup, I was able to use fewer circuits than I had planned.

Building an AI without deep machine learning certainly is tough.

“And for Arisa and the others...”

“You made them already?”

Arisa's eyes widened when I brought out the other accessories.

“Put it on with the flat side of the gems against your wrist.”

“This is a pretty dull red for gemstones... Oh, wait, they're cores. But I can see some kind of circuits carved into them when I hold it up to the light—are the cores Magic Items, too?”

“That's right. They're separate from the bracelet itself. Try pressing the inner stone and adding some magic.”

“Oooh? I'm kinda glowing.”

Arisa looked down at herself in surprise.

The faint glow was a sort of testing process, so it only lasted a moment.

“...Whoa, it's giving me Physical Protection!”

“It only works on the person wearing it, and it's only about as strong as if you used it with a scroll, but yeah.”

“Still, it'll protect me from scratches and bug bites, so it might be handy for

when I'm playing with the kids in the bushes and weeds and such."

Arisa was becoming a bit of a tomboy, so I warned her that she should be careful as I handed bracelets to the other girls.

"What a cute bracelet."

"Matchiiing?"

"Pochi's matches, too, sir!"

Lulu smiled and put on the bracelet, and Pochi and Tama promptly struck poses to show off their matching power-limiter bracelets.

"Mine produces a transparent spear when I charge it with magic."

"Grrr, Liza's is a ring? I want a ring, too!"

"It just seemed like it'd be easier to use that way in her case."

I tried making the floating spear into a bracelet at first, but it was too hard to grip it that way. Likewise, a shield would be more difficult to use in ring form.

"Shield."

"Yours is star-shaped, huh, Mia? Mine's shaped like a heart!"

I made Mia's and Arisa's last, so I tried playing around with the shapes a bit.

"Hee-hee, mine and Nana's are nice oblong shields."

"It should be easier to defend that way, right?"

"Yes!"

Lulu smiled even brighter as she tested out the shield.

"Master, I want a baby-chick shape, I declare."

"All right, all right. I'll try to modify it for you tonight."

Nana pressed her chest against me as she made her demands, so I couldn't really say no.

"Aw, maaan?"

"Pochi wants a meat shape, sir."

"Tama, toooo?"

Tama's and Pochi's bracelets only had power-limiter-related functionality.

I wouldn't be able to do it right away, but I promised I would add a cartoon-meat-shaped shield or club in the near future.

"Pochi, Tama! Let's go exploring!"

Karina burst into the room without so much as a knock.

"Did you all get new equipment?"

Everyone scrambled to hide their pseudo-shields and spears, but Karina had already spotted them.

"They did. Why? Is there something you'd like, too, Lady Karina?"

"There certainly is! A broadsword that won't get chipped or broken so easily!"

I'm pretty sure I made the one she's using out of sturdy material, though...

Confused, I asked Karina to show me the broadsword I gave her.

"Wow, it's definitely beat-up..."

How anyone could wear down a blade so quickly, I have no idea.

Lady Karina does not seem to excel at holding a sword. I believe she would be better suited to something like a mace."

The Intelligent Item Raka chimed in from Miss Karina's chest.

"No thank you! Maces are terribly unstylish!"

"I see..."

Blunt weapons like maces are ideal against enemies with tough outer shells, but they went against Karina's aesthetic sense.

Actually, I think Karina would be unmatched in the labyrinth with a good old-fashioned iron club, but I wasn't going to try to force her to use equipment she didn't want.

In the back of my mind, I had a spectacular vision of Karina in a tiger-striped bikini swinging a club around, but I reluctantly shook the delusion away.



“Then how about a weapon with interchangeable blades like a box cutter? Then you can just swap them out whenever the blade breaks! *SHING!*”

Arisa gestured to illustrate the impractical gimmick she was describing, which sounded like something right out of anime or manga.

Karina, Pochi, and Tama all seemed thrilled by the idea, but it seemed way too impractical.

“If you’re going to use a setup like that, wouldn’t it be easier to just stock up on multiple broadswords in a Magic Bag?”

I held up a Garage Bag as an example.

“Well, yeah, buuut...”

Arisa seemed reluctant, but the others nodded in agreement with my assessment.

“I have some made out of a few different materials, so I’ll put them all in. Let me know which ones you liked later, all right?”

All of them were made under my fake smithing name, Hephaestus.

They weren’t much different in attack power from the one I gave Karina before, but these four were special in that they would grant the user effects similar to skills like “Strength” or “Agility” when charged with magic.

I finished these at the same time as the war mantis broadsword I gave to Princess Meetia’s guardian knight Lady Ravna, but I kept them stashed away in Storage since I felt like they were too powerful to release to the public.

I had other swords similarly hidden away, too, like a one-handed sword that would paralyze the victim with electricity and a broadsword that set its cuts aflame, but I kept them to myself for now, since they were a bit too flashy.

“I’ll test these out on some beetles at once!”

“Whoo-hoo...”

“Your sword will bounce right off beetles if you don’t cut them just right, so be careful, sir.”

Pochi offered a word of advice to the excited Karina.

They'd been hunting maze ants up until yesterday, but I guess they were switching to maze beetles now.

Unlike in the previous days, Karina hadn't gained enough experience to get level-up sickness yesterday, so it was probably the perfect time to shift to a new opponent.

"If you're going after maze beetles, you should try area thirteen."

The beetle sections in areas two and three weren't good for leveling up, as there was a constant scramble to get the most monsters.

Since it was only possible to get to area thirteen's maze beetle section by following a roundabout route, not many people ever made the trek.

Normally, you would have to stay overnight to go there, but it was possible to make it there and back in the same day using the hidden shortcut we developed in area eleven.

I didn't choose it for Zena and company's hunting ground because so few parties were allowed to hunt there at the same time and the maze beetles were scarce, which meant you'd have to move around a lot while hunting. That would make it tough for magic users to take breaks to recover their MP.

But since Karina's group was composed of all melee fighters, that wouldn't be a particular issue for them.

"There shouldn't be too much competition there," I added, handing Tama a map.

This shortcut was currently undeveloped, so I asked Tama and Pochi to handle any traps or dangerous monsters that might still be lurking.

I was thinking of opening it up as another hunting ground for the explorers' school graduates in the future.

That didn't mean I would lock the entrance or anything like that; I'd just teach them the shortcut to area thirteen and give them a map with information about the hunting ground.

"So we can hunt as much as we like?"

"Damn, we'll make a killing!"

Karina's guards Pina and Erina looked ready to break into a dance—probably because maze beetles were worth more money than maze ants.

The young maids of the mansion gave Karina and her group bento box lunches, and I sent them off to the labyrinth with a warning not to get hurt. Liza was going with them today, too.

"Heeeeey, master. You're not going to train Madame Karina like we're doing for Zenny and her friends?" Arisa sounded concerned.

"Lady Karina seems more like the learn-through-experience type, so Tama and Pochi are a better match for her."

According to Tama and Pochi, they worked on leveling up during the morning, then went to less popular areas to engage in mock battles in the afternoon, so she should be gaining plenty of combat experience.

For other kinds of knowledge, one of Karina's guards like Erina or the newbie could probably just undergo some scouting training.

The newbie seemed to prefer small weapons, so maybe she'd be better suited to scouting than the somewhat clumsy Erina?

"Well, I'm glad you seem to have big ideas and all, but you'd better be sure to follow up on them or Madame Karina will do some serious pouting."

"Good point. I'm not worried about that, but maybe I'll invite Lady Karina along to the overnight hunting grounds development we're going to start tomorrow."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea."

Arisa responded with a smile.



"I'm so sorry I'm late!"

Zena arrived just past noon.

She had overslept and come running here so fast she'd even used Wind Magic.

Still catching her breath, she hastily patted down her tousled hair in an

adorable gesture.

Today, she was wearing a ladylike summer dress I gave her for everyday wear along with the outfit for the viceroy's wife's tea party. It suited her innocent image very well.

"No need to apologize. We didn't really set a specific time."

I'd made a reservation at a restaurant for lunch, but this world was fairly lax about timekeeping, so we still had plenty of time to get there.

"By the way, I managed to get ahold of some of the Blue People's favorite wine that we discussed the other day."

"Thank you very much, Satou."

Zena bowed her head deeply.

The merchant's guild had acquired a single bottle, so I bought it right away.

There wasn't enough for what the vampire lord had requested from me, but I could just head out and find some at a later date.

"If you've written a letter already, a trustworthy friend of mine was planning to go to the labyrinth village soon, so I can have them deliver both."

"Oh, but..."

Zena wanted to go to the labyrinth village herself and deliver the letter personally, but I talked her out of it by explaining how long a round trip would take and how many dangers she'd face in the village itself.

Besides, my delivering it to Ban was a much better guarantee he'd get it than was dropping it off somewhere in the labyrinth village.

"All right, then...if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course."

Zena took the letter from her bag and handed it to me.

I would've liked to deliver it right away, but I was planning to hold off on going to the progenitor's castle in the Lower Stratum until after I'd gotten all the goods he requested.

Even despite this, I was confident that it would reach him much faster than her bringing it to the labyrinth village.

“Young master, your order from the painters’ studio has arrived.”

As we were on our way out, Miss Miteruna approached with a sheaf of papers in hand.

They were the illustrations I’d ordered for the introductory magic textbooks Arisa had requested for the orphanage library.

I flipped through the papers and confirmed that the illustrations were correct. Since there didn’t seem to be any issues, I asked Miteruna to bring them to my study.

“Satou, weren’t those...?”

“They’re for magic textbooks.”

Zena seemed to have spotted the pages with magic runes on them and taken an interest, so I showed her the original copy of the textbook.

“Th-this is amazing. I’ve never seen such an easy-to-understand book on magic before.”

I couldn’t help being a little pleased to hear such frank praise. She seemed too genuinely excited for it to be mere flattery.

“It’s for the kids in the orphanage, so the only difficult theories and such are in the index.”

“The orphanage? There are children there who can read?”

According to Zena, it was incredibly rare for orphaned children to be able to read and write.

“Yes, all thanks to the practice cards we bought in Seiryuu City.”

That only surprised her even more.

“Well, if they can read and write, that opens up their job opportunities in the future,” I explained, adding that this was also the reason for the child-friendly magic book.

Since she seemed intrigued, we stopped by the orphanage on our way to

lunch so Zena could observe Arisa from a distance teaching magic to the children.

“So Arisa’s teaching them, is she?”

“Yes, we don’t have any specialized teachers, so Arisa gives them lessons in her free time.”

Other than that, the rest was self-study. Mia and I both tried teaching, too, but my explanations were too hard and Mia’s were too short, so we couldn’t get through to the children.

“Would you like me to come teach them, too, when I’m off-duty, then?”

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t have even dreamed of asking.”

“Of course! It’s the least I can do to thank you for everything!”

I thanked Zena for her offer and accepted as long as she didn’t put herself out too much.

Before we left for the restaurant, I introduced Zena to some of the children, teachers, and staff of the orphanage.

The restaurant in question was one Baronet Dyukeli’s wife had told me about; lesser nobles and affluent merchants went there frequently, so I figured she would enjoy it, too.

“Thank you very much. It was delicious.”

Zena thanked me with a contented smile.

The cuisine avoided using monster meat to cater to nobles, so there wasn’t anything too exciting about it. But the flavor of the food was still more than satisfactory.

“And it was so fancy inside, too... Are you sure it was all right for someone like me to eat there?”

She must’ve noticed the other diners in the restaurant staring at us.

Once we took our seats, we were able to eat in peace, thanks to the decorative plants shielding us from other tables, but people who were walking back and forth definitely cast interested glances our way.

I'm guessing the gossip-loving types were taking note that I was dining with a cute girl they'd never seen before.

"No need to be so self-deprecating. In fact, I'm the one who should apologize for drawing attention."

"O-oh no! It definitely wasn't your fault!"

Zena hurried to refute me so urgently that I couldn't help chuckling.

Fortunately, this put a smile back on Zena's face, and we peacefully chatted about our favorite dishes from the restaurant until our carriage arrived at its destination: a street packed with shops for explorers.

"This is the street you showed me before, right?"

"Yes, I thought it would be easiest to get everything in one place here."

This was one of the places we stopped by after Lilio left for her scout training.

Kuuts Alley, where there were many bargains to be found, was just two blocks away.

"I didn't notice last time, but there are an awful lot of shops selling bones, aren't there?"

"That's true. Bone bludgeons are quite inexpensive, and the bones that oil slimes spit up don't smell strange, so I'm told they make good materials for accessory crafting, too."

Lumber was a little expensive in Labyrinth City. As such, demi-goblin femurs were often used to make bludgeons and stone axes for newbie explorers, or were combined with claws and fangs from insectoid monsters to make pickaxes.

Leather vests reinforced with bone were popular and used by brand-new and novice explorers alike.

"Hey, mister! Bet your girlfriend would like one of these, yeah?"

"O-oh, goodness, I'm not Satou's g-girlfriend..."

Zena turned bright red at the salesman's casual pitch.

As usual, she seemed to be sensitive to that kind of teasing.

“Are these accessories made from horns or claws?”

“That one there’s a good-luck charm made from the bone of a lucky rabbit.”

My AR display exposed the salesman’s lie.

It didn’t look anything like bone to me, but it was actually a modified demi-goblin finger bone.

I couldn’t figure out how they’d changed the look of the bone, so I searched my map for the name of the accessory’s creator in the hopes of asking them later.

...A necromancer?

For some reason, the person who made the accessory had the Ghost Magic ability, not Bone Crafting.

Curious, I searched the Ghost Magic spellbook I got at the dark auction in the old capital and found a spell called Bone Sculpting, which was described as a spell that could work bone like clay.

I hadn’t read this spellbook too closely because I’m not good with horror, but I guess there’s more to Ghost Magic than just making zombies and skeletons.

“So, little lady, how about it? Want a good-luck charm so your man doesn’t get hurt in the labyrinth?”

Unimpressed with my reaction, the salesman set his sights on Zena instead.

Before she could answer, though, a few customers around us burst out laughing.

“Wh-what’s so funny?!”

“Come on, really?”

“Yeah, you’re offering a charm like that to Pendragon the Untouchable?”

“That’s like selling armor to a dragon!”

The salesman was indignant at first, but as the men explained themselves through their laughter, he realized his mistake.

...Hmm?

Among the bone accessories was a pendant made from a fragment of a unicorn's horn.

Like the finger bone in the charm, this horn had been modified using Ghost Magic.

I wasn't sure what such a rare item was doing in a place like this, but it had the wonderful effect of curing the wearer of poison and illness, making it a perfect present for Zena.

"Well, I suppose I might as well buy one."

Instead of the fake lucky rabbit charm, I bought the pendant under the pretense that it would look better on Zena.

"That lucky rabbit pendant is just one large copper—"

Since it was made with the same method, the shopkeeper seemed to have mistaken the unicorn horn pendant for another demi-goblin finger bone product.

"One silver coin!"

He changed the price partway through, clearly trying to overcharge me, but it was still a bargain for the valuable unicorn horn.

"I guess I'll grab one, too."

"If Mr. Pendragon is doing it..."

Other people seemed to be lured in by the sight of me purchasing it; the men who'd been laughing all started buying accessories, too.

Exclaiming in glee all the while, the shopkeeper handed over the "good luck" pendant in exchange for my silver coin, and I presented it to Zena.

"May this bring you luck in your labyrinth explorations."

"Thank you very much, Satou." Zena put the necklace on and smiled. "I love it."

"It looks wonderful on you."

The pendant was a perfect match for Zena's summer dress.



“Shall we take a little break here?”

“...All right.”

Zena nodded, looking a little embarrassed.

It might sound like something a couple might say in front of a sleazy hotel, but we were standing in front of a lovely café with an open terrace.

Zena’s stomach rumbled at the sweet smell coming from the café, so I pretended not to have heard anything as I proposed that we stop in.

We’d been walking around shopping for almost two hours, so it made sense that she might be a little hungry by now.

“Heya, mister!”

As soon as we walked in, a redhead girl ran up to us in a waitress outfit.

“Neru! No running in the café!”

“R-right, my bad!”

Neru ducked her head toward the kitchen where the shout came from.

This was actually a café that the Echigoya Company had recently opened near the west guild building.

There weren’t many places to get sweets in Labyrinth City, so I snatched up the excellent location as soon as the space became available to give the venture a try.



“Hello, Miss Neru. You’re not running a cart today?”

“Yeah, Polina brought a couple people with her when she got promoted to the office in the royal capital, so the café’s been a little short-staffed.”

I didn’t have many people I could appoint as factory managers for the confidential work in the royal capital, so I moved Polina over there.

“But hey, at least it means I get to wear this uniform.”

Neru did a little twirl.

The skirt was a bit on the short side, but it was layered with panniers to prevent any accidental flashing. So even if someone as carefree as Neru wore it, I could still look safely.

“It’s very cute.”

“Eh-heh-heh, thanks.”

Neru grinned bashfully.

I’d heard that this was actually a popular job for employees of the Echigoya Company’s Celivera branch because of the cute uniform.

“Neru, table!”

“R-right!”

One of the senior waitresses scolded Neru for standing around.

“H-hey, mister, there’s a special table open on the terrace right now.”

Neru, a little flustered, led the way, and we sat down at a table on the open terrace.

We ordered the popular royal honey pancakes and the blue-green tea made with leaves from Eluette Marquisate. Unlike in a modern Japanese café, there was an extra charge for sugar for the tea.

The tea arrived first; we sipped it until Neru came flying back with a plate in each hand.

“Food’s here, mister! We threw in some extra honey on the house!”

Neru put our plates in front of us.

Sure enough, the pitcher-style milk vessel next to the pancakes was nearly overflowing with royal ant honey.

I thanked Neru for the service and asked for a refill of tea.

“Delicious...!”

Zena exclaimed in surprise when she took a bite of the pancakes.

“Heh-heh, you know it—that’s a recipe from little Miss Lulu! Everything that girl makes is delicious, I tell ya!”

Neru grinned proudly as she poured us more tea.

“Plus, the honey Lord Kuro brought us is supersweet!”

While not as difficult to get as regular bee honey, ant honey could be found only in maze ant nests and was thus very expensive and difficult to collect, so I gave them some of the huge amount I had saved up in my Storage.

When Neru went back inside, Zena and I chatted as we enjoyed the tea and pancakes.

Just then, a pair of cute voices reached my ears.

“I knew I smelled master, sir!”

“Zena’s here, too...”

Turning my head, I saw Pochi and Tama leaning over the fence that separated the café’s terrace from the street, their tails and hands both waving wildly.

Liza promptly came up behind them and scooped them up under her arms.

“Master, Lady Zena, I am terribly sorry for the interruption.”

“It’s fine,” I replied to Liza’s apology. “Pochi, Tama, say aah.”

As they hung under Liza’s arms, I fed each of them a big bite of pancake, loaded with honey, of course.

“Aah?”

“Aah, sir!”

When I turned back to Zena, I pretended not to notice that she was opening her mouth a bit, too.

Feeding two little kids was one thing, but feeding a high school-aged girl like Zena in front of a bunch of people was a bit too much.

“Are you done exploring the labyrinth for the day?”

“Yes, Lady Karina collapsed, so we decided to withdraw.”

“Collapsed?! Was Lady Karina hurt?!?”

Misunderstanding Liza’s report, Zena jumped from her seat.

The sound of her chair falling over made Tama’s and Pochi’s eyes widen, their ears and tail fur standing on end.

“No, she is fine,” Liza responded, and Zena sagged with a sigh of relief.

The two of them hadn’t spoken that much since they first met, but maybe Zena thought of Karina as a comrade who fought at her side on the battleground known as the viceroy’s wife’s tea party.

“Does she have level-up sickness?”

I didn’t see her anywhere, so I patted Pochi and Tama on the head as I confirmed Karina’s status with Liza, mostly just to reassure Zena.

“Yes, Lady Karina and her entourage had a rather severe case, so we brought them to the doctor’s office in the explorers’ guild. Lady Pina is with them as well, so there is nothing to worry about.”

“Level-up sickness, you say? Wait, so when she was sick the other day...”

“Yes, that was level-up sickness, too.” I nodded.

“Wh-what sort of hard-core training did she do to level up so much...?”

“She only did battle with a few dozen opponents around her level. Hardly what I would call ‘hard-core,’ as the number of monsters did not even reach a hundred.”

“A h-hundred?”

Zena stared at Liza.

“D-damn, did you hear that?”

“Yeah, that’s Liza of the Black Spear for ya.”

“How could anyone go up against a bunch of same-level enemies without their life being forfeit?”

“Guess you gotta do something that crazy to become a mithril explorer in just a few months.”

The explorers who were walking past the open terrace murmured to each other in tones bordering on alarm.

“If you are interested, would you like to join us for a session?”

“O-oh no, I couldn’t...”

Zena glanced over at me, so I nodded.

“That’s all right, Liza. We were already planning to go into the labyrinth for a few days starting tomorrow to develop a new hunting ground, so she’ll be hunting monsters at a pace similar to Lady Karina’s.”

“S-Satou?”

For some reason, Zena’s expression seemed to say “*et tu?*”

“We’ll be coming with you, and we always put safety first, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“O-okay...”

I smiled at her reassuringly, and Zena hesitated for a moment before nodding.

She still looked a bit nervous, but once we actually got started in the labyrinth, I was confident she would see her concerns were unfounded.

Oh, that’s right, I should talk to her about that now.

“Zena, speaking of tomorrow’s labyrinth venture...”

“What is it?”

Zena looked even more anxious, so I assured her it was nothing too important before I got to the matter at hand.

“If you and your squad fight alone, you won’t have many people, so I was hoping you’d be willing to have Lady Karina and her two attendants along, too. Is that all right?”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

She seemed confused, but promptly agreed.

If anything, she said she was worried that she would hold them back, but I gave her the stamp of approval, since they were all around the same level.



“...Developing a hunting ground?”

Karina was fresh out of the bath and dressed in a robe when I invited her to join us on the two-night labyrinth expedition starting the following day.

Under Arisa’s strict supervision, this bathrobe thoroughly covered her chest and other areas, so it was more practical than suggestive.

Lady Karina’s favorite part was that it felt like a soft towel on her skin, according to her.

“Yes, we’ll be helping Zena and her squad train while we create a new hunting ground in a spot near area eleven.”

“...Zena gets all your attention.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up Karina’s grumble under her breath.

Just as Arisa predicted, Karina seemed to be jealous that I was spending a lot of time on Zena.

“Mew?”

“What’s wrong, sir?”

Tama looked like she’d heard it, too, but Pochi missed the comment, as she was busy downing a post-bath fruit milk.

“I shan’t be joining you on this hunting ground expedition!”

“You’re not interested?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I’m not interested, but...”

“Come on, let’s fight togetherrrr?”

“Yeah, sir! A new hunting ground means new meat, sir!”

Tama and Pochi pleaded with Karina to join us.

“Fine, I... I mean, I still refuse!”

Karina wavered at the temptation of food and fighting, but then rapidly shook her head.

I would prefer that she didn’t move too quickly in a bathrobe, lest anything too exciting happen around the chest.

“You’re really not going? Master and Lulu are going, too, so dinner won’t be quite as good when they’re not around, you know.”

“I—I said I’m not going, and that’s final!”

Karina made a sour expression at Arisa’s comment, but she quickly turned away again.

It was all too obvious that she was just being prideful, but I didn’t want to keep pushing and have her get even more stubborn, so I decided to back off.

“All right. I can’t force—”

As soon as I started to give up, Karina’s gaze whipped toward me.

Her expression was that of an abandoned puppy.

“—you, but I would also like to check the performance of the equipment I gave you, so could I ask you to reconsider one more time and join us?”

“O-oh, very well. If you absolutely insist, Satou, then I suppose I can come along!”

I gave a rather forced explanation, but Karina promptly agreed without a second thought.

“Oh, sure, you *suppose*,” Arisa muttered, rolling her eyes.

I was just glad that things with Karina weren’t getting any more complicated.

The next day, Karina and company joined us on the way to the west gate.

Walking alongside me were the beastfolk girls, Miss Karina, and her attendants Erina and the newbie. Since there were a fair amount of people this time, Pina was staying behind.

The rest of the group was supposed to come, too, but Arisa had been talked into staying by the orphanage kids who were upset that their magic lessons would be delayed, and Lulu, Nana, and Mia wound up going with her to the orphanage as well. The group was a bit too big to begin with, though, so that wasn't really a problem.

They said they would come to visit with some provisions on the last day, so I figured they'd at least be able to see how far Zena and the others had come.

Hard Work Pays Off

This is Zena. From far away, it's hard to tell how high a mountain is until you're right at its base. But if you hesitate because it's bigger than you realized, I don't think you'll ever be able to climb to the top.

“Zena!”

Waiting by the west gate, I turned when I heard a voice call me and saw Satou approaching through the crowd.

Unusually, Satou was wearing armor today. It was very light-looking, the perfect fit for someone so nimble.

“Falling for your boy toy all over again, Zenacchi?”

“L-Lilio!”

I looked over my shoulder to frown at my teasing friend.

Admittedly, she wasn’t entirely wrong, but I didn’t want Satou to know about my crush when we were about to enter the labyrinth.

He was followed by Lady Karina of the house of Baron Muno, as well as Liza and the others.

Lady Karina was wearing the beautiful armor I’d seen before, and carrying a giant sword even bigger than Iona’s broadsword.

“Thank you for having us today, Satou.”

“Of course. Thank you for joining, Lady Karina!”

Lady Karina saw me and started to turn around, but Satou caught her and made her face forward.

I could tell her real feelings from the way she reacted to Satou’s hand on her shoulder. Satou said their relationship wasn’t romantic, but I was certain Karina had feelings for him.

She seemed to really enjoy talking about Satou at the tea party.

I'm sure the only reason she acted even more excited to talk about hero legends was to hide her embarrassment.

"Lady Karina, I—I might not be much help, but I look forward to working together."

I ended up doing a military salute out of nervous habit, which may be why Lady Karina stared at me in confused silence.

"Lady Karina?" Satou prompted.

"Oh, it's nothing."

Karina shook her head, her gorgeous golden curls bouncing around, and turned a stern gaze on me.

"J-just make sure you don't slow us down!"

With that, she turned away and started walking briskly toward the labyrinth.

"Karinaaaa?"

"Don't be grouchy, sir."

"Lady Karina, Lady Zena is a master of Wind Magic. She will certainly not slow anyone down."

"W-well, good, then."

Tama, Pochi, and Liza spoke up in my defense, which softened the hard expression on Karina's face.

As Satou whispered something in her ear that made her turn red, I felt a bit of a twinge in my heart.

"Zenacchi, your boy's gonna get stolen if you don't start getting proactive. Most guys are into boobs, y'know."

"L-Lilio!"

Honestly! Satou wouldn't care about something like that.

Despite my inner protests, I couldn't help glancing down at my chest, which seems to be developing a bit more slowly than that of most girls my age.

Maybe I should add one more layer of padding next time I go out with Satou...

“Zena, looks like we’re about to head out.”

“R-right! I’m ready.”

Iona came over to call me, so I picked up my bags from the ground.

Clapping my hands to my cheeks to pull myself together, I stepped forward into the Path of Death.

“Zena, when we get back to the barracks, would you like me to teach you my family’s secret technique for bust growth?”

“...Wh-what?”

Whispering in my ear, Iona grinned mischievously.

“Or do you not need it?”

I could tell she was teasing me, but I still responded “No, please do” in a quiet voice.

Secretly, I was a little grateful to the darkness of the Path of Death, since it prevented Satou from noticing the fire in my cheeks as he walked on ahead.



“There’s nothing around but people so far.”

Keeping ahead of the group as our scout, Lilio grumbled back to us.

There were many explorers coming and going in the main passage of the labyrinth, so it was rare to encounter monsters there.

When the all-female explorer party the Silverlight guided the Seiryuu County Elite Training Corps before, they also said that area one and the surrounding areas weren’t suitable for hunting.

“Mooooth...”

“Maze moth, sir!”

Walking alongside Lilio in the front, Tama and Pochi suddenly pointed up at the ceiling. All I could see was darkness.

The intermediate Wind Magic I use for detecting enemies isn’t suited to

finding targets that aren't moving, so my detection magic wasn't picking up a maze moth.

"Where?"

Lilio directed her lantern toward the ceiling.

This military lantern was developed for fighting bandits at night, so it illuminated a wide range.

"I see it. A bit to the left."

Lou's sharp eyes spotted the enemy before Lilio did.

Even with the light on it, its camouflage made it hard to see, but there was a giant moth around half a human's height sitting in the corner of the ceiling.

Avoiding the lantern's light, the maze moth skittered across the ceiling to flee into the darkness.

"Wait!"

Lilio handed the lantern to Iona and notched an arrow to her crossbow.

"Tch, I missed."

It looked like it was out of Lilio's range.

The maze moth sprayed powder in its wake as it flew toward us.

Iona and Lou drew their swords.

"Hiya..."

"Hah, sir!"

Tama and Pochi each threw something with incredible strength, piercing right through the moth.

It froze in midair for just a moment, then fluttered to the ground.

"Maze moths are poisonous, so it's best to defeat them from as far away as possible. And if you walk over to it right after defeating it, you'll breathe the powder in the air, so please be sure to cover your mouth with a cloth first."

We followed Satou's directions and quickly made our way past the powder.

"Maze moths shower anyone who passes beneath them unawares with poisonous dust, then attack them from behind when they're weakened, so do be careful."

"So I should check the ceiling with the lantern, too, yeah?"

"Yes, please do."

Satou nodded at Lilio.

"The sign stones have changed. It looks like we're in area eleven from here on."

"The number of enemies starts increasing around here, so please proceed with caution."

Everyone nodded in response to Satou's warning, including me.

At the first intersection, there was a pile of rocks blocking the main passage. It looked like the ceiling had caved in and blocked the central path.

The left and right paths were half-blocked with rocks, too, but there was just enough space for one person to get through at a time.

Lilio approached one of the rocks blocking the main passage.

"There's something written on this. Can you read it, Zenacchi?"

"Umm, it's in sort of old-fashioned phrasing. It says... 'Thou foolish explorers who venture into hell. Beware the knight killers.'"

"Knight killers?"

"It's shorthand for the horn hopper, which can pierce the metal armor knights wear, and the rock-head bee, which can crush even the toughest helmet. Both of them move very quickly, so please be sure not to let your guards down."

Satou gave a detailed explanation.

The Celivera Labyrinth is said to be the oldest labyrinth on the continent, so it's no great surprise that it's full of enemies who can't be beaten by any ordinary means.

"Rock-head bee meat is sweet and tasty, sir."

“And horn hoppers make a crunchy cannoli...?”

Pochi and Tama looked back at me with a grin.

So even monsters that can defeat knights are just food for these two?

I wasn't sure what kind of food a “cannoli” was, so I decided to ask Satou later.

“I'd like to try that for myself sometime.”

“I'm sure you would like it, sir.”

Walking behind me, Karina sounded interested, too.

“Wyvern meat is tough and gross, but it sounds like some of the monsters in the labyrinth actually taste good, huh?”

“Mew?”

“But wyvern meat is tasty, too, sir?”

“Well, if you kids think even wyvern is tasty, I guess I shouldn't get my hopes up about these other ones...”

Sorry, Tama and Pochi, but I had to agree with Lou on that one.

“Master, perhaps you ought to give them those items now?”

“Good idea.”

Satou looked back at us for a moment, then nodded at Liza.

“Zena, Lilio, please replace the gauntlets on your nondominant hands with these.”

Satou handed us each a gauntlet that glittered in the light.

“It's made of monster parts?” Lilio asked.

“Yes, try wearing it on your wrist and put some magic power into it.”

I switched out my gauntlet as Satou directed, and charged the new one with magic.

“...No way!”

A Shield like the kind Practical Magic users make appeared above the

gauntlet.

“Whoa, this is crazy.”

“A transparent shield... You can see the enemy through it, and it’s light and easy to move around.”

Lou and Lilio commented in awe of the shields.

“Z-Zena...”

Iona looked at me, and I nodded back.

Without a doubt, this kind of magic tool was akin to a national treasure.

It might not be on the same level as a Hallowed Artifact, but no ordinary magic tool would be able to produce a Magic Shield so immediately.

“Satou, what are these?”

“It’s like the Practical Magic spell Shield. They’re not terribly strong, so think of it as an emergency defense measure.”

“N-no, that’s not what I meant...”

Satou blinked at me in confusion.

I don’t know too much about the cost of magic tools, but I believe something like this would cost at least one or two hundred gold coins.

There’s no way Satou doesn’t realize how valuable this Magic Item is, so he must be knowingly letting us borrow them for our safety.

“Is it really all right for us to borrow something so incredible?”

“Yes, of course. The president of the Echigoya Company asked me to test these out in battle. Even if they break, you won’t have to pay a cent, so please go ahead and use them freely.”

Even then, I wasn’t reassured.

I wish I could show mine off as easily as Lilio.

Whether he was aware of my concerns or not, Satou said something even more amazing.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot. If you press the stone on the wrist side while

charging it with magic, it'll give you magical protection like the Practical Magic spell Enchant: Physical Protection for about half a cycle. It's only about as much defense as an extra layer of thick clothing, but it'll protect you from light cuts and scrapes, so please give it a try."

"Wow, that'll be great for scouting."

Lilio seemed pleased, but I was sure this was just as priceless as the Shield.

The red stone might be its own separate magic tool.

"Shall we move on, then? Lilio, be mindful of your magic consumption, please."

"Got it. So, are we going left or right?"

"Neither. There's a very slim path between the rocks straight ahead, so keep going that way."

"...A path?"

Lilio went over to inspect the rocks.

"Heeere?"

"Damn, that's really well hidden. I dunno how you found a path like this."

Tama walked up next to the confused Lilio and pointed out the hard-to-find gap.

With Lilio in the lead, we formed a single line to pass through the opening.

Along the way, we ran into a few small monsters, but since my enemy detection and Lilio's scouting managed to find them ahead of time, we were able to defeat them without a problem.

When we emerged into a wider passageway, Lilio paused.

"Wait a sec. Something's up."

The rest of us all stopped, too.

"Ah, that paint means there's a trap here."

"Meat maaark?"

"Me and Tama drew them, sir."

This area was used for explorers' school students to practice, so they marked known traps to make them easier to find.

After we walked for a little while longer, Lilio made another observation.

"Looks like someone passed through here not long ago."

Sure enough, there were fresh monster corpses off to the sides of the passage.

"RIP..."

"Lorda mercy, sir."

Tama and Pochi scattered some white powder over the corpses and murmured something in a language I didn't recognize.

"That's Purification Ash to make sure the corpses don't turn into the undead. It's not as effective as a priestess's Purification Magic or Holy Water from a temple, but it's certainly faster than burning them."

According to Satou, one small bottle of the ash powder cost several large copper coins, which really worked out to a penny coin per monster, since the smaller kind only required a few grains.

Not far into the large passage, Lilio stopped again.

Several monster corpses were lying around.

"Hang on, it's a trap."

Those of us in the rear stopped, too.

As Lilio started inspecting one of the corpses, Tama trotted over and watched her closely.

"Should we turn back?" Lou asked.

"Hold on... No, it's fine. It's just a shoddy arrow trap, I can take care of it in no time. Just to be safe, don't come over here yet."

Lilio worked to disarm the trap.

"It's unusual to see new traps in this area," Satou remarked.

"Goblin Trapperr?"

“Usasa said they saw one before, sir.”

Tama said that it was the work of a trap-setting goblin. The “Usasa” person Pochi mentioned was a rabbitfolk boy who’d graduated from the explorers’ school.

“All right, I got it.”

“Good one, Lilio.”

“Heh-heh, this kinda thing’s a piece of cake for me. Just let me take care of the other one there, too.”

Grinning back at Lou, Lilio pointed at one of the other corpses.

“Heh-heh, a double trap might work on a beginner, but you gotta wake up a whole lot earlier in the morning to pull one over on the great Lilio.”

Lilio stepped toward the corpse.

“Stoppp?”

Tama pulled on Lilio’s sleeve.

“What?”

“Looook...”

Tama pointed at Lilio’s feet.

I couldn’t see anything from where I was standing.

“...String?”

“If it breaks, poison’ll go *bloosh* out of the wall...”

This third trap seemed to be set up specifically to catch a scout moving from disarming the first trap to the second.

“S-so what do we do?”

“Waaait?”

Tama followed the string with her eyes, and carefully made her way over to a different corpse.

“Gonna disarm...”

“How’s it look? Think you can get it?”

“All done. You can move.”

That was fast.

How did she disarm the trap just by fiddling in the darkness for a few seconds?

“Tama’s amazing, sir!”

“Hee-hee...”

“Thanks. What kinda trap was it?”

“Ummm, look heeere?”

Tama showed Lilio how the trap worked and how to disarm it.

“It’s not unusual to find a different trap hidden next to an obvious one in the labyrinth, so always be careful.”

“I learned before that there might be more than one trap, but I didn’t think the second one would be a fake-out, too.”

Lilio grimaced and nodded at Satou’s warning.

“Something is coming from up ahead.”

Judging from my enemy detection magic, it wasn’t particularly large.

“Lou, have your shield ready. It’s three rock-head bees.”

As three shadows flew from the darkness with the buzzing of wings, Satou warned us exactly what kind of monsters they were.

The bees crashed into Lou’s shield with a heavy *thud*.

“Oof!”

At the third one’s impact, Lou lost her balance a little.

“Now!”

Iona leaped out from behind Lou, bringing her broadsword down on one of the grounded rock-head bees.

“I’m going in, too!”

“L-Lady Karina!”

“Wait, ma’am!”

Karina sprang forward and swung her even bigger sword down on the rock-head bee. A powerful *clang* echoed through the passage, but the bee hopped back into the air virtually unharmed.

“Miiissed?”

“Gotta focus more, sir.”

“I’m not done yet!”

“Lady Karina, that’s enough for now.”

Lady Karina tried to attack again, but Satou stopped her.

In the meantime, Iona and Lilio finished off the second bee.

“It’s dangerous to swing around such a large sword in a small passage, so it might be best to let them handle this one.”

“O-oh, very well...”

Karina turned bright red and looked away.

I knew it. She really does have feelings for...

“Zena, are you keeping up your detection?”

...*Oh, something’s coming.*

“More enemies are approaching from the front. Three of them, and fast.”

If Satou hadn’t reminded me, I wouldn’t have noticed.

“Iona, get back!”

“They’re horn hoppers. A stab from those pointed horns can potentially be a fatal wound, so please be careful.”

As Lou shouted out to Iona, Satou told us what the approaching monster was.

It was still nearly impossible to see it, but somehow he could tell anyway.

Is this just a matter of experience as an explorer?

“RRRAAAAAAH!”

Lou shouted with the “Taunt” skill.

Instead of the rock-head bee, a grasshopper with a horn bounced off the shield and stabbed into a nearby rock.

“Yikes, it stabbed right through the rock!”

“No wonder they call it a knight killer.”

Lilio and Iona murmured in amazement behind Lou.

...Wait, it got stuck in the rock?

“Lou! Are you all right?”

At that, both Lilio and Iona looked up at Lou.

“I’m fine. Let me take care of the last rock-head bee while you guys handle the thing that’s stuck in the rock there.”

Breathing sighs of relief, Iona and Lilio approached the horn hopper stuck in the wall to finish it off.

“It’s easiest to aim for their necks.”

With Satou’s help, the pair quickly sliced off the heads of the giant grasshoppers.

“I-it won’t come out!”

Lady Karina went to take on the third horn hopper, but she missed her target and got her sword stuck in the wall instead.

“Newbie, we gotta help out Lady Karina!”

“Right! Here I come!”

Karina’s two escorts struck the third rock hopper with their short swords.

“Karina, behind you—”

“Bee! Sir!”

Knocked aside by Lou’s shield, the rock-head bee sped toward the defenseless Karina.

Huh?

Glittering white scales appeared over Karina's back, and the bee bounced off them harmlessly.

"Eek!"

Karina let out a cute shriek and tumbled forward from the impact, but she didn't seem to be seriously injured.

"HIYAAAAH!"

Lou shouted with the "Taunt" skill again, but the rock-head bee ignored it and flew toward me instead. The skill must have failed to activate.

Surprised at my own calmness, I aimed the Wind Rod in my hand at the rock-head bee and filled it with magic.

An invisible ball of wind flew toward the rock-head bee, knocking it aside.

It flew toward Liza at the rear instead, but she just glanced at it without interest and lightly struck out with her spear, knocking it right in front of Iona.

For Liza, it didn't even seem to be an enemy worth fighting.

Before long, we finished off the remaining horn hoppers and rock-head bees.

When the battle was over, Tama and Pochi ran around to collect the cores from the monsters.

Liza retrieved the one intact rock-head bee and brought it over.

"When you break down a monster like this, be mindful of the insides. If this organ breaks, all the meat will become inedible. The base of the wings and the back are delicious, so unless you intend to sell parts, all you really need to collect is the meat here and the core."

Liza demonstrated how to break down the monster.

She even explained what each part could be used for and how much it would sell for.

It was hard to believe that someone this knowledgeable had been a slave just a year ago.



“Sir Satou!”

“Sir Pendragon!”

As we proceeded down the passage, with a few more random encounters along the way, we met a group of kids in expensive-looking equipment.

I had seen them training in the courtyard of the explorers' school a few times.

If I remembered right, they were the kids of some high-ranking nobles, led by the son of the viceroy of Labyrinth City.

Of course, the kids weren't alone. Their guards included a female knight who was even better built than Lou and a few other knights clad in white armor.

“Sir Gerits, are you and your friends hunting maze slugs here?”

“That's right! And guess what, Sir Pendragon? We finally reached level ten!”

“That's wonderful. Just be careful not to get hurt, all right?”

“By the way, Sir Pendragon, would you happen to have any sweets on you?”

“Hmm. Would a mint candy do, Sir Luram?”

“Why, my whole mouth is refreshed. Yes, I like this very much.”

The well-fed-looking boy nodded appreciatively at the candy Satou gave him.

“Thou art unfair to favor Sir Luram, no? Dost thou have one each for the rest of us?”

“Of course, Princess Meetia.”

The other kids happily gathered around to accept candy from Satou.

“Sir Knight, I wish to speak to you a moment...”

Mr. Kajiro, a teacher from the explorers' school, whispered in Satou's ear.

“Explorers with small flying tamed monsters?”

“Yes, we only passed by them along the way, but I heard they were hunting an excess of mantis monsters in area seventeen.”

We were going to the same area, so I was a little concerned.

“They're probably sending out their tamed monsters to lure in mantises from

dangerous areas."

The teacher nodded at Satou's guess.

"Luring monsters with monsters can easily lead to a chain rampage, so be careful not to get caught up in it if that happens."

"We will. Thank you."

Shortly after he finished talking with the teacher, the group's scout came back with a large slug-like monster and their battle began, so we took our leave from their base.

"Sir Knight, are there a lot of that sort of monster where we're going?"

Iona looked pale.

"That sort of monster... Maze slugs, you mean? They live around the watering hole near that spot, but they don't usually appear anywhere else, so I don't think you'll end up fighting one."

"I—I see. That's good, then..."

Iona put a hand to her chest and sighed; behind her, I saw a similar look of relief on Lou's face.

I felt a visceral revulsion from that slimy creature myself, so I couldn't blame them.

Lilio and Satou seemed fine, but Lady Karina and her maids appeared to feel the same way we did.

"I hear something. Be careful, guys..."

As soon as Lilio gave a warning, Tama and Pochi nodded in agreement.

They had started glancing at her a few moments before, which probably meant they'd heard it before she did.

Once we moved a little farther down the passage, my enemy detection magic reacted as well.

It looked like some kind of fight was taking place up ahead.

Soon, we saw a mixed party of humans and beastfolk fighting a locust

monster.

The three shield users in the front were focusing on defense, while the four in the rear attacked with spears.

“Aah, Usasa?”

“Rabibi and Gaugaru, too, sir!”

Tama and Pochi pointed at the fighters as they called to Satou.

“Satou, are those kids students at the explorers’ school, too?” I asked.

“No, the blue cloak means they’ve graduated.”

“Pendraaa...”

“Graduates get the Pendra cloak, sir!”

Tama and Pochi chimed in with Satou’s answer.

Lady Karina looked like she wanted to be included in the conversation, too, so I asked her, “Do you know about this ‘Pendra,’ too, Lady Karina?” But she simply answered, “O-of course I do” and looked away.

Unfortunately, that was the end of that conversation, but at least she didn’t seem to hate me as much as I feared.

“Wow, those kids are pretty damn good.”

“None of them are as strong as Lou on their own, but the three of them together disperse the monster’s attack, so they’re able to keep the line stable.”

“But of cooourse?”

“Usasa and them are hard workers, sir.”

As Lou and Iona applauded the graduates’ efforts, Tama and Pochi grinned proudly.

“Looks like they’re about to finish off the maze locust.”

Immediately after Satou said this, the dogfolk boy in front crushed the locust’s head with his mace and brought the battle to a swift end.

“Nice one, Gaugaru!”

“Usasa and Rabibi, you did good, too, sir.”

“““Hey, it’s Miss Tama and Miss Pochi!”””

When Tama and Pochi called out to them, the “Pendra” kids exclaimed happily in response.

“““Mister Satou!”””

Spotting Satou, the Pendra kids came rushing over. Satou praised them for their efforts in battle, and they promptly started exchanging information about the hunting grounds.

Satou beckoned me over and introduced me to the kids so I could listen to the conversation.

“There’s a grassy area up ahead where maze locusts and hoppers breed, um, sir. Sometimes there are soldier mantises, too, but you hardly ever see them, sir.”

With haltingly polite speech, the boy explained his experience of the area.

It sounded like there were other grasshopper-like monsters besides the ones we’d seen so far.

“Past the grassy area is a big cavern with lots of mantis monsters, but hunter mantises are always roaming that place, so we stay away from there...sir.”

“We got too close once, and they shot a crazy big arrow at us.”

Hunter mantis...? I’d never heard of that monster before, so I would have to ask Satou about it later.

“Sir Knight, this could’ve been a mistake, but Usasa thought he saw a monster even bigger than a hunter mantis there once, too, sir. It could’ve been an areamaster or its spawn.”

“Ah, that’s very possible. That cavern is connected to the areamaster’s room, I believe.”

I wasn’t familiar with a lot of this vocabulary.

“Satou, what is an areamaster?”

Once the conversation with the young men was over, I asked Satou about

some of the terms.

“It’s a strong monster, usually around level fifty. They’re about as strong as an intermediate demon, but they’re much larger, so it’s best to make lots of preparations before fighting one.”

“““Level fifty?!”””

Lilio and the rest of my squad chimed in with my exclamation of shock.

“As if that level wasn’t crazy enough, you’re saying they’re as strong as a demon...?”

Lilio murmured in disbelief.

I remembered the intermediate demon we saw in Lessau County.

There was only one, but its powerful magic was enough to devastate the Lessau County army.

Just remembering it sent shivers down my spine.

“I definitely don’t want to meet one of those.”

“You said it.”

Lou nodded emphatically at my quiet comment.

“All right, we’ll be going on our way. There are slimes around here that can blend in with the ground, so keep an eye on the floor as well as the walls and ceiling.”

“““Yes sir!!”””

With a cheerful response, the Pendra kids waved as we went on our way.

We avoided the grassy area with the maze hoppers and locusts, sticking to only the smallest encounters.



“Wow.”

As we continued down the passage toward the light source, a space appeared beyond the narrow rocky entrance that was so large it was hard to believe it was underground.

“Byooteefuuul?”

“It’s so big, sir.”

Tama and Pochi hopped up on a large boulder and looked around.

“Lilio, take the left, please.”

At Satou’s direction, Lilio stopped looking around with the pair and went back to walking ahead.

Satou helped me climb across the boulder in front of the entrance, too.

The passage we came from was connected to a small tunnel about halfway up the cavern wall.

“My enemy detection magic is picking up on something, but I think it’s below the cliff.”

I didn’t see any signs of the giant monster the Pendra kids had mentioned. There was some kind of fog farther into the cavern that made it difficult to see, though, so maybe it was over that way.

“Danger,” Tama warned in a whisper.

Lilio knelt and put her ear to the floor.

My detection magic was only picking up on the monsters wandering around below the cliff.

“Heavy footsteps—something’s coming!”

“Look, sir!”

Pochi pointed into the fog.

A shadow shaped like a knight hanging onto a horse’s neck came into view.

“That must be the hunter mantis,” Satou remarked, sounding unconcerned.

Something black came flying toward us from the fog.

“Get down!”

I flattened myself against the floor as soon as I heard Lilio’s voice.

Just as we all ducked, something whizzed through the air and stuck to the

rock behind us.

Looking up, I saw an enormous arrow stabbed into the rock. It was as thick as several spears bundled together.

A hit from that would mean instant death.

My blood ran cold, and my hands trembled.

“Looks like the hunter mantis spotted us. Lilio, please hurry to the tunnel up ahead.”

Satou’s calm instructions soothed my fearful trembling.

“Got it!” Lilio broke into a run.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a giant mantis notching another arrow to something that looked like a longbow.

Oh no...

She’s not going to make it in time!

With a dull *thud*, the arrow slammed into the wall.

I thought it was going to hit someone, but it hit far higher than its target, as if an invisible giant had knocked it away.

“Run! Before the next arrow comes!”

Prompted by Satou’s voice, we sprinted over to the cavernous tunnel in the wall.

“Everyone’s here, right? Let’s take a quick break, then head to the hunting ground.”

Despite that near-death encounter, Satou was calmly moving us along.

Liza and even Tama and Pochi seemed equally unfazed.

I guess this is normal for a labyrinth explorer...

I’ll have to work hard to make sure I don’t hold them back.



“It’s crazy, Zenacchi! The water in this watering hole is crazy clear. You could

probably drink it as is!"

Lilio called over from where she was investigating the watering hole.

When we arrived at area seventeen with Satou's guidance, we found a safe area that could easily be turned into a long-term exploration base with just a little bit of work. It was big enough for anywhere from thirty to fifty people to make camp.

"This nut is edible, sir."

"Is it good?"

"I don't know, sir. But you can't eat anything besides what master says is okay to eat, okay, sir?"

Pochi and Lilio chatted about the plants near the watering hole.

"There were some spots that could make good toilets or garbage dumps, too."

"Judging by the age of the materials and the growth of the ivy, it seems like this place has been abandoned for a long time, but everything's so intact that's hard to believe."

Lou and Iona came back from their investigation with Tama in tow.

"The area past here I was planning to turn into a hunting ground had a few spots that would be good encampment sites for hunting, too. And the kinds of monsters are consistent with the information I collected beforehand."

Satou came back with a map in hand.

Behind him, Liza followed with some kind of large beast over her shoulder.

"Um, what is that?"

"I hunted it for tonight's dinner. These alligator geckos can cling to the walls and ceiling with the suction pads on their feet, so be mindful of the range of your enemy detection when you're hunting."

Liza answered my question with additional information.

"Zena, this is the distribution of monsters in there. Please use this to update your own maps."

“I will, thank you.”

I scanned the map Satou lent me.

It was covered in precise, detailed writing. The information included the distribution of monsters, trap locations, and even emergency evacuation routes.

As I copied it down, I read aloud for Lilio’s sake, since she was peering over my shoulder.

The area we were planning to develop had monsters called maze hoppers and maze locusts ranging from levels 6 to 8, which would be perfect opponents since our members were around levels 12 to 15.

But there was one problem...

“S-Satou, about this map...”

I held up the paper as I spoke.

“Is there a problem?”

“Won’t this distribution make it difficult to avoid soldier mantises and alligator geckos while we hunt maze locusts and hoppers?”

Soldier mantises and alligator geckos were marked around level 15, so it would be dangerous to fight them unprepared.

I didn’t know how strong Lady Karina and her escorts were, but my squad would only barely be able to beat one and would likely get injured in the process. It would be one thing to fight them for the protection of others, but they seemed far too strong to fight for no good reason.

“...Avoid?” Satou tilted his head, looking puzzled. “You don’t really need to avoid them. Once you get used to things, I was hoping to have you hunt soldier mantises and alligator geckos as your main prey.”

“Wait, for real?”

Lilio, who would be in charge of entering the monsters’ territory and luring them back to us, groaned aloud.

Hearing that, Iona, Lady Karina, and the others gathered around, too.

“Level fifteen?”

“I’ve never heard of an alligator gecko, but I know soldier mantises are pretty strong.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to fight an enemy that’s around our level or higher, even if there’s only one?”

Iona and Lou seemed to share my concerns.

But Lady Karina’s reaction was somewhat different.

“It wouldn’t be real training if they weren’t at least our level! Right, Pochi, Tama?”

“Yes indeedy...”

“That’s right, sir! You gotta have a strong enemy for a blood-curfing battle, sir!”

Evidently, they were well accustomed to this kind of battle.

...I guess you would have to do something that crazy to level up so quickly that you got level-up sickness, which most people think is a hoax.

“...Let’s do it.”

“Z-Zenacchi?”

At my declaration, Lilio and the others looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

Even I knew I was being reckless.

But still, I... I...

“It’ll be all right.” Satou patted my shoulder reassuringly. “It’ll be tough going at first, so I think the best approach would be to level up against maze locusts and hoppers before you start getting used to soldier mantises.”

Even with Satou’s support, Lilio and the others seemed reluctant to fight enemies right around our level.

“And if things look bad, we’ll step in and help you out. We could handle dozens of soldier mantises and alligator geckos without a problem, so don’t worry.”

With Satou's extra assurance, Lilio and the others finally agreed.

"There's a lot of really tall grass."

We left our supplies in the safe area and headed to the spot we'd slated for our future hunting grounds.

It was about the size of a castle's training grounds, with weak light coming from the ceiling. Since there was a downward-facing light source, it was that much darker near the ceiling, giving the place an eerie atmosphere.

We chose one corner spot that seemed like it would make an easy base and started setting up an encampment.

Without an Earth Magic user, though, all we could really do was remove rocks and debris that might get in the way of battle, cut the weeds around our encampment to clear our view, and perform other menial tasks like that.

"Zena, enemies?"

"There are a lot of them in the overall space. There are three monsters that seem particularly strong, and more than forty smaller monsters like maze locusts and hoppers. There are none around our encampment at present."

I sifted through the information from my enemy detection magic and conveyed it to Lou.

There was one more large enemy in the darkness near the ceiling, probably an alligator gecko.

There were smaller monsters than the maze locusts and hoppers, like maze wings and needle wings, hovering around above the grass.

"What're you doing, boyo?"

"Spreading monster repellent so the weaker monsters that aren't useful for leveling up won't come near us."

I heard Satou answer Lilio as he scattered white powder around the area.

"It works to repel bugs, too," he added with a smile.

"...Zena?"

"S-sorry, I was spacing out a little."

“I seeee...”

If I said I got distracted by Satou’s smile, Lilio and the others would tease me for the next three days at least, so I tried to cover it up.

However, Iona glanced pointedly at Satou before she continued, so I can’t say I really fooled her.

Moving on, I discussed my magic casting priorities with Iona and Lou.

“Zena, head down.”

Following Iona’s gaze, I saw the head of a soldier mantis craning above the sea of tall grass.

We needed to fight those soon.

“I’m sure it’s frightening when you’ve never experienced it before, so let’s take on a soldier mantis now and get it out of the way.”

“...Huh?”

As we stared at him in confusion, Satou sent Tama out to lure back a soldier mantis.

“Don’t be afraid! Why, I’ve defeated one all on my own before!”

“Karina, pride comes before a fall, sir.”

Unlike those two, my squad and I couldn’t keep up with what was happening.

“Soldier mantises are the weakest of the mantis monsters that appear in the Celivera Labyrinth, and we’ll take care of it if it looks like you’re out of your depth, so please don’t worry. Just think of this as a chance to test your strength.”

If Satou hadn’t noticed our nerves and reassured us, we might not have been able to use even half our strength.

Before long, Tama came back with a single soldier mantis in tow.

It’s huge.

It was nearly twice as tall as Lou.

But in spite of how strong it looked, Satou said it was the weakest mantis

monster in the Celivera Labyrinth... So we couldn't let ourselves be intimidated by a foe like this.

Gathering what little courage I had, I stared down the soldier mantis as it approached.

“Over here, you big lug!”

Lou shouted with the “Taunt” skill to draw the mantis’s attention.

KWWWAAAAMUWA.

Stopping in its tracks, the soldier mantis spread its wings and four front limbs and let out an intimidating roar.

“.....■■■ **Wind Hold Kaze Shibaru!**”

Since it was standing still, I was able to use an obstruction spell on it easily.

The wind wrapped around the giant mantis’s legs, slowing its movements.

KWWWAAAAMUWA.

“Raaaah!”

The soldier mantis shrieked with rage, and Lou bellowed back as if in response.

Falling for her taunt, the soldier mantis swung a swordlike foreleg down at Lou, so powerfully it looked like it could slice through metal.

“Oof!”

But Lou’s shield was able to stop the blow.

“I’ve got this. Leave the defense to me and focus on attacking this thing.”

“Lilio—”

“Got it!”

Iona attacked the soldier mantis from the front with her broadsword, while Lilio aimed for its head with her crossbow. Her short arrow bounced off the head’s hard shell, but Iona’s sword managed to crack the arm and send blood streaming out.

“We’re getting in on this, too!”

“Lady Karina, please attack from the opposite side so you don’t hit any allies with your sword.”

Karina hefted her enormous sword and ran over to the other side of the mantis per Satou’s directions.

“Erina and Newbie, try to attack from behind Miss Lou with your spears without getting in her way.”

“Gotcha!”

“O-okay, I’ll try!”

Lady Karina’s two guardian maids ran into the battle with short spears they definitely weren’t carrying during our travels.

...If they’re Lady Karina’s guards, shouldn’t they be protecting her?

“Hiyaaaa, et cetera!”

Lady Karina’s massive sword struck the soldier mantis with the force of a typhoon.

Her attack was so powerful it knocked the soldier mantis off its balance with ease.

“Amazing... Is Lady Karina a high level like you, Satou?”

“No, she’s only one level higher than you.”

...Really?

“It’s just that Lady Karina has the support of the Intelligent Artifact Raka, an heirloom of the house of Baron Muno.”

Satou explained that Karina was able to swing that heavy-looking sword around like a twig, thanks to the enhancement effects of Raka.

“Mew...”

“Karinaaa, you can’t beat it without proper sword technique, sir!”

“If you prefer to crush everything with sheer strength, I believe Sir Raka may have a point that a bludgeon would be better...”

The beastfolk girls sighed as they watched Karina fight.

From the look of things, even an amazing attack like that didn't earn a passing grade from them.

"I can't aim for its eyes with my crossbow."

"That's all right. Just try to use it to keep the soldier mantis from attacking Miss Lou with its full strength."

"Hmm, I gotcha... But that thing's attacks don't seem to be as strong as they look. Does Lou really need my support?"

"I wouldn't say that," Satou answered Lilio, and strolled right up to the soldier mantis.

Producing a sturdy-looking shield from who knows where, he held it up with both hands and took a blow from the soldier mantis's sword arm.

"Yeesh!"

Lilio gasped at the result.

The mantis's sword arm had pierced right through the shield.

Satou ambled back over to us, as if satisfied with his experiment, and showed us the shield.

It was made with metal even thicker than the one Lou used in the army, and there was a hole straight through the center.

"Uh-ohhh?"

"Karina, you're getting much too agg-row, sir!"

Tama and Pochi started clamoring loudly.

Following their gaze, I saw the soldier mantis turn toward Lady Karina.

"Looks like Lady Karina worked a little too hard, and now the monster's targeting her instead."

Satou narrated quite calmly.

Lou hurriedly used the "Taunt" skill again, but it had no effect. She seemed to have failed at recapturing the soldier mantis's attention.

"The 'Taunt' skill doesn't work as well if you use it multiple times in a row."

I appreciated the friendly advice, but this didn't seem like the best time for it.

Soon, my fears were realized: Lady Karina took a direct hit from one of the soldier mantis's sword arms and went flying into the wall at a terrible speed.

■■■■■ **Scratch Wind Sakka Kaze!**"

I used a lesser attack spell meant for keeping a crowd in check, directing it at the mantis's head as it turned to chase after Karina.

It was a weak spell that only inflicted light scratches on the target, but perfect for dividing the monster's attention like Satou suggested.

Sure enough, it stopped chasing Lady Karina.

In the meantime, Lou managed to get its attention back on her.

"Oopsie-daisy..."

"How embarrassing for you, sir."

Standing next to Lady Karina, Tama and Pochi shook their heads as if in mild disappointment.

I couldn't believe their heartless reactions. I thought they were close friends with Lady Karina, but maybe I was mistaken?

"Q-quick, we have to heal her..."

I pulled out a potion from my pouch and started to run toward her, but Satou stopped me.

"Don't worry, she's fine."

He pointed toward Lady Karina, who was standing up unharmed and dusting herself off, murmuring, "Oh dear, that was a blunder."

"Since she has Raka's protection, she can take any number of hits from a soldier mantis without a scratch."

Amazing... A Magic Item that grants the same kind of power as the "Indestructible Body" used by Sir Kigorri, the strongest human in Seiryuu County...?

Tama and Pochi weren't being heartless after all, then. I made a silent mental

apology to them.

“Lou!”

“It’s just a scratch. Don’t worry.”

Blood was running down Lou’s sword arm.

She must have gotten hit when she tried to get the mantis’s attention.

“...■ ***Healing Wind*** *Iyashi no Kaze.*”

The spell wouldn’t do much more than stop the bleeding, but it was the most I could manage for now.

Just to be safe, I checked that Lady Karina wasn’t injured.

“Oh dear, my sword is gone.”

“Under the mantis?”

“Even without a sword, your super-steely body is plenty, sir!”

“Fair enough!”

Huh?

With a running start, Karina delivered a flying kick to the soldier mantis’s trunk.

The unexpected attack sent the giant insect stumbling backward. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought I saw alarm in its compound eyes.

“Haaaah!”

Lou followed up with a “Shield Bash,” and the soldier mantis fell over sideways.

“Under the jaw!”

Following Satou’s advice, Iona and Lady Karina’s maids stabbed their swords and spears under the soldier mantis’s jaw and succeeded in defeating it.

“Whew, I’m beat...”

“But we managed to win.”

Lou and Iona sank to the ground.

“I’ll heal you right away. Everyone who’s injured, please gather near Lou.”

“Wait a minute. You focus on recovering your magic, Zena.”

I started a chant, but Satou stopped me.

“B-but...”

Arisa and Mia also advised me to focus on recovering my magic as much as possible outside of using spells in battle, but I had to close their wounds right away.

If wounds were left unattended in a miasma-thick place like the labyrinth, they could easily become cursed and even prove fatal.

“Please use magic potions for healing injuries whenever you can. There are lesser and intermediate ones, so you can gauge which to use based on the severity of the injury. If someone gets hurt in the middle of battle, the vanguard might not be able to use potions, so please use your recovery magic to heal them.”

“B-but...”

I was reluctant to use an expensive potion on a minor wound.

“If you run out of potions, I can supply you with plenty more, so don’t worry about going through them.”

“I’m not sure we can do that without worrying...”

Iona seemed to feel the same way.

“I’d say the best pace is to use one after every few monsters you defeat. We have stamina recovery potions, too, so be sure to use those if you feel your focus starting to wane.”

“S-Satou, isn’t that a little wasteful?”

“No, it’s fine. You won’t have any potion overdosing effects from that level of use.”

“No, that’s not what I...”

Satou looked at me like he didn’t understand what the problem was.

"All righty, then. It won't be so bad to experience fighting in luxury for a change."

"Well said!" Lou agreed with Lilio. "But I'd rather not be in pain, so I'll do my best to defend in the first place!"

With that, the topic of conversation was over.

"So it wasn't really as difficult as it seemed, right?"

"Well, no... But I think that's only thanks to this equipment."

"Yeah, those attacks would've gone right through an iron shield, but this one held up to 'em. And even when I did take a few hits past the shield, my armor took the worst of it. If I hadn't gotten grazed in a spot without armor, I don't think I would've even gotten this scratch."

"I could say the same of this sword. With my heirloom steel sword, I could barely even scratch the weak spots at the joints before, but this sword that Sir Knight lent me was able to cut through the soldier mantis's hard shell and do some real damage."

Now that they mentioned it, I realized that this soldier mantis hadn't resisted my obstruction magic as much as the one we fought before.

I'd suspected this during training, too, but the equipment Satou prepared for us might be even more valuable than we thought.

"Let's begin the hunt, then."

Lilio and Tama went off to find the next monster. From this point on, we'd primarily be fighting weaker monsters like maze locusts and hoppers.

These monsters turned out to be far weaker than the soldier mantis. The only times we struggled was when Lilio occasionally lured more than one over to us by accident.

As Satou, Liza, and friends gave us advice, those fights, too, stopped being a struggle. When we fought our second soldier mantis, it went far more smoothly than the first fight.

By the time we took on our third soldier mantis, we were able to defeat it without suffering a single scratch.

Once we finished cleaning up all the enemies in the cavern, drinking magic potions as if they were water all the while, we started using it as a base while Lilio brought new enemies from the neighboring room.

Over and over, one battle flowed into the next.

Whenever we finished one monster, the next was already waiting for its turn.

I lost count when the number of monsters we defeated exceeded one hundred.

Partway through, we started moving from one room to the next while hunting. Satou said that the hoppers and locusts were no longer efficient, so we shifted our focus to mantises, as well as maze snails and red-shelled beetle monsters called red carapaces.

I'm sure we must have leveled up quite a bit.

And eventually...

“Lilio?”

“It’s okay, I just got a little dizzy for a minute there.”

“That’s likely a sign of level-up sickness. Let’s go back to the safe area for now and rest awhile.”

...we experienced the legendary level-up sickness, said to happen when one levels up too quickly, for the very first time.



“I’m toast...”

“Whew, I can’t move another inch.”

“We did fight an awful lot.”

As soon as we reached the safe area, Lilio and Lou crumpled onto the ground. Iona and Lady Karina’s guards looked exhausted, too.

We had just fought one enemy after another, most of them close to our own levels, so that was bound to be the case.

“Satou, I am simply starving.”

Lady Karina was the only fighter who still seemed full of energy.

“I’ll go catch food!”

“Pochi too, sir!”

Tama and Pochi ran from the safe area.

“Wait—”

I moved to stop them, but Liza tapped her chest reassuringly.

“No need to worry, my lady. There aren’t any enemies in this area who could possibly hurt those two.”

Satou nodded as well, so I guess I was worried for nothing.

Lilio drained a canteen of water and got up to guard the area, but this time Satou stopped her.

“Liza and I can keep watch. You should rest, too, Lilio.”

“Thanks. I guess I’ll take a little breather, then.”

“You too, Zena. Please drop the detection magic and relax. If you’d like to sleep for a while, we’ll wake you up after three hours or so.”

As soon as I laid down on the soft quilt Satou gave me, I immediately fell asleep.

“...Something smells good.”

When we awoke, we were greeted with a feast so magnificent I nearly forgot we were in a labyrinth.

The table was decked out with a basket full of soft white bread, bowls of fresh fruit and vegetables, and heaping piles of thick meat, grilled to perfection, as well as a steaming pot of amber-colored stew.

The scent of spices and simmering sauce set my stomach rumbling.

I tried to suppress the growling so it wouldn’t embarrass me in front of Satou, but my attempts were in vain.

“Did you sleep well? We’ll get back to hunting in half a cycle, so you ought to have a light meal.”

“O-of course.”

Grateful that Satou at least pretended not to hear my stomach rumbling, I sat down next to the already-awake Lilio and Lou and started filling my plate.

“Morning, Zenacchi. You won’t believe how good this stuff is.”

“No kidding. I might even move into the labyrinth if I could eat like this every day.”

I smiled at their exaggerated praise and brought a spoonful of the stew to my lips.

...They weren’t exaggerating.

It was the most delicious thing I’d ever tasted in my life.

The fried fish Lulu made at Satou’s group’s festival was delicious, too, but the meal in front of us surpassed even that.

I dug in ravenously.

Completely forgetting that we would be doing battle again afterward...

Before the hunt resumed, the only people who didn’t need stomach medicine from Satou were Liza, Tama, and Pochi.

This cycle of hunting and resting continued, and when it came time to return from the labyrinth, we were a great deal stronger than when we first entered.

“Sorry, I got two mantises, and I think an alligator gecko might be coming, too.”

Lilio came running back with a soldier mantis on her heels. I didn’t see the second one she mentioned, though.

The room we were fighting in was adjacent to the large cavern where we encountered the hunter mantis on the first day. Light poured in from that cavern through a broken wall, so it was fairly bright, which actually made it harder to see into the dark passage beyond.

“There aren’t any monsters moving along the ceiling, just the two mantises. The second one feels a bit on the large side—it might actually be a war mantis, not a soldier mantis.”

War mantises were one size larger than soldier mantises and about 50 percent stronger in both attack and defense, making them powerful opponents.

At this point, we could defeat one without a problem, but it would be difficult to take one on at the same time as a soldier mantis.

“Understood. We’ll bring down this soldier mantis as quick as we can, then.”

“Graaaah!”

Iona nodded at my report, and Lou bellowed with the “Taunt” skill, drawing the soldier mantis toward her.

“Let’s go, Newbie!”

“Yes, Miss Elina! ‘Twin Pierce!’”

Lady Karina’s two guards used special moves with their short spears.

The spear thrusts destroyed the knee joints of the mantis’s left and right front legs, sending it tumbling toward Lou’s shield.

“Shield Bash!”

Lou countered it with a powerful push of her shield, and the massive mantis was sent tumbling backward.

“Iona!”

Before Lilio even finished calling to her, Iona was already prepared.

Aiming for the soldier mantis’s exposed throat, Iona unleashed her broadsword special attack “Rising Stratos.”

It was an anti-monster move that could only be used against tall opponents, but its piercing power was magnificent.

“Lady Karina, finish it!”

“But of course!”

Tearing through the air with centrifugal force, Karina’s whirling blade plunged down toward the base of the soldier mantis’s neck.

It was similar to the broadsword attack “Windmill Blade,” but according to Satou’s assessment, she didn’t have the actual skill yet.

“...Oh dear, sir.”

“Mew.”

The enormous blade hit the ground with a loud crash, sending fissures through the earth.

“Eek!”

“Wah!”

The impact of Lady Karina’s strike sent a rain of rocks into the air.

Lilio and I quickly activated our Shields to block the debris.

They couldn’t catch the smaller pebbles, but our gauntlets’ Enchant: Physical Protection would protect us against those.

Through the cloud of dust, I saw the soldier mantis pull its bloodied neck away from Iona’s broadsword and wobble to its feet.

Lady Karina’s attack mustn’t have missed completely, because there was blood gushing from the base of its neck, too.

“Zena, the Fire Rod—”

At Iona’s words, I turned my head to the side and started a support magic chant to prepare for the next battle.

“I’ve got you now! Ha!”

Sneaking around behind the soldier mantis, Lilio ran up its back, thrust her dagger deep into the hole left by Iona’s “Rising Stratos,” and slashed out to the side.

Before the mantis could turn around, the strength left its neck, and its head and body slumped forward.

Lilio had used “Neck Chopper,” a special move normally reserved for short swords.

Satou had taught us the basics to these special moves during our break periods.

It turns out Satou isn’t just nimble—he has even more knowledge and

techniques than I ever realized.

“Mew?”

“Sounds wrong, sir.”

As Tama and Pochi carried the corpse of the soldier mantis off the battlefield, they suddenly froze.

“...This could be bad.”

For the first time since we entered the labyrinth, Satou’s voice sounded serious.

And he was looking intently in the direction that Lilio had come running from before.



The war mantis emerged from the entrance to the room.

It was bigger than a soldier mantis and had shield-like arms in addition to the sword arms.

Unlike soldier mantises, which were purely about offense, this strong monster excelled at defense as well.

“What? It’s just a normal war mantis.”

“We should be able to defeat that just fine by now, right?”

“Yes, that would be true...if it were just the war mantis.”

Satou didn’t take his eyes off the creature as he responded.

The monster had stopped with its back to us and was looking around warily.

But my enemy detection magic wasn’t picking up any monsters that would be a threat to a war mantis.

“Spawnhooole?”

“Another monster’s coming, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pointed toward the tunnel.

The sign stone would normally glow red to alert us of a monster’s arrival, but

it was already glowing because of the war mantis, so I hadn't noticed.

"Oh damn!" Lou exclaimed.

What emerged from the spawnhole was another mantis.

But it wasn't a soldier mantis or a war mantis.

It was several times bigger than either of those, with six front arms that were shaped like swords and axes: a sword ax mantis.

"Ah..."

I covered my mouth to keep from letting out a scream.

In the next instant, the sword ax mantis leaped at its prey, faster than a gust of wind.

It wasn't after us, though.

Its target was the war mantis right in front of it.

The bigger mantis swung its ax arms, and the war mantis's shield arms that could block even Iona's broadsword special moves were broken in an instant.

The war mantis tried to counter with a sword arm, but it only whipped past the sword ax mantis's eyes in vain. The difference in their strength and speed was simply too great.

As my hand trembled in fear and despair, Satou squeezed it softly with his own.

His hand was small and slim but still slightly rough to the touch.

"It might be a little too soon for you to take on something like that."

Sounding unenthusiastic, Satou took a single step toward the sword ax mantis.

Immediately, Liza was at his side, and Tama and Pochi were fast to follow.

As I watched their steadfast steps, I felt a twinge of loneliness, like I was being left behind.

It might be beyond me now, but I wanted to stand alongside them someday, too.

“Ah! That scar—it’s the same sword ax mantis from before!”

Lilio pointed at the gigantic mantis.

...From before?

“Really?”

“Yeah, no doubt about it. It’s got a scar where Sir Hence cut it.”

Ah! Now I understand!

A memory of the first time our special force entered the labyrinth flashed across my mind.

A spray of fresh blood, my vision going dark with despair... In that moment, I truly believed I was about to die.

This was the same sword ax mantis that nearly killed me before.

“But this time...”

I had lowered my head, but now I faced forward again.

Before me stood Satou—no longer walking but looking back at me with gentle eyes.

“Do you want to try fighting it?”

I started to respond with a “Yes!” But then I remembered it wasn’t my decision to make alone, and I looked at the rest of my squad.

“Let’s do it, Zenacchi!”

“It knocked me out in a single blow last time, but that’s not gonna happen again.”

“This is a perfect chance to get our revenge on the monster that hurt Zena.”

Everyone looked back at me and nodded.

“Yes, we’ll do it, Satou. I want to fight.”

Satou smiled warmly and nodded at my response.

“But of course, I shall fight, too!”

Lady Karina broke free of her guards and jumped between Satou and me.

"If you insist," Satou responded.



A strange feeling gripped me as I watched the two of them, but it would be good to have Lady Karina fighting with us, since she had yet to receive a single scratch in all our battles.

“Then I’ll let you all take care of that thing. But first...”

Satou assessed the sword ax mantis as he gathered us together.

It didn’t appear to see us as much of a threat; it was devouring the war mantis it had just defeated, crunch by nauseating crunch.

“We’re going to cheat just a little.”

“Cheat?”

“That’s right. Please trade your weapons for these.”

With that, Satou produced a beautiful red sword, an ominous and powerful-looking broadsword, and other impressive weapons from his Magic Bag, and handed them to us.

I already had the staff and short sword that the hero’s attendant Sir Kuro was lending to me, so I was hesitant to accept Satou’s offer.

“Is that a Magic Sword?”

“It is. I’m afraid I can’t give it away, so I’m just lending it to you for now.”

The broadsword was a Magic Sword, too, but the red blade looked more like the real deal, the sort of which there were probably fewer than ten in all of Seiryuu County.

“If you let magic flow into this red sword, it’ll produce fire from the blade, so it’s good for keeping enemies in check. The broadsword is just a basic Magic Sword that cuts well, but it consumes a lot of magic, so be sure not to load it up too much. Lilio, you can use this Fire Rod Gun. It works about the same as a crossbow.”

We all held the weapons, and Satou taught us the trick of channeling the right amount of magic into them.

“One more thing. Lou, over here...”

Satou put his hands on Lou’s shoulders and did something, and her armor got

a little bigger.

“This armor is made from the materials of a monster called a hard newt, so if you charge it with magic, its defense power will increase. Likewise, if you fill the shield with magic...”

“Whoa, the shield’s glowing red... So this thing is magic, too?”

Satou nodded at the surprised Lou.

I started casting support magic on everyone to prepare for battle.

“Red alerrrt?”

“The hungry mantis is looking our way, sir.”

Tama and Pochi gave us a warning.

Luckily, I was already on the last support spell.

“.....■ **Wind Armor Fuugai.**”

A green glow surrounded Lou, indicating that the defense support magic was in effect.

I drank a magic recovery potion and used my “Meditation” skill to recover one-third of the magic I’d lost.

“Obviously the sword and ax arms are dangerous, but if it catches you with the smaller scythes, it’ll try to bite you with paralyzing poison. Everyone besides Lou should try to avoid standing still as much as possible while fighting.”

I made a mental note of Satou’s calm precautions. Someday, it would be my turn to learn more about these monsters and share that information with my comrades.

“...Wha—?”

Lilio exclaimed, and I opened my eyes from meditating to see a white light surrounding us.

“It’s a physical protection enchantment with Practical Magic. It’s only from a scroll, so it won’t be as effective as the real thing, but it’s better than not having it at all.”

Satou explained casually as he held the scroll, but if I remembered right, magic scrolls were even more valuable than potions, and were one-use-only at that.

I might never be able to repay Satou for everything he kept doing for us.

“Master, it’s coming.”

Hearing Liza’s warning, Lou jumped forward.

“Over here, you ugly mantis!”

Her “Taunt” skill directed the sword ax mantis’s hostility toward her.

“I’d start the Air Hammer chant,” Satou suggested to me.

“Whoever strikes first laughs last!”

Lady Karina swung her broadsword around, leaving a trail of red light in the air as she charged toward the mantis’s forelegs.

...Ah.

Her foot got caught on a bump in the rocky ground.

“Take this, if you please!”

Lady Karina just barely managed to save herself from falling and used the momentum to strike the sword ax mantis with a powerful blow of her special attack “Windmill Blade.”

Her broadsword sliced off one of its forelegs in a single slash, then kept moving until it struck the ground with a crash.

“Nice one, Karinaaa!”

“Great recumbery, sir!”

Tama and Pochi cheered Karina on, both waving around an object called a “folding fan.”

Unfortunately for Lady Karina, her momentum sent her tumbling across the ground, leaving her broadsword behind.

As always, she was remarkably tough. I’d be worried about her if it was anyone else, but with Raka’s protection, Lady Karina should be fine.

“That didn’t even slow this thing down?”

Lou hurriedly braced her shield as the sword ax mantis sped forward with a cloud of dust.

I guess losing one of its eight limbs didn’t matter to it much.

But that was fine.

“Now, Zena!”

On Satou’s signal, I spoke the final syllable of the Air Hammer chant I’d been holding, and sent it flying into the sword ax mantis.

It didn’t seem to deal much damage, but it did succeed in slowing the monster down.

“RAAAAAH!”

The mantis’s gaze swiveled toward me, but Lou noticed this and bellowed with the “Taunt” skill again, then rammed her shield into the giant mantis’s torso.

KWWWAAAAMUWA.

The sword ax mantis swung down one of its ax arms, and Lou raised her shield to block it.

Then one of the mantis’s front legs stretched toward Lou’s defenseless torso.

“Watch out!”

Iona struck the leg down just in time with her broadsword.

Unlike Lady Karina’s “Windmill Blade,” this attack didn’t slice it off in one go, but the blade stuck in deep enough to smash its joint.

“Take this as well!”

With a running start, Lady Karina delivered a flying kick to the back of the sword ax mantis’s head, knocking its sword arms off course to stab into the ground in front of Lou.

“Karinaaa, attack naaame?”

“You gotta yell an attack name with a flying kick, sir!”

As Lady Karina landed, Tama and Pochi shouted some advice (I think?).

Karina gasped and started muttering to herself. “‘Magnificent Kick’... No, perhaps ‘Golden Spiral’ would be better...?”

“Lady Karina, look out!”

“...Zena?”

Lady Karina blinked at me in confusion right before the mantis’s rear leg kicked her across the ground.

“Newbie, we’ve gotta cover for Lady Karina’s fumble!”

“Yes, Miss Erina!”

Karina’s two guards drove their short swords into the sword ax mantis’s middle pair of legs.

Their attack knocked the mantis back down just as it was trying to recover its posture.

“.....■■■ **Wind Hold Kaze Shibaru!**”

I used an obstruction spell to slow the monster’s movements.

That should stop it from getting up for a while.

“Lou, the right sword arm’s joint!”

“Got it!”

Iona crushed the left sword arm’s joint with her broadsword, and Lou’s red sword flamed as it cut a gash into the right one.

Since she was blocking an ax arm with her shield at the same time, she wasn’t able to put her full weight into the attack.

“Now!”

Lilio used the Fire Rod Gun to attack the joint Lou had damaged.

The ball of flame from the rifle hit the joint dead on, and the turbulent air of the Wind Hold spread the flames, burning the sword ax mantis’s shell.

GWWAABABBUWWA.

For the first time, the mantis unleashed a pained-sounding howl.

“Iona, Lilio! Don’t worry about me, just hit it with all you’ve got! You too, guard gals!”

Everyone shouted their agreement to Lou’s cry, and a wave of powerful attacks began.

I thought about joining in with Air Hammer or even Heavy Hurricane Hammer, but decided to support Lou with spells like Wind Armor and Wind Hold instead.

The fierce clash of offense and defense continued, until...

“Dammit, it’s flying!”

Once the sword ax mantis flew up into the air, we had limited choices for attacking it.

We had to bring it down somehow, and fast.

“...■ **Turbulence Rankiryuu!**”

I used Wind Magic to create gusts of wind, hindering the mantis’s flight.

Lilio shot another fireball from the Fire Rod Gun, which expanded in the wind and singed the sword ax mantis’s wings.

Even then, the giant insect didn’t come down.

How about this, then?

“...■■■■■ **Fallen Hammer Rakkitsui!**”

I used a downward-pushing air attack to slam the sword ax mantis into the ground.

Before we could run over to it, though, the mantis spread its wings and got ready to take off again.

But then—

““Karinaaa...Kiiiick!””

Karina’s flying kick prevented the sword ax mantis’s escape, leaving flashes of blue and golden light in her wake.

I started my next chant right away.

“Let’s go, Newbie!”

“Yes, Miss Erina—‘Twin Pierce!’”

Karina’s two guards followed close behind her, using their special attack with their short spears.

KWWWAAAAMUWA.

Dark green fog began to spill from the mantis’s mouth.

“It’s a poison attack! Get back!”

“Enough already!”

Lilio’s Fire Rod Gun shot the mantis right in the head, burning the poison fog away at once.

GWWAABABBUWWA.

“Yaaaah! ‘Shield Bash!’”

Lou came charging up and struck the sword ax mantis’s thin neck with her shield, sending it tilting backward.

Iona’s broadsword was fast to follow, piercing the mantis’s jaw with the special move “Rising Stratos.”

If her sword had kept going, the monster’s life likely would’ve ended right there.

But it grabbed Iona’s shoulders with its thin scythe arms, preventing her from doing any more damage.

“Zena—”

I nodded at Satou, and he immediately blew on a wooden flute to signal everyone to fall back.

The strange, shrill sound echoed, and everyone hurriedly backed away.

Pochi and Tama kicked the scythe arms away to set Iona free from their grasp.

Perfect. Now I don’t have to hold back.

I sent all the magic I had built up into my staff to help cast my spell.

“.....■ **Heavy Hurricane Hammer Omosen Yari!**”

I let fly the intermediate Wind Magic spell I'd learned from Satou's spellbook.

A ferocious wind howled through the area, whipping up a tornado of sand.

The spinning hammer of wind struck the sword ax mantis's long torso, easily breaking through the red light of its attempted magic protections, and destroyed the unprotected body beneath the broken carapace.

It cost three times as much magic as Wind Hammer, but the effect was far more powerful.

“Zena!” I heard Satou call. “It's not quite finished yet!”

“■■■■■■■■■■ **Down Burst Kakou Bakuryuu!**”

I used the other spell I recently learned along with Heavy Hurricane Hammer, and the barely surviving sword ax mantis was crushed completely.



“That was remarkable, Lady Zena.”

“Congraaats?”

“Great job, sir!”

Liza, Pochi, and Tama celebrated our victory.

I praised my comrades for their hard work and thanked Liza and the others for their help.

I've been relying on Satou for a while now, but after this training, I think we can fight on our own a bit, too.

Suddenly realizing that I didn't hear Satou's voice, I looked around and saw him gazing at the wall adjacent to the giant cavern, looking grave.

“Everyone, drink some potions and retreat to the back wall, please.”

We all did as he instructed.

I reactivated the enemy detection magic I'd stopped using during the battle against the sword ax mantis.

Tama, Pochi, and Lilio had their ears to the ground, listening for far-off

sounds.

“Comiiing...”

“It’s coming, sir.”

Shortly after Tama and Pochi spoke, I heard screams and the sound of trees falling.

My enemy detection magic was picking up something, too.

Three beastfolk—an ape, a rat, and a weasel—came running in through the hole in the wall.

Just then, the wall next to the hole exploded, sending shards of rock everywhere.

“Wah!”

Lilio and I produced the Shields from our gauntlets to protect everyone.

The transparent Shields broke after a few hits from the debris, but Lou had her giant shield at the ready to protect us after that.

There was a new hole in the wall, and running through it to the ceiling was an arrow thicker than several spears put together.

“It can’t be...”

“Yes, it appears they were trying to lure prey with their tamed monsters, but they failed and ended up attracting the hunter mantis instead.”

Hunter mantis?!

The image of the massive arrow shooting from the fog flashed across my mind.

...Impossible.

We didn’t stand a chance.

That wasn’t the kind of monster any individual could face down.

You would have to have an army, a base, and a ton of supplies and equipment to battle something like that.

Even Satou and his group couldn’t possibly defeat a monster that powerful

without any preparation.

And yet...

“Wait over here, please.”

Satou smiled at us and strode toward the hole.

He barely glanced at the beastfolk who were cowering behind a boulder, never mind saying anything to blame them for bringing the hunter mantis here.

“Us toooo?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Yes, let us support master as best we can.”

Liza, Tama, and Pochi stepped forward to follow Satou, just like when we first encountered the sword ax mantis earlier.

They didn’t seem any more concerned than Satou.

“Th-then so shall I!”

“No, you can’t!”

“She’s right! Please control yourself, Lady Karina!”

Lady Karina tried to follow them, but her two guards stopped her with all their might.

The massive hunter mantis loomed through the giant hole, large enough to make the sword ax mantis look like a child.

...Terrifying.

Just looking at it was enough to make my hands turn cold and the blood drain from my face.

HWUNTZWEEERRR.

The hunter mantis emitted a screech as if to laugh scornfully at us.

It was like a bell tolling the hour of our execution.

In the face of death incarnate, a coward can do nothing but quake in fear.

...No.

I can't fight if I'm frozen with fear.

I clenched my trembling hands into fists and took a deep breath.

My darkened, narrowing vision grew just a bit better.

I slapped my cheeks to get ahold of myself and steady my nerves.

It's all right.

I was still trembling, but I could at least use support magic.

“.....■ **Wind Armor Fuugai.**”

“Thank you, Zena.”

I succeeded in casting the protection of the wind on Satou and the girls.

“Well, now that we've been given a support spell and all, let's bring this thing down.”

Satou drew a stunningly beautiful sword, nodded lightly to Liza and the others, and ran forward.

Sprinting up a giant boulder near the massive hole, Satou leaped nimbly until he was right before the hunter mantis's eyes.

The hunter mantis moved its massive bow arm to the side and used a smaller, short swordlike foreleg to slash at Satou.

“He jumped in midair?”

Satou picked up speed in the air and passed below the hunter mantis's head.

“Neck Slaash’?”

Following Satou like a shadow, Tama flitted past the other side of the massive mantis's neck.

Right after Tama passed, blood spurted from the neck of the hunter mantis.

“‘Achilles Hunter,’ Pochi, sir!”

Pochi sped around, slashing up all six of the hunter mantis's lower legs.

“‘Draco Bus—’”

Running up in front, Liza easily pierced the extra-hard shell of the mantis's

chest with her Magic Spear.

“—No, I suppose that won’t be necessary for a foe like this.”

The red light surrounding Liza’s body faded.

As she withdrew her spear and walked away toward the hole leading to the large cavern, the hunter mantis’s severed head dropped to the ground behind her.

They defeated that insanely powerful monster in a matter of seconds.

The sight before me was so unreal that my mind went blank.

“...Did it notice us?”

As I stared in a daze, I heard Satou’s voice reach my ears.

Looking around, I saw that Satou and company were looking not at the mantis they defeated, but somewhere else.

Their eyes were on the other side of the hole in the wall—the large cavern.

“Spaaawn?”

“That must be the areamaster, sir.”

Gazing into the cavern with Satou, Tama and Pochi murmured something terrifying.

If I remembered right, the areamaster was a powerful monster on par with even an intermediate demon.

It was clear that I didn’t know the limits of Satou and his party’s strength, but without all their members or the proper equipment, I couldn’t imagine how they could defeat something like that.

I fought back my fear and exhaustion, trying to stand up to suggest that we retreat to the safe area.

“Should we go defeat it?”

...Huh?

“No, it’s fine. We don’t need to do anything.”

Shortly after Satou’s words, the cavern blazed with crimson fire.

The heat's going to come this way!

I started chanting the Air Cushion spell as I rushed over to Satou's side.

Before my eyes, a gust of golden wind took form, and held back the raging flames with its arms.

A giant gold bird was floating in the air.

What is that?

“Garuuudaaa?”

“It's Mia's Mr. Spirit, sir!”

Tama and Pochi pointed at the golden creature.

A giant mantis staggered from the flames, blackened and burned.

It was hard to tell from this distance, but it looked like it might even dwarf the hunter mantis.

“Whoopeeee!”

“Hooraay, sir!”

Sparkling flashes of light crashed into the gigantic mantis, and finally the golden creature cut off its own head.

...An intermediate demon-level monster, brought down in seconds?

“Satou, was that...?”

“It's just Arisa and the others. They said they'd come visit and bring us supplies on the last day.”

Satou responded to my question nonchalantly.

That's not what I was asking...

I closed my mouth without asking any further questions.

Satou and his party were clearly on another level, even more than I realized. The sheer difference in our strength threatened to activate my inferiority complex, but I slapped my cheeks to fend off such childish thoughts.

There was something more important that needed to be said right now.

“Satou, thank you.”

I was still a long ways away, but someday I swear I’ll get strong enough to pay Satou back for everything he’s done.

The beastfolk trio who had caused the chaos were apprehended by Lou and some comrades, and Arisa and the others brought them to the explorers’ guild after giving us the supplies they brought.

Thus, our little—or rather, completely unforgettable—adventure of training and developing a hunting ground in the labyrinth came to a close without a single life lost.

When we returned from the labyrinth and got into bed in the barracks that night, the physical and mental exhaustion from the expedition fully set in, and we didn’t wake until sunset the following day.



Mochi Party

Satou here. With all the modern technology these days, I feel like you don't see mochi made with a mallet and mortar outside of neighborhood and school events. It's a lot of work to make it by hand, but I think it tastes that much better after all the effort.

"Wow, Arisa, your cheeks stretch just like mochi."

How could such small cheeks stretch so far?

"Owwie, I faid I'm fowwy..."

I was currently reprimanding Arisa for using Inferno, a highly potent attack spell with a wide range of effects, in a small space. She had come to visit on the last day of our labyrinth expedition with Zena and the others.

Fortunately, the quick-thinking Mia created a wind pseudo-spirit, Garuda, to stop the heat from spreading, but if she hadn't, then everyone could've easily suffered second-degree burns.

"What's mochi, sir?"

"Stretchyyy?"

Tama and Pochi came over, their keen ears twitching with interest.

"Well, you see, mochi is..."

As I explained mochi to the pair, Lulu came over to gently intervene.

"Um, master, I think that might be enough punishment for Arisa..."

Looking down, I saw Arisa's teary-eyed, stretchy-cheeked face still pinched in my hands.

Sorry, I kind of forgot.

We couldn't exactly make mochi in the labyrinth, so we decided to do it when we got back aboveground.

However, since the sticky rice for it had to be soaked overnight, I started making preparations while Zena and the others were resting.

I soaked the fillings for the mochi, like azuki beans and black soybeans, overnight as well. Besides making different kinds of bean paste, I also wanted to make daifuku, so I made sure to use extra beans.

Still, I couldn't believe how thoughtless the mages in this world were. Why was there magic to accelerate the ripening and curing of foods, but not for shortening the amount of time it takes to soak sticky rice and beans?

It would probably be some kind of water spell; I decided to experiment a bit in between preparations.

Mia would probably be annoyed, since she hated memorizing new spells, but as long as I explained that it was for making delicious rice cakes, I was sure she would agree to learn it.

While I was prepping and developing the new spell, I also used the Multitool spell to make some mallets and mortars.

Since I didn't want to disrupt Zena and the others while they slept, I used Return to do all this in the labyrinth vacation house.

There was still plenty of time, so I kept preparing all the ingredients I could think of.

Oh, while I'm at it, maybe I should try making some weirder flavors, too?

In addition to the usual flavors for traditional Japanese sweets, I decided to make cheese and strawberry fillings, among others.

You could never tell what fillings everyone would like.



"All right, shall we get started?"

The morning after we returned from the labyrinth, we began a mochi-making rally in the courtyard of the mansion.

I wanted to invite Zena and friends, too, but since they seemed completely exhausted, I figured I could bring them some freshly made mochi once they woke up.

Karina had been fast asleep, but Tama and Pochi dragged her to breakfast anyway, and she joined the mochi-making as well.

“Flaaat...”

“Squish-squish, sir!”

As soon as I started making the mochi, Tama and Pochi wanted to try it, too. They were already swinging away with their mallets.

Nana was in charge of standing next to the mortar and flipping the mochi.

“Me too! I wanna flip ‘em, too!”

“Sure, just put these on and trade places with Nana.”

I handed some thin gloves to an excited-looking Arisa and Mia.

“Hmm? Why the gloves?”

“If Pochi or Tama hit you with the mallet by mistake, they could shatter your wrists. These gloves are made of the same material as Lulu’s labyrinth equipment, meaning if something hits them, they’ll harden to absorb the impact.”

Even with their power-limiting magic tools, Pochi and Tama had some serious strength behind their mochi mallets.

I could’ve given the girls defense enchantments, but since I didn’t know how many mallet strikes they could withstand, I decided on the unlimited defense of the gloves.

Of course, any serious injuries could be cured in an instant with Healing Magic or potions, but the girls would still be hurt in the meantime, and nobody wants to eat pink mochi that’s been stained with blood.

“All righty, here we go! Make sure you hold back, okay?”

“Aye-aye, sir...”

“Of course, sir! Pochi’s a pro at holding back, sir!”

“Here goes.”

As Arisa and Mia gingerly flipped the mochi, Lulu and I started rolling the

finished dough into balls, filling them with the ingredients I'd prepared beforehand.

Next to the first mochi-pounding crew, Liza, Nana, and Lady Karina started using the spare mallets and mortars to make mochi as well.

At first, Lady Karina wanted to swing the mallet, but she missed the mortar entirely several times and was promptly relegated to flipping duty.

With Raka's protection, she didn't have to worry about getting hurt.

The young maids from the mansion and Lady Karina's attendants helped shape the mochi as well.

“Owie, hot! How do you and the young master handle this, Lady Lulu?”



Sure, it was hot, but not compared to forging molten metal fresh from the fire.

“Hee-hee, just dip your hands in cold water first.”

“Weh, my hands are all sticky...”

“Spread this flower over your hands before you touch it, and it won’t stick.”

I watched warmly as Lulu guided the little maids while we worked.

At first, I was going to have Arisa use some fire-resistance magic on them if it was too much, but they seemed to be all right.

“Pochii!”

“Tamaaa!”

I heard shrieking and turned to find that Pochi had tried to incorporate some strange action into her mochi-making and failed miserably.

From the look of things, the mochi that was stuck to her mallet got wrapped around her body, and now she was covered in it.

Pochi was so panicked that she even forgot to say “sir.”

“Owie, owie, hot mochiiii!”

“Arisa!”

Nearby, Arisa had ended up with some stretched mochi on her head and was writhing on the ground. In her alarm, she had forgotten to use heat-resistance magic on herself.

Before I could do anything, Lulu went over to deal with it, murmuring, “Now, now. There, there” like a beleaguered housewife.

A potion healed the light burns, and Lulu’s Everyday Magic cleaned up the mess, but Pochi and Arisa got a firm scolding from Liza—Pochi for messing around while handling food, and Arisa for egging her on.

“Whew, that was rough.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t worry, Pochi, it was my fault, too. Come on, cheer up so we can enjoy

some mochi!"

Pochi seemed dejected about her blunder, but Arisa comforted her.

Meanwhile, I separated the huge amount of mochi we'd made into plain, sweet, savory, and colored varieties.

"Did we make a bit too much?"

"No such thing! We can always share it with the kids at the orphanage and the explorers' school. Oh, and those underground folks, as thanks for the brooch."

"Good idea."

Arisa pointed at the soul shell garland on her chest.

Given to me by the "Bone Lord" Mukuro, who lived in the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth, this artifact was meant to preserve a reincarnation's soul vessel to prevent them from turning into a demon lord by using their Unique Skills too much.

He and my other new friends in the Lower Stratum were fellow reincarnations from Japan, so they would no doubt be excited to eat mochi again.

"Anyway, let's eat before they get cold! It's not often you get to eat freshly made mochi."

With that declaration from Arisa, the mochi party began.

"Mmm! Fresh mochi really is the best."

"Stretchyyy?"

"M-Mr. Mochi is so strong, sir. Is stuck to da top of my mouf, sir."

Tama stretched her mochi with all her might, while Pochi struggled to pull hers off the roof of her mouth.

"It's a mite difficult to eat, but absolutely delicious!"

"Yummy."

Karina and some of the younger kids were enjoying the fresh plain mochi.

"Oh yeah! We should grill some of this mochi!"

Arisa waved her mochi around dramatically.

“Liza’s off getting the tools for that right now,” I assured her.

“Master, there are no chick-shaped mochi, I report.”

“Maybe not, but this mochi here has a cute filling inside.”

Lulu handed Nana one of the filled mochi she had just finished making.

Nana gazed at it for a moment, then took a big bite.

“The yellow star shapes inside are cute and delicious, I report.”

Evidently pleased, she started popping them into her mouth one after another.

Noticing this, the younger kids started reaching for the filled mochi, too.

“This one’s got sweet bean paste, sir!”

“The powdered mochi’s tasty, toooo?”

“Mmm, honey mochi. Yummy.”

“Aah, we can’t fill up too much before the grilled mochi—wait, honey?!”

Arisa took a big bite from the mochi, her eyes widening.

Honey oozed from the mochi after the first bite. When you ate them together, the mochi and honey mixed surprisingly well, I thought. It was a little too sweet, though, so one was more than enough for me.

“This one’s got pork belly, sir!”

“Teriyaki chickennn?”

“Mmm, custard.”

“The cheese flavor is delicious as well!”

Overall, everyone seemed to be enjoying the mochi.

Hmm? Arisa was slumped on the ground in an orz-like pose.

“What’s the matter? Do you have heartburn or something?”

“Y-you’re corrupting traditional Japanese culture...”

Oh, don't be silly.

Cuisine is supposed to evolve over time, you know.

"Well, since you're so concerned with preserving traditions, you'll like this part."

I pointed at the grill-like magic tool and the wire mesh that Liza had brought over.

Making a miraculous recovery, Arisa immediately started lining up mochi to grill on the wire mesh.

"It's not really puffing up, is it?"

"Probably since it's so fresh."

I experimented a bit to see if we could get it to puff up like premade mochi by drying out the surface with magic, putting little cuts in the surface, and other hacks.

"The mochi's alive, sir!"

"Oh dear, how terribly creepy."

"Puffyyy?"

"Slime?"

The little kids and Miss Karina couldn't take their eyes off the puffing-up mochi on the wire mesh. I'm glad I worked so hard on that.

Though Liza was keeping a straight face, she was watching the mochi closely as well.

It's probably about done now, right?

I handed Arisa a dish with some sweetened soy sauce.

"Mmmph. This is totally the best way to eat mochi!"

But Arisa and I seemed to be the only ones who appreciated the traditional grilled mochi with sweet soy sauce or wrapped in seaweed. Everyone else seemed more interested in the weird new flavors I made mostly as a joke.

"Cheese topping filled with meat saaauce?"

“Professor Hamburg was hiding in this mochi, sir!”

“Caramel.”

I enjoyed some kinako mochi covered in sweet soy flour as I watched everyone have fun.

“This teriyaki mayo flavor is spectacular. When one chews it, the flavor of the teriyaki transfers to the mochi, as if one is eating an unusual kind of meat...”

It was especially entertaining to watch Liza give a lengthy report on the cuisine while Pochi and Tama nodded along wisely.

Oh, I know.

Since Nana wanted me to make yellow chick-shaped mochi next time, I decided to try making *kusa* mochi and *sunda* mochi, too, with mugwort leaves and green soybeans.

Some sakura mochi and leaf-wrapped *kashiwa* mochi might be nice for spring, too.

“I finished the red bean soup.”

Lulu came from the kitchen with a pot full of red bean soup, followed by an entourage of maids carrying bowls and spoons.

“Aah, the one-two punch of salty-sweet mochi and red bean soup is dangerous! If we had some bitter tea to go with it all, you could pull off an endless combo! That much happiness is downright scary!”

“Mochi’s scaryyy?”

“Red bean soup’s scary, too, sir!”

As the younger kids joked around like manga characters and smacked their lips, I gave some fresh mochi to Lulu and the maids.

While enjoying the red bean soup, I insisted that Miss Miteruna try some, despite her reluctance, and watched the littlest maids’ eyes widen as they ate the sweet mochi Lulu gave them.

“Aah, that was delish...” Arisa looked as round and soft as mochi as she patted her belly in satisfaction. “Let’s make some for New Year’s, and some *osechi*,

too!"

"I don't know the recipe for those dishes."

I could probably make something that at least looked similar to *osechi*, the traditional foods cooked for New Year's in Japan, but I had never made it myself, so I didn't think I'd be able to recreate the taste.

I was always great at taste-testing, though, when my mother and grandmother made the food.

"Master, I will be back, I bravely declare."

"I'll heeelp?"

"Pochi will deliver happiness, sir."

After the party, Nana, Tama, and Pochi set off to the orphanage to bring them some big baskets of mochi. By now, they were probably covered in mochi and children.

Miss Miteruna and the maids left to bring some to the explorers' school.

I took one basket to deliver to Zena and her squad at the barracks.

By some unexpected chance, many of my friends and acquaintances in Labyrinth City heard about the mochi party, so I ended up needing to deliver some to them, too.

When the little maids and the teachers at the orphanage learned the price of sticky rice in Labyrinth City, they turned pale and nearly fainted dead away...

It was supercheap to buy in the old capital, okay? I had no idea.

Return to the Lower Stratum

Satou here. Shocking truths aren't just revealed by mass media, like news channels and magazines. Sometimes you might learn about one in the middle of a casual conversation.

“Ban, I brought the things you asked for.”

Late that night after the mochi party, I went alone to the Eternal Night Castle in the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth.

We were leaving for the royal capital the next day, so I wanted to deliver Zena’s letter and the goods I promised before I forgot.

I would’ve liked to bring the kids, too, but I didn’t want them to experience any negative effects with their lack of miasma resistance, so I decided to hold off until I could develop some anti-miasma magic tools and spells, like miasma masks or miasma guards.

There were plenty of spells for purifying miasma, but none of my spellbooks contained a single spell for resisting it, for some reason.

“Kuro, eh? You’ve returned sooner than expected.”

“Yes, and I brought you a letter, too.”

The vampire progenitor Ban, a reincarnation and lord of the Eternal Night Castle, came out to welcome me. I handed him the letter from Zena.

“A letter? ...Ah, it’s from the girl I assisted before, is it? What a conscientious lass.”

The vampire lord opened the seal and murmured to himself as he read its contents.

“So first you came to the Lower Stratum to rescue her, and now you even act as her personal mail carrier. Is that girl your sweetheart, Kuro?”

“No, she’s a very dear friend, but not my sweetheart.”

My heart belongs only to Miss Aaze.

“Is that right? What a shame. The wives would have loved to gossip about that.”

The vampire lord folded up the letter and put it away in his Item Box.

“And this wine is a thank-you from her, too.”

I handed over the bottle of Lessau’s Lifeblood red wine.

“A gracious gift indeed.”

Ban was all smiles.

This guy really likes that particular wine, huh?

“Is this the only bottle of Lessau’s Lifeblood you have for now?”

“From her, yes. But I did get the five casks you asked for. I’ll bring them to your wine cellar later.”

I searched far and wide, but aside from the one bottle I got through the merchants’ guild, I wasn’t able to find any around the royal capital or the neighboring Zetts County. I actually ended up going to the vineyard in Lessau County to buy them straight from the source.

Just as I’d heard, Lessau County was the site of some terrible destruction; its capital had become a ruin overrun with monsters, and many of the villages nearby were abandoned, too.

Even in the village where the vineyard was, citizens were debating whether to abandon their land because some monsters had built a nest nearby.

I wanted them to keep regularly producing Lessau’s Lifeblood wine there, so I went out as Kuro to destroy the offending monsters and their nest, used Earth Magic to build sturdy walls around the village and their vineyards, and even set them up with six level-30 golems to defend them from enemy attacks.

The golems should be able to take down any ordinary monsters or even lesser demons without a problem.

“My wives can carry the casks for you.”

I took the casks from my Item Box and placed them in the space the head handmaiden indicated.

“Should I leave the other gifts here, too?”

“Very well.”

While I was getting the vampire lord’s permission, the handmaidens laid out thick waterproof cloths on the tables, so I placed the gifts for the vampiresses and handmaidens there.

“Lord Ban, won’t you please make me a Nippon katana with this mithril?”

“This is a splendid ingot indeed. Yes, I’ll be able to make a fine blade with that.”

When I overheard one of the vampiresses making a request to the vampire lord, my hand froze in the middle of taking out the gifts.

“That’s right... You’re a swordsmith, aren’t you, Ban?”

“Indeed, it took me some three hundred years to learn to make a proper blade... But how do you know that, Kuro?”

“I just remembered that a katana I once found in a treasure chest in the labyrinth said it was created by Ban.”

I didn’t have the sword on hand at the moment, since I’d given it to Tama.

“Would I be able to observe your process of making a katana for future reference, if you don’t mind?”

I had tried to make a Japanese-style katana before, but it didn’t go all that well.

While I managed to make blades that bore a decent resemblance to a katana, they broke easily, and their attack power was far lower than my Magic Swords and fairy sword.

Basically, I was a long way off from making the “unbreakable, unbendable, unbeatably sharp” katana that are so often depicted in light novels and manga.

“Very well. However, I shall need some time to prepare the furnace.”

“I can wait, of course. By the way, that ingot is pure mithril without any

special ingredients. Will that work all right?"

"Indeed. My furnace is of a special make that utilizes Blood Magic, so in fact a pure ingot is ideal."

That works out, then.

Feeling pleased that I had lucked into a swordsmithing lesson, I resumed laying out the presents.

"These are for the handmaidens."

I handed out some things I thought they would like, including sewing kits and some light reading.

"Are you certain?"

"Of course."

"I call this book here."

"I'll take these coral earrings!"

"Girls! You can pick out your baubles later! You're disrupting Lord Ban and his guest!"

"""Yes, Mistress Fedoralka!""""

The vampire lord's trusted elderly head handmaiden scolded the younger girls as they loudly scrabbled over the gifts.

Evidently, the progenitor had asked the head handmaiden many times if she would like to become a vampire, but she insisted on remaining human.

As all this unfolded, a lovely young woman arrived from deeper within the castle: Yuika.

There were two small horns on the goblin girl's pale forehead. She was a reincarnation like Ban and possessed the most Unique Skills of anyone I knew.

"Hello there, Kuro."

"Hi, Yuika."

Yuika's pretty frilled dress suited her well.

"I brought some fresh mochi and an assortment of spices—"

“Mochi?! Oh, it’s been so long! It’s so difficult to get sticky rice here.”

Yuika was usually pretty reserved, but she seemed so excited that there was a rare grin on her face.

“I brought ingredients for sushi and sashimi, too.”

“Sushi, eh? How long it’s been. Maze bass, is it? Or the sakura salmon from the royal capital, perhaps?”

“No, it’s tuna from—”

““TUNA?!”” Ban and Yuika exclaimed.

Yuika’s expression had changed to that of Yuika Number 3. Her appetite must have gotten the best of her.

Since Yuika had multiple past personalities due to one of her Unique Skills, her personalities sometimes switched periodically like this.

The quiet Yuika, who had been there moments before, was Yuika Number 1; this was clearly the face of Yuika Number 3, the original Yuika, whose decidedly edgelord full name was Foilunis la Bellefille, the Beauty in Black.

“How very nostalgic indeed. Some eight hundred years ago, I recall I set out to the southern seas in search of tuna myself.”

“Ah, yes. We had difficulties with the kraken and the skeleton aboard that ghost ship at the time, so we only managed to hunt the likes of skipjack and sharks.”

I had a feeling I knew what “ghost ship” Yuika Number 3 was talking about.

Most likely, they had encountered the Skeleton King, who tried to revive the legendary floating island of Lalakie.

“You couldn’t find it with your Unique Skills, Foilunis?”

Yuika Number 3 hated being called Yuika, so I referred to her with her edgelord name instead.

“Even Unique Skills are not all-powerful, you know. The ocean is far too large.”

I guess my Map Reading ability is outrageous even compared to Yuika’s

Unique Skills, then.

“Well then, if there is tuna to be had, we must summon Mukuro and Yoroi as well.”

“They would be very cross if we didn’t.”

The progenitor vampire sent his vampiresses to collect the pair.

I gave into the impatient demands of Yuika Number 3 and produced a bit of mochi and sushi to hold us over, then went to see Ban’s swordsmithing in the forge that the vampiress who wanted the katana had prepared.

“The equipment isn’t that different from the tools of an ordinary forge.”

“I am remiss to agree with the descriptor of ‘ordinary,’ but yes, the equipment is nothing too unusual. The only difference might be that we use powdered fire stones and Firelight Pearls to improve the overall firepower.”

The vampire lord touched some red and crimson powders set out next to the forge, inspecting the heat of the furnace by sight.

He picked up a pinch of powder and tossed it inside, and the flames roared all the more.

“That ought to do it.”

Satisfied with the heat level, the vampire took the mithril ingot, cut it into three parts with a blade made from Blood Magic, and put one of the three pieces into the furnace using a pair of tongs.

“Up until this point, the process is identical to any sort of forging.”

Then he used a sharp fingernail to make a small cut in his wrist.



Blood seeped from the cut and slithered toward the red-hot mithril like a living thing, producing red steam.

Once the steam settled, there was a mysterious pattern on the surface of the mithril.

“This cursed seal will make the blade stronger.”

The vampire lord swung his smithing hammer.

Any forging process would produce red sparks, but the strange black haze that rose at the same time was definitely unusual.

At first, a vampiress swung the other hammer in alternation with Ban, but they let me take over partway through.

The process was a repetition of heating, imbuing the curse seal, and tempering the metal.

“This back-and-forth tempering process is part of the original method of swordsmithing as well. Traditionally, it is meant to remove impurities and even out the amount of carbon, but in our case we use it to create magic circuits, or perhaps one would say curse seal circuits.”

While we alternated swinging the hammers, the vampire lord explained the reasoning behind each step, as well as how it differed from ordinary smithing, which was incredibly helpful.

“This will be the ‘inner iron.’”

He put aside the mithril we’d been working on, which was now jet black, and we set to work on the other two.

One would be the extra-hardened “outer iron,” while the other was what was called the “edge iron,” its strength and viscosity carefully refined.

Ban explained that normally this balance was achieved using carbon, but in the vampires’ forges they were able to adjust that using the curse seals.

“Finally, we sandwich the edge iron between the inner and outer iron, and fuse them together.”

We weren’t actually working with iron at present, but the vampire lord didn’t

seem particularly bothered about the distinction, so I let it slide.

The clump of black mithril slowly began to take the familiar shape of a katana.

“That should be sufficient for the lengthening. I will carry out the rest on my own, but you ought to observe closely, Kuro.”

The progenitor vampire used Blood Magic to keep layering on curse seals as he hammered the black mithril blade into a katana.

Ripple-like patterns began to appear near the edges.

When he finished making the tip, it was time for the firing process I’d so often seen in movies and swordsmithing videos, but even that was accomplished by passing the blade through a vortex of blood in midair. With that fantastical, or rather vampirical, process, the Japanese-style magic katana was complete.



“Aah, so this is where you’ve been hiding out.”

“Where’s the tuna? Didn’t eat it all on us already, did you?”

Mukuro and Yoroi arrived in the forge just as we were putting the finishing touches on the katana.

“Aww, man, Lord Ban’s already finished his katana forging? But he looks so cool and serious when he’s working in the forge...”

Semery was with them, too.

“What, you were making a katana for the kid here?”

“No, this is for me.”

The vampiress who requested it held the freshly finished sword to her chest.

Looking with “Miasma Vision,” I saw a black aura creeping around the vampiress’s body, as if caressing her, which was a little weirdly sexual.

“I have dubbed it the ‘Blade of the Black Fog.’ Use it with care.”

“Yes, Lord Ban!”

The vampiress thanked Ban and skipped away to make a cover for the hilt.

“Aww maaan...” Semery watched her go, grumbling with jealousy.

“Did you really get anything out of watching Ban’s swordsmithing?”

“I don’t appreciate your tone.”

The vampire lord scowled at Yoroi.

“I can’t use Blood Magic, of course, but he taught me a great deal about smithing.”

I learned a great deal, since I’ve been making a lot of things up based on what I remember seeing in manga so far.

Though I tried touching it a little when Ban used Blood Magic, I wasn’t able to acquire the ability. According to him, it was a sort of fusion between Dark Magic and Water Magic, among others.

“I’m looking forward to putting it all into practice when I go back to the surface.”

“Indeed. Do come and visit when you’ve a finished sword to show me.”

Once I got a bit better at making them, maybe I could create a ninja sword for Tama.

“Forget that crap. Time for tuna sashimi and sushi.”

Mukuro pushed us along out of the forge, and I ended up becoming the official sushi chef in a newly set up banquet space on the terrace.

It was a little too much to do on my own, so the chefs of the Eternal Night Castle helped me.

“Uho-ho-ho, this *ootoro* is melting in my mouth.”

“Aah, this is perfection. You made some damned fine wasabi, too.”

“The flounder and sea bream sashimi are delicious, too.”

“Kuro, no wasabi on mine, please.”

I smiled back at Yoroi, Mukuro, and Ban as they smacked their lips with pleasure, and served up the request of Yuika Number 3.

But while the reincarnations gave the feast a warm reception...

“Even if this is Lord Ban’s preference, I would prefer not to partake of such

things..."

"I don't know about this."

"....."

...the vampiresses gave the sushi and sashimi a wide berth.

"Eating fish raw like animals? That's far too disgusting for me."

"Semery?"

"Are you saying Lord Ban is an animal?"

"...Prepare to eat those words."

As soon as Semery uttered a criticism of the vampire lord, the other vampiresses all turned on her and dragged her away from the terrace with multiple Blood Whips.

I'm guessing they were just using her as an excuse to get away from the strong smell of fish and vinegared rice.

Shirahime in particular was clutching a handkerchief to her face the whole time.

"Is this soy sauce-boiled beef?"

"Close, but it's whale, not beef."

"Oh, whale, is it? How very nostalg—"

When I answered Mukuro's question while working on the wasabi-free tuna roll for Yuika Number 3, he suddenly froze mid-sentence.

"...Did you say *whale*?"

"Yep. I have tons of it, if you'd like some."

We've been eating it like crazy for a while now, but we still haven't even come close to finishing the first whale.

I guess that's to be expected with a thousand-foot-long gigantic whale.

"What do you mean, 'yep'?" Mukuro imitated my tone. "By whale, you don't mean the giant monster fish Tobkezerra, do you?"

“That’s right. Why? Do you not like monster meat?”

“Mukuro, are you really still surprised? Or did you forget that this is the crazy bastard who casually took down Doghead?”

“Right, right...”

That was a somewhat rude reaction.

“Sure, gimme some whale meat. I’ll owe you a favor for it, yeah? If you ever have problems with the gods, come see me.”

“I certainly will, thank you.”

That seemed like a great deal to offer for a cut of my nearly endless supply of whale meat.

The vampire lord gave me some rare materials from the Endless Night Castle, like blood pearls and blood stones, Yoroi offered me one of the macho statues from his base, and Yuika agreed to set up a barrier like the castle’s around my labyrinth vacation home and hot springs.

I hate to say it, but I didn’t really need what Yoroi wanted to give me.

“By the way, is there not any wrapped *makizushi*?”

“I can make cucumber maki, but that’s about it.”

“What about *tekkamaki*?”

“I just want regular *makizushi*.”

By “regular,” Yuika Number 3 was evidently referring to *futomaki*, a thickly rolled *makizushi*, with dried gourd (*kanpyou*).

“Sorry, but I don’t have any freeze-dried tofu or dried gourd.”

“There’s freeze-dried tofu in Ban’s castle.”

Oh?

I had acquired some regular tofu in the old capital, but I couldn’t figure out how to make the freeze-dried version, *koya tofu*.

The Eternal Night Castle crew who was helping me cook agreed to teach me the recipe; I decided to make it right away once I got back to the surface and

give some to Arisa.

“Besides...”

Just then, the vampire lord suddenly dropped a huge revelation on me like a bomb.

“We found gourds for making *kanpyou* when we were looking for tomatoes.”

What?!

I used “Warp” to get up close to Ban and ask him where he found it.

Very politely, of course.

“Where did you find it?! Spit it out!”

“Kuro, back down, will you! I have no interest in male-on-male romance!”

He seemed reluctant to share his information; maybe he’d had a difficult time finding it.

It seems rude to push someone’s face away when they’re just politely asking you a question, though.

“Wait. I don’t have a map, but it should be simple enough to find.”

“So where is it?”

If he could narrow down the location for me a bit, I should be able to track it down using my Map Search function.

I’ll finally be able to eat the makizushi I so often had for lunch again!

“You know the great river in the east of the Shiga Kingdom, yes?”

“Of course.”

I doubt anyone in the Shiga Kingdom would be unfamiliar with the river that runs next to the old capital.

“First, you must travel upstream to the source.”

Even farther north than Gururian City, huh?

“If you cross the mountains beyond there and head north-northwest...”

Wait, north-northwest...?

"You will find the great forest village where the forest giants dwell. It grows freely in their domain."

Wait...that's the Mountain-Tree Village!

Who would have thought I could find *kanpyou* gourds in the giants' village, where I had already traveled before?

"Those giants are a difficult lot, however. They crushed quite a few of the blaze wolves and ghouls I spawned for my exploration."

The progenitor offered to help me if I intended to invade their territory.

"That's all right, thank you. I might have an idea."

I had friends in the forest giants' village. Even if the village chief Stonehammer didn't know where to find them, I could probably ask the little giant leader Lank and the other villagers to track down the gourds.

I wanted to head there right away, but we were leaving for the royal capital the next day, so it was probably best to wait until we did some sightseeing there and got settled down a bit.

"I'll definitely bring some next time I visit."

"I look forward to it."

I promised Yuika I would make her the best *makizushi* ever.



"Wow, so the Celivera Labyrinth has been around for that long?"

"Which is precisely why demon lords like Doghead so often come to accumulate power here."

While we ate the mochi I'd brought as dessert, the reincarnations who lived in the Lower Stratum told me about how this was the oldest labyrinth on the continent.

"Most demon lords only live one life, but a few of the famous ones like Doghead, the Scorpion Lord, the Bug Lord, and the Tempestuous Lord have been revived and have come back on several occasions."

They explained that revived demon lords reappeared in this world as spirit

bodies, and manifested from there into physical bodies by using deposits of thick miasma.

“So these past thousand years, heroes come to investigate just about once a generation.”

“Although most of them don’t come all the way down here.”

“It’s all well and good when a hero mistakes us for demon lords and comes to attack us, since that can be entertaining, but I wish they wouldn’t trample the garden so with their dirty boots.”

Come to think of it, even in Labyrinth City, the explorers’ guild adviser, Miss Sebelkeya, was under the mistaken impression that the Bone Lord, the Abyss Blood Lord, the Steel Lord, and the little ogre princess were all demon lords as well.

I suspected these names actually referred to Mukuro, Ban, Yoroi, and Yuika, respectively.

“There do seem to be legends about you on the surface.”

“...Legends? Are they horror stories, or romance, perhaps?”

“It’s a story about the ancestral king Yamato called ‘The Depths of Celivera.’”

“Ah, that old gossip rag.”

“As if a carefree lazybones like that could ‘exorcise’ Mukuro and me...”

The ancestral king Yamato was a “lazybones.”

“So is the part about fighting the Ogre King made-up, too?”

“Hm? All I did was teach Yamato how to make miso and soy sauce.”

What a shocking reveal!

So it was Yuika who was responsible for passing miso and soy sauce on to the Shiga Kingdom.

“Oh, that reminds me, Kuro. Did you get an elixir from Ban?”

Yoroi, who had been munching away on all kinds of mochi and drinking Shigan sake while the rest of us spoke, suddenly brought up a new topic.

“Oh, do you need elixirs?” asked Ban. “I have several in the basement storage cellar. Go on and take what you need.”

“No, I couldn’t accept something so valuable.”

I should be able to mass-produce them in another three months or so, and in the meantime I had enough for Arisa, who would need them the most.

“It’s quite all right. I hunt the floormasters of the Lower Stratum on a regular basis, so I acquire a new elixir every few years or so.”

“You hunt them regularly?”

“I have to do it every year, or Mukuro grows worried.”

“About what?”

Maybe it’s like worrying you’ll miss out if you don’t hunt a rare monster whenever you see one?

“His bride is very precious to him.”

“Shaddup!”

Mukuro scowled at the progenitor vampire’s words.

I wasn’t sure I understood what Mukuro’s concern for his wife had to do with regularly hunting floormasters.

“What is she like?”

Since she’s Mukuro’s wife, maybe she’s a mummy queen?

“Mukuro’s wife, you mean? She’s the DM, duh.”

Yoroi gave an unexpected answer.

“DM? You mean the dungeon master?”

“Yeah, that’s right. A guy like you must’ve beaten a floormaster or two by now, yeah? You know the part in the summoning speech that goes, ‘*Soon I shall come to thee with three proofs in hand!*’? Well, that ‘thee’ refers to the dungeon master. S’why we always hunt the Lower Stratum’s floormaster, so no one can collect all three proofs and put the DM in danger.”

Wow, his wife is the dungeon master? That’s impressive.

I was definitely a little curious how that particular romance began.

Oh, wait a minute...

“Is there any chance you’d be able to get a ‘Chant’ Gift Orb, then?”

If I could get my hands on that, I could use magic a lot more freely.

“...Oh dear.”

“You moron.”

“Drop it, kid.”

Lord Ban, Mukuro, and Yoroi all recoiled at once.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“You dumbass. My wife is a rebellious soul, y’know. If you say something like that...”

“Ho-ho-ho, then you’ll definitely never get it.”

What? That’s so mean.

“It’s what they call a ‘desire sensor.’”

No, I think that’s something else.

“Don’t you have an orb or two left in your treasure house, Ban?”

“I’m afraid not. I give them out to any wives or handmaidens who want them.”

Yoroi got my hopes up for a second, but Ban promptly shot them down.

Hmm...

“Is there any way I could meet her to ask for it myself? I would be willing to pay any price, of course.”

“Any price, eh...?”

Mukuro’s face was dour.

“Knowing Mukuro’s wife, she might very well ask you to hunt down a god as payment.”

“Oh, for sure. She hates the gods.”

“Uho-ho-ho, I could see her saying that.”

For real...?

Whether I could actually defeat a god or not, I don’t think I’d be able to kill someone I have nothing against just to get something I want.

“Come on, don’t let it getcha down.”

Yoroi smacked my back to cheer me up.

Since his hands are made of metal, it was pretty painful.

“Yuika, can she even see into Ban’s castle?”

I looked up despite myself when I heard Mukuro’s question.

If her barrier was strong enough to interfere with my Space Magic, maybe it could defend against the prying eyes of the dungeon master, too.

Feeling a little hopeful, I looked at Yuika... But she only looked back at me with a forlorn expression.

Evidently, she’d turned back into the quiet Yuika Number 1.

“I’m not so sure... I’ll put the original back in charge.”

Yuika Number 1 switched with Yuika Number 3, the original.

“The only place she can’t see into is Mukuro’s secret base, fools. It would be cruel to leave her out, wouldn’t it?” Then she put a hand to her chest and recited, “Bullying is bad, no matter what.”

At any rate, it sounded like my chances of finding a “Chant” orb in this labyrinth were virtually nonexistent.

“Bah, it only takes ten years or so to learn it.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“It is as my lord says. Aside from those who quit their training partway through, all the handmaidens here have managed to learn it in five years or so, eight at the most.”

After receiving a pointed glance from Ban, the head handmaiden, Miss Fedoralka, chimed in to reassure me.

“All right. I’ll keep up my ‘Chant’ training.”

I was already practicing with the orphanage kids, so maybe it would be shameful for an adult like me to take the easy way out by finding a Gift Orb for it anyway.

Eventually, I said my farewells to my kindly friends in the Lower Stratum and returned to the surface.

Departure

Satou here. There are plenty of scenes in fiction where a character says, “If I win, you have to go out with me!” and such, but I’ve never once seen that happen in real life. For one thing, as soon as you make that challenge, you’re already confessing your feelings.

“Not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle in my clothes—I guess that should do it?”

Once I returned from the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum to my study in the mansion, I changed into my noble’s ceremonial suit for the airship flight to the royal capital.

As I stepped into the hallway, I heard some commotion from the direction of the entrance hall. I headed over, and one of the young maids noticed me and came pitter-pattering over at top speed.

“Young master! It’s an airy-ship! An airy-ship! It flies!”

“An airship, you mean?”

“Yeah, that, right! It’s amazing, right?!”

Well, if it didn’t fly, it wouldn’t be an airship.

The little maid took me by the hand and dragged me over to the window to see the “airy-ship.”

A very large airship was hovering above the labyrinth army’s base. It was the Airship Number 1 that I had given to the government as Nanashi.

We would be going to the royal capital aboard that airship, along with many others, including Baronet Jelil and his Red Dragon’s Roar party, who had defeated the Middle Stratum floormaster.

“Wowie, it’s so big, right?! You’re going to be riding that airship, right?! That’s amazing! Right!”

An airship came to Labyrinth City from the royal capital once a month, so I wasn't sure why she was so excited, but evidently it was because someone she knew would be boarding this one.

"That's right."

I patted the little maid's head and looked up at the airship with her.

The side of the airship's armor bore the Shiga Kingdom's royal crest, and above the bridge jutting out near the prow was a display of small crests indicating the passengers. Thanks to the heraldry lessons Baron Muno's secretary, Yuyurina, pummeled into me when I gained a title, I knew the flag belonged to Vistall Duchy.

If I remembered correctly, the duke there was the nephew to General Erthal of Labyrinth City army.

I'd heard that the Vistall Duchy didn't get along well with the Ougoch Duchy. As a representative of Muno Barony, neighbor to the Ougoch Duchy, I hoped they wouldn't try to get involved with me out of boredom on the trip...

But surely someone as important as a duke wouldn't bother getting involved with a mere hereditary knight like me.

"Girls, you haven't finished your duties for the morning yet. Hurry up and get back to work!"

As soon as the head maid, Miss Miteruna, appeared in the entrance hall and scolded them, the little maids scattered like baby spiders to get back to work.

"Good morning, young master."

"Good morning."

I wonder if everyone else is done changing yet?

"Are the others ready?"

"Yes, we've finished helping them all get dressed."

As if on cue, the door at the top of the atrium stairs burst open, and everyone peeked out, with Arisa in the lead. They were all dressed in their finest clothes.

"Ta-daaa! Well? Pretty great, right?"

Arisa twirled around in place.

The sleeves of her cocktail dress spread out beautifully, then settled as she struck a pose. Her soul shell garland brooch glittered on her chest.

“Yes, it’s a wonderful outfit.”

“Honestly! Compliment your adorable Arisa, not the clothes!” Arisa huffed and puffed.

“You’re cute, too, of course,” I assured her.

“Pochi’s next, sir!”

“Tama too?”

Tama and Pochi trotted down the steps, then struck their signature poses to wait for my approval.

“Very adorable, you two.”

“Yaaay!”

“Sir!”

Tama and Pochi were wearing pink and lemon yellow dresses, respectively.

They were supercute, although their military-esque poses didn’t quite seem to match their outfits.

“Satou.”

Mia was wearing a dress lavishly decorated with chartreuse green lace.

She was debating the night before about whether to wear a miko-esque outfit like the kind Miss Aaze wore in the tradition of the elves, but she seemed to have chosen a western-style dress to match the other girls.

“You look like a princess, too, Mia.”

“Mm.”

Mia’s response was short, but her rosy cheeks indicated that she was pleased.

“Master, top of the morning to you, I declare.”

“Good morning.”

Nana was wearing a modest blue dress that covered her chest.

The outfit I originally designed for her was formidable enough to appear on a magazine cover, but between Mia's complaints and Arisa's careful supervision, this was how the final product looked.

"I am prepared to hear your praise, master, I invite."

"You look even more beautiful than usual today."

It was hard to tell, since Nana's expression rarely changed, but this was definitely her way of expressing pride and excitement.

She must be really looking forward to the trip to the royal capital.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, master."

Lulu was wearing a modest, mostly white dress.

She had tried to pick a maid outfit the day before, but I suggested that she choose something more stylish for our airship journey.

"Good morning, master."

Finally, Liza emerged in her battle gear, decked out in armor like a knight.

I tried several times to convince her to wear a dress, but she insisted that she wanted to wear her armor, as befitting a mithril-badge explorer.

Since it was rare for Liza to express such a strong preference of her own, I decided to let her do as she pleased.

"Arisa, is this all your luggage?"

"Yessirree!"

Arisa gave an antiquated response.

Our dummy luggage consisted of three suitcase-style travel bags and two armor cases. The real luggage was in everyone's Fairy Packs, Arisa's Item Box, and the storage space created by Arisa's Space Magic spell, Garage.

"Let's get going, then."

The young maids opened the doors for us, and we stepped outside.

Two horse-drawn carriages were already waiting out front, and the maids,

kids from the orphanage, and explorers' school students lined up on either side of the path to see us off. Mr. Kajiro and Miss Ayaume were there, too.

One of the carriages was being borrowed from Baronet Dyukeli.

The baronet had taken a liking to our carriage, so when we got to be reasonably friendly, I gave him this carriage modeled after ours.

Two carriages still wouldn't be enough for everyone, so Karina and her entourage had already gone ahead to where the airship waited.

“““Have a safe trip, Sir Knight!“““

The children called out in unison.

I smiled and waved back at them as we walked toward the carriage.

About halfway down the path, some boys from the orphanage stepped forward with short staffs—a few of the kids who I did “Chant” practice with in the mornings and evenings.

The three of them raised their voices and chanted in time.

“■ *Breeze Soyokaze!*”

To my amazement, one of them succeeded in chanting a spell.

The wind his spell created fluttered the skirts and dresses of all the girls in the vicinity.

Reflexively, I grabbed Lulu and Nana to hold their skirts in place. Hopefully, it didn't look like sudden sexual harassment to any onlookers.

Unfortunately, the skirts of all the girls who I didn't manage to guard flew up in the air. It probably didn't help that most of them were short and made of light, breathable material to deal with the hot Labyrinth City weather.

There was a chorus of shrieks, followed by exclamations of protest from Mia and Arisa.

“Swishy...”

“Sir!”

Pochi and Tama seemed amused by all the flying skirts.

“Hee-hee, I did it!”

“It was worth practicing our chants in secret to surprise Mr. Knight.”

The mischievous young boys were delighted by their success.

As they were dragged back to the orphanage, I noticed that none of them had gained the “Chant” or “Magic” skills.

How did one of them manage to master chanting in such a short time?

Regardless of how he might’ve used it, I had to applaud his hard work and talent.

Honestly, I was kind of jealous...

No, an adult shouldn’t be envious of children.

As for the prankster’s punishment...

“You little puuuunk!”

Arisa bopped him on the head with her fist, producing another shriek.

Once this cute little incident was over, we boarded our carriages and headed for the docked airship.

“Biiig?”

“Amazingly amazing, sir!”

Tama and Pochi leaned from the carriage windows on each side, gazing excitedly up at the giant shape floating in the sky.

Pochi’s wagging tail kept on smacking me in the face.

“Mrr.”

Since both windows were occupied, Mia grumpily opened the small window, meant for conversing with the coachman, to look outside.

Arisa, Lulu, and Nana had lost the game of rock-paper-scissors that determined seating, and were in the other carriage in front of us.

For some reason, Liza was sitting on the coachman’s bench with her Magic Cricket Spear in hand. Her apparent liking for high places was surprising, considering how scared she was on the black dragon’s back.

Outside, I could see throngs of well-wishers and spectators lining the streets.

As soon as they saw our carriage, they started shouting and cheering like it was a parade.

Many of the cheers seemed to be directed at Liza, perhaps because she was especially visible in the coachman's seat.

"Stop the carriage, please."

In front of the airship, I saw Zena and friends waiting to see us off; I had the maid who was driving the carriage park for a moment, and I got down.

"Here, Satou. You can eat these on the airship, if you like."

"Thank you very much, Zena."

I accepted the package Zena gave me, feeling its warmth in my hand.

"Did you make this yourself, by any chance?"

"...Well, um..."

Apparently not.

I didn't mean to put Zena in an awkward position. I had to change the subject before— "Unfortunately, it was me and the old lady who cooks at the barracks who made 'em."

"L-Lilio! You said you'd keep it a secret! Besides, I did help by plating everything!"

Before I could come to her rescue, Lilio revealed the truth.

I would have to see the results of Zena's hard work later.

"Presentation is a big part of a meal, too, so arranging things nicely is an important job."

"Y-yes, of course... Very important..."

Zena looked away and mumbled.

Shoot, should I have let it slide instead of trying to reassure her?

That was a definite failure. If this were a dating sim, I would probably have heard the sound indicating my affection rating had sunk.

“Oh right, boyo. Thanks for the map. Next, we’ll go in with the troops to hunt mantises... Or rather, we’ll avoid those because they’re dangerous, but we’ll hunt maze snails and red carapaces, at least.”

Lilio flapped her hand as she thanked me.

“Of course. Be careful, and good luck. The stronger you all become, the safer Zena will be.”

As long as they were careful of the large cavern where the areamaster and the knight killer monsters lurked, they should be fine.

If Zena’s squad was going to develop that area, it would make it safer for the explorers’ school students and graduates to hunt there, too, so it was a definite win-win.

“Aww, he cares about you, Zenacchi.”

“Sir Knight!”

Just as Lilio was teasing Zena, Miss Iona arrived with some familiar knights and civil officials behind her.

“Sir Knight, our captain Sir Hence and Mr. Toril would like to thank you for—”

“Sir Pendragon! Thank you for mediating with the viceroy for us!”

Iona was interrupted by her superior, Sir Hence.

They’d asked me to talk to the viceroy for them when they’d observed the explorers’ school before, so I wrote a letter of introduction for them.

The following day, they would be joining the guards for training in how to maintain public order during times when explorers thronged the city.

Although I hadn’t asked, Sir Hence told me they would prioritize training knights and soldiers with experience in equipment repair. I wished them success; if they learned how to maintain public order, then eventually Seiryuu City would be even safer for the folks at the Gatefront Inn, for Miss Nadi, for the boss of the general store, and for my other acquaintances.

“Sir Pendragon, we are incredibly grateful to you for allowing us to observe the explorers’ school the other day as well. And you trained our magic knight

Zena and her squad to new heights of capability in such a short time! We have nothing but gratitude and admiration for you.”

The civil official exaggeratedly sang my praises.

Usually, this sort of thing meant a request was sure to follow, so I braced myself.

“On that note, could you perhaps make use of a few members of the Seiryuu Elite Squad as teachers’ aides at the explorers’ school? There would be no need to pay them, of course.”

They were offering some instructors from their army, so I was happy to accept.

I felt bad letting them work for free, though, so I intended to pay them as teachers’ aides.

“Sir Pendragon, you are also friendly with the explorers’ guild, are you not?”

I nodded, and the official asked if I could put in a good word for a few of them to apply to work there. I didn’t have any authority to do that, however, so I just agreed to write a letter of introduction, especially since we were about to leave for the royal capital.

Finally, they asked if I’d be willing to train the other soldiers besides Zena’s squad, but I flatly turned that down. Even their promises of decoration and rewards from Seiryuu County didn’t move my heart one bit.

“I gave my assistance for the sake of Zena, my good friend who once saved my companions’ lives. If you plan to make any excessive requests, I may need to reconsider our relationship.”

It’s better to stick a pin in things like this before they run you ragged.

Sensing that he had displeased me, the official immediately switched to apology mode, so I let them off the hook. Especially since Zena joined in on apologizing for their rudeness.



“...Do you have feelings for Zena, Satou?”

“That’s a sudden question, Lady Karina.”

I turned around when I heard Karina's voice and barely managed to hide my disappointment.

Why in the world is she wearing armor instead of a dress?

She was definitely wearing a dress at breakfast this morning...

"What happened with your outfit? I requested that you wear the dress I gave you in case we meet His Majesty the Duke today, didn't I?"

I smiled politely as I grilled Karina.

Since we were traveling with some influential nobles, I made sure to give her a fittingly eye-catching dress so that she might attract some marriage proposals.

"...But I'm oh-so-scared of how the gentlemen might look at me in a dress."

"Being cute about it will get you nowhere."

"You're horrible, Satou! Even though you're so nice to Zena..."

Well, Zena's a good friend, and I owe her a lot.

Putting aside Karina's sulking for a moment, I wondered why Zena and Arisa were staring so intently in our direction.

Once I saw Lilio and the rest of Zena's squad grinning wickedly, I finally figured it out.

Ah, it's about what Karina said, is it?

"That's because Zena is my—"

"I...! I challenge you!"

I was about to say "my dear friend who I deeply respect," but Karina suddenly looked panicked and loudly interrupted me.

All I was doing was trying to answer her question...

"I challenge you to a duel! If you win, I shall wear that embarrassing getup, as you insist."

H-hey, don't make me sound so sketchy in front of all these people.

The dress I gave her was based on the latest fashions in the royal capital.

She called it an “embarrassing getup,” but it was just slightly loose near the chest, nothing excessively revealing.

The dresses Karina wore back home were mostly made in Ougoch Duchy and tended to be slightly old-fashioned, conservative designs. That was probably why the newest fashions felt “embarrassing” to her.

But if all I had to do to get her to wear it was defeat her in a battle, I might as well take her up on that right away.

“Oh, very well. Will the same rules apply as when you duel Pochi and Tama?”

“Of course, I would ask for nothing less!”

When Pochi and Tama battled Karina, it was usually a one-round match; whoever fell out of the ring or landed with their back on the ground was the loser.

“And if I win...”

Oh, right, she didn’t give her demands yet.

Miss Karina stared at me with a fiery red face.

I felt like I was being glared at.

Flustered, Karina revealed her shocking demand.



“...y-you, you’ll have to, m-m-marry mwee!”

Huh? Marry?

Nearby, I heard Arisa chanting “Guilty! Guilty!” over and over.

Thank goodness I’d sent Mia to buy some snacks with Pochi and Tama.

Incidentally, Lulu was with Liza and Nana, carrying our luggage over to be transported onto the airship.

Still, the rest of the crowd pelted Karina and me with both cheers and jeers.

“W-wait, I meant...”

Karina flailed around in a panic, but no one was listening to her excuses.

She was probably asking me to pretend to be her fiancé so she wouldn’t have to deal with courtship in the royal capital, but she had gotten so flustered she’d instead blurted out “marry me.”

I thought it was fairly obvious that she was fond of me, but whether she was actually attracted to me as a member of the opposite sex wasn’t nearly as clear.

If anything, I suspected she thought of me as a bonus beside Pochi and Tama.

More importantly, I was a little worried about Zena, who was repeating the word “marriage” like a broken record. I needed to clear up the misunderstanding with her.

“Hey, young master! The stage is set!”

Before I could reassure Zena, though, someone from the meddlesome crowd prepared a spot for our duel.

After a moment, I realized the familiar face was none other than Skopi, the leader of the Mud Scorpions of the downtown area.

With that, we were hustled toward a temporary space that had been set up for entertainment before the airship’s arrival.

A lot of nobles and mithril explorers were gathered today, so the space was primarily for explorers and other warriors to show off their strength.

When we reached the area, we were greeted by a large crowd that Skopi’s

underlings had already gathered up.

“The young master is doing battle? Against who? Liza of the Black Spear?”

“It’s that gorgeous babe, I heard.”

“Damn, those are huge! Bigger than a cowfolk lady’s!”

“Hey, don’t talk like that about my goddess!”

“Ooh, I know that lady. The bean warrior pair are always dragging her around.”

“So she’s a new addition to the Pendragon treasury?”

“This’ll be worth watching, then.”

The peanut gallery was having a field day, but Miss Karina seemed to be so nervous about our duel that she showed no sign of responding.

I stood face-to-face with Karina.

Today she was wearing her labyrinth equipment and Raka.

She didn’t have the giant broadsword she swung around in the labyrinth, though; her hands were empty.

I responded accordingly by handing the fairy sword at my waist to Arisa.

Originally, I built Karina’s armor to have high defense power without preventing her signature jiggle, but when we got back from the labyrinth expedition, Arisa had modified it to keep things in place. As a result, it looked a little tight in the chest area now.

“W-wait a minute, master. You’re not going to lose on purpose, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Arisa whispered a stupid question, which I rejected immediately.

“Don’t get lured in by her boobs, okay? You can touch mine as much as you want later.”

“Yeah, no thanks.”

Why would I want to touch a little girl’s chest?

"Then how about... I know! I'll ask Lulu if you can touch her boobs later, too, okay?"

That was fractionally more tempting, but not something that anyone but Lulu herself could give permission for.

"Arisa, calm down. I'm not going to lose."

"R-really? Right, of course. I mean, you've got us."

I patted Arisa's head reassuringly and stepped into the center of the performance area where Karina was waiting.

It was tempting to wrap up the fight right away, but that would be unkind.

If I defeated Karina in an instant without any difficulty, it would embarrass her, but if I held back for too long in spite of my visible level, people might think I did want to marry her.

The best option would be to make it look like we were evenly matched for a while, then narrowly beat her.

It'd be a pain to pull off, but I would just have to do my best.

"If you let your guard down thinking I'm the same fighter I was before, you'll lose for certain!"

"That's intimidating. Go easy on me, please."

"Hmph, I say! How long will you be able to keep that calm exterior when you see how I've grown in the labyrinth, I wonder?"

At times, Karina tended to act childishly due to all the time she spent with Pochi and Tama, but now she was behaving like a proper adult again.

While she was taunting me, Raka silently enhanced Karina with Bestow Strength Enhancement.

I could tell by the brief flash of the scale-shaped magic barrier around her.

Raka's Bestow Strength Enhancement provided the same benefits as Body Strengthening, as well as other buffs, like Morale Boost, Acceleration, and Barrier Magic.

I waited for Raka to finish these enhancements, then took a battle-ready

stance.

As soon as the referee gave the signal, Karina sped across the ground, then tripped right in front of me—no, it only looked like she had tripped.

She spun around in midair and dropped an ax kick toward me.

If this were a big-budget movie, the most entertaining response would probably have been to cross my arms and block her kick, but that seemed unnecessary.

Instead, I leaned the upper half of my body to one side to dodge her kick.

Ooh, nice.

Just as it swished past me, her kick suddenly changed direction and came back at me from the side.

Raka must have used Barrier Magic to create a foothold in midair, allowing her to quickly change her stance.

Even if that was the case, though, it was impressive that Karina was able to react that quickly.

Tama was good at this kind of maneuver, so maybe that was where she picked it up.

I shot out a palm strike toward Karina's foot at short range.

My hand broke through the small shields Raka created, parrying Karina's attack.

Whoops and cheers rose from the crowd.

“Oooh! He dodged that in a second!”

“Is that beauty’s armor some kinda magic thing?”

“It’s the same equipment the Pendragon kids use, right?”

“Talk about untouchable equipment!”

I had no time to clarify their misunderstanding.

Karina landed on the ground with one foot, using that leg as an axis to send a spinning kick toward me with the other.

I dodged with a backstep, taking care not to leave the boundaries of the arena.

Gauging that she wouldn't be able to hit me with such big, dramatic attacks, Karina switched to a barrage of combo moves.

Her attacks were a far cry from the Karina I'd known back in Muno City: She was using far more complicated strategies, like a barrage of jabs to keep my attention on her hands while she tried to sweep my legs.

I guess training with the beastfolk girls since we arrived in Labyrinth City was really paying off.

...In fact, she seemed far stronger than when she was fighting with a sword in the labyrinth.

Maybe Miss Karina was better suited to martial arts than swordsmanship.

While these thoughts passed through my mind, Karina and I kept up an even exchange of blows. The continual flow of our movements as we shifted around the arena was almost like a dance.

I blocked her midair kick combo with my hands, then countered with a spinning kick of my own.

Of course, I held back my strength significantly, but no one would suspect that, since my speed was still on par with Karina's.

Miss Karina used a Raka-made foothold to shift her trajectory midair and avoid my attack.

She was moving like a master fighter.

"Damn, how'd she dodge that kick?!"

"Shut up, let me focus on my goddess's battle!"

"Aah, so close! Lady Karina, you can do it!"

"Aah, enough already! Quit fighting so close to the edge and end it already!"

"Mrrr."

As the crowd's cheers and commentary filled the air, Karina finally brought out her ace in the hole.

“Whoa! Look at that!”

“Spellblade?”

“But why is it white?!”

As Karina swung the white blade of light down from midair, my “Sense Danger” skill warned me to dodge to one side.

The blade, which seemed almost to have sprung from her wrist, was made of Raka’s protection—the same material as the small, scale-shaped shields, shaped into a foot-long light sword.

It was an unexpected attack, but it would’ve been even scarier if the blade had been a bit longer.

But she was never going to hit me at this distance.

“Now I’ve got yooou!”

Ah, Karina, you should never say that line.

The second stage of her attack might have caught me off guard, but her overconfident declaration ruined the effect.

As the blade of light detached from Karina’s wrist and flew toward me, I dodged it with a twist of my waist.

Since it was a diagonal attack from above, nobody else was in the line of fire.

I was worried that it might explode as it passed by me, but no—it just hit the ground and vanished.

“I’m not done yet!”

Refusing to buckle, Karina tried to continue her onslaught, but panic and exhaustion were beginning to show on her face.

The blue light from her Raka pendant was visibly dimmer than before; that must have been an all-or-nothing attack. Karina was nearly out of magic, too.

It wasn’t all that fun fighting Karina when her chest wouldn’t budge, so I decided to wrap things up.

The crowd had probably gotten enough of a close fight by now, and Karina

had fought with everything she had, so hopefully she wouldn't feel too frustrated about losing now.

In order to make it look to everyone else like she was narrowly defeated by my aggressive attacks, I used my "Foresight: One-on-One Battle" skill to come up with an attack pattern that would let me win in ten moves or so.

Arisa would probably scold me to be more careful.

As that silly thought crossed my mind, I sent a palm strike toward her left shoulder to throw her off-balance.

The strike broke through Raka's weakened defenses and went straight for her shoulder—only to narrowly miss when Karina's legs buckled from exhaustion, coincidentally moving her out of the way of my attack.

My nail grazed her armor, but I'd made it too strong to take damage from such a light scratch.

Readjusting my planned sequence of attacks, I bore down on Karina, maneuvering us right up against the borderline of the arena.

As the tide of battle gradually turned against Miss Karina, the crowd watched her with bated breath.

A barrage of light punches knocked her blocking arm aside, and Karina began to topple backward.

Three more moves. Once Karina blocked my next attack and moved to counter me, I planned to defeat her with a parry and counterattack.

A moment later, the crowd erupted with a roar.

Magic danced through the air.

"OOOOOH!"

"O gods!"

"Wh-what was that?!"

"So miracles are real..."

The binding Arisa had added to the armor around Karina's chest snapped, and her magically massive bust regained its freedom, flying around acrobatically in

time with Karina's movements.

Of course, her armor was completely intact, but it did nothing to protect against the allure of those magic boobs.

My eyes were glued to the rhythmic dance before me.

“GOOOOO!”

“Lady Karinaaaaa!”

Karina's maids were cheering her on.

The whistling of the wind alerted me that a kick was on its way.

But my primal instincts prevented me from reacting to Karina's kick from my blind spot in time.

“NOOOOOOO!”

“Satoooou!”

Amid the cheers of the crowd, I heard Arisa and Mia cry out despairingly.

The fateful blow was delivered, and the referee declared a victor.



“How many times have I told you to be more careful?!”

“Mrrr. Don't let your guard down. Not ever, okay? It's fine to be confident, but you have to be careful. You promise?”

After the battle, Arisa and Mia chewed me out thoroughly.

Wait, when did Mia even get back?

I apologized to the pair for worrying them, and turned to Miss Karina, who was slumped, unmoving, on the ground.

“Are you all right, Lady Karina?”

“Please leave her be until she gets her feelings in order.”

“Are you sure, Raka? I'll leave you and the maids to cheer her up, then.”

It should go without saying that I won the battle, of course.

Right before her kick struck my head, I lowered my head without averting my

gaze and just barely avoided her gorgeous legs.

Then, once her magic boobs were blocked from my sight, I pushed her waist slightly while she was still in midair to send her flying from the arena.

The fateful blow might've just been one light shove, but from Karina's reaction, it clearly was "fateful" for her.

To everyone in the crowd, it probably just looked like her momentum propelled her out of bounds.

"Karinaaa?"

"Are you hurt, sir?"

Tama and Pochi came to comfort her, too, so I stood up to let them take care of things.

Then I felt a tug on my robe, and looked down to find pale fingers hanging onto my sleeve and Karina's tearfully disappointed face looking up at me.

"Next time... I swear I'll defeat you next time."

I had to admire her persistence.

If it wasn't me she was after, I'd be cheering her on for sure.

"All right. Please go easy on me."

I agreed to an eventual rematch and left Pochi and Tama in charge.

"You did great, sir."

"We'll train even more and mooore?"

"But of course!"

Leaving the three of them to get fired up anew, I checked with Liza on the status of our departure. Lulu and Nana were already on the ship.

My battle with Karina had taken a while, so the wait shouldn't be much longer now.

I could have Karina change into that dress in her room on the airship; in the meantime, I had to go say farewell to everyone who came to see us off.

"Sir Pendragon!"

First, I greeted the noble kids, led by Baronet Dyukeli.

It hadn't even been ten days since they started at the explorers' school, but their muscles were already starting to firm up.

"Sir Knight, that was an incredible battle."

"Indeed! A man of thy skill might even be recommended to the Shiga Eight in the royal capital, Sir Satou!"

After I thanked Baronet Dyukeli for lending us the carriage, I chatted with Mary-Ann and Princess Meetia.

I had no intention of ever accepting an invitation from the Shiga Eight, so I wished she wouldn't make such predictions. After talking to the pair, I also greeted Princess Meetia's guardian knight, Ravna, and her meek squire, Ryula.

Next, the other noble kids stepped forward.

"I... I mean, we will be fighting by your side soon enough, Sir Pendragon."

"Then I shall have to work even harder so that you and your friends do not surpass me, Sir Luram."

Luram, the son of Baron Tokey, was the only one who was somehow still chubby, but I paid him some lip service anyway.

"Yeah right, Luram."

The viceroy's third son, Gerits, bopped Luram lightly on the head, then approached me.

"I heard about everything you did for Bowman."

...Who's that again?

The name only vaguely rang a bell, but I was able to jog my memory, thanks to the memo pad in my menu's social networking tab.

Bowman was a friend of Gerits; when the rest of his group was wiped out in the labyrinth, I lent a hand in arranging for a search party.

"I despise him, but I do owe his mother a lot. Thank you for your help, Sir Pendragon."

I guess they were more like lifelong rivals than friends?

After Luram and Gerits, I greeted the other kids, too, and exchanged light nods with the viceroy's guardian knights who were accompanying them.

“Sir Knight!”

Iruna and Jena from the Lovely Wings had come to see us off, too, on behalf of the explorers' school.

“Don't worry about a thing—between us, Sir Kajiro, and the others, we'll take care of the students.”

“Just watch, we'll train those Pendra kids to be useful to you yet!”

Putting it that way made it sound like I was training kids at the school in order to make them my vassals.

“Just make sure you always put safety first.”

“Right!”

“Of course!”

Iruna and Jena smiled back brightly.

These two didn't have a ton of luck as explorers, but they were pretty excellent teachers.

“Heeey, Mister Satou! Here, for the road.”

“Is this *takoyaki*? Thank you very much. I'll share these with Tama and the others later.”

Neru had come to see us off from the Echigoya Company's Celivera branch.

Some important explorers like Mr. Dozon, Mr. Koshin, and Zarigon, and some of the Hellfire Fangs came to see us, too, as well as a few members of the all-female explorers' party Silverlight.

We didn't talk very often, but I appreciated their well-wishes.

Finally, I went to say farewell to Zena and company one last time.

“We'll be back within a month at the latest, so please don't do anything too reckless in the meantime.”

"Yes, of course. We'll put everything we learned in the labyrinth to use, and put safety first!"

Despite this statement, it was hard to feel reassured when Zena looked so overzealous.

"Weren't you going around this morning saying, 'I swear I'll find a way to get closer to Satou and his party's strength!' and all that, Zena?"

"Lou, don't mention that right now."

Iona hastily shushed Lou.

...Zena?

I looked at Zena questioningly, but she just glanced away awkwardly.

"We'll take care of Zenacchi, don't worry. Even if we can't stop her from being reckless, we'll make sure she doesn't get totally crazy."

Lilio's words weren't exactly comforting. I smiled back wanly and reminded Zena once more to be careful.

"We should get going."

"All right, Satou."

At the end of this strange conversation, I exchanged a stiff handshake with Zena, and we headed up the ramp onto the airship.

We must have been the last passengers to board; the ramp was raised as soon as we got inside, and I heard the main engine of the airship starting up.

With thoughts of our royal capital plans, I headed to the observation deck to meet with everyone else.



"...Oh, right, master. I just remembered what I meant to say when we were talking about reincarnations."

Turning from the window, Arisa touched her soul shell garland as she whispered to me.

"When I was first reincarnated, a god said something to me: '*Authority, hope,*

growth.’ So I think it might be bad to never use my Unique Skills at all.”

“Maybe so, but your safety comes first.”

“I know ‘Over Boost’ is dangerous, but ‘Never Give Up’ has a limit on how often it can be used, so shouldn’t that be fine?”

Hmm, I guess that’s probably okay.

“All right. I give you permission to use ‘Never Give Up,’ but only when absolutely necessary. And make sure you never use it past the limited amount of times.”

“Okaaay, I got it,” Arisa responded in a cutesy voice. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“About reincarnations?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t when I got reincarnated exactly, but when I was a baby, a god appeared to me in a dream and told me to be careful if I met any other gods or ‘gods’ apostles’...”

Arisa lowered her voice even further.

“...That if they find someone who’s inherited their powers, they’ll definitely attack, so I should resist or run away with all my might if I meet a different god or a god’s apostle.”

As soon as I heard Arisa’s words, I remembered something from when we were baptized at Tenion Temple.

Arisa wasn’t able to receive the Tenion baptism.

We aren’t going to have to fight a god next or something, are we?

I’d much rather have a heartwarming sightseeing trip than a dramatic final showdown with an evil god.

Looking out the window at the sun, I sent this silly prayer to the gods.

Journey to the Royal Capital

Satou here. When I first sat near the wing of an airplane, I remember being alarmed by how the wing moved in the wind so much more than I expected. But I got used to it eventually, and just enjoyed the scenery.

“Duke Vistall, it is a pleasure to see you in such high spirits.”

“You as well, Baronet Mosaddo.”

Not long after the airship took off from Labyrinth City, I was summoned to the VIP noble visitors’ room along with the Scarlet Nobleman Baronet Jelil Mosaddo and other nobility.

There were other mithril-badge explorers who were being honored in the royal capital, too, but no commoners were invited into this room.

But aside from Baronet Jelil, most of the nobles here had just honorary titles or were children of nobles.

Kneeling at the foot of the table, I snuck a peek at Duke Vistall, who entered the room after us.

Like his uncle General Erthal, he was a man in the prime of his life with stern features and a hawklike nose. In fact, despite being the general’s nephew, he seemed quite close in age to him.

Since Duke Vistall wasn’t royalty, the etiquette of Shiga Kingdom didn’t require a bow. However, whether it was due to his lineage as the king’s cousin or to his sheer authority, everyone who had already entered the room knelt upon his entrance, so I followed suit like a proper Japanese person.

“I heard from Laberre that you did a stellar job.”

Duke Vistall praised Baronet Jelil for his fine commanding and strategies in defeating the powerful floormaster of the labyrinth’s Middle Stratum.

“Perhaps you will lead our army one day—ah, or will you join the Shiga Eight

to build up your accomplishments first?"

"That is an honor I would not dare dream of, but as one who walks the path of a warrior in the Shiga Kingdom, I would certainly hope to have that honor someday."

Baronet Jelil responded nervously to Duke Vistall's lavish praise.

I was fairly bored, so I searched the unfamiliar name of "Laberre" on the map and found one of Duke Vistall's subordinates, an Earth Magic user who had also defeated the floormaster with Baronet Jelil.

Duke Vistall must have sent this person to help Baronet Jelil conquer the floormaster. Maybe Duke Vistall was on this particular airship in order to congratulate Baronet Jelil.

Eventually, Duke Vistall and Baronet Jelil's conversation ended, and the duke addressed the other noble-descended explorers to congratulate them one by one for defeating the floormaster.

Next, he gave some slightly shorter words of congratulation to the honorary nobles, and finally it was my turn.

Judging by his expression, I got the feeling he wasn't thrilled to be talking to me.

"I enjoyed your little acrobatics performance earlier. Perhaps you have the makings of a better street performer than an explorer?"

Karina would probably fly off the handle if she heard him call it an "acrobatics performance."

But actually, touring the continent as a performing act with Mia's music, Arisa's singing, and Pochi's and Tama's dancing really did sound fun.

Maybe I wasn't supposed to take it that way, but...

"That certainly sounds fun. When we retire from exploring, we'll be sure to take our show on tour in your castle town, Your Excellency."

...I accidentally blurted out an honest response, and earned a scowl from the duke.

> Title Acquired: Innocent Agitator

I got a weird title for my trouble, but I decided to ignore it.

The duke probably intended to be rude, so maybe my earnest reply came off as sarcastic to him.

And here I thought he'd just call me an "upstart peasant" and sneer or whatever...

"It seems Duke Ougoch intends to recommend you as a successor to Sir Torel, but the Shiga Eight is no place for one without any *real* strength."

I wasn't sure who Sir Torel was at first, but given the context, he must have been someone retiring from the Shiga Eight.

Come to think of it, Zena had mentioned someone by the name of Sir Torel when she told me about their journey, too. If I remembered right, he challenged a lesser dragon and got severely injured.

Still, even if he saw me as a political enemy, I think claiming that a mithril-badge explorer has no "real strength" is a bit of a stretch.

"Your Excellency..."

An aide of the duke's with the "Analyze Person" skill whispered in his ear.

The duke raised an eyebrow slightly, looked at me, and *tsked* irritably.

"Besides, deeds of arms alone are not enough to become a warrior who represents the Shiga Kingdom. You must have the elegance and refinement to set an example for the people."

He must have shifted the direction of his criticism because the aide told him my level.

Not my absurdly high real level of 311, of course—the official level I set in my social networking tab.

Before I beat the Dogheaded Demon Lord, my publicly shown level was set around 30, but now I had raised it to 45. That was around the same level as Baronet Jelil's, which would explain why the duke abruptly changed his perceived requirements for a member of the Shiga Eight.

"There are few people who possess all those traits."

The duke cast a glance at Baronet Jelil and nodded solemnly.

Ah, so he was planning to counter Duke Ougoch by nominating Baronet Jelil.

I didn't really want to be a pawn in this political battle.

If I got stuck in the Shiga Eight, I wouldn't be able to go sightseeing anymore.

Besides, it'd be stressful knowing that one misstep might make me a bunch of enemies.

"I appreciate the advice, Your Excellency." For the time being, I tried to make up for my inadvertent rudeness with an inoffensive response.

If sparks really started flying, I could always take on a new fake name, show up as a mysterious third-party candidate, and steal the seat on the Shiga Eight that way.

Then, once things got settled, my mystery swordsman persona would just challenge a dragon and die tragically in battle.

Then Baronet Jelil could take over, and everything would work out fine.



"I can't believe Duke Visty has it in for you, master. That's just asking for trouble, y'know?"

"Honestly. The poor fool."

Liza nodded along with Arisa's statement, while Mia seemed unconcerned.

When I returned to our assigned cabin, I told Arisa and the others what had happened in the VIP room, but for some reason they seemed more concerned for Duke Vistall than for anyone else.

They didn't seem worried about any danger, so I warned them to let me know if any strange people approached them.

Meanwhile, Lulu and Nana were observing in the galley, while Pochi and Tama went to check on how Karina was recovering from her loss in our showdown.

“What if you join the Shiga Eight for real?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If you were in that position, you’d get the same treatment as a minister or a count!”

“I’m not interested in those kinds of titles.”

I didn’t see any benefit to becoming a high-ranking noble.

Besides, if I really wanted peerage, I’m sure I could talk to the king about it as Nanashi. A marquis might be too much, but I bet he’d be happy to make me a count or something.

“Aaaargh! I swear! Where’s your sense of ambition?! Don’t you want to use your cheat-like powers to get ahead in life, like a normal *isekai* protagonist? If you became a count, you could marry as many nobles’ daughters as you wanted, you know!”

“Calm down, Arisa.”

Arisa was getting all worked up for some reason.

She tended to get a little out of control when it came to tropes like this. Why would she want me to get a bunch of other wives when she’s normally trying to get me to marry her?

Just then, Mia came to the rescue.

“Adultery is bad. Really bad, okay? Besides, he doesn’t need any more wives. He’s already got one, you know?”

“All right, all right! I’m sorry, Mia! Forgive mee!”

Arisa scrambled to apologize in the face of Mia’s menacing expression.

Truthfully, the only person I’d want as my wife is Miss Aaze, but I decided not to clarify who Mia was referring to, since it would undoubtedly only lead to more trouble.

Liza didn’t offer any opinion, but judging from her expression and mannerisms, she probably agreed with Arisa that I should join the Shiga Eight.

Personally, though, I thought Liza would be a better fit for that role.

She was definitely stronger than the third crown prince, who was formerly one of the Shiga Eight.

Pochi and Tama were also stronger than the prince, but they were still way too young for a role like that, I thought.



“We’re baaack?”

“We’re back, sir.”

Pochi and Tama entered the room, looking exhausted.

That was unusual, since they were normally so energetic.

“How was Lady Karina?”

“Shut-iiin?”

“She won’t come out of her room, sir!”

Pochi and Tama slumped onto the sofa. I decided to relieve their exhaustion by popping a piece of their beloved whale jerky into each of their mouths.

That was the last of the two hundred pounds of jerky I had stocked up, so I would have to make more soon.

“I-it can’t be!”

“Whale jerkyyy!”

“My energy’s back, sir!”

The two of them hopped up and struck their trademark poses, the jerky still sticking out of their mouths.

I patted them both on the head to reward their hard work.

They both fidgeted bashfully but squinted and made happy noises.

“All right, then...”

“Are you going to go see Miss Boobs?”

...No, I wasn’t planning on it...

I opened my mouth to say as much, but decided against it.

I guess it would be a little cruel to leave Karina alone when she was clearly depressed.

My original plan was to take this opportunity to get everyone to exchange information with the other mithril explorers, but that would have to wait.

“Good idea. I’ll give it a little more time, then go check on her.”

There was a knock at the door, and Liza stood up.

It was Karina’s guardian maids, Erina and the newbie, along with Lulu and Nana.

Her lady-in-waiting, Pina, was still in the room with Karina, they said.

“Sir Knight, you gotta help us...”

“Please!”

The pair of maids bowed their heads and begged me to do something about Miss Karina.

I thought they were worrying a bit more than necessary, but they insisted the situation was very unusual in their experience.

“I mean, we put the plate of fried chicken that we had Lulu make for her in front of her door, and she still didn’t come out!”

Erina, that would only work on you.

Pochi, Tama, and even Liza were nodding solemnly behind me, but I ignored them.

“Even when Viscount Nina scolds her, or Captain Zotol kicks her butt, the smell of Chef Gert’s fried chicken has always been enough to cheer her up! But now...”

Erina pressed toward me desperately.

I understood they were worried about Miss Karina, but I wished she wouldn’t keep pressing her slim chest against my arm. The newbie was even starting to copy her.

“Guilty.”

“Hey, don’t get so close.”

Arisa and Mia pried the two maids off my arms.

I was already planning to see Miss Karina, so we ended up agreeing to follow the maids back to her room.

“Lady Karina, I heard that you haven’t left your room. Are you feeling all right?”

I knocked on the door of Miss Karina’s quarters.

Of course, there was no response.

“I didn’t realize Lady Karina liked Sir Knight so much that she would get this depressed about it...”

“Well yeah. Since Sir Knight rejected her, she’ll have to deal with marriage hunting in the royal capital.”

“Right. Lord Baron aside, I’m sure Viscount Nina could set up an engagement with an influential noble in no time flat.”

“No doubt about it. She’s right on the edge of gettin’ too old to be married. I’m sure she’d much rather be Sir Knight’s wife than have to hunt for a fiancé in the royal capital. ’Specially since it’d mean she could keep fighting in the labyrinth with Pochi and Tama.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on a private conversation between the newbie and Erina behind me. They definitely seemed to know Miss Karina well after all their time together.

More importantly, though, what should I do now?

“We’ll go with the Ama-no-Iwato strategy here!”

“Ama... What?”

“The cave of the sun god! In the hero’s world, there’s a myth about a goddess who holed up in a cave! So we’ll use the same strategy the gods used to get the goddess to come out!”

Arisa stood valiantly on top of the table, huffing and puffing.

“Arisa, mind your manners.”

“Bah-ha-ha-ha, sorry, sorry...”

After Liza’s scolding prompted her to step down onto the floor, Arisa eagerly explained the Ama-no-Iwato strategy again and dragged everyone away to the kitchen to prepare a banquet.

If you ask me, though, having a party right outside the room of a human who’s genuinely depressed would just be mean, and probably make them want to come out even less.

I sat near the door to Miss Karina’s room and racked my brains.

I wouldn’t mind seeing Nana in the role of Ame-no-Uzume, the scantily clad goddess who did a seductive dance to draw Amaterasu from her cave in the legend, but knowing Arisa, she would probably take that role herself or give it to one of the other kids.

Standing up resolutely, I walked to the door separating Miss Karina from the rest of us and used Clairvoyance to see what was going on in her room.

To be honest, peeping into the room of a young lady of a certain age is definitely not good behavior, but I decided to put my moral reservations aside just this once.

Unfort—I mean, luckily, Miss Karina was still wearing the same clothes as before, lying facedown where she had flung herself into bed.

According to my map, she didn’t have the Sleeping status condition, so she must have still been awake.

Once I confirmed that, I used the Magic Hand spell to unlock the door from the inside, activating Secret Field to keep any sound from escaping.

It’d be terrifying if anyone used this combo for criminal activity, but anyone who can use Wind Magic, Space Magic, and Practical Magic wouldn’t need to resort to crime to be successful in the first place.

Putting such silly thoughts aside, I entered the bedroom.

Raka pulsed blue on the table. Judging by the pattern of the light, it had probably noticed me, but it didn’t seem to be inclined to alert Miss Karina.

“Lady Karina, I heard you’re not feeling well. Are you all right?”

I leaned down and whispered to her next to her pillow.

Startled, Karina jumped up and scurried to the other side of the large bed, pressing her back against the headboard.

Whoops. Since I'd silenced the noise of the door unlocking, I'd also automatically snuck over on tiptoe...

Well, I'd better just play dumb.

"Sorry, did I startle you?"

Karina's face was so flushed that the reddening around her eyes was almost indistinguishable, her lips flapping open and shut silently.

...Was it really that shocking?

Her eyes were wet with tears, presumably from frustration at losing the battle, which made her look all the more appealing. I summoned up a mental image of Miss Aaze to keep my desires on track.

"Hold still, please."

"...'kaaay..."

Karina looked around the room wildly, then seemed to steady her resolve and closed her eyes.

I produced a handkerchief and wiped away the tears, then used magic to heal them. *There, much better.*

It should have been perfectly safe, since Karina's eyes were closed and my body blocked the magic from Raka's view.

But even after I finished doing that, she still didn't open her eyes.

...She's so vulnerable.

If I were a more predatory man, this would have been the perfect chance to go for a kiss or who knows what else.

"All done. You can open your eyes now."

Karina blinked a few times, then stared at me in disbelief.

Making eye contact with me seemed to displease her somehow; she puffed

up her cheeks.

“Satou, you are such a bully, I swear!”

With that, she threw her pillow right at my face.

As my vision was otherwise blocked by the pillow, I noticed a few new titles in my log in the corner.

> Title Acquired: Magic Thief

> Title Acquired: Silent Intruder

> Title Acquired: Heart Stealer

...I don't think I really want that last one, thanks.



“The food has arrived, sir!”

“Mountain of chickennn?”

Pochi and Tama flew into the room, shouting excitedly.

I was honestly grateful, since I had no idea how to deal with Karina making a show of being angry while somehow acting enticing at the same time.

“Karinaaa?”

“Karina opened the door, sir! The Amayno strategy worked, sir!”

No, the Ama-no-Iwato strategy hasn't even started yet.

Tama and Pochi threw their arms around Karina happily.

As Karina apologized to the pair of them, I glanced at the huge plate of food they'd brought in.

“Wow, smells good.”

“No snacking, sir!”

I went to investigate the quality of the cooking, but Pochi scolded me.

“I'm just taste-testing, that's all.”

“Oh, then I guess it's fine, sir.”

“Tama’s taste-testing, too?”

“Pochi’s not obverse to taste-testing, either, sir.”

You mean “averse,” Pochi.

I popped a small piece of chicken from Tama’s plate into each of their mouths, then one for myself.

Lulu’s cooking really did keep improving. It might even be better than mine at this point, and my “Cooking” skill is maxed-out.

Karina watched Pochi and Tama enviously, with her mouth slightly open, so I gave her a little piece of chicken, too.

Startled by the unexpected food, I assume, Karina twitched in protest.

She didn’t object strenuously, though, so I assume she took no issue with the food itself.

Just then, Mia returned, followed shortly thereafter by Arisa.

Both of them were wearing full-body cloaks. I was afraid to ask what was underneath.

“Guilty.”

Taking measure of the mood Karina was giving off, Mia started accusing us of all kinds of things. But if anything, she and Arisa were the guilty ones.

“Oh dear, did you already lure Miss B... I mean, Madame Karina, out of her room?”

I wasn’t a big fan of how she phrased that, but I nodded anyway.

“Aw, we got all gussied up in these seductive outfits for nothing.”

“Nighttime.”

“O-of course!”

I heard Arisa and Mia whispering conspiratorially, but I ignored them with all my might.

Now then, since everyone else went to all this trouble, we might as well have that banquet, right?

“Hoh-hoh. So this is the work of the greatest chef in Labyrinth City.”

“It’s delicious. I never dreamed that the legendary chef would cook for us on an airship.”

The mithril explorers all gave Lulu’s party food high praise as they ate.

There was plenty of food, so I invited the other explorers on the airship to the main dining hall for a party.

More people came than I expected, so I had the airship cooks help me provide backup in the kitchen. Most of the ingredients were from my Storage.

The majority of the mithril explorers on the airship were men, but there were seven or eight women in the mix, too.

I was hoping Karina might be willing to make friends with her fellow female explorers, but I was sorely mistaken.

She was set up at the corner of her table, using Erina and the newbie as barriers on either side as she dug into the food.

At first, some of the male explorers had been lured in by her lovely features and magic boobs and gathered around her, but Karina only got frightened when too many of them crowded her at once, so I got stuck with the manager-like job of making sure no more than one or two approached at a time.

Before too long, the men mostly figured out that Karina wasn’t remotely receptive to them and started flirting with the waitresses instead.

Some of the male explorers followed Nana around, too, but she dealt with them in her usual deadpan way. Clearly, only children could break through her iron defenses.

Once the male explorers finally backed off, I tried to introduce Karina to some of the female explorers I’d befriended during the party, but for some reason she was short and snippy with them.

Why would she be so hostile toward women who were being nothing but friendly to her?

Fortunately, the female explorers just laughed it off and didn’t seem

particularly offended.

“Hey, keep your hands off our master!”

“Mm. No touchy-feely.”

Arisa and Mia popped up between me and the friendly female explorers.

Hmm, were they really being that touchy-feely?

Maybe it was just my imagination, but Karina seemed to cheer up a bit when she saw Arisa and Mia.

Perhaps she acted salty toward those women because she felt like they were getting too close to me.

Next time I tried to introduce new friends to Karina, I would have to be more mindful of keeping my distance.

Mia performed some music in a corner of the relatively large dining hall.

She was playing a famous song that was often used for social dances in the Shiga Kingdom, probably a request from one of the explorers.

The men and women alike started dancing to the music, although neither seemed particularly used to it.

“Promise not to laugh at us, mister. Unlike you and Baronet Jelil, we’re just commoners. We’ve gotta get some practice in before we reach the royal capital.”

“I wouldn’t laugh at you. Everyone’s a beginner at some point, after all.”

One of the female explorers, probably in her early thirties, sheepishly explained why the explorers weren’t very good dancers.

Once we reached the royal capital, they would likely be invited to all kinds of nobles’ parties. They probably wanted to practice social dancing so they wouldn’t embarrass themselves there.

Oh, that’s perfect.

I might as well use this chance to have Miss Karina practice, too.

We’d had a few chances to dance together in the old capital, but I couldn’t

exactly say she was an expert dancer by any stretch of the imagination.

Since dancing was a necessary skill for finding a marriage partner in the Shiga Kingdom, I wanted to make sure she worked hard at it.

“Now then, Lady Karina. May I have this dance?”

“I—I don’t feel like dancing.”

“Come on, now, you have to practice. Besides, even if you step on my feet, no one’s going to scold you or laugh at you here.”

“But...”

I took Karina’s hand as she stubbornly stuck to her seat.

“Or do you find me that disagreeable as a dance partner?”

I leaned in closer, taking a serious tone.

“N-n-no, I... Oh, all right.”

Karina turned bright red as she tried to object, then reluctantly agreed to it in a barely audible whisper.

That wasn’t quite the reaction I was expecting, but it was fine with me as long as she was willing to practice.

Arisa and Mia started to protest, but I pacified them by promising to dance with them next, once Karina’s dance practice was done.

I wanted to make sure I danced with Lulu, too, since she’d worked so hard to prepare for this party.

“Lady Karina, come a little closer.”

“V-very well... Good heavens, this is so embarrassing.”

Karina’s flustered face was definitely a little exciting, but I had to focus on teaching her to dance.

Keep it together, Satou.

Don’t get distracted by the two miracles brushing against your chest. Nnnope. Don’t do it.

Feeling Mia’s sharp gaze boring holes into my back, I continued teaching Miss

Karina to dance.

“Yes, just like that. Very good.”

“...N-not at all.”

Whenever she did even remotely well, I made sure to praise her right away, trying to alleviate her fears about being bad at dancing.

“Don’t get distracted because you can’t see your feet. It’s all right.”

Karina’s bust was so large that it completely obscured her view of her lower body, so she couldn’t watch her steps while dancing. That seemed to contribute to her anxiety.

How can I help her stop worrying...? Oh, I know!

“Think of it like your footwork in battle.”

“L-like this?”

“Yes, exactly.”

When I framed it in terms of combat, she finally started to get the hang of it. She was still far from being a master of dancing, but her movements had become a lot sharper.

The rest was probably just a matter of getting more experience.

After Karina, I danced with Lulu and each of the other girls in turn, then wound up dancing with Karina’s maids and the female explorers, too.

When I was done with all that, I was put in charge of teaching the male explorers how to dance.

It was tough going for a while, but well worth the effort if it meant the explorers would be willing to help us in the future.

Arisa’s heavy breathing as she watched me practice dance steps with the male explorers was a little annoying, though.



“Hey, mister, the observation deck’s open! We’re going to check it out. Want to come along?”

Eventually, the dancing died down. We were about to call it a night when one of the female explorers invited us along to the observation deck.

“Sure, that sounds good.”

Excited, we all headed to the observation deck on the bow.

The dining hall we were using was all the way back at the stern, so it took a while to get there.

As we headed down some narrow corridors that reminded me of a submarine, I saw a few red dots on the radar that was always displayed in the corner of my vision. It must be some monsters or criminals on the ground below.

I opened the radar settings window and, for the time being, tweaked it to only display red dots of flying monsters level 10 or above that might be a threat to the airship.

I left the setting that displayed red dots for individuals who were hostile toward me intact, just in case.

...*Hmm*?

There were still some red dots nearby.

Inspecting the map, I found that the three red dots actually belonged to the wyvern mounts of the knights flying next to the airship as guards.

I must have forgotten to exclude tamed monsters when I changed the settings.

Chuckling at my own mistake, I adjusted the settings again.

While we were walking to the observation deck, a flying monster approached the airship, but the flying knights drove it away before it could get too close.

“So biiig?”

“Pretty glass, sir.”

“Why, it’s beautiful!”

The two-floor observation deck was fitted with glass.

Instead of regular glass, it was made with steel wire netting covered in crystal in order to minimize bird strikes.

I had equipped the airship itself with a magic barrier device modeled after the Practical Magic spell Defense Wall, too, but since it consumed a lot of magic, that was only for use in combat.

Anyway, if it weren't for the convenient Earth Magic spell Stone Object, I might not have managed to make the observation deck with crystal like this.

Although it was technically two stories high, it was a vaulted atrium shape, so the hanging garden-style terrace of the second floor was only about a sixth of the size of the main first floor.

"This kinda reminds me of Rei's old home."

Arisa was referring to Reiaane, who we met during the Lalakie incident in the southern seas.

"Once we've finished our business in the royal capital, we should go visit them again."

Whenever I did my daily goodnight call with Aaze by way of the Space Magic spell Telephone, I also called Rei and her sister to catch up, but we hadn't actually gone to see them in person since we stopped by on the way to Bolenan Forest when the girls were training to defeat a floormaster.

"Master, I was told the second-floor terrace is off-limits, I report."

Nana came over, looking disappointed.

Glancing in the direction she came from, I saw some knights from Vistall Duchy standing guard in front of the stairs to the second floor.

It appeared that Duke Vistall's multiple wives, along with some nobles' daughters and important officials, were monopolizing the second-floor terrace. Baronet Jelil was there too, presumably invited by one of the wives.

I saw **Duke's Wife** come up a lot in my AR display; searching the map with that keyword, I got eleven matches in total.

Three of them were women around the duke's age, but the overall range of ages was quite large. From below, the youngest-looking woman I could see had

features about as youthful as Nana's. My map information confirmed that she was seventeen years old, several years younger than the oldest of the duke's daughters.

In fact, he had seven daughters on the airship, averaging around Lulu's age, at fourteen or so.

Well, that's probably enough research on the duke's impressive family tree.

"We can go up there later. I'm sure they'll get bored eventually."

"Yes, master."

Nana nodded and walked over to join Arisa and the others looking out the window.

"Mother, do all airship observation decks have such a magnificent view?"

"Not quite, dear. I've been on all the airships in the Shiga Kingdom, and this terrace has the finest harmony of light, greenery, and sky that I have ever laid eyes on."

"Perhaps His Majesty has hired a new artist?"

"I should like to have a terrace like this in our castle villa, too."

My "Keen Hearing" skill caught the noble wives and daughters praising the view from the terrace.

I'd gone through a lot of trial and error to perfect that setup, so I felt a little proud to hear their earnest compliments.

"Byootiful?"

"Very hurri-sky high-cane, sir!"

Tama and Pochi stuck their faces against the glass, gazing outside happily.

I wasn't quite sure what Pochi was trying to say there.

Miss Karina and her guardian maids were looking out the window with sparkling eyes as well.

"Satou."

"Master, it appears that we can go out on the deck through that door."

Mia and Liza approached me.

“Is it really safe to go out there?”

“It is windy outside, I report.”

Lulu and Nana pointed at the signal flag whipping in the wind in front of the deck.

“It should be fine, don’t you think? Look at that person on the balcony—her hair’s not even moving in the wind.”

Arisa’s observation was correct. I used my recently acquired “Wind Reading” skill to check the flow of the wind.

It appeared that the area around the balcony was being protected from the worst of the wind pressure by Wind Magic.

“Looks like it’s safe. Let’s go check it out.”

I led the way through the double doors of the observation deck onto the balcony that overlooked the deck, which was just six feet or so below.

“Master! The view from here is remarkable, I report.”

Nana called me over to the end of the balcony that jutted from the ship’s side.

From there, it was possible to see all the ground below us.

Tama and Pochi were too short to see, so they climbed onto the railing to join in on looking down below. The fearless Karina tried to get onto the railing, too, but her lady-in-waiting Pina reprimanded her.

“*Très bieeen?*”

“It’s super, super high-high, sir!”

Maybe Pochi was trying to say “sky high.”

“That’s dangerous,” Liza warned the pair, grabbing them by their belts.

“.....■ **Summon Vision Denshobato Shoukan.**”

When my “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a spell being chanted, I looked up to see one of Duke Vistall’s officials summoning a pigeon in the sky.

According to my AR display, he had the **Summoning Magic** skill.

As I looked on, he informed me without my asking, “It’s a routine communication to our royal capital estate,” and hurried back onto the observation deck.

Just as that slightly sketchy man was leaving, a young girl came running onto the balcony in an expensive-looking dress.

“Wooow, this is even more amazing than the terrace! Don’t you agree, Nanny?”

“It is dangerous to run in a place like this, young madam.”

“Verily, there is no need to fret. If anything should happen, I shall save the young madam at once.”

Behind her was an older wet nurse and a female knight.

My AR display informed me that the girl was Duke Vistall’s youngest daughter.

Brimming with curiosity, the young noble girl’s eyes fixed squarely on me—no, behind me.

“Animal-eared folk!”

With that cry, she ran right past me up to Tama and Pochi, staring at them impolitely.

“Are they real?”

“Reeeal?”

“Are you really, really animal-eared folk?”

“Of course we’re real, sir! Pochi is a dog-eared folk, sir.”

“Tama is cat-eared fooolk?”

At first Tama and Pochi seemed nervous, but once they sensed that the young girl meant no harm, they responded to her normally.

“You mustn’t be so overly familiar with demi-humans, young madam.”

The wet nurse, who must have some prejudice against demi-humans, tried to pull the duke’s young daughter away from Tama and Pochi as she reached out

to touch their ears.

“Big Brother Torriel says it’s wrong to look down on people just because their race is different from ours, though.”

“That nonsense again... I shan’t come to your rescue if your father scolds you, you know.”

“Don’t worry! Father would never scold me.”

The little girl grinned confidently.

“Oh, Somienna, there you are.”

“They said we’re allowed to observe the combat bridge. You wanted to see it, didn’t you?”

“My, how wonderful!”

The girl’s two older sisters, who looked to be just a little older than Arisa, came to invite her to look at the bridge.

“Oh, I know! Pochi and Tama, you should come, too!”

“Mew?”

“Can we, sir?”

Tama and Pochi looked up at me hopefully.

I certainly wanted to let them play with children their own age, but sending them off alone with an upper noble they’d just met—especially the daughter of Duke Vistall, who seemed to have it in for me—seemed like it might be asking for trouble.

“I’m afraid we mustn’t impose on Lady Somienna. I’m terribly sorry, but...”

“Hey, what’s your name?” The little girl interrupted me.

“I am Satou Pendragon, hereditary knight and vassal of the Muno Barony.”

“Oh, so your name’s Satou? You can come, too. Then you’ll have nothing to worry about, right? That’s okay, isn’t it, dear sisters?”

She’s pretty quick-thinking for such a little girl.

Since I no longer had any reason to refuse, and the two sisters gave their

permission with reluctant smiles, I ended up getting dragged along.

The rest of our group couldn't come along, as the guide in charge of the visit said it would be too many people.

He agreed to show the others around once the princess's group was done observing the bridge.

"Master, I'm sure I don't need to worry about this, but no fooling around."

"Mm. Forbidden."

Arisa and Mia glanced at the fairly flat-chested female knight.

I assured them they had nothing to fear, and went off to observe the deck with Tama and Pochi.

The arrival of the duke's daughter had distracted me, but I did a quick investigation of the official who'd summoned the pigeon earlier.

He was only level 7, but he had a good deal of administration-related skills in addition to Summoning Magic. According to Arisa, magic skills required a lot of skill points, so there was probably nothing to worry about.

Just in case, though, I put a marker on him for the duration of the trip.



"This is the bridge from which the airship is steered."

We were guided to the bridge at the bow first.

Though it couldn't be seen from the balcony due to the shape of the hull, this bridge wasn't far from the observation deck.

"Goodness, even the floor is glass."

"My, how frightening."

The bridge was surrounded by a glass, boxlike construction for maximum visibility while steering.

In battle with monsters, the hull would close around the bridge, and lookouts would report to the helmsman through small windows.

"Unlike other airships, this state-of-the-art design..."

The captain told us more about the airship as he showed us around.

He enthusiastically explained how the latest technology allowed the entire ship to be controlled from the bridge, but to his disappointment, the young noble girls didn't seem at all interested.

Still, I wished he wouldn't direct jealous glares at the people manning the radar and the helm just because they did get the girls' attention.

"W-well, then, we mustn't disrupt the steering of the ship. Let's move on, shall we?"

Wisely reading the room, the guide escorted the girls toward the next room.

When we left the bridge and headed down the next corridor...

"Your Excellency, please reconsider disinheriting Lord Torriel. Your eldest son ought to inherit reign of the duchy—"

"Enough! As if I could trust a fool who blindly trusts savages and puts our villages in danger to carry on my legacy!"

I faintly overheard an argument coming from around the corner.

One of the voices sounded familiar: It was Duke Vistall.

Since the others didn't have the "Keen Hearing" skill, they didn't seem to have heard the details. They were anxious, though, because it was clear from the tone that this was a tense exchange. The female knight moved in front of her wards.

"But those were thieves who had been driven out of their tribes, not the sav—erm, the monkeyfolk—"

"Save such feeble excuses for the villagers whose parents or children were killed! Perhaps their spades and hoes will be enough to clear that field of flowers you call a brain!"

The duke stormed around the corner, accompanied by several members of his entourage.

Even taking the sound of the airship into account, it was strange how difficult it was to hear his voice from this short distance.

“Deactivate the security device.” Once the duke said this, his voice became audible. “...Somienna, are you touring the ship?”

His wrathful expression vanishing abruptly, he addressed his youngest daughter in a sweet, cloying voice.

“Y-yes. My elder sisters here invited me along.”

“How nice. You enjoy yourself, now.”

“Yes, Father.”

With that, the duke patted his daughter on the head and turned toward the bridge with his knights and officials in tow.

He addressed his two older girls, too, but not as dotingly as he had the littlest one. His youngest daughter must be the favorite.

The duke then proceeded to glare daggers at me as he passed—either because I was too close to his favorite daughter, or because he just hated me on sight.

“Shall we continue?”

The guide, who’d been pressed against the wall almost invisibly, resumed the tour.

When we turned the corner, we passed the high official who had just angered the duke so much, and was now being addressed by one of his colleagues.

I was already aware, thanks to the marker on my radar, that it was the same Summoning Magic user who sent up the pigeon from the balcony earlier.

After his colleague left, the man stayed behind, and I overheard a murmur that aroused my suspicion: “Perhaps there is truly no other way...”

I wish these people would keep their family quarrels out of the sky.

“Verily, the security in this area seems quite strict.”

“It has to be, since the airship’s magic barrier device is here. It’s set up so that no burglars can possibly infiltrate this room.”

The guide explained the nature of the room to the female guard.

“Verily, it is a rather large device. Perhaps even bigger than the magic barrier in the fort.”

“Indeed. The heavier the airship, the more fuel is required for its flight, so it is better to have a barrier like this that can produce a shield if the need arises rather than make the hull denser and heavier.”

The knight nodded thoughtfully at the guide’s explanation.

As a soldier, she seemed to be very interested in equipment like this.

“Verily, may I ask what that large tubelike device might be?”

“That? I’m sorry, I’m not entirely sure. I’ll ask someone with more expertise about it later.”

The pipe the guide couldn’t identify was a magic-conducting cable connected to an emergency altitude control booster.

The booster was one-use-only, but it was meant to help evade attacks that the rudder alone couldn’t deal with. Although it produced a considerable amount of speed, the propulsion didn’t last long, so the only passengers who might risk injury would be anyone in a large space like the observation deck or the hangar. Normally, there would be an emergency notification before using the booster anyway.

“And here we have the crown jewel of this cutting-edge airship: the latest coaxial skypower engine. Through alternating rotations...”

Next, we moved to the engine room, where we observed the Magic Furnace, the coaxial skypower engines, and finally the propellers.

At the skypower engines, the chief engineer made the same mistake as the captain. I certainly understood his desire to talk about the technology. Maybe once we reached the royal capital, I could invite him out for drinks and have a good in-depth discussion about airships.

“Flappyyyy?”

“So shaky, sir.”

“Yes, that’s the airship’s rudder. By pushing air from the propellers against the rudder, the airship can change direction.”

The guide explained the workings of the rudder, or tail fin, to Tama and Pochi, who were glued eagerly to a small window in the corridor.

Since the rudder could easily be broken by a magic attack, I'd made it from a material with strong magic resistance. It could resist multiple intermediate (or stronger) attack spells, and even my Magic Hand couldn't meddle with it.

I used the same material for the flaps on the stabilizing fin and the rotating ailerons.

"In case of emergency, the control room above the rudder can steer it directly by pulling on a wire."

Of course, the wire was made from this material as well.

It was a shame that I couldn't brag to anyone about it, since it was a secret that I built this airship.

For the propellers, I used a generous amount of the giant wind stones that I found in the windy cave in the Black Dragon Mountains.

"Oh? What's that little thing that looks like a small ship?"

"That's a lifeboat for evacuating important persons to safety in case of emergency."

In the hangar at the rear deck were two sixteen-person lifeboats.

I reused fans that didn't meet the skypower engine's standards to make a magic device to reduce fall speed, so they could safely drop from a considerable height.

Unlike with a sea vessel, it would be difficult to deploy these in the unlikely event of a crash with no time for an emergency landing, so I put only a minimal number of lifeboats on board.

That seemed to be the end of the tour. We went around through the rear corridors and returned to the observation deck.

...Hmm?

Looking at my radar, I saw a marker on the rear deck.

It was the high official who'd angered the duke earlier.

Worried that he was up to no good, I peered through a small window in the corridor and saw that there was a woman with him.

According to my map information, the woman was named Leda, and she was one of Duke Vistall's wives.

At first, I thought she was the mother of the eldest son, Torriel, who was about to get disowned, but I was wrong—she was one of the younger ones.

“...Ew.”

After the official gave the wife some kind of present, she embraced him passionately, and an intense makeout session ensued. I was witnessing an extramarital affair.

“Satou, is something interesting happening out there?”

“No, you just missed it.”

I hustled the curious children away from the window, and we returned to the observation deck.



“We will now be entering the territory of Vanwing Pass. Our wind mages will be performing a ritual spell to ward off monsters, so we kindly ask those with sensitive hearing to enter the soundproof room in the bridge or return to the noble visitors’ room.”

After this announcement repeated three times, the wind mages emerged onto the deck with safety ropes.

The dots on my radar informed me that the wives who had taken over the terrace were withdrawing to their quarters.

I leaned over the balcony railing to listen, and transcribed the Ritual Magic spell as I waited for it to activate.

PYWEEEE.

Just as the spell was completed, there was a loud shriek like the cry of a bird monster.

That was probably to keep the real monsters away.

Checking my map, I saw the dots that indicated monsters stopping or moving away from us.

The spell seemed to be pretty effective. Our airship safely crossed the mountains, the most dangerous part of the journey to the royal capital, without being attacked by any monsters.

As we flew above the Vanwing Pass fort, I saw a big, blue field in the distance.

“Prettyyy... So many flowerrrs!”

“Those blue blobs are flowers? I wonder what kind...”

I sensed Arisa using Space Magic without a chant, probably the Clairvoyance spell.

“They sort of look like lotus flowers, but light blue instead of purple.”

The detailed information on my map labeled them as blue lotus flowers. “You’re right, they are lotuses,” I informed Arisa.

“Oh? Master, can you tell what those telephone-pole-like things are?”

Arisa pointed at a line of columns in front of the field.

“Those are barrier posts. That barrier forms a circle with the royal capital at the center. I’ve heard they gradually widened the ring over hundreds of years, gradually making a bigger safe area for cultivated land.”

The Echigoya Company folks in the royal capital had told me about this.

However, some monsters could break through the barrier posts’ monster-repellent effect, and others had been left inside the area when the barrier was erected, so the area wasn’t completely free of danger.

In fact, I had even come across a government-sponsored ranch being attacked by monsters before.

Still, I had never seen such large and abundant fields, even in the Ougoch Duchy.

As far as I could tell from the rivers and canals, these were primarily wheat fields as opposed to rice paddy fields. Either way, all this farmland should be enough to easily feed the population of the royal capital.

“Master, our altitude has decreased, I report.”

The airship had been flying at a high altitude up until we flew over Vanwing Pass, but now we had lowered to an altitude of about 600 feet.

“You’re right. Maybe there’s no need to keep a high altitude since there are so few monsters near the royal capital.”

Even if there was anyone crazy enough to try attacking an airship, we were still high enough to be well out of the range of any arrows or spells.

A military Magic Cannon might reach, but I can’t imagine how anyone would smuggle in a cannon with a huge Magic Furnace without being noticed by the royal army.

“You can see the ground a lot more clearly now,” Lulu commented.

“Indeed. I believe I spy a big, round wild boar in the forest there.”

Liza’s eyes glittered, while Lulu smiled awkwardly.

While the land around the royal capital was mostly flat, there were still a few more mountains and valleys along the way that kept the capital itself out of sight, but the main road to the royal capital was full of carriages and travelers coming and going.

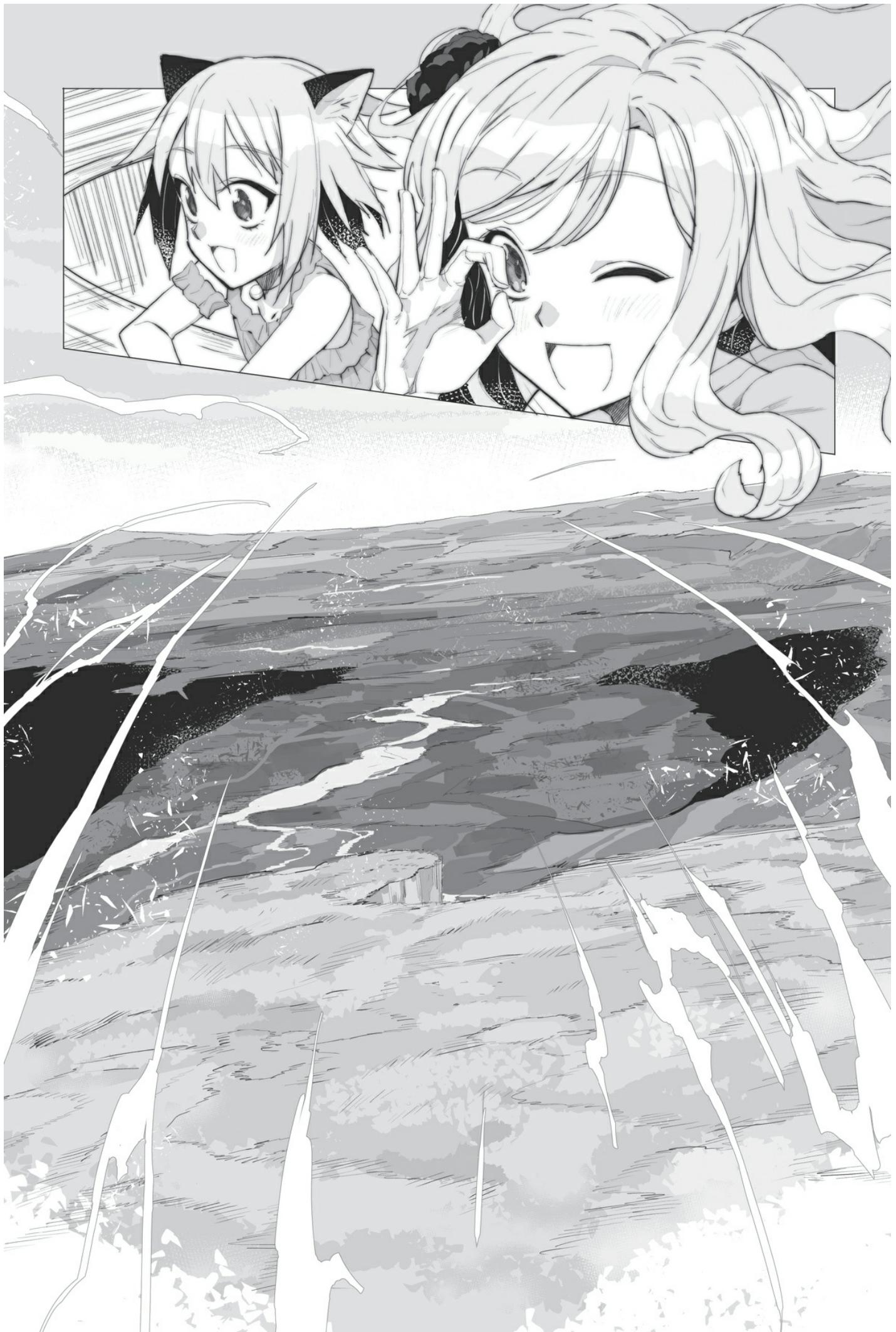
“So peaceful...”

“Relaaax...”

“Nice and calm, sir.”

Sitting on a bench on the balcony, my young friends gazed warmly at the peaceful scene.

Barring any dramatic incidents, we would land in the royal capital very soon.



Rebellion in the Sky

I have always lived by the rule, “A true man of honor serves his lord and protects his people.” But now, for the sake of our territory’s future, I must turn my sword against the very lord I am sworn to serve...

“Your Excellency... We are going to rebel against you now.”

A lone man looked up at the portrait of Duke Vistall that had been removed from the council room wall and murmured quietly.

This was the duke’s hunting manor, located between Vanwing Pass and the royal capital. It was a fort-like mansion where the duke sometimes invited other nobles to enjoy hunting monsters while he was visiting the royal capital.

Normally, the staff would be hard at work preparing for the hunt as the year-end kingdom meeting drew near. Today, however, instead of servants, there was a large crowd of grim-faced men in Vistall Duchy military uniforms coming and going.

“Captain, we’ve finished exchanging the portraits.”

“Good work.”

The captain nodded at the young soldier’s report, and the boy took the swapped-out portrait and left the room.

Where the duke’s portrait had been hanging not long before, there was now a portrait of his eldest son, Torriel.

It was the men’s way of expressing that they were now serving a new master.

“Captain! We’ve received a pigeon from Mossan on the airship!”

An aide came running into the room, cradling a pigeon.

The captain accepted the bird, which had been created with Summoning Magic.

“We left Labyrinth City a quarter-cycle later than expected. Unsure if this will delay our passage over the hunting manor.’ I see... Well, no matter. Such a small delay will not affect our plan.”

The captain nodded gravely.

“But are you sure about this...? If we fail, our lives and even our families in our hometowns might well be forfeit...”

The aide’s voice trembled as he addressed the captain.

“Do not speak of it. *‘The time of great upheaval is upon us. An era of drastic change will come, just as when the ancestral king and the first hero of the Saga Empire founded the kingdom.’* We have no future unless we overthrow His Excellency, even if we are given the dishonorable name of traitors. We must put the prescient Lord Torriel at the head of the duchy.”

“Those are Prince Sharorik’s words... But is ‘a time of great upheaval’ really coming?”

The aide recalled the third prince’s cruel face as he spoke.

“It is. I may be too ignorant to understand, but Lord Torriel had full confidence in the ‘era of change’ Prince Sharorik spoke of,” the captain responded firmly. “That is precisely why Lord Torriel respects the demi-humans, and even went so far as to go to the city of the Weaselman Empire to serve as their viceroy himself.”

“But he earned His Excellency’s displeasure by acquiring the Screws.”

The captain and the aide both looked at the “Screw” on the table.

It was the size of a man’s arm, a terrifying magic tool that could control even the most ferocious monster if driven into its head.

In truth, the Weaselman Empire had expanded from a small nation to an empire controlling all the demi-human nations on the eastern part of the continent in a mere twenty years by using this Screw and their army of manned golems.

They formed alliances with the burly lionfolk, the scalefolk tribes, and many others, and even destroyed the land of the tigerfolk.

"His Excellency may hate demi-humans, but even he would understand the usefulness of the Screws. If we were to show them to him now, we might yet—"

"No."

The captain cut the aide off.

Then, after thinking for a moment, he continued.

"Lord Torriel has already spoken to His Excellency the Duke about the Screws and the manned golems, of course. And yet His Excellency still refused to join hands with the weaselfolk."

"I—I see..."

The captain revealed information that only those closet to Torriel would know.

The excuse Duke Vistall gave for disowning Torriel, a monkeyfolk attack that caused major loses in several villages, was actually the monkeyfolk's retaliation against a new weapon test conducted by weaselfolk engineers that had killed some of their people.

"We will be the stones that pave Lord Torriel's noble path to leadership. If that has cleared up your doubts, go and check on the tamed monsters before you gather the commanding officers. There should be no issue as long as we have the Screws, but just in case."

"Understood. Should I check on things underground as well?"

The aide's face was once again full of his usual readiness for battle.

Now he could be trusted to do his job.

"Yes, if you would. The tamers we hired in Labyrinth City should be looking after it, but they have too much pride in their own taming abilities. Make sure someone keeps watch that they don't foolishly attempt to remove the Screws."

"Of course. I shudder to think what would happen if the creature we needed seven Screws to capture were to turn its fangs against us."

"Agreed."

The aide excused himself and hurried to the hangar containing the tamed

monsters.

“Truly, I see no reason why we would need to use that thing when we have all this force already, but...the famous Scarlet Nobleman, Baronet Jelil, and all those sly mithril explorers are on that airship. Better to be prepared just in case...”

Muttering to himself, the captain stared in the direction the airship would be coming from.



“Thank you for gathering here for the sake of Vistall Duchy’s future, everyone.”

With that, the captain looked around at the commanding officers lined up before him.

“I am sure many of you feel reluctant to turn against our master Duke Vistall, to whom we owe very much. But know that this is a necessary step for the security of our duchy.”

Most of the officers listened impassively, but a few wore bitter expressions.

That was understandable. Anyone who served a feudal lord knew that rebellion was a sin punishable by worse than death.

Unlike most capital crimes, anyone deemed guilty of treason would see his family and fellows all slaughtered without exception—in addition to himself.

“For the future of Vistall Duchy, I ask that you pledge your loyalty to me—no, to Lord Torriel.”

The captain looked around to ensure there were no objections, then nodded.

“Thank you. Then let us go over the strategy once more.”

On the table in the center of the council room was a map with the hunting manor at the center.

It was positioned squarely between Vanwing Pass and the center of the royal capital; even with the fastest Wyvern Riders, it would take a solid four and a half hours to reach.

“The primary goal of this operation is the assassination of His Excellency Duke Vistall.”

The captain looked at the officers.

“Such a thing would be impossible at home, but away from his territory, his power as a lord will not work. We will shoot down the airship and execute His Excellency.”

A lord could use the power of a city core to protect himself within his territory, so assassinating him would be incredibly difficult. Everyone present knew this, because when a terrifying demon once attacked the duke’s castle, the duke was able to use that power to chase the demon off.

“Our secondary goal is to rescue Lady Somienna and her mother. This will be accomplished using the airship’s lifeboats.”

The real objective of this was the Holy Chalice contained in the duke’s youngest daughter’s Item Box.

Lord Torriel’s mother and sister were valuable as well, but the chalice was far more important to him.

As far as the captain knew, the Holy Chalice was a magic tool for collecting and purifying the miasma within a territory, and ought to be easily replaceable; but when Lord Torriel explained the plan to him, he put great emphasis on securing the “Holy Chalice.”

“The tertiary goal is the duke’s wives and daughters. We need not worry about rescuing our comrades who have infiltrated the airship.”

“You would abandon them?”

“If we send in a few Lance Beetle Riders, surely—”

The officers sounded accusatory, but the captain interrupted them.

“No, they’ve already been given a precious magic tool from Lord Torriel himself to use for their escape. They will be fine.”

“A magic tool?”

“Yes, it’s a remarkable item that will protect them from the magi-bomb blast

and allow them to land safely.”

“Such an item exists...?”

“I should have expected no less from Lord Torriel.”

There were murmurs of admiration from the officers.

The secret magic tool was known as a “Demonic Heart”—a forbidden item that granted the wearer effects similar to a demonic potion. It had been discovered long ago in the now-withered labyrinth that was once in Vistall Duchy.

I would have liked to have the Lance Beetle Riders wear them, too, were they not cursed items that can never be taken off..., the captain thought.

Having relayed the objectives of the plan, the captain went on to outline the steps.

“First, the escape lifeboat will be launched with Lady Somienna and her mother. It cannot fly for long, so when the operation begins, the aides will go out with a carriage to collect them.”

The captain pointed at the map and a rough schematic of the airship as he explained.

“Once we confirm that the lifeboat has been launched, we will attack from the ground using the tamed monsters, and destroy the airship’s magic barrier. Of course, if that is enough to bring the airship down, that would all be well and good.”

At that, the commanding officer of the bombardment squad smirked.

Of course, they knew when they first formed this plan that bringing down a flying airship would be exceptionally difficult.

Although it had presumably lowered its altitude after crossing Vanwing Pass, the airship would still just barely be within range.

“Once the bombardment begins, the Lance Beetle Riders will take off and draw the Wyvern Knight guards away from the airship. Wait to bring them down until they’ve been lured far enough away.”

The commander of the Lance Beetle Riders nodded.

“While the Wyvern Knights are drawn away from the airship, activate all the rocket trees, and destroy the airship.”

“Understood!” the intense commander of the rocket tree squad barked.

Unlike the other squads, no one would be riding the rocket trees once they were fired; success would be dependent on the rocket trees’ instinct to attack any large flying object.

“At the same time, our attack will signal our comrades on the airship to assassinate the duke, and sabotage the airship’s bridge, mechanisms, fuel stores, steering equipment, and turrets.”

The assassination would be committed by an expert operative, while the sabotage would be accomplished by one-use-only magic tools called magi bombs, made by the Weaselman Empire.

The latter’s strength was on par with several Fire Shots from a Fire Rod, so it could only be used to destroy the airship’s equipment from the inside.

“Captain, what about our secret weapon underground?”

A monster tamer sitting in the corner of the room insolently raised a question.

“That is only to be used as a last resort. We must avoid using things that are difficult to control unless absolutely necessary.”

The captain hesitated for a moment over whether to ignore him, then responded briefly and added, “Any other questions?”

“Captain, when should I go up?” This was from the artillery observer.

“At the same time as the assault begins,” the captain responded.

Ideally, he should go up before the assault, but they couldn’t risk him launching too early and catching the attention of the airship guards.

“If they issue an emergency SOS to the royal capital, they’ll send Wyvern Riders from the capital and Vanwing Pass. Most of them can already take on several times their number, but if Sir Torel of the Shiga Eight comes, even ten times our amount of Lance Beetle Riders would not be enough. Do we have any

countermeasures for that?"

"No need to worry. Directly before the lifeboat is launched, our man on the inside will destroy their emergency communications."

The captain of the Lance Beetle Riders nodded quietly.

"Captain, what will we do if the lifeboat doesn't leave the airship?"

"Once the airship passes above this hunting manor, we will put the plan into action even if the lifeboat does not appear. Our first objective is the highest priority," the captain added grimly.

Those present who knew that Lord Torriel's mother was also the captain's older sister looked at him worriedly.

There were no further questions after that, and the commanding officers left to give their men their orders.



"It's almost time..."

Mossan, a high official and summoning mage of Vistall Duchy, muttered into the wind.

He stood on the balcony of the large airship as it cruised toward the royal capital, mingling with lowly explorers to gaze at the scenery, until he spotted a familiar tower below.

"So the time has come to toll the final bell, then."

He used a mirror to flash a signal, and a flash of light came back in return.

So the plan was moving forward unchanged.

"...I must make preparations as well."

Mossan turned on his heel and left the balcony.

He had to hurry, or the airship would arrive above the hunting manor before he reached the bridge.

On his way back onto the observation deck, he spotted his beloved Leda on the second-floor terrace. She was holding the magic flute he gave her and

gazing at him silently.

I've asked her to do a terrible thing.

In spite of his regrets, Mossan focused on the plan and looked away to hold back the tears.

But while he was awash in those emotions, he bumped into a black-haired girl as he went back inside.

"I—I'm sorry... O-oh dear. Are you all right? You don't look well..."

Mossan responded that he was fine, and passed by the kindly girl as she looked at him worriedly.

"That certainly is a frightful face..."

Catching a glimpse of his reflection in the polished metal door, Mossan winced.

This ship is about to sink.

He couldn't say it aloud, but he thought about it as he looked around at the passengers who were about to get caught up in the situation.

The cat-eared girl at the end of the balcony looked around suddenly, and said something to the black-haired boy next to her.

For just a moment, Mossan had a dreadful premonition, but of course there was no way to convey it to his comrades in the hunting manor below.

"But still..."

Even if she was a filthy demi-human, it was terrible that such a young girl would be embroiled in their plot...

"I will not ask your forgiveness. Once you pass to the realm of the dead, you may come seek your revenge."

The high official murmured something inaudible, then shook his head to clear away his doubts.

We must take action, just in case the worst should happen...

The rest of his words did not leave his lips as he vanished onto the

observation deck.



“...The airship still hasn’t arrived.”

Standing on the balcony of the hunting manor, the captain squinted toward the forest.

“Captain! Our scout says the airship’s come into sight. It will pass above our base within the quarter.”

“So it’s begun at last...”

Upon receiving his aide’s report, the captain strained to suppress the darkness in his expression, and forced a fierce grin onto his face instead.

Turning around, he stepped into the hallway overlooking the expanse of the vaulted entrance hall. His men were lined up below.

“Focus! The time is finally upon us! The fate of our Vistall Duchy rests upon this operation. I expect great things from all of you.”

“““Yes, sir!“““

His soldiers shouted a strong response.

The doors to the storehouse below the manor opened, and the ferocious monsters, tamed by the Screws in their heads, appeared one after another.

The Lance Beetle Riders, who would be the driving force behind this attack, were in the lead.

There were no less than ten knights wielding Fire Swallow Rods astride lance beetles. Elite though they might be, a mere three of Shiga Kingdom’s Wyvern Riders could not defend the airship against all ten of them.

The mages applied several rounds of support magic to the lance beetles and their riders in order to improve the chances of the plan’s success.

After the ten Lance Beetle Riders, the next monsters emerged, their large forms shaking the ground.

There were cannon toads, which boasted more firepower than a catapult, and rock shooters, which were larger than carriages. Both were more than powerful

enough to damage an airship without any serious armor.

Through Lord Torriel's arrangements, they also were able to get three valuable Barrier Breaker shots, which could destroy magic barriers.

"They really are enormous, aren't they?"

The aide was looking at the five giant rocket trees growing in the garden as they began to rustle and move.

Rocket trees were nasty treelike monsters that attacked flying wyverns and left seeds in their corpses. They had acquired five, but since they were only shooting down a slow-moving airship, perhaps two would have been plenty.

Next to prepare for takeoff was the Elder Crow, with the Wind Magic-using artillery observer mounted aboard.

"With all this power, one almost pities the enemy."

The aide's eyes looked fiery as he spoke.

The enemy... For just a moment, the captain's thoughts went out to his former colleagues on the airship, but he nodded without saying a word of that.

"Then let us begin the operation. Transport the cannon toads and rock shooters to the designated firing grounds. Lance Beetle Riders, move to the slope for easy acceleration."

At the captain's orders, each of the squads leaped into action.

"Captain, may the fortunes of war be with you."

"And you as well."

With a salute, the aide set out, leading ten mounted knights and two four-horse carriages to the highway. Their goal was to rescue the duke's escaped wives and youngest daughter, Somienna, who possessed the Holy Chalice.

"Urgent news! The airship is here!"

"Excellent. As soon as the lifeboats are confirmed to have escaped, or when the airship arrives directly above the manor, begin the attack."

As soon as the lookout gave the report, the captain reminded everyone of the timing of the attack.

The cannon toads and rock shooters, now scattered to their posts, aimed their barrels toward the sky, while the lance beetles spread their wings and prepared to launch with their riders aboard.

Receiving orders from the tamers, the rocket trees spread their roots and charged up magic, preparing to fire at any moment.

All eyes were on the rear deck of the airship, waiting for the lifeboat to appear.



“Hmm? Aren’t you Duke Vistall’s...?”

As the high official entered the bridge, the bridge captain addressed him.

Since the captain didn’t seem to remember his name, one of his aides murmured, “That is Sir Mossan, a civil official and Summoning Magic user.”

“Sir Mossan, was it? Have you business with us? If you’re looking for His Excellency, he has already gone back to the noble visitors’ room.”

“Yes, I am aware. I was hoping to observe your work for a while. Would that be all right?”

Mossan could hardly say that he was here to ensure that the plan succeeded, and even to destroy the bridge, if necessary.

Noticing his pale face, the aide whispered to the captain, “He incurred His Excellency’s ire earlier...”, and the captain sympathetically agreed to let him observe the bridge.

Mossan stood behind the lookout who was watching a magic tool called an “enemy detector,” and looked out at the view ahead.

The hunting manor where his comrades lay in wait was right in front of them.

“Captain, we have a report from the rear deck. Some of our noble passengers have entered the lifeboats to play around without permission.”

“Let them do as they wish. Just warn the rear deck staff to ensure that they don’t launch the lifeboat by mistake.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

Mossan cracked a faint smile at this conversation.

Lady Somienna and her mother had safely entered the lifeboat.

“Hmm? What kind of error is this?”

The lookout frowned at the blinking lamp that indicated something was amiss on the airship.

At the same time, they heard a heavy, metallic grating sound.

“What was that?”

“I’m checking now—it looks like a lifeboat has been launched from the rear deck.”

“What?! But what happened to the safety lock?”

“It seems that it had been unlocked.”

Mossan heard the captain and the aide confirm what had happened.

It seems the lifeboat has been launched safely with its precious cargo in tow. Now we can put the plan into action without fear.

With that silent thought, Mossan reached for the Magic Bag hidden at his breast to withdraw the magi bomb and destroy the bridge.

But his hand stopped in place before he could pull it out.

Rationally, he knew destroying the bridge was the best way to ensure his comrades’ success.

And yet his hand refused to move.

Because deep down he feared that if he used the magi bomb here, the shrapnel might go flying into the sky, break through the glass of the observation deck located behind the bridge, and harm his beloved Leda.

What a coward I am...

Mossan sighed, then pretended to lose his balance and fall against the lookout.

“Excuse me. I just grew a bit dizzy...”

He grabbed the man’s arm, as if he had lost his strength.

This was all to prevent the man from reporting his comrades on the ground, who were likely showing up on the enemy detection device.

But as if in mockery of his efforts—

“Enemy attack! There’s something on the ground up ahead!”

A young man’s voice echoed through the airship’s announcement device.

The lookout shook Mossan off and went back to the enemy detector.

“Hard to starboard!”

“Hard to starboard!”

The helmsman echoed the captain’s orders.

Most likely, the airship’s efforts to slowly change course would be in vain.

After all, the sesame seed-sized bombs flying up at them were about to become much larger in the blink of an eye.

If all was according to plan, the barrage included Barrier Breaker shots.

“Emergency maneuvers!”

“Alert to all passengers, we are taking emergency maneuvers—”

When the captain shouted, his aide began relaying a warning through the announcement device.

“Hang onto the nearest railing if you want to live!”

The captain bellowed over the aide with a warning of his own.

As soon as he finished, the captain barked orders at the helmsman.

The helmsman slammed the buttons on the control panel, and the airship accelerated sideways.

The crewmen on the bridge were safely buckled into their seats, but Mossan was thrown from his position slumped on the floor, was tossed across the bridge, and went tumbling against the glass wall around it.

Wh-what?! Where did this speed come from?!

Mossan was shocked as the acceleration pressed him against the glass wall.

The barrage that was about to hit the airship head-on instead flew past its side.

They dodged it?!

Unable to even exclaim in the face of the acceleration, Mossan trembled at the unexpected capabilities of the airship.

And while the speed alone was shocking enough, he was equally startled that the hull could hold up to such acceleration so easily.

“Magic Furnace at full throttle! Activate the lower magic barrier at once, full power! If there’s enough fuel to spare, speed up the propellers!”

The crewmen quickly recovered and followed the captain’s orders.

“Damage report!”

“No damage to the machinery. The noble passengers are alarmed, but no one is hurt. No damage to the observation deck.”

At that, Mossan briefly clutched his chest in relief.

His beloved Leda was safe.

“No one was thrown from the balcony, either.”

“That’s a miracle.”

Impossible.

It made sense that Leda was fine inside the airship, but he couldn’t believe that no one had fallen from the balcony when the sudden acceleration happened so soon after the emergency announcement.

Was it a miracle from heaven, or mischief from hell...?

Forcing his sore muscles to move, Mossan turned to look at the hunting manor below.

As he gazed down through the glass wall, he saw the magic barrier below the airship becoming denser.

Beyond that, the rocket trees started sending up smoke.

“Captain! More monsters!”

The crew on the bridge had noticed the same thing.

“Starboard under attack! Hard to port!”

“*All hands, hold on to the nearest railing!*”

Mossan looked around for something to grab onto.

He wrapped his arm around a convenient frame, but his relief was short-lived when he saw the magi bomb rolling along the glass floor.

He must have dropped it during the emergency acceleration, since he was holding onto it within his bag.

Mossan stretched his arm toward the bomb with all his might.

“Now!”

The helmsman shouted, and the airship suddenly accelerated in the opposite direction.

Clinging tightly to the frame, he saw from the corner of his eye a rain of rocket trees and bullets fly past the airship.

“Captain, that was the last of the emergency altitude control boosters.”

“I know that!”

Looking up from the glass wall, Mossan saw the rocket trees changing trajectory in the sky above.

“Captain! Those monsters are coming back toward us!”

“Change of priorities! Focus on the turrets before the propellers. Shoot down those monsters as soon as the Magic Cannons are fully charged!”

As he listened to the captain, Mossan looked around, but he couldn’t find the magi bomb anywhere. It must have gotten stuck somewhere during the last acceleration.

He couldn’t see where it might have gone, but surely no one had just picked it up, so it had to be somewhere.

“Multiple reactions detected below! It’s other monsters!”

Mossan saw the Lance Beetle Riders fly up from the forest. At the same time,

something that looked like a mess of black dots went flying toward the airship. It was the third barrage.

“Tch, what the hell is—”

In the middle of the captain’s comment, the third barrage hit the airship’s magic barrier.

“Damage report!”

“There’s...”

The airship barely shook.

The Barrier Breaker must have destroyed the magic barrier, but failed to do anything else.

“...no damage.”

Mossan’s eyes widened.

Impossible.

“The magic barrier was reduced, but is still intact.”

Impossible. Impossible!

It was unthinkable that any magic barrier could be so strong that even the Vistall Duchy’s treasured Barrier Breaker wouldn’t destroy it after a direct hit.

Had the kingdom developed a new magic barrier and kept it secret from the duchies...?

“Enemy contact with the monsters below!”

The Lance Beetle Riders flew past the airship, using the Fire Swallow Rods to shoot Fire Shots as Mossan watched.

The Fire Shots hit the airship’s magic barrier, glowed red, and vanished.

As he feared, they had little effect while the magic barrier was still in effect.

“Send an SOS to the royal capital!”

“We can’t. The emergency signal isn’t working!”

His comrades had done their job well.

Mossan paused his search for the magi bomb long enough to cheer silently.

“Captain, up ahead!”

One of the Lance Beetle Riders charged at the bridge from the front.

Surely even this newfangled magic barrier couldn’t neutralize a high-speed, head-on charge from a lance beetle.

This time, it’ll surely be over.

“Evasive maneuvers!”

“That was the last emergency boost cylinder!”

“We won’t make it in time!”

The shouts from the aide and helmsmen were tinged with panic.

“All hands, brace for impact!”

As the captain’s strained cry echoed in his ears, Mossan watched calmly as the lance beetle closed in, bringing his doom with him.



“This is the end.”

Riding an Elder Crow, the artillery observer smirked as he watched the lance beetle speed toward the bridge.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the airship’s turret hurriedly turn from the rocket tree toward the lance beetle, but it was too late.

The lance beetle would break through the bridge in seconds, and into the airship.

There wasn’t a soul alive who could do anything to stop—

“What?!”

Suddenly, a shining sphere shot the lance beetle down.

A black-haired boy and girl had run out onto the front deck and fired at it from long staffs.

Fire Shots from a Fire Rod should have little effect on a lance beetle, but just a

few of those shots were enough to make flames burst out and destroy the exoskeleton.

Miraculously, the flames from the lance beetle pushed its rider off into an unnatural arc, so he landed safely on the deck.

But that was as far as his luck went—a brown-haired demi-human girl with a tail ran over and pinned the rider down before he could get his revenge on the black-haired boy and girl.

The artillery observer saw some little girls and a blond young woman who had tumbled to the deck from the balcony slump with relief when the danger had subsided.

Little did he know that the girls were actually lamenting that they hadn't gotten to participate: "No fuuun?" "Aw darn, sir." "We missed our chance to get in on the action."

"I-it's not over yet..."

The Magic Bullets from the airship's turret couldn't quite keep up with the rocket trees' speed, uselessly spewing flares into the sky.

Besides, there were only two turrets, and five rocket trees.

The Wyvern Knights were off dealing with the Lance Beetle Riders' attack, so they couldn't defend against the rocket trees.

It was impressive that the boy had managed to shoot one of the beetles down, but a rocket tree was far faster, with far higher defenses.

Even if he was a little strong, no individual's Fire Rod could bring down such a monster.

"How pathetic..."

On the balcony of the airship, several mages were beginning chants.

If the powerful Magic Cannon couldn't keep up with the rocket trees, how could an individual mage with a shorter range possibly hope to do so?

The artillery observer sneered at the foolish mages.

Sure enough, the spells that followed scattered far from the rocket trees.

“What’s this? ...A green person?”

A green woman the size of a giant had appeared next to one of the little girls on the deck.

“A summoner’s beast?”

The artillery observer squinted, but then he was distracted by three of the five rocket trees about to strike the airship.

“Now fall, you hunk of—whaaaaat?!”

The green woman flew into the air and knocked two of the rocket trees aside, catching the third one in midair.

Her other hand glowed green, and as the girl who seemed to be the summoner waved her arm, the green woman sent that light crashing into the rocket tree.

The trunk tore open like an ancient branch breaking, spraying out flames and seeds that could pierce even metal.

The artillery observer crossed his fingers that the airship would get caught up in the explosion, but the blast of fire and seeds went no farther than the woman’s outstretched hand, evaporating in the air without a scratch on the vessel.



“Tch, they’ve got a damned elf!”

Looking through his longscope, the man realized what the aqua-haired little girl who had summoned the green woman really was.

“Then that must have been one of the magical spirits from the legends of the ancestral king! What the hell are you doing on this airship?!”

The man howled with rage, but of course the elf girl didn’t hear.

The spirit flew up into the air, chased down the other two rocket trees she had knocked off course, and destroyed them far away from the airship.

Of the other two rocket trees, one was shot down by the turret’s Magic Cannon, and the last one was pierced by the black-haired boy and girl’s magic and slowed down, then was blown up by the other mages’ attack magic.

But the rebellion still had the advantage.

The battle between the Lance Beetle Riders and the Wyvern Knights had produced one loss on each side, and now an eight-on-two battle was unfolding in the sky far from the airship.

“The magic barrier should be at its limits now, surely?”

Amid the rain of fire from the cannon toads and rock shooters, the magic barrier of the airship was beginning to cave.

“I was worried when the three Barrier Breakers were misfires, but it looks like it should be fine.”

Misfires... Was that really what happened?

Three Foundation spears shot from the balcony and destroyed one of the cannonballs.

But surely there was no way anyone could have specifically targeted the Barrier Breakers so precisely...

The artillery observer shook his head, dismissing the absurd notion.

“GOOOOO!”

The young girl’s cry carried far on the wind and reached his ears.

A series of red flares flew up from the deck and rained down toward the ground.

“S-surely not—”

The lights disappeared into the forest, and columns of flames rose in their place.

Strangely enough, their number matched the exact amount of cannon toads and rock shooters.

“Please let me be wrong...”

But the observer’s prayer was in vain; the barrage from the ground abruptly stopped.

Though he had no way of knowing this, right before the scarlet lights hit, a series of Remote Stuns struck the riders off the tamed monsters and miraculously saved their lives.

“No! It’s still not over. We still have the Lance Beetle Riders.”

The artillery observer looked up toward their battle, placing all his hopes on their victory.

With their advantage in numbers, they brought down yet another Wyvern Knight as he watched.

Leaving two Lance Beetle Riders to square off with the final, wounded Wyvern Knight, the remaining six flew down toward the bottom of the airship toward the bridge.

They were probably planning to attack the pesky mages on the front deck.

Luckily, the elf girl’s powerful wind spirit had disappeared.

Even an elf’s remarkable stores of magic couldn’t maintain such a powerful summon for too long.

“Now, time to dance...”

Imagining the mages being roasted by the Fire Swallow Rods, the artillery observer smirked a little.

Flying along the side of the airship, the Lance Beetle Riders finally rose toward

the front deck.

Six balls of flame shot forth from the riders' Fire Rods, closing in on the mages.

Then the observer saw it.

A blond girl with a large shield blocked three of the flames.

Two of them were slashed away to nothing by two small children's glowing red Magic Swords.

The young woman with the blond ringlets jumped in the path of the final shot, glowing with white light as she was engulfed in flames.

"No way... Who the hell are these people?"

Understandably, the artillery observer stared in disbelief as the blond girl stood unharmed at the center of the flames.



"It can't be. It can't be. It can't..."

Standing in the lookout tower of the hunting manor, the captain stared up in shock as the airship passed overhead.

The first major stumbling block was when the airship avoided all five of their carefully timed rocket trees.

The second was when all three of their Barrier Breakers failed.

But still, it wasn't yet a total failure.

Even if the rocket trees missed once, they would keep chasing their target until they ran out of fuel.

And even if the Barrier Breakers didn't work, the cannon toads and rock shooters could chip away at the airship's defenses as long as it was in range.

The reckless Lance Beetle Rider who attacked the bridge hardly counted as a third stumbling block, since they had still managed to defeat the Wyvern Knights as planned.

"Impossible... Impossible. IMPOSSIBLE!"

As the captain unsteadily went down the stairs underground, the unbelievable scenes flashed through his mind.

A strange green creature destroying the rocket trees. Greater Fire Magic the likes of which he had never seen, burning every last one of the cannon toads and rock shooters to a crisp.

Neither of those monster species were weak. In fact, they were the kind of monsters one would only take on with a large squad, and fully prepared for casualties.

The Wind Magic-using observer reported that the green creature was a wind spirit controlled by an elf, but surely that was impossible. The only time a mighty elf who could use Spirit Magic would stray from their World Tree was if the world itself was in danger.

And though the Lance Beetle Riders were their last ray of hope, there was only one still in the air.

The saboteurs on the airship had destroyed the emergency communication device and helped Lady Somienna and the others escape, but there had been no further contact from them since. Most likely, they had been captured aboard the airship.

“Sir? You’re not going to use that thing, are you?”

“You’re damn right we are! Wake it up and let it loose!”

The monster tamer hesitated—and the captain cut him down with a slash of his magic sword and stormed up to the monster they had trapped underground: the many-winged centipede.

Even with seven Screws in its head, the beast couldn’t be controlled completely. If it hadn’t been hibernating when they found it, it would likely have been impossible to tame the creature, with Screws or otherwise.

The captain threw a magic potion of Awakening over the creature’s massive head, ending its slumber.

As the many-winged centipede’s eyes opened and glared hatefully, the captain felt an ominous premonition, but there was no turning back now. This

was the only option left.

Taking a deep breath, the captain slashed the monster free of its bonds with his magic sword.

ANWOOOOMWALOOOOWN.

The insect howled and ripped into the captain with its fangs.

Then, evidently satisfied, it left the captain alive and began to take off into the air with its countless wings.

“Go... The enemy you must destroy is up above.”

Even as he lay bleeding from his mortal wounds, the captain bellowed after the giant centipede as it rose into the sky.

Perhaps the last thing he saw as his vision went black was victory.



“...Where in the world did it go?”

Mossan was desperately searching for the magi bomb on the bridge, but there was no sign of it anywhere.

Strangely enough, his comrades who went to sabotage the other parts of the airship with magi bombs didn’t seem to have succeeded, either.

“If I knew this would happen, I would’ve brought the magic flute myself instead of giving it to Leda...”

He had asked Leda to hold on to the magic flute out of fear that it would be destroyed in the blast from the magi bomb, but now that fear had backfired.

Muttering to himself, Mossan reached for the creepily squirming magic device under his shirt—the Demonic Heart.

Even with the strength enhancements it would grant him, a non-military man like Mossan wouldn’t be able to take over the bridge alone.

If he had the magic flute, he could release the limits of the Demonic Heart and truly run wild.

The wearer’s life would be forfeit, but in exchange, he would receive such

strength that he could cause far more destruction than any magi bomb.

“Captain! A giant monster just emerged from the hunting manor behind us!”

“Again?! What is it this time?! A hydra? A naga?”

Listening to the panic on the bridge, Mossan looked back toward the manor.

“So they decided to unleash it...”

As he watched, the enormous many-winged centipede flew past the airship and stopped in front of it.

“Alert from the turret! The Magic Cannon barrel has caught fire! It’ll be a quarter cycle before they can use it again—”

“That thing’s wings are deflecting our mages’ attack spells!”

The many-winged centipede was so dangerous that no monster tamer could fully control it, and it was as strong as a four-headed hydra or an intermediate demon—no, maybe even a lesser dragon.

The airship was now without its Wyvern Knight guards and Magic Cannons, and even the powerful Spirit Magic user must be out of magic by now.

There had been plenty of miscalculations up until this point, but this beast was powerful enough to overwhelm all those odds.

As long as there was no one aboard with hero-like abnormal strength, the airship was doomed to go down.

“No—this airship has the Scarlet Nobleman, Baronet Jelil, and other mithril explorers aboard. Better to be safe than sorry, then...”

Mossan put his hand to his chest and activated the Demonic Heart.

“Now there is no way our plan can fail. I am ready for your magic flute at any time...Leda.”

Murmuring the name of his beloved one last time, Mossan closed his eyes.

Turbulent Travels

Satou here. In fiction, as soon as heroes make it through one predicament, they often find themselves in another one. That can be fun to read or watch, but I'd definitely rather not live it for myself.

“Master! Something huge is coming from down below!”

Arisa whirled around from where she stood staring behind the airship.

It was on my radar, too: a level-45 monster called a many-winged centipede. The insectoid creature had some annoying-looking race-specific inherent skills like “Reflect Magic” and “Magicrystal Barrier.”

I had ignored it when I first noticed it on my map, since it was asleep and didn’t seem likely to attack us, but now it had chosen to show up at the last possible second.

Clearly, we were caught up in the midst of some Vistall Duchy drama, but the dissenters were running low on firepower.

All they had left were this many-winged centipede and the last lance beetle; the Elder Crow rider who’d been observing nearby was already starting to flee. I had placed a marker on him already, so I could track him down anytime.

One of the lifeboats had prematurely left the airship a little while before. As far as I could tell from my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance, though, it didn’t seem to be an abduction, so I left it alone.

“That thing looks like an anomalocaris. Is it a tamed monster, too?”

I peered out next to Arisa.

The monster that had crashed through the hunting manor in the forest and was heading our way really did look like an anomalocaris from a paleontology book, albeit with a bigger torso and insectoid wings.

“Want me to get ‘im?”

“No, it can reflect magic, so...”

I'll just take it down physically.

Before I could finish saying that, other mithril explorers started chants and sent all kinds of attack magic flying toward the many-winged centipede as it passed by the airship.

Most of the magic that hit its carapace bounced back toward the front deck and balcony, sending the explorers scurrying to dodge it.

“I guess it doesn’t go back toward the caster specifically.”

“Apparently not.”

We were able to continue having a casual conversation because Nana blocked the spells that bounced our way.

The flying centipede’s body seemed to bounce magic off at random rather than reflecting it, while its roundish bug-like wings neutralized and absorbed any magic that came their way.

Of course, it couldn’t deflect and neutralize an endless amount of magic attacks; my AR display showed me that it did take some amount of damage.

The many-winged centipede let out an irate-sounding screech and twisted around in front of the airship to face our way.

“Seems like greater attack magic should be able to break through. What do you want to do?”

“Hmm... I think I’ll pass.”

Arisa glanced over at Mia, who was almost done with her chant. A massive amount of energy was starting to surround the elf girl.

“It looks like Mia’s almost done with her chant anyway.”

No sooner did Arisa finish speaking than Mia’s spell was invoked.

“.....■■■ **Create Garuda Fuureiou Souzou.**”

A golden, bird-shaped pseudo-spirit appeared, shining and semi-transparent with a crown atop its head.

It was as powerful as the behemoth Miss Aaze once summoned.

“A golden beast?”

“No wait, a bird?”

“No... It must be one of the divine beasts that the high elves used in the age of mythology.”

The mithril explorers murmured in awe as Garuda appeared.

“Satou, magic.”

In response to Mia’s brief demand, I used Mana Transfer to restore Mia’s drained MP.

“Do it.”

On Mia’s command, the Garuda spread its wings and stopped in midair against the strong wind, transforming its wingtips and stretching them toward the centipede monster like something from a CGI film.

Dozens of golden feathers flicked out faster than the eye could follow, piercing straight through and shredding the many-winged centipede.

The giant insect squirmed its sinewy body to escape, but it couldn’t resist for long before it was torn to pieces.

Garuda’s golden feathers had cut right through the centipede’s magic-reflecting body and neutralizing wings alike as if they weren’t even there.

“Incredible...”

“So that’s the Summoning Magic that defeated a floormaster?”

The mithril explorers who were fighting on the balcony murmured in awe.

“Good work, Mia.”

“Mrrr.”

Mia seemed a little disappointed.

She probably asked me for more magic so she could use Garuda’s special attack “Tempest,” so she must have been disappointed that the enemy went down before she got a chance to use it.

But I would've most likely stopped her from doing that anyway, since "Tempest" is way too powerful and flashy.

"Send home?"

Mia watched as Garuda defeated the fleeing lance beetles and captured their riders, then looked at me questioningly.

"Sure, we're done here." I nodded.

There were no longer any red dots or tamed monsters on my radar.

All that was left was to capture the terrorists who tried to blow themselves up on the airship. I hadn't had time to go deal with them before, so I had just stolen their magi bombs from a distance.

Of course, I had already restrained the higher-level knights on the rear deck who had the "Item Box" skill or who had attempted to mess with the machinery.

"Mew?"

"I hear a flute, sir."

Tama's and Pochi's ears shot up straight.

My "Keen Hearing" skill wasn't picking up on anything, though.

"Where from?" Arisa asked.

I guess she couldn't hear it, either.

But before the pair could answer, there was a loud crash and the sound of shattering glass from ahead of us.

At the same time, a dark gray mass billowed outward on the other side of the front deck, followed by a wave of glass fragments flying toward us.

The only person who had been over there was the high official with the "Summoning Magic" skill.

I ran across the deck, heading for the bridge.

The official's "Summoning Magic" skill level seemed low enough that I wasn't expecting him to produce something so dangerous.

I jumped in through the freshly made hole in the glass ceiling of the bridge.

Countless tentacles unfurled around me as I dropped toward the bridge. I slashed away at them, trying to make sense of what was happening before I landed.

My AR display informed me that most of the equipment on the bridge was broken, and the majority of the crew except for the captain had sunk into a sea of blood.

On top of that, the glass wall surrounding the bridge had been more or less shattered, leaving only a frame that didn't protect the bridge from being whipped by the powerful winds.

I heard the crewmen groaning amid the puddles of blood. It wasn't too late to save them, then.

Shortly after I landed, the beastfolk girls dropped down behind me.

"Oopsie, sir."

Tama supported Pochi before she could lose her balance.

Since the bridge that controlled the engines and propellers had been destroyed, the airship's flight seemed to be slowly losing its stability.

"KARINA KIIIIICK!"

Lady Karina appeared to have come along as well, flying right into the writhing mass that had destroyed the bridge.

"Eeeeek!"

Unfortunately, she was snatched up in midair and held upside down by the tentacles.

Since her skirt had been wrapped up along with her, her underwear was safe from being exposed, but the sight was still decidedly risqué.

"Liza, destroy the tentacles. Tama, Pochi, please help Lady Karina."

As I directed the beastfolk girls, I also used Healing Magic on the whole crew.

Some of them were near death, but luckily I managed to save them, although they were still unconscious from the blood loss.

While Karina was distracted, I used Magic Hand to move all the crewmen from the wreckage of the bridge to the other side of the corridor.

“Heeeeave...”

“Hooo, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were doing their best to dig Karina out from what was now a mountain of tentacles.

“Master! Take a look at this.”

I turned toward Liza and saw that she had cut all the tentacles away. Beneath the pile of them was a bizarrely transformed human figure.

Though his features were no longer recognizable, my AR display informed me that it was the high official who used Summoning Magic.

At first I thought he'd been overpowered by a monster he summoned.

But I realized it was another story when I saw the ominous-looking magic tool embedded in his chest. Though it had broken open in the middle and lost its contents, the surface was the same color and texture as the tentacles.

It was evidently called a Demonic Heart. It had the conditions **Rampage** and **Breakdown**, most likely making it the source of all the tentacle madness.

“Heal hiiim?”

“He's going to die, sir.”

Whoops, almost forgot.

I used Healing Magic to close the high official's wounds.

Though it was enough to save his life, there was no spark of intelligence left in his eyes; he just lay convulsing and staring into space.

Well, he brought this on himself. I could probably let a medical institution take things from here.

“Goodness, that was dreadful.”

Drenched in viscous liquid, Karina wiped her face clean with a towel borrowed from Pochi.

Raka can't protect her from getting dirty?

A bit confused, I used a scroll from Storage as a dummy while I cleaned her up with Everyday Magic.

"Master! Do you need backup?"

Arisa connected everyone with the Space Magic spell Tactical Talk.

"No, we're—"

In the middle of my sentence, I felt the airship shake.

"Master! Tentacles popped up over here, too!"

Arisa shouted urgently.

"Nana, protect everyone! There should be a person at the heart of the tentacles. Be careful!"

"Yes, master."

As I called out an order, I searched my map for Demonic Heart.

The devices showed up not only in the engine room, nobles' room, and rear deck where the suicide bombers had been, but also on the observation deck near Arisa, and even in the fuel store and the base of the stabilizing fin.

The Demonic Heart on the observation deck was in the **Rampage** and **Breakdown** conditions, but the others seemed to be in relatively normal states. Most likely, the tentacles appeared when the devices broke down and entered the "Rampage" mode.

There were too many people and important airship parts in the way for me to destroy all the Demonic Hearts from where I stood using only magic or physical attacks.

The only one I could probably target from outside with a spell like Remote Arrow or Flexible Sword was the one on the observation deck. If I haphazardly attacked the ones near the stabilizing fin or the rear deck, I might end up destroying the airship in the process.

Besides, the Demonic Hearts were embedded in people's bodies. If I tried to destroy them with a long-distance attack, there was a good chance I'd kill the

host, too.

But maybe a nonlethal attack spell like Remote Stun...

ZHWOZHWOZHWOOGZ.

I heard an awful, hacking howl behind me—from the direction of the observation deck, where Arisa and the others were.

Shortly afterward, a series of unpleasant tremors shook the floor.

I didn't even need to look at my map information. The Demonic Hearts in the other five areas besides the observation deck must have started sprouting tentacles and rampaging.

They had beaten me to the punch.

Using a spell like Remote Stun probably wouldn't be enough to stop them now.

“Master, there are tentacles near the wing now, too.”

“Master, tentacles have appeared at the rear of the airship as well, I report.”

I heard Lulu's and Nana's voices.

“Master, what are your orders?”

Liza looked at me intently.

Tama and Pochi stood on either side, gazing up at me as well.

Mentally, I quickly sorted through my priorities.

Arisa and the others should be fine. The Demonic Heart tentacles were only around level 30.

Baronet Jelil was in the noble visitors' room, so he could probably handle that.

“Liza, take care of the engine room, please! Pochi and Tama, go with Liza! Once you've taken care of things there, head to the fuel stores.”

The beastfolk girls took off running with a quickly shouted response. Karina went with them, too. Since Raka was with her, though, she'd likely be all right.

Normally, I would have gone with them, but right now I had to take care of keeping the airship on track in place of the broken bridge.

Ideally, I was hoping we could still reach the airport in the royal capital, but at the very least I had to make sure the airship landed safely.

I tore away the broken console and pulled up the cables from within.

Then I took from Storage the development terminal I had used when I built the airship and connected the cables to it.

All I would be able to do was enter debug commands, but I might be able to make it work.

First, I checked if a *PING* signal would reach the engine room and steering circuits.

Got it.

The signal successfully connected with both.

"Engine room doooor?"

"Tentacles everywhere, sir."

"We will begin the extermination now, master."

The beastfolk girls seemed to have reached the engine room.

"Master, we beat the one over here. It looks like it was a lady-in-waiting who sprouted the tentacles. A scout who was on the observation deck said that one of the wives is missing—whoa!"

In the middle of Arisa's report, a large tremor rocked the airship.

I heard the other kids shriek in surprise through Tactical Talk.

According to the information in my development terminal, three right-side propellers out of a total of six had gotten overcharged with excess magic power, while one had been cut off and had stopped working.

The airship leaned heavily to the left as it began to pick up speed.

At this rate, we would crash into the mountain up ahead on our left.

I tried to do an emergency shutdown on the propellers in overdrive, but there was no response.

Well, if I can't do it the proper way, I'll just have to use some tricks.

I decided to use the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance and the Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to look for the emergency brake devices attached to the propellers themselves.

Using my “Parallel Thoughts” skill to keep working with the development console, I activated Clairvoyance and saw the grim state of the engine room.

Of the four skypower engines, two of them had their coaxial wheels bent out of shape and were shooting sparks. The other two weren’t producing flames, but their rotations weren’t quite on track.

The Magic Furnace had taken significant damage, too; the red light at the center was flickering faintly.

Amid all the damage, though, the beastfolk girls had destroyed most of the tentacles in spite of the sideways motion of the airship.

“Master, up ahead! Look out!”

Arisa desperately shouted about the mountain up ahead.

I know.

I searched for the emergency brake mechanisms.

“They’re gone?!”

The propellers’ emergency brakes seemed to have been deliberately ripped off.

In fact, that was probably why the propellers were in overdrive in the first place.

I couldn’t just cut off the magic power supply cable, either, since doing so might break the Magic Furnace and other devices.

If I stop the furnace first—no. If I stopped the furnace, the skypower engines would stop working until I was able to restart it. And there was no proof that the nearly broken devices would start back up again at all.

Originally, the airship was designed so that it could make an emergency landing as long as one of the engines was intact, but I couldn’t take the chance of all of them stopping and the airship going down.

How about this, then?

I entered a command in the development console.

The airship sped up even more.

"Master, this is bad! Up ahead! Watch OUT!"

We drew close enough to the mountain to clearly see animals running away.

Just a little longer...

"Liza! Kick propeller Number 2 on the right!"

"Understood!"

The propeller sputtered and slowed down for just a moment.

Its speed should have picked back up in no time, and even if it was in worse shape than before, that was fine for now.

"GYAAAAAH!"

The airship abruptly swerved around the mountain as if pushed away by Arisa's piercing scream.

There was a grating sound and tremors as the side of the airship scraped against the rocks and withered trees jutting from the side of the mountain.

For a moment, I felt like I could almost see the air density and flow.

I put my faith in that sense and pushed the airship along with the wind, managing to raise its altitude.

"I thought we were gonna diiiie!"

The blue sky opened up before my eyes.

I had managed to avoid crashing into the mountain by sending the left propellers into overdrive.

Unfortunately, that meant the airship was now rapidly gaining speed.

Whether it was because the propellers were taking up so much of the magic power supply, or because the skypower engines were on the verge of breaking, the airship kept jostling up and down like a plane that had hit turbulence.

Thanks to my “Parallel Thoughts” skill, I was able to keep conversing with Arisa and company over Tactical Talk, but that left me without enough resources to do magic at the same time. Hopefully, I could take care of things with the Magic Hand and Clairvoyance spells I had already activated.

“Master, shouldn’t we try to either gain altitude or lose speed?”

“Believe me, I’m trying.”

I would have adjusted these factors already if I could have.

“Are we out of control right now? Like, is this pretty bad?”

“Yeah, it’s not great at the moment.”

As I had concluded earlier, I would have to turn off the Magic Furnace to slow down the propellers, but that would result in the skypower engines stopping and the airship crashing to the ground.

At the moment, I was doing my best to use the dynamic lift flap on the stabilizer fin to raise our altitude.

Unlike an airplane’s wings, the airship’s wings were short and thin, so my adjustments probably wouldn’t do much.

“Master, if I use my Unique Skill, I can teleport all the passengers to the ground.”

“Absolutely not.”

If Arisa did that, her soul vessel might take damage, even with the protection of the soul shell garland.

“But if we don’t do something, everyone else will—”

“No. You’re more important to me than any of them.”

“Wha? O-oh my, hee-hee. That serious tone is making me blush...”

Arisa’s voice trembled with genuine emotion as she tried to laugh it off.

As usual, in spite of her typical attitude, she got embarrassed when she was on the receiving end of praise.

“Just trust your master and his cheats, okay?”

"Yes, of course."

I put on a bit of a joking tone, and Arisa responded with relief.

"Mrrr."

I heard a slightly annoyed grunt from Mia over Tactical Talk. I tried to reassure her by saying, "You're important to me, too, Mia," but she just angrily repeated, "Too?" Kids are so hard to deal with.

"All right, let's see here. This really doesn't look great."

I scanned the development console and my AR's map information, muttering to myself.

It might have seemed like we were doomed, but if I didn't mind revealing all of my powers, I could save everyone at any moment.

All I would have to do is put the airship itself in Storage, and lower everyone to the ground with Magic Hand. However, given the number of passengers, I would probably have to let about a third of them drop into the lake we would soon be passing over.

I thought about using Magic Hand to lower the airship to safety, too, but that probably wouldn't work. As useful as the spell was, the most it could produce was the strength of about sixty ordinary men.

It'd be another thing if I could use the advanced spell Magic Hand, but as things stood, I couldn't possibly support the entire weight of the airship.

I thought about having Arisa use a Space Magic gate spell of some kind, too; however, it would be far too difficult to hold a gate open long enough for the unstable, nearly breaking airship to get through.

I doubt even Arisa could maintain a gate spell in a constantly changing position for more than a short time.

If only there were two of me, I could have one steer the ship and send the other to fix the machinery...

"No, there's no use thinking about if-onlys."

An emergency landing was probably the best way to ensure everyone's safety

after all.

But I would have to satisfy a few conditions to succeed:

- Lower the airship's speed enough to land safely.
- Make sure there was enough of a runway-like space for the landing.
- Find a landing area that wouldn't endanger anyone on the ground.
- Neutralize the four remaining Demonic Heart users before they caused any trouble.

Those first two were especially indispensable.

The third one was necessary as far as I was concerned, but wasn't technically an absolute requirement.

And the last one would be fine regardless, but I wanted to minimize the risks as much as I could.

I mentally planned out the required steps and a path for the airship.

All while steering the unsteady craft, of course.

It certainly wasn't easy, but I was able to keep it up well enough over a short time, I'd say.

But it would definitely be impossible to pull all this off by myself.

"Sorry, everyone, but I'm going to need your help."

"Don't be ridiculous! Just say the word!"

Over Tactical Talk, the others all chimed in to agree with Arisa.

"There are four more of those tentacle things. Liza, Tama, and Pochi, you take care of the one in the fuel stores like we planned—"

"Dooone?"

"We just finished, sir!"

"The fuel stores are under control. We also healed the host enough to survive and restrained him."

In spite of the turbulence and acceleration, the beastfolk girls had already carried out my initial instructions.

“Great job! Can you go to the rear deck next?”

“Of course, sir.”

Liza and the other beastfolk girls headed for the rear deck.

“Nana, grab Mia and come to the bridge! Mia, get ready to summon Garuda again, please!”

“Yes, master.”

“Kay.”

I was planning to have Mia’s Garuda get rid of the tentacles crawling all over the stabilizer fin.

Huh?

There was nothing there anymore.

“Master, Lulu and I got rid of the one that was on that wing.”

My girls were on top of things, as always.

“A crow-looking thing picked it up as it fell. Should we shoot it down?”

The Elder Crow rider who I thought had fled had returned.

“No, you can leave that alone.”

I already had a marker on him.

“There are still some tentacle fragments on the wing. Can you have Mia’s Garuda get rid of any that seem like a problem?”

“Mrrr.”

Mia didn’t seem to appreciate her powerful Summoning Magic being used for cleanup.

I checked the remains with my still-active Clairvoyance spell. It looked like Arisa had used Space Magic to knock the tentacles off before Lulu blasted them away. They’d done a pretty great job, I had to say.



"Then could you and Lulu go to the noble visitors' room, Arisa?"

"That VIP room?"

"Yeah, to back up Baronet Jelil so he's not fighting on his own."

"Okey-dokey! Let's go, dear sister."

According to my map information, Baronet Jelil was fighting to protect Duke Vistall and had gotten injured.

If I remembered right, he was in formal nobles' wear without even a sword, so he was probably having a tough time.

"Master, some mithril explorers came along. What should we do?"

With a big enough group, they should have been able to defeat the tentacles without Arisa and Lulu.

"All right. Let them take care of things in the nobles' room. You and Lulu heal the injured and guide passengers and crewmen to the multipurpose room at the rear of the ship, please."

There were several multipurpose rooms on the airship, all of them equipped to neutralize impact from an emergency landing.

"Youuu got it!"

Arisa and Lulu jumped into action.

That should take care of the tentacles and evacuation for now; next, I had to try to guide the airship toward an area where it could land safely.

Hmm?

I noticed the rudder wasn't turning very well.

The tentacles on the rear deck must have done some damage—it was like the tail fin was dragging.

There was also the aileron for stabilization, but since it was covered in tentacle remains and could only turn to the right, it wasn't very useful.

But we should have been able to scrape through somehow.

"Master, I am here to help, I report."

Nana jumped onto the bridge, expressionless but eager to offer her support.

Mia's long pigtails were getting whipped into her face by the strong wind on the ruined bridge, impeding her spellcasting.

"Nana, stand next to me and use your Foundation Defense Wall, please."

"Yes, master."

A magic circle appeared on Nana's brow, and she surrounded us with a transparent dome of protection.

Right away, Mia's chant got steadier.

Evidently bored, Nana was tying Mia's hair back from her face.

The airship bounced to one side, and Mia's eyes filled with tears as she bit her tongue.

"Mrrr, start over."

Mia started the chant over again.

Hmm?

The turning rudder was no longer responding at all.

"Master, we've disposed of the tentacles on the rear deck and restrained the person who was at the source of them."

Liza gave a timely report.

"Liza, could you look out the window nearby and tell me what's going on with the rudder?"

Changing the position of my already-invoked Clairvoyance spell was something of a pain. Since she was already on the scene, I asked Liza to check things out.

"Wobblyyy?"

"The top thingy is all broken and floppy, sir."

Tama and Pochi reported in before Liza could respond.

Unfortunately, I didn't quite understand their description, so in the end I had to change the Clairvoyance spell to look at it myself after all.

The rudder itself was intact, but the wire that controlled it had broken.

"I'll have to fix it with Magic Hand—wait, it's made from anti-magic material, huh..."

Since the wire and rudder were both made from magic-proof material, it would be difficult to interfere with them using Magic Hand.

While not totally impossible, it would be about as difficult as trying to grab a single strand of hair blowing in the wind while also keeping an eye on something else.

"We can do it, sir!"

"Aye-aye!"

Pochi and Tama scrambled up the rear deck's maintenance ladder and along the frame that supported the rudder.

It was pretty reckless, even if I could theoretically catch them with Magic Hand, if it came to that.

"Liza, use a lifeline."

"Understood."

I told Liza where to find rope on the rear deck, and had her attach some to Tama and Pochi. As long as Liza held on to the other end, the pair should be safe.

Checking the area, I spotted Karina being blocked by her guardian maids.

They seemed to be arguing about something, but I couldn't quite hear them.

When did her maids get to the rear deck anyway?

"I'm going to help, too!"

"N-no way!"

"Lady Karina, please stop."

Pina and Erina tackled Karina to prevent her from running after Tama and Pochi.

"I was curious what they were saying, so I hooked up Madam Karina and

company to the line, too.”

Arisa must have been checking on the deck with Clairvoyance, too, after hearing my conversation with the beastfolk girls over Tactical Talk, and had taken an interest in what was happening with Karina.

I couldn’t really use any more magic at the moment, so I sort of appreciated it.

“More importantly, master. Aren’t we going to either crash into the mountain on the right or scrape through the valley on the left and crush the village down there?”

Arisa pointed out that the airship’s altitude had lowered again.

The tremor that made Mia bite her tongue earlier must have been one of the engines blowing out.

That made our already low altitude drop even lower, and since the rudder wasn’t working, we had strayed from my intended path and were between a rock and a hard place like Arisa described.

“Sergeant Pochi, Sergeant Tama! I’m counting on you to fix the rudder!”

“Aye-aye!”

“Roger, sir!”

Both good responses.

Before their reverberations had fully faded, our airship plunged into a perilous pass.



“Master, careful on the right!”

Arisa was using the information she sensed with Space Magic to give me directions.

I appreciated the favor. Theoretically, I could get the same info from my map, but it was pretty tough to control the airship and assess the details on the map at the same time.

“Tama, roll up the wire by half an arm’s length.”

“Twiirl!”

We shifted away from the rock face coming up on the right.

“Master, on the left next!”

“Pochi, unroll your wire by two arms’ lengths.”

“Swoosh, sir.”

The airship narrowly dodged a large tree branch jutting from the wall on our left.

But we had moved a bit too far away—now we were about to graze a rock jutting out on the lower right.

“Pochi, roll it back up half an arm’s length.”

“Waaah, sir!”

“Great, that’s perfect.”

We managed to dodge the rock.

The valley was alongside a river, making it incredibly rife with twists and turns.

Luckily, we were still able to avoid crashing thanks to Tama and Pochi’s frantic wire work steering the rudder.

“Master, up ahead!”

A bird around the size of a large motorcycle came flying toward the warped frame that was all that remained of the bridge.

“Bird strikes are dangerous, I declare!”

Activating her Foundation Flexible Shield and holding her trusty physical one, Nana defended Mia and me from the bird’s body slam and sent it flying behind us.

I heard some serious crashing and snapping, but it didn’t matter, since just about everything here had already been destroyed by tentacles.

“Master, this next bit’s gonna be tricky.”

Three massive trees blocked our path.

They were spaced out a bit to the front, but as far as I could tell with my “Telescopic Sight” skill, they might as well have been lined up right across our path. It would be all but impossible to weave around them with the giant airship.

“Lulu and I will see what we can do.”

As soon as Arisa spoke, red flames fired out of Lulu’s Fireburst Gun and hit the trunk of the tree on the left.

Moments later, Arisa used Fire Magic to snipe the middle tree and burn it to a crisp.

Arisa started a chant to take down the tree on the right, but Lulu hadn’t finished taking down the first tree yet.

The Fireburst Gun, which was intended for high-level monsters, had such high piercing power that it shot right through the trunk.

Just as Lulu managed to bring her tree down anyway, Arisa’s spell activated.

“Geh, sorry, I missed...”

The turbulence in the valley caused Arisa’s Fire Magic to go off target and fail to bring the tree down.

Lulu followed up with her Fireburst Gun, but considering how long it had taken her to bring down the first tree, her shot didn’t seem like it would land in time.

I couldn’t let Arisa use chantless Fire Magic in public, and Nana’s Foundation attacks were too short-ranged to reach. Mia’s chants kept getting interrupted; it would be a while before she could finish a spell.

If I used a minimal Fire Shot, maybe I could keep steering the airship at the same— *“Master, allow me.”*

Liza stepped in front of me, her crimson hair rippling in the wind.

She must have noticed my peril and come running from the stern of the ship.

“O mana, feel my burning blood—”

Liza smoothly spun her beloved Magic Spear to face forward, and it rapidly

began to glow red.

“—pass through my arm, and gather at my spearhead!”

Glittering red Spellblade formed at the tip of the spear.

The giant tree bore down on the airship.

Lulu’s bullets were still pelting the trunk, and some mithril explorers’ magic had begun to reach it as well.

But it still wasn’t enough.

“Come forth, Spellblade Shot!”

As Liza shouted, a massive ball of magic power shot forth from the spearhead and smashed into the trunk of the tree, leaving red light in its wake.

With that final push, the tree began to fall forward.

But it was a little too late.

“*Oh sh—*”

At this rate, the tree would pierce straight into the bridge.

“*I will protect master, I declare.*”

Nana readied her shield.

Given the speed of the airship, though, even she wouldn’t emerge unharmed from a collision with an enormous tree.

I used Magic Hand to grab the giant tree and put it in Storage, and almost immediately took it back out and put it in a position where it wouldn’t hit the airship.

Hopefully, the mass of the airship itself would block most people from noticing.

Even if they did see it, they would probably just assume it had gotten pulled downward somehow.

“Thank you, Liza.”

Liza humbly explained that she had left Karina in charge of Pochi’s and Tama’s lifelines.

“Looks like that big tree was the last major obstacle.”

As Arisa spoke, we made it clear of the valley, and the enormous field of lotuses where I was planning to make a soft emergency landing came into view up ahead.

“That’s not good...”

There was a small settlement in the middle of the field.

“Master!”

“I see it.”

We must have gotten off my planned course.

At our current height, we would destroy half the settlement.

With the help of my “Telescopic Sight” skill, I saw the people in the settlement looking up at us in fear.

Guess it’s all or nothing...

“GOOOOOO!”

I released the power limiter I’d been discreetly using on the Magic Furnace and turned it up to full throttle.

Overcharged past their limits with magic power, the skypower engines roared and pushed us up higher into the air.

The nose of the airship tilted up right in front of the villagers running around in a panic below.

We were close enough to see their faces in detail, but somehow we managed to clear the settlement without damaging anything but a watchtower.

“Oooof. I thought we were gonna—waaah!”

Before Arisa could finish her sigh of relief, the airship shook.

Two of the engines had broken under the strain.

A coaxial wheel bounced around the engine room and crashed into one of the propellers, finishing it off.

“I’m shutting down the Magic Furnace! All hands, prepare for impact!”

I took over the announcement equipment to warn the crew and passengers.

But even when I sent the emergency shutdown command to the Magic Furnace, it didn't stop.

At this rate, we would scrape right through the lotus field and crash into the outer wall of the royal capital, causing massive casualties.

"I'll handle it, though, of course."

I reached for the Magic Furnace with Magic Hand and put all the fuel inside it into Storage.

Of course, I also broke the supply pipe from the fuel stores with the coaxial wheel that had caused the problem.

The propellers quickly burned through the last of the fuel and stopped moving.

Then I used commands to slow the last two engines to a stop.

Before I could relax, though, the bottom of the airship scraped against the surface of the field.

"Eeeeek!"

Lulu shrieked at the sudden impact.

I activated the air brakes and opened the emergency parachute on the rear.

The airship began to rapidly slow down.

Good, now we should be able to stop right in front of the wall—

There was a loud KA-THUNK from behind me, and the braking suddenly loosened.

"Parachute, looost?"

"Karina, be careful, sir."

Tama and Pochi, who were clinging to the tail of the airship, reported that the parachute had broken off.

Karina seemed to have toppled off when it happened, but Tama and Pochi managed to catch her by the arms and keep her from falling. Besides, even if

she had, Raka probably would've kept her from being too badly hurt.

“The royal capital’s up ahead. We’re going to crash!”

There was no time to spare to answer Arisa.

I was already using Magic Hand, the Earth Magic spell Binding Grass, and various Wind Magic spells to try to slow the airship down, but given its enormous size, the spells weren’t having much effect.

Arisa was using Space Magic spells like Deracinator and Dimension Pile to back me up, too.

Even if we couldn’t stop before hitting the wall, I wanted to make sure we did as little damage as possible to the royal capital, at least...

No, wait.

I wasn’t so determined to hide my powers that I was willing to risk serious casualties.

If I did that, I’d feel too guilty to enjoy sightseeing in the royal capital.

All right, time to get serious.

This might make my life as Satou more complicated, but I could always make a new disguise mask for everyday life and go sightseeing as “Suzuki” or something instead.

Feeling strangely relieved, I opened my menu.

*“.....■■■ **Create Garuda Fuureiou Souzou.**”*

I heard a spell being cast behind me and turned around.

The golden-winged pseudo-spirit Garuda had appeared.

In spite of all the turbulence forcing her to start her chant over repeatedly, Mia had finally managed to complete it in the nick of time.

Wiping her hair away from her sweat-soaked forehead, Mia pointed forward and gave a slightly longer command than usual.

“Garuda, stop the airship.”

Immediately, Garuda surrounded the airship with golden feathers, slowing

down the airship even more effectively than the emergency parachute.

“Nice one, Mia!”

“Mm. Did it.”

Mia puffed up her chest proudly at Arisa’s praise over Tactical Talk.

But even with Garuda’s power to control the wind, the massive airship was still closing in fast on the royal capital.

The crunching sounds of the hull gouging through the ground had quieted, but they hadn’t stopped.

The alarm bells of the royal capital rang, and I saw some Wyvern Knights and a squadron of birdfolk fly into the air.

My map showed the people in the royal capital fleeing as they noticed the approaching airship.

“Stop, dammit!”

“Garuda, hurry.”

The wall got bigger and bigger in my view.

From the bridge, I could see the city beyond the wall.

“It’s too late!”

Arisa cried out in despair.

At this rate, the airship would hit the wall in a matter of seconds.

Are you okay with that?

I didn’t even need to ask myself that question.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Satou!”

“Master?”

I jumped off the bridge and landed in front of the airship as it skidded forward.

Reentering through a gash in the bottom of the hull, I grabbed the mainframe

of the airship, which had been exposed by the rocks and earth—and was made of dragon bone.

“Here we go!”

I activated Skyrunning.

Strength surged through my legs, more powerfully than I’d ever felt before.

The Skyrunning foothold broke, but I just kept making more.

The dragon bone began to bend due to all the pressure on a single point.

It dug deep into my shoulders painfully.

But pain was no big deal!

“AAAAARGH!”

Letting out an uncharacteristic war cry, I pushed back against the airship even harder.

As I held on out of sheer stubbornness, the airship stopped shaking, and the rocks and dirt pelting my back gradually subsided.

A cheer went up from atop the wall.

At last, the airship seemed to have stopped safely.

I pulled away from the dragon bone, rubbing my reddened shoulder, and flopped down on the dirt that had piled up at the bottom of the hull.

Whew, I haven’t been this exhausted in a while.

> **Title Acquired: Unlucky Passenger** > **Title Acquired: Expert Pilot** > **Title Acquired: Muscle Flexer** > **Title Acquired: Peerless Strength** > **Title Acquired: Alterer of Fate**

Epilogue

Satou here. I feel like there aren't as many stories about people who get discovered by a famous person and have a sudden rise to stardom as there used to be. Maybe people are more into relatable stories of happiness than distant fame and glory these days.

“Phew. I think that should do it.”

I used the remains of the airship’s cockpit to restore the steering mechanism enough that it looked like it might be theoretically possible to use it.

If I said I was controlling things with the development console, I would basically be admitting that I’m really Nanashi the Hero, hence the slight cover-up.

For the same reason, I had also fixed the bend in the dragon bone.

“Master, we’ve finished healing the wounded and evacuating everyone.”

“Great. I’ll use a rope to descend to the surface.”

I had bent the bridge door beyond all possibility of opening so that no one would come in while I was covering things up.

No ordinary person would be able to get down onto the bridge from the front deck, and the bow had been bent upward by all the earth when we landed, meaning it would be impossible to peer into the bridge from the front deck or the city’s outer wall.

I even used the Light Magic spell Illusion to display what it would look like when I was done, in case a birdfolk soldier peeked inside from the sky, but it didn’t end up being necessary.

“Welcome baaack?”

“Good work, sir!”

Tama and Pochi jumped up and latched onto my legs when I arrived.

“You did great, too, Lady Karina. Thank you for supporting Tama and Pochi.”

“B-but of course!”

Miss Karina was shrinking inward while being scolded by Pina, so I decided to throw her a bone.

“Here, have a damp cloth.”

“Thanks, Arisa.”

I used the cloth to wipe my hands clean as I looked around to assess the situation.

The people who'd come down from the airship had been divided into five groups: the wounded, the crew, explorers, people connected to Vistall Duchy, and everyone else.

Since all the crewmen who were on the bridge except the captain had lost a lot of blood, they were still resting after being healed.

Which was all well and good, but...

“Where did all these gawkers come from?”

“The west gate of the royal capital. I guess it's pretty close by.”

There was a crowd of nosy onlookers gathered around the airship.

Thanks to the help of some guards who had ridden over from the west gate, they weren't barging into our space, at least.

The captain of the guard was getting a rundown of the situation from the captain and other men on stretcher-like carriers.

“They said some carriages will be here to pick up the wounded soon, and nobles and such, too.”

Arisa kept me updated as I looked on.

“Master, have some tea.”

“Thank you, Lulu. I'm pretty cold from all that wind.”

Sitting on a tarp that had been spread on the ground, I sipped the delicious

blue-green tea Lulu gave me.

“Master, sweets will make you feel better, I declare.”

Nana produced some chick-shaped cookies from her Fairy Pack and handed them to me.

As I nibbled on them, Tama and Pochi sat down next to me and started snacking, too.

Lady Karina joined us as well, and Pochi started doting on her. She seemed to really enjoy acting like a big sister.

Once Tama finished her cookie, she curled up on my lap and settled in. When our eyes met, she smiled up at me adorably.

“Satou.”

Mia latched on to my head from above.

“Master, it seems our ride will take a little longer to arrive.”

Liza and Mia had just come back from inquiring about the schedule from the soldiers.

“Mew?”

There were some angry shouts from the direction of Duke Vistall and his entourage.

They seemed to be using some kind of counterintelligence devices, but their voices were raised enough to be audible nonetheless.

Listening closer, I gathered that they were arguing fruitlessly about who had or hadn’t betrayed whom.

What a waste of my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“Sir Pendragon.”

I was approached by Baronet Jelil, the mithril explorer known as the “Scarlet Nobleman.”

He had changed into his trademark red armor and knight’s mantle.

It would be rude to stay seated, so I gently removed Tama from my lap and

stood.

“Liza of the Black Spear told me of your deeds. A far cry from mine, when I could barely keep up with fending off the tentacle monster’s attacks.”

“Please, Sir Jelil, there’s no need to be modest. You were simply prioritizing protecting His Excellency the Duke’s life over defeating the monsters, were you not?”

I wasn’t actually sure if that was true, but until backup had arrived, the only person in the nobles’ VIP room who was injured besides the knights and soldiers was just one of the duke’s wives.

That particular wife had separated herself from the rest of Duke Vistall’s entourage, which made me think that she must’ve been up to something that was bound to result in her getting hurt anyway.

“Hey, check out that red armor.”

“Isn’t that Jelil, the Scarlet Nobleman who defeated the floormaster?”

“Now there’s a fine man. If I were ten years younger, I’d try to snag him myself.”

“Ga-ha-ha, more like thirty years...”

I heard chatter from the far-off gawkers.

Evidently, Baronet Jelil was famous even in the royal capital.

“Then does that mean the black-haired fella next to him is the young leader of Pendragon?”

Hmm? Sounds like they’ve heard of our explorer team name, too.

“What, that kid?”

“He doesn’t have a sword or a staff. Gotta be some noble kid who looks up to Jelil, right?”

“Yeah, he’s got no muscle, either...”

I guess I really don’t look like an explorer.

“Hmm? What’s going on?”

Arisa was the first to notice that something was amiss with the crowd of gawkers.

Someone famous seemed to have shown up behind them and drawn their attention.

“I-isn’t that...?”

Baronet Jelil stared at the newcomer and trailed off.

I knew of this person, too. But I’d met him as Nanashi the Hero, not Satou, so I had better pretend otherwise.

“He looks to be a military man. Is he an acquaintance of yours?”

“You don’t know him? That’s Sir Zef Juleburg the Unstoppable, the leader of the Shiga Eight.”

I only knew him as the king’s guard, so I wasn’t very familiar with his real strength or fame.

The other explorers seemed to have noticed him, too; a wave of murmurs spread through the crowd.

Was this like what would happen if a pro baseball player showed up in front of a bunch of promising high school players?

The commotion gradually began to take the form of baseless rumors.

Most frequent of all were lines like these:

“He must be here to recruit Jelil.”

“That’s gotta be it. Maybe he’s even looking for a successor.”

“That’s our leader Jelil for you!”

The murmurs of the members of the Red Dragon’s Roar party seemed to have reached Baronet Jelil’s ears, too; he wore a barely suppressed grin of complete confidence.

It all sounded a little too good to be true; next to me, Arisa was smirking evilly, as if she fully expected a plot twist to come.

The second most popular theory was that he was here to scout me, and

people began betting on who he was here for.

“Master, isn’t that the gun user?”

At Arisa’s comment, I noticed that behind Juleburg was Miss Helmina, a gun user from the Shiga Eight, as well as several of her Holy Knights.

Miss Helmina and a knight with a white spear were saying something to Juleburg.

The crowd of gawkers was so loud that I couldn’t really hear what they were saying, even with my “Keen Hearing” skill. The most I could tell with my “Lip Reading” skill was that they said my name and Liza’s a few times.

But it was only Helmina and her Holy Knight who mentioned my name, so they were probably just mentioning that we met in Labyrinth City or something unimportant like that.

“They’re coming this way.”

Arisa grabbed my arm as she whispered.

The leader of the Shiga Eight walked directly toward me, as if there were no one else around.

The crowd parted for him like the Red Sea around Moses.

Baronet Jelil took a few steps forward to greet Juleburg.

For just a moment, I saw the hint of a smug smirk on Baronet Jelil’s face. I’m sure he was picturing himself as the protagonist of a drama or something.

Hmm?

My skin started prickling.

The crowd suddenly stiffened, and my group and Baronet Jelil all readied themselves and put their hands on their weapons.

Liza even stepped in front of Arisa and me and took a battle-ready stance.

Juleburg must have used a full-throttle “Intimidation” skill.

Heedless of the tense silence, the head of the Shiga Eight kept walking forward.

"That was quite a baptism by fire."

Though I could see he was sweating, Baronet Jelil nevertheless greeted the leader in a casual tone.

But Juleburg just shot him a cold, dismissive glance and walked right past him.

"So you are Liza of the Black Spear?"

Ooh, so he's got his sights on Liza after all.

I recognized the Holy Knight with the spear who'd been speaking to Juleburg as someone who had challenged Liza to a match in Labyrinth City before and had gotten handily defeated.

"I am interested in the spear user who defeated Kerun, but I will not spar with you now."

With that, he pushed Liza's spear aside with his hand, and stopped in front of me.

"So young... You are Pendragon the Untouchable, then?"

Juleburg looked down at me appraisingly.

Behind him, I saw Miss Helmina give me a cheerful little wave.

She must have prompted him to come seek me out, then.

"Yes, I—"

"I am Zef Juleburg the Unstoppable, First Seat of the Shiga Eight. I have come to request a duel with you, Sir Pendragon the Untouchable!"

Juleburg interrupted my greeting with a bombshell declaration.

I guess I won't be able to enjoy a peaceful end of the year just yet...

EX: Tifaleeza

Work is suffering. That's what I thought in my old hometown, at least. But the Echigoya Company is different. Here I have a job worth doing, colleagues I respect, and most of all, Lord Kuro...

“Tifaleeza, we’ve finished interviewing the factory workers. What should I do with these documents?”

As I was sorting paperwork in the Echigoya Company office, Merina brought in a stack of papers.

“Leave them there, please. I’ll sort them by name and specialization, then pass them on.”

“I can sort them if you want?”

“No, it’s all right. I’d like to draw up a list to attach so that it’ll be less work for the manager.”

“Wow, you’re really thorough, Tifaleeza. No wonder Elu depends on you so much.”

Referring to Eluterina by a nickname, Merina patted my shoulder and left the room.

I looked over the documents, which contained neat lists of information and important points from the interviews.

The Echigoya Company’s top brass all studied at the royal academy in the royal capital, so they were far more talented than their gaudy appearance might imply.

“Tifaleeza, we’ve secured a jeweler and an engraver.”

While I was sorting through the interview documents, Louna, a small-statured noblewoman riding on a stone wolf, came into the room next.

“Do you mind taking care of the contracts?”

She handed me some papers, still attached to a clipboard.

From a glance at their credentials, the jeweler and engraver both seemed to meet all our requirements.

Though Louna looked like a child, she actually excelled at sweet-talking moody artisans.

As unsociable as I am, I had to envy her talent.

“Certainly. Is it all right if I pass them on straight to the manager once I’ve drawn them up?”

“Yes, please.”

With that, she rode the stone wolf out of the room, gleefully declaring, “Work is over! Snack time now!”

I smiled a little to myself.

I did have a tendency to work without taking any breaks, so I could probably stand to learn from her example.

“All right, just a little longer...”

While I kept working away at the documents that continued to pile up, the sun began to set, the room growing dark.

Just as I was questioning whether to charge the stone-based candlestick with magic to get some light, a gentle wind drifted into the room.

“...You’ll strain your eyes.”

At the same time, the room suddenly grew brighter.

It was Lord Kuro.

Though his tone was a little cold, he was a kind man who was constantly looking after us.

Before I peered from behind the mountains of paperwork, I quickly checked my reflection in a hand mirror and fixed my hair.

“Welcome back, Lord Kuro.”

I stood to greet him.

I would've liked to welcome him with a warm smile like Eluterina and the others, but that was simply too tall of an order for someone like me.

Cursing myself silently for always being so businesslike, I retrieved some documents from a drawer.

"Hmm. Tifaleeza, you look a little pale. Are you taking enough breaks?"

"...Yes."

I'm sorry. That was a lie.

I didn't want to worry Lord Kuro, so I told a little fib without thinking.

Fighting back my feelings of frustration, I turned my attention to the work that needed doing.

"I'd like you to take a look at these, please, Lord Kuro."

As I handed Lord Kuro some paperwork that needed his approval, I heard frantic footsteps racing down the hallway.

The footsteps stopped in front of the door to the office, and after a short pause, Eluterina entered the room wearing a composed expression.

Her hair and clothes were neatly in place, but her flushed cheeks told the real story of the footsteps from before. It was impressive that she was able to catch her breath so quickly, considering she must have run all the way up from the first-floor parlor to this office on the top floor.

Finding it strange that she was always able to detect Lord Kuro's return from the first floor without any prior contact, I once asked her how she did it, but she replied that it was "the power of love" with a perfectly straight face. I had since given up on questioning her about that sort of thing.

"Welcome back, Lord Kuro!"

Eluterina gave a beaming smile as she greeted Lord Kuro.

"Thanks. Glad you seem to be doing well. Any news?"

"Yes, there were some local residents who objected to the building of the factory, but we managed to convince them with sincere reasoning. We can

begin construction as soon as tomorrow.”

“Great job, Miss Manager.”

Eluterina’s smile got even brighter at Lord Kuro’s praise.

I’ll admit, I was a bit envious that Lord Kuro had complimented her. His hand on her shoulder only added fuel to the flames of jealousy.

“Thank you very much, Lord Kuro. But I couldn’t have done it on my own. It’s thanks to all the other executives as well, especially Tifaleeza here.”

“Yes, of course. Good work, Tifaleeza.”

“Not at all.”

Eluterina was kind enough to give me some credit, too.

I was ashamed that I’d been jealous of her over something so silly.

“Lord Kuro really is here!”

“I knew it. His visits are the only time Elu goes speeding down the hallway like that.”

Louna rode into the room on her stone wolf, followed by the other executives, and they all started cheerfully speaking to Lord Kuro.

“Lord Kuro! We found a jeweler and engraver to produce the rune light gems!”

“...Rune light gems?”

Lord Kuro looked at Louna uncertainly.

“Lord Kuro, it’s the product name we chose for these.”

I showed him the light stone engraved with a rune that he had made.

“Ah, I see. A good name.”

“Eh-heh-heh, thank you... I’m the one who came up with it!”

Louna puffed up her chest proudly, still sitting on the stone wolf. When Lord Kuro patted her on the head, she scrunched up her face in a childlike display of happiness.

"That's perfect timing, then. We can test the craftsmen's skills by having them make IDs for the Echigoya Company. I'll leave this sample and these stones to use as the base."

Lord Kuro placed an elegant brooch inlaid with a gemstone on the table, along with slightly more gems than the number of executives at the company.

"So pretty..."

"...Huh?"

"There's a rose inside the gemstone?"

"And the Echigoya crest is in the middle of the rose."

Everyone but Louna exclaimed in surprise as they looked at the stones.

Inside the transparent gemstones were roses made from blue gems, and in the center of each rose was a white gem forming the crest of the Echigoya Company.

It had probably been modified with magic, but even if a spell existed that could refine such small gems into the shape of a crest, I had never heard of any magic that could encase a smaller gemstone inside another one unless it was made of glass. Judging by their surprised reactions, Eluterina and the others hadn't, either.

"L-Lord Kuro, what is this?"

"I had it made by the same artisan who created the rune light gems. If you charge it with magic, the light stone in the shape of the Echigoya crest will glow, making the crest appear on the surface. It should be fairly difficult to counterfeit this," Lord Kuro said nonchalantly. "They should make perfect identification for all of you, right?"

We certainly wouldn't have to worry about anyone reproducing it, but I couldn't imagine wearing something that seemed like it'd be worth hundreds of gold coins as identification.

"Tifaleeza, could you hold onto these until we can pass them on to the artisans?"

"No, I think you should be in charge of such valuable objects, Miss Manager."

Eluterina held out the brooch and gemstones to me, but I pressed them back toward her, trying to maintain my composure.

“Oh, really?”

“Eluterina! Me, me! I’ll take care of them!” Louna waved her hand eagerly.

Ignoring her, Eluterina agreed to take care of them herself, and stored the gems and brooch in the office safe.

Lord Kuro watched her finish, then looked around at all of us.

“...Listen carefully, ladies. I’m giving you a special task tomorrow night.”

Eluterina and the others murmured in surprise for a moment, then fell silent.

Did everyone but me know what he meant by “special task”?

“We’ll start at the first cycle of night and wrap up by the second, but there’s a good chance you won’t be able to work the next day. Try to finish up your duties for that day early. If any of you won’t be able to make it that night, let me know, and we’ll make other plans.”

It was very unlike Lord Kuro to give us nighttime duties, but as his slave, it was of course not my place to refuse.

Looking around, I saw that the executives seemed to feel the same way, even if they weren’t slaves.

“L-Lord Kuro. Is this special task for all of us?”

“That’s right. Any and all executives who are able.”

Just as I thought that I was likely excluded from this as a non-executive, Lord Kuro looked at me and added, “That includes you, too, Tifaleeza.”

Maybe Lord Kuro can read minds.

I tried mentally sending him some advances, but he gave no reaction.

“V-very well. What sort of clothing would you prefer us to wear?”

Eluterina drew oddly close to Lord Kuro as she asked the question.

Perhaps a little *too* close, hmm?

“Whatever you want to wear is fine.”

As he responded, Lord Kuro tactfully distanced himself from Eluterina.

That's Lord Kuro for you.

I felt a little sorry for Eluterina, who looked mildly disappointed, but our manager ought to set an appropriate example by not mixing business with personal matters.

Yes, that's all. I'm certainly not saying this out of jealousy.

"Sorry, but I have to take care of something."

While my thoughts ran wild, Lord Kuro abruptly excused himself and teleported out of the office.

The paperwork I'd given him was stacked on the desk, somehow already filled out with his seal of approval, although I have no idea when he did it.

As proof that he had looked them over properly, there were even a few forms with notes attached, explaining the reason they needed to be revised or rejected.

When I looked up from the returned paperwork, I heard gleeful shrieking fill the room.

"So, was that what I think it was?"

"It's gotta be. Lord Kuro is a man, too, after all."

"Elu, what are you going to wear to capture his attention?"

"I—I... I'm going to go all out."

What in the world are they talking about?

I was mystified as one executive asked me a strange question as well.
"Tifaleeza, what kind of outfit are you going to wear to seduce Lord Kuro?"

"Seduce...?"

"Oh, come on, now! We're all ladies here, so there's no need to play innocent! You have feelings for Lord Kuro, too, right?"

"Wh-what are you...?"

What in the world are you saying?!

I covered my mouth to stop myself from exclaiming.

“Tifaleeza, if you don’t have anything to wear, would you like to borrow something of mine?”

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

Eluterina offered to help, but I shook my head.

“But this is the first time Lord Kuro has requested our company. You’ll need some cute underwear and nighties, too, won’t you?”

At this point, even I realized what they were getting at.

They must have misunderstood Lord Kuro’s words as an invitation to a nighttime affair.

But I knew the upstanding Lord Kuro was the last person who would ever do such a thing. Even when Neru and I approached him in the nude with some of the other girls, he just looked uncomfortable and made us put on coats.

I raised my head to clear up their misunderstanding, but then I was struck by the bright smiles and womanly voices of Eluterina and the others.

Maybe if it was them, instead of a surly-faced girl like me...

“Tifaleeza, what’s wrong?”

“I’m a little tired, and I’ve worked past my allotted time for the day. If you’ll excuse me.”

With that, I practically fled from the office.

“...Everything I have is so plain.”

Back in my room, I stared down at the underwear and nightgowns I had taken out from my closet and dresser drawers in disappointment.

“Underwear like this won’t make Lord Kuro hap—”

No, no. Don’t think about it like that.

I was planning to go to bed in a huff as soon as I got back, but I couldn’t seem to fall asleep. Instead, I paced around my room until I ended up trying to choose underwear and nighties.

“What in the world am I doing...?”

I threw myself down on top of the clothes in despair.

They’re going to get wrinkled.

Realizing that, I sprang back to my feet.

For now, the underwear I bought when I went shopping with Eluterina and the others a while back was the nicest, so I picked that and the nightgown I got in the Ivy Manor, putting everything else back in the closet and dresser.

I wasn’t getting my hopes up, but I at least wanted to make sure I didn’t look shabby next to Eluterina and the other executives.

“With these, maybe Lord Kuro will...”

I was too embarrassed to finish that sentence, so instead I burrowed into my bed and closed my eyes.



“S-sorry to keep you waiting, Lord Kuro.”

I stood next to Eluterina and the other executives, who were all dressed in highly provocative outfits, to greet Lord Kuro.

...No, I suppose my getup wasn’t much different from theirs.

“Miss Manager, you’re all very...boldly dressed today.”

“Of course. Since you asked for us, we all did our best to get gussied up.”

At Eluterina’s response, Lord Kuro pressed a hand to his forehead.

“...It seems I wasn’t clear enough. I would never force any of you to join me in the bedroom. The special task is something different. Go change into more normal clothing, please. And wear shoes that are easy to walk in.”

I watched as the girls reacted to Lord Kuro’s words with silent screams and fell to their knees.

I knew it. That’s just the kind of man Lord Kuro is. Honestly...

After we changed clothes, Lord Kuro teleported all of us to a place that looked like a dark cavern.

“A-are we in the labyrinth?!”

“That’s right. This is an unexplored section of the Upper Stratum.”

My legs nearly gave out from beneath me.

Lord Kuro might be superpowerful, but for someone like me who had never even been in a fistfight, the monster-filled labyrinth was a terrifying place.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already gotten rid of any dangerous monsters.”

Lord Kuro’s words reassured me just a little.

Eluterina and company let out sighs of relief, too. Even those who were former explorers seemed to be afraid of this place.

We accepted the magic weapons Lord Kuro gave us, and began the strange work he assigned: forming a line to attack monsters in the bottom of a pit, one at a time.

The squirming mass of gleaming black monsters was viscerally disturbing to see by the light of the magic weapon, but since we only had to stand over the pit for a few seconds at a time, I managed to avoid screaming or vomiting.

“Tifaleeza, are you all right?”

My face must have been remarkably pale, because Lord Kuro looked at me with concern.

“Y-yes, I’m... I’m fine.”

Forcing myself not to focus too hard on Lord Kuro’s hand as it touched my face, I barely managed to respond calmly.

“Lord Kuro, we’ve all had a turn.”

“All right. This’ll be dangerous, so everyone step back a little.”

Hearing Eluterina’s report, Lord Kuro pulled his hand away.

While I was turning red at the realization that my eyes had desperately followed his hand as he left, Lord Kuro walked to the front of the hole and used some incredible magic.

There was a blast of cold wind that set our hair and clothes aflutter.

Lord Kuro really is the follower of a hero.

That belated realization made me freshly aware of the distance between us.

It was like I'd been left all alone in the dark.

"Tifaleeza, are you okay?"

"...I feel a bit woozy."

As my feelings sank, I began to get dizzy and nauseous.

"Yes, I feel strange, too..."

"My body feels heavy."

The other executives all began to complain of symptoms as well.

Lord Kuro explained that it was a phenomenon called "level-up sickness," a temporary illness that occurred when one's body couldn't keep pace with rapid leveling up. So it wasn't just my feelings, then.

"That will be all for the special training today."

Lord Kuro brought us all back to the Echigoya Company headquarters in the royal capital, explained who had gotten which skills and how much we'd leveled up, and dismissed us.

"You're lucky, Tifaleeza. It seems you learned the rare 'Item Box' skill."

"Thank...you."

I still felt nauseous and faint, and my eyelids were so heavy that I felt I might pass out on the spot at any moment.

Shamefully enough, I even gave a short response to Lord Kuro's praise.

"Can you get back to your rooms all right?"

"Not for a while."

Eluterina responded on behalf of the group.

"I'll carry you all, then."

Lord Kuro ended up lifting each of the executives in turn and carrying us to our rooms.

The handful who had actually fallen asleep went quietly enough, but...

Stop! Surely it's against the rules to press your face into Lord Kuro's chest!

Hey! It's improper to use this as a chance to grab onto him so tightly!

Merina! Don't touch Lord Kuro's bottom! You lucky—I mean, you lecher!

Eluterina! I don't think it's very maidenly to pretend to be asleep so you can sniff Lord Kuro's scent.

As I protested in my mind, I must have drifted off to sleep, until there was no one else left in the room but me.

“Looks like Tifaleeza is the last one...”

I heard Lord Kuro’s voice, sounding a little tired.

Through my barely opened eyelids, I could see him looking dignified and distant, as always.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but his clothes looked a bit ruffled.

I’m sure some of the more proactive girls must have tried to forcefully seduce him in their rooms.

As Lord Kuro came closer to me, the scent of his cologne tickled my nose.

Then he lifted me in his arms.

They were thinner than I expected, but I could feel his firm muscles beneath.

A feeling of contentment filled me as I leaned against Lord Kuro, who walked gently as he carried me so he wouldn’t wake me.

But that happiness didn’t last long.

Slowly, I was lowered onto my bed.

“Lord Kuro...”

The disappointment I felt as his warmth drew away from me was so much that I murmured his name without thinking.

For a second, I was afraid he’d realize I wasn’t really asleep, but he turned away without a word.

I couldn't try to seduce him, or even stop him from leaving.

All I did was watch as he left the room.

"...you spineless coward."

I quietly cursed myself for not being as assertive as the other girls.

"I can't do it yet. But someday, surely..."

Once I have enough confidence in myself to state my feelings clearly...

...then I'll forget about my position as a slave and step onto the battlefield called love.

Just like my beloved colleagues!

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 15 of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

It's thanks to the support of all you readers that I've been able to build up so many volumes.

The entire anime has now been released on Blu-ray, and the events have all wrapped up, but I'll make sure that doesn't stop me from doing my very best to keep the story exciting. I hope you'll continue to stick around.

Before we discuss the highlights of this volume as usual, I'd like to talk about something personal for a moment.

Some of you may already know this from an interview that was posted online recently, but about a year ago, I quit my day job as an office worker to become a full-time writer.

I'm sorry I didn't announce this sooner. I've been meaning to put it in an afterword for a while now.

At first, I was all excited: "Now I'll have tons more time to write!" But when it comes down to it, the amount of writing I do in a month hasn't really increased that much, and the publication schedule will probably stay about the same.

But when I was working both jobs, I tended to do my writing when I should've been sleeping, so that part has greatly improved.

My family was really supportive of me writing full-time. I think the state of my health before I made the change might've looked really bad to them...

Since I do all my work at home now, it's kind of inconvenient if I can't use the car, so I also started taking driving lessons again.

I got my license in college, but I haven't driven at all since then, so I was a little nervous about it. Luckily, the teachers at the driving school are great, so after a few lessons I can more or less drive just fine. It'll be a little longer before I really get used to it, though.

And yes, I'm planning to work these experiences into *Death March* somehow.

Now, for those of you who are reading the afterword to decide whether or not to buy the book, let's talk about the highlights of this volume.

Continuing from the previous volume, this one starts with Zena's return to the spotlight.

Specifically, it picks up after the romantic-sounding line "Satou, the truth is, I..."

If you're thinking that you wouldn't remember anything about a book you read four months ago, please take a quick look at the last few pages of Volume 14. Perhaps taking note of how Zena's outfit is described will give you a hint at how the adventure in this volume unfolds.

Since she's the first friend he made in this parallel world, Satou is relatively unguarded with Zena, but don't worry—he does draw the line when it's really important. His friends are what are most important to him, after all.

And then there's Miss Karina!

She showed up with quite a bang in the previous volume only to not actually do much, so in this volume I increased Miss Magic Boobs's scenes and contributions quite a bit from the web version. You'll have to read the volume if you want to find out how she gets involved in the story. There's even an early appearance from that legendary kick that shows up later in the web version...

The spotlight shines again on the new friends in the labyrinth's Lower Stratum who appeared in the previous volume, and we'll even learn more about some things that remained unexplained in the web version, like the incantation for summoning the floormaster and the real identity of Mukuro's wife.

I also expanded on some popular scenes from the web version, like the ones with the Echigoya Company crew and the orphanage kids.

And as soon as the gang reaches the royal capital, a certain person will set their sights on Satou!

In the print version, unlike the web version, Satou already knows Miss Helmina from the Shiga Eight before he reaches the royal capital, and a hint of his strength has already been exposed through his battle with Liza in Labyrinth City. Those small changes seem to have created a butterfly effect.

I'll get in trouble if I give too much away, so let's wrap up the discussion of the contents of Volume 15 here.

Last but not least, the usual words of thanks!

Thanks to the specific instructions, revisions, and advice from my editors A and I, some difficult-to-read passages have become much clearer, and the charm and realism of many scenes has been greatly improved. I hope you'll continue to guide and encourage me in the future.

And as always, I have nothing but endless gratitude to Shri for always bringing *Death March* to life with such wonderful illustrations.

I would also like to thank the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone else who was involved in the publication, distribution, sales, promotion, and multimedia aspects of this book.

Finally, the greatest thanks of all goes out to you, the readers!

Let's meet again in the next volume for the Royal Capital arc!

Hiro Ainana

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