

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

7

DEATH MARCH Rhapsody

TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD





DEATH MARCH 7
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY



ARISA

A former princess of the Kuwork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.

SATOU

A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.

TAMA

A cat-cared girl.

POCHI

A dog-cared girl.

MIA

A taciturn elf who loves music.

LULU

Born in the Kuwork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.

LIZA

A ccaletfolk girl.

NANA

An expressionless homunculus.



Buying
magic tools to mask
their identities for the
dark auction...

For someone
raised in a
royal palace,
the princess
was awfully
frugal.
In the end, I
settled things
by buying
three of the
grade-three
tools and
letting them
borrow the
extras.

“I think my
guard and I
will buy
grade-one
tools instead,
please.
Grade one
would be a
bit cheaper,
correct?”



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

7

★ ★ ★
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UN
NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 7

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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Princess Menea's Request

Satou here. Have you ever heard the phrase a bolt from the blue? You never know when it'll happen to you. That's why you have to enjoy every day to the fullest without regrets, or so my grandfather out in the boonies often said.

"So we meet at last, my hero. I am Menea Lumork, the princess of a small kingdom to the east of the Shiga Kingdom."

The girl was lovely, with light-pink hair that cascaded to her waist in gentle waves and emerald-green eyes. And she was addressing me with the look of a maiden in love.

I glanced over the information in the AR display next to her.

She was sixteen years old. Level 9, with the "Etiquette" skill and a far more unusual one: "Summoning Magic."

She was barely five feet tall, with youthful features, but already she had a slim waist and a large bust. Most likely a C cup but one step away from reaching a D.

If it wasn't for the difference in our social status, I'd be interested in wooing her in another four or five years.

But as it stood, I'd never met her before.

Nor the escort knight standing behind her, of course.

I did rescue her in the guise of Nanashi the Hero during the incident this afternoon—that yellow demon appearing in the old capital stadium, the giant monster fish fight, and so on—but there was no way she could have figured out my real identity from that.

"I would like to enlist your help to save my homeland from its hardships. If the Saga Empire wills it..."

She must have mistaken me for Hayato, the hero of the Saga Empire, because

of my black hair and Japanese features.

But how did such a mistake lead her to track me down to my temporary residence at the count's mansion?

...Oh, I guess I should resolve this misunderstanding before I contemplate the cause.

"Your Highness, I'm afraid you are mistaken. I am not the hero of the Saga Empire."

"...Huh?" The princess's adoring smile changed abruptly to an expression of genuine surprise more befitting of a sixteen-year-old.

"However, it is an honor to meet you. I am Satou Pendragon, an honorary hereditary knight of the Muno Barony."

"...Are you not the Savior Chef Satou of whom Mistress Karina spoke?"

Miss Karina, please stop spreading around strange nicknames...

"I am hardly worthy of any such title. That aside, how did you mistake me for the hero of the Saga Empire?"

I gestured to the sofa as I spoke, trying to keep my tone light and curious to avoid giving the impression that I was interrogating her.

"...Well, you see..."

To summarize the explanation that Princess Menea reluctantly gave:

There had been a lot of people gathered around the hero at the prince's castle, so she couldn't even get near him, much less ask for his help. She heard that he was going to see me, so she came here to find him.

Then, seeing my black hair, dark eyes, and Japanese facial features, she mistook me for the Saga Empire hero himself.

I was curious as to why the hero would be coming to see me, but first I decided to check his location on my map.

Just as I executed the search, there was a knock at the door, and the house butler, Mr. Seba, peered inside.

"Sir Satou?"

Behind him was the very same man I'd been looking up just moments before.

"Please come in."

Needing no further explanation from the old butler, I invited the hero inside.

"Hey, thanks."

The hero entered the room clad in his blue armor.

With his sporty haircut, thick eyebrows, and manly smile, he cut a pretty handsome figure.



“<I am Hayato Masaki, the hero of the Saga Empire.>”

“<Nice to meet you, Sir Hero. I am Satou Pendragon, a hereditary knight.>”

He introduced himself in Japanese, so I responded in kind.

Behind the hero were two of his followers: magic knight Miss Ringrande—the granddaughter of Duke Ougoch known as “the Witch of Heavenly Destruction”—and the busty, blond Meriest Saga, the twenty-first princess of the Saga Empire.

“<Were you summoned from Japan, too?>”

“<As I told Lady Ringrande, my ancestors are Japanese. I speak the language thanks to a comrade who’s a reincarnation.>”

The hero seemed like a good person, so it would probably be safe to tell him that I was Japanese, but I didn’t want to risk drawing unwanted attention from the Saga Empire.

So I gave him the same information I’d told Ringrande before.

The reason I decided to speak Japanese to him now was that it seemed easier than pretending not to understand only to give myself away later.

Since he and Arisa seemed to be acquainted, it was presumably safe to tell him that she was a reincarnation.

When he’d visited Arisa’s old home, they were friendly enough to exchange information about Skill Reset, a special ability exclusive to reincarnations, heroes, and the like. That made me think that he would probably remember her.

“<A reincarnation... Their name isn’t Nanashi, is it?!>”

“<No, I’m afraid not. Her name is Arisa. I believe she told me that you’ve met before.>”

“<Is this true, Satou?! My honey is alive?!>”

The hero brought his face way too close to mine.

My honey, though? Looked like he’d taken quite a liking to Arisa.

This was a more intense reaction than I'd expected. Princess Menea and the rest of our company looked surprised and confused as well.

"Ohhh!"

"Whaaa—?"

"No pushing, sir."

"Mrrr."

The door burst open, and the crew of younger kids came tumbling inside.

"Retreeeat?"

The first to flee was Tama, a girl with white hair and the ears and tail of a cat.

As usual, she was quick on her feet.

"Tama, wait! Sir!"

The next speaker was Pochi, sporting a short brown bob, dog ears, and a tail to match.

"<...Beastfolk?>"

The hero seemed surprised at the appearance of the pair.

Miss Ringrande and the others were startled, too. They had probably rarely seen beastfolk outside of the sanctuary in the Saga Empire.

"Slow down for a change, you two!"

This was Arisa, a young girl with violet eyes and hair. She was a reincarnated Japanese person and the de facto leader of the younger group.

She normally wore a blond wig to hide her purple hair, which was considered a bad omen here, but it had come off in all the commotion.

"Violet hair like Lady Yuriko's...?"

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on Princess Menea's murmured words.

Yuriko?

A Japanese name... And for some reason, I felt like I'd heard it somewhere before.

Whoever this person was, she must be a reincarnation like Arisa.

“Arisa.”

The person lying underneath Arisa gave a single word of protest. It was Mia, an elf girl with her blue-green hair tied in two long pigtails that didn't quite cover her slightly pointed ears.

“Oops, sorry, Mia,” Arisa apologized, standing up.

“I will assist Mia, I declare.”

“Mm, thanks.”

Suddenly joining in the fray, the beautiful, blond Nana helped Mia to her feet.

Though her giant bosom made her look older, she was actually a homunculus of less than a year old, hence her odd manner of speaking.

“I apologize, master. I should have been watching them more carefully.”

Liza of the orangescale tribe appeared and bowed deeply.

Aside from a reptilian tail and orange scales around her limbs and neck, she was otherwise indistinguishable from an ordinary human.

“We're sorryyyy.”

“I apologize, sir.”

The would-be escapees Pochi and Tama were secured under each of Liza's arms like stuffed animals.

However, the hero wasn't listening to the group's apologies in the slightest.

“<P-Princess Arisa...is it really you?>”

“Yes. I'm afraid I simply couldn't control myself in my haste to see you... My late parents would surely scold me for such behavior.”

Arisa's graceful, ladylike tone was very unusual for her.

“It has been much too long, Sir Hero. How fortunate that we meet again.”

“<Princess Arisa!>”

Relinquishing his hold on me, the hero rushed over to Arisa and knelt down to

her eye level.

He seemed very emotional about their reunion, yet he made no move to lay a finger on her.

Come to think of it, Arisa had told me that he shouted weird things like “Yes, Lolita! No touching!” when she first met him.

“Sir Hero, our comrades seem perplexed. Perhaps we ought to speak in the language of the Shiga Kingdom or the Saga Empire?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

> Skill Acquired: “Sagan Language”

Shigan and Sagan were evidently similar languages, as I was able to understand the latter even without a skill.

But since I had tons of skill points to spare, and it seemed like a skill that might be handy in the future, I decided to select the skill and raise it to level 5 anyway.

I beckoned the hero and his friends to sit on a sofa.

My heart went out to Princess Menea, who looked a little helpless, but she would have to wait a while longer.

“Still, I’m so glad to see that you’re safe. After the Yowork Kingdom was invaded, I was certain—”

“—Hayato.”

Princess Meriest quickly cut off Hayato’s insensitive remark.

“A great deal has happened since then, but now I am enjoying a peaceful life with my traveling companions under Sir Satou’s protection,” Arisa said.

“Are you sure you’re really happy?”

The hero frowned as he looked at her.

He’d probably noticed Satou’s Slave among her titles.

“Yes, very much so.”

“I see...”

Sitting down beside me, Arisa leaned her head on my shoulder to demonstrate her happiness.

“Very well. Satou!”

The hero called me by the wrong name yet again, emphasizing the Japanese pronunciation. (The natives here pronounced it more like “Sa-two.”) “I’m counting on you to take care of Princess Arisa. However, never forget the spirit of ‘Yes, Lolita! No touching!’ Little girls are meant to be admired but never touched! If you ever lay a hand on Princess Arisa, rest assured that my sword Arondight will not be silent.”

The wild look in the hero’s eyes was a little disconcerting.

“I am a former princess now,” Arisa insisted, but he seemed intent on calling her by the same title.

“But of course. I would never attempt to lay a finger on a child. Also, my name is Satou, pronounced ‘Sa-two,’ not Satou.”

A woman’s not a woman until she reaches at least her twenties, if you ask me.

“You’re scarcely an adult yourself, you know,” Miss Ringrande muttered, but I chose to ignore her.

I had been restored to my fifteen-year-old self when I first came to this world, but on the inside I was still an old geezer pushing thirty years old. I definitely didn’t see anyone of high school age or lower as a romantic interest.

“I prepared tea, sir.”

The maids of the house entered, along with the last member of my party, Lulu. With her black hair and eyes, she was incredibly beautiful.

“Damn, she’s something else...”

“Hayato, don’t be rude.”

The hero caught his breath when he saw Lulu’s beauty, and he was promptly scolded by Princess Meriest.

The natives of this world tended to see Lulu as unsightly, so Meriest must have misinterpreted his comment as an insult.

“N-no, it’s all right...”

Lulu looked uncomfortable, half covering her face with a tray.

“Lulu, Sir Hero was trying to say that you’re beautiful.”

“...Master, th-thank you.”

I was telling the truth, but Lulu seemed to think that I was just trying to comfort her.

“Satou’s right. Even I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you before, y’know.”

Flustered by the hero’s words, Lulu bowed quickly and ran out of the room.

I’d have to check in on her later.

“Is she a relative of yours, Satou?”

“No, she’s Arisa’s half sister.”

“Princess Arisa’s? Really?”

“Yes, that’s right. In fact, Sister Lulu’s great-grandfather was a hero of the Saga Empire.”

The hero muttered something along the lines of “If she were five years younger...,” but I pretended not to hear it.

Once our initial introductions were completed, Princess Menea stood up, and all eyes in the room turned to her.

“So we meet at last, my hero. I am Menea Lumork, the princess of a small kingdom east of the Shiga Kingdom. I would like to—”

“The Lumork Kingdom, you say?”

“Oh, that’s right—I’ve heard that pink hair is a unique characteristic of their royal family.”

As the princess attempted to make her plea, she was interrupted by Meriest and Ringrande.

“The Lumork Kingdom, huh...?”

For some reason, the hero’s voice sounded grave as well.

What exactly happened in the Lumork Kingdom?

“...Her country used unsanctioned Summoning Magic to abduct some Japanese people.”

“Is that like the Hero Summoning of the Saga Empire?”

“Please do not make such an insulting comparison. Our heroes are summoned with the blessing of Goddess Parion and endowed with incredible power, while their unblessed summoning drags in ordinary riffraff without any enhancement at all.”

“Is that all th—? I mean, I sincerely apologize for insulting your kingdom in my ignorance.”

I noticed Meriest’s eyebrows arching at my careless words, so I quickly changed my tune.

“I apologize to you, Sir Hero—nay, Sir Hayato Masaki of Nippon.”

While Meriest’s anger was redirected at me, Princess Menea used that opportunity to prostrate herself before Hayato.

It reminded me of the Japanese *dogeza* style of bowing.

“Y-Your Highness!” Princess Menea’s escort exclaimed in surprise at her actions.

“Our transgressions against the people of Nippon are unforgivable. You should be bowing with me.”

The escort didn’t look convinced, but he took to his knees as well.

“A weaselfolk magic user who had studied Hero Summoning led us to our actions, but that does not change the fact that we summoned eight people from Nippon without any means of sending them home, nor that the majority of them lost their lives.”

Yikes, that was pretty bad. No wonder the hero and his friends got angry.

But why was a weaselfolk person studying Hero Summoning to begin with?

Maybe it was just prejudice because the race had a reputation for being sly and selfish, but I felt like the reason wasn’t anything good.

“However, the previous king, my grandfather, who ordered the summonings, was put to death by my father, the king. The weaselfolk magic user and my aunt who carried out the summonings have also paid for their crimes with their lives.”

Princess Menea kept her head down as she continued.

Still, executing his own parent...? This world was always so violent.

“There is no one left in our kingdom with any desire to summon people from Nippon. So please—”

“Lend you our strength?” Princess Meriest interrupted coldly.

“...Y-yes. I would entreat you to banish an evil dragon for the sake of our people.”

Though she trembled under Meriest’s glare, Princess Menea continued her request.

A dragon? I wouldn’t mind meeting a living one myself.

“An evil dragon?” Ringrande repeated doubtfully. “This is the first I’m hearing of any such thing in the Lumork Kingdom.”

“The black dragon appeared about half a year ago, as I am told. It lived in a forest at the crossroads of the main road connecting the royal capital to the neighboring kingdoms, and it began devouring the people living in the nearby villages and traveling on the road,” Princess Menea explained.

“I’ve heard of dragons killing soldiers who attempt to defeat them or thieves who sneak into their nests to try to steal their scales or eggs, but...”

“I have never once heard of a dragon that harms common people directly, not even in fairy tales.”

Even after hearing the details, the hero’s party didn’t seem convinced.

Come to think of it, the black dragon that attacked Seiryuu City ate only livestock and left without attacking any humans, or so I’d heard.

“Meri, what did the Deception-Piercing Artifact reveal?”

“I can’t believe it, but...she’s telling the truth.”

Princess Meriest was now wearing some kind of monocle-like object.

Judging by their conversation, it was probably a lie-detecting magic tool.

That sounded pretty handy to me.

“Did the Lumork Kingdom dispatch their troops to deal with the dragon?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. An army of the kingdom’s knights and mercenaries from neighboring kingdoms attempted to drive the dragon away, but they were unsuccessful.”

I’d wondered why they would come to the hero instead of using their own armies to deal with their problems, but it sounded like they’d used up their own resources already.

The Lumork Kingdom requested help from others, too, like Duke Ougoch and the Shiga Kingdom, but it was refused on the grounds that its capital had not been damaged.

Still, while I was certainly not thrilled about what her kingdom did, I doubted the villagers who were being attacked had anything to do with it.

If the hero wouldn’t do it, I decided I would use “Skylarking” to go over there and try talking to the dragon myself.

Hearing a loud *smack*, I came back to my senses and looked around.

“...A dragon, huh? Not a bad match, if you ask me.” The hero was grinning ferociously, his fist slapped onto his palm.

Apparently he, too, was more concerned about the suffering commoners than the transgressions of the Lumork Kingdom.

“Wait a minute, Hayato. Don’t be so reckless!”

“If it’s a stray lesser dragon from the habitat between the Weaselman Empire and the small kingdoms to the east, that’d be one thing. But if it’s a full-grown dragon from the Black Dragon Mountains, we mustn’t get involved.”

“She’s right, Hayato. They say a dragon’s fangs can pierce anything.”

“Exactly. Dragon fangs are the ultimate blade—they spell destruction even for

a demon lord. Remember, your so-called Invincible Shield isn't a guarantee!"

Miss Ringrande and Princess Meriest advised the hero with troubled expressions.

Phew.

So there were other dragon habitats besides the Valley of Dragons.

As I heard later, a lesser dragon was somewhere between an intermediate demon and a greater demon in strength, while a full-grown dragon was between a greater demon and a demon lord.

"I'm a hero, you know! What kind of hero would just leave people to suffer at the hands of an evil dragon?! Even if I can't beat a dragon, I should at least be able to chase it off. Otherwise, how am I ever going to beat a demon lord?"

The hero looked at Ringrande and Meriest in turn with fire in his eyes and voice.

The women blushed. It looked to me like they both had feelings for him.

"Besides, I've got you guys. Together, we could drive away even a full-grown dragon from the Black Dragon Mountains!" he declared.

For some reason, he directed this part toward Arisa.

As he gazed at her, Arisa's eyes welled up, and she exclaimed, "Wonderful, Sir Hero!"

It would've been a very moving scene were it not for the small vial of eye drops she was holding behind her back.

"All right, Princess Menea. We'll take on your request. Satou, you're coming with us."

The hero smacked my shoulder firmly.

...How do you figure?

"I want to judge for myself whether you're fit to be Princess Arisa's guardian," he declared.

"P-pardon me, Sir Hero. Mas— That is, Sir Satou has business in the old capital..." Arisa quickly cut in. She was probably worried about me.

But if I went with him, not only would I get to see a live dragon, I might even get to ride in the hero's silver spaceship.

I didn't know how dimensional submersion worked, but I definitely wanted to experience stuff like entering subspace and watching the scenery change around us.

Would it be a Japanese-style ship, Western-style, or maybe a hard sci-fi aesthetic? My imagination ran wild.

It would be a shame to let this opportunity go to waste. I definitely wanted to participate.

"If it's no trouble to you, Sir Hero, it would be my pleasure to accompany you and learn from your ways."

"Now, that's what I like to hear!"

Quelling Arisa's protests, I accepted the hero's proposal.

"Don't worry, Princess Arisa! He'll be safe with me."

The hero thumped his chest proudly.

I didn't want to worry one of my wards, either, so I whispered "It'll be fine" in her ear.

"S-Sir Hero! Please let me accompany you, too."

"Y-Your Highness?!"

Princess Menea's guardian knight exclaimed in alarm once again. Most likely, it was because he would have to go along with her.

"You too? Sorry, but we've only got two empty seats. If Satou's coming, that just leaves one more spot," the hero objected coldly.

Surely a princess would never embark on a journey without any guards. However, it appeared Princess Menea was no ordinary princess.

"I'll come alone, then! I'm sure I will not be in danger if you're by my side, Sir Hero."

"Hey—"

“Why, you—”

Princess Menea pressed herself against the hero’s chest.

Clearly, Ringrande and Meriest were not thrilled about this development.

“Cut it out, will you?” The hero casually pulled away from the lovely girl’s embrace.

There was no trace of embarrassment or lust in his demeanor. At first glance, he seemed to be a virtuous man, but in truth it was probably just because he was interested only in little girls. This guy was one devoted lolicon.

“Princess! That simply will not do. Sir Hero, I do not require a seat. Please allow me to accompany Her Highness.”

Evidently judging that he wasn’t going to change Princess Menea’s mind, the escort knight instead made up his mind to come along.

Shortly after, Arisa requested to be brought along as well, but the hero and I both quickly refused.

Not one to waste time, Hayato declared that we would leave the old capital later the very same day.

While the hero went to call his ship, I explained the situation to my party, leaving Arisa and Liza in charge.

“So I’ll contact the people on this list to cancel, shall I?”

“Thanks, Arisa.”

The hero said that we should be back within two or three days, but just to be safe, I had Arisa cancel all my plans in the period leading up to the duke’s grandson’s wedding.

By the time we finished our arrangements, the hero’s ship was waiting outside the house.

“Cat eeears?”

“This lady has dog ears, sir!”

“Tsk-tsk-tsk, not quiiite.” The woman wagged a finger.

“That’s right. Rusus is of the tigerfolk tribe, and I am wolffolk.”

Tama and Pochi were excited to see fellow beastfolk in the form of the tigerfolk Rusus and the wolffolk Fifi, two members of the hero’s party.

Both of them were in their twenties; in their mysterious leatherlike armor, their proportions were as impressive as Nana’s. The pair’s waists were especially attractive.

Would Tama and Pochi grow up into beautiful women like them, too?

“It’s unusual to see beastfolk outside the Saga Empire.”

“These children are human-born, you see.”

Liza looked tense as she responded to Rusus’s observation.

“Hmm. So they were born to humanfolk parents, like an *atavision*, right?”

“Ooh, Fifi, you’re so smart!” Rusus exclaimed.

Fifi rubbed the back of her head bashfully at the praise.

But that’s called atavism, not atavision.

As I was listening in on this fun conversation, the hero poked his head out from the silver ship.

“Let’s go, Satou! Princess Arisa, I’m borrowing this guy for a while.”

“Of course, Sir Hero. Best of luck to you.”

Arisa put on her brightest smile, and the hero’s face melted in admiration.

Waving to the beastfolk girls, Rusus and Fifi sprinted up the ramp.

“Let’s get going, Hayato. Satou, you too. Get on board.”

Delivering a swift kick to the hero’s behind as he fawned over Arisa, Miss Ringrande then grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the silver ship.

I waved to everyone before I entered.

While I was gone, the vanguard was to be training with Mr. Kajiro. Arisa would study Space Magic, Mia would practice with the instrument she received from a songstress in the city, and Lulu would work on baking sponge cake.

I was looking forward to seeing the results of everyone's training once I returned.



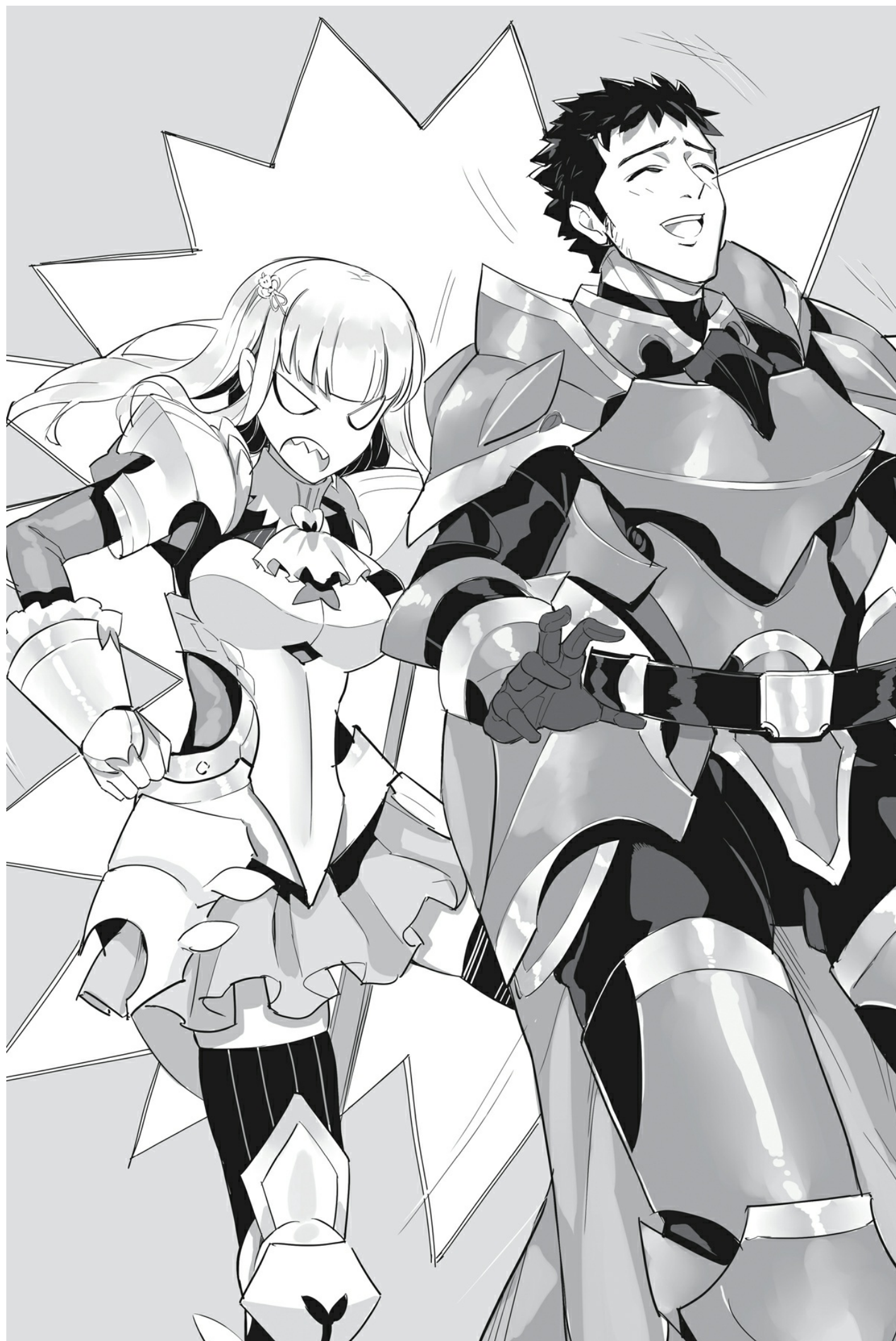
It looked exactly like the kind of spaceship you'd see in an old science fiction movie.

That was my first impression when I entered the silver ship.

Through the gear-shaped glass windows, which didn't serve any discernible purpose, I could see lines of light running through magic circuits in geometric patterns, creating a mysterious waveform.

There were countless buttons and toggle switches at the control station on the bridge.

I could feel a faint vibration from the floor, while a low pulsing beat and a high-pitched engine whine sounded from the rear part of the hull.



As I was gazing around in rapt curiosity, three lovely girls approached me.

“Is this him? The kid Rin said had a promising future?”

Weeyari, with the bamboo leaf-shaped ears of the long-eared folk, brought her face close to mine. To the average Japanese person, I’m sure she would look more like an elf than Mia would.

“Yeah. He looks kinda like Hayato but more on the delicate side.”

“I dunno what Rin was talking about. There’s not a single callus on his hand.”

The first to answer Weeyari was the tigerfolk girl Rusus.

Fifi, the wolffolk girl, followed up by brazenly grabbing my hand and appraising it.

I probably didn’t have any calluses, because I hadn’t trained that much, but I was pretty sure that even if I did, my “Self-Healing” skill would fix them right away.

“So he’s all bark and no bite, huh?”

“Booring. He’s just some well-to-do noble boy who happens to have a high level.”

Losing interest in me, Rusus and Fifi returned to their seats.

“I’m sorry about them. Rin spoke very highly of you, so their expectations were probably blown out of proportion.”

“Oh, no, it’s quite all right.”

Miss Weeyari apologized for her friends’ rudeness, but they weren’t wrong that I’d gotten to this high level with minimal effort. I wasn’t particularly offended.

Princess Meriest, who’d been talking with the priestess Loleiya in the front seats, turned toward me, so I greeted her with a bow.

“We’re heading out! Everyone, get to your seats!”

““““Roger!”””” the three young women chorused briskly in reply, taking their respective seats.

“Satou, you can take the support seat behind the captain’s chair.”

When I headed to the seat the hero indicated, Princess Menea was already in the chair next to it.

True to his word, her escort knight was standing at attention behind her.

“You really came, then...,” she remarked to me.

“Of course. I could hardly turn down an invitation from Sir Hero.”

Menea frowned at me.

Since she’d called me the Savior Chef before, I was guessing she thought of me as more “chef” than “savior.”

“Well then, let us both be sure to stay back and let my escort knight protect us, so that we do not cause trouble for Sir Hero.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Sometimes she’s sweet, and sometimes she’s salty. Looks like this princess has a tsundere side.

I had no intention of getting in the hero’s way, regardless, so I might as well keep back with my fellow spectator.

“Jules Verne, take off.”

“Jules Verne, take off!”

Weeyari echoed the hero’s orders. *She must be the helmsperson.*

After a brief floating sensation, we saw the view outside the portholes rapidly zoom away.

“Dimensional submersion!”

“Jules Verne, engaging dimensional submersion.”

Weeyari pulled a large lever in the cockpit labeled SUBMERSION.

A wave of sound like something from a synthesizer echoed through the ship, and the view beyond the portholes turned dark gray.

“Dimensional submersion complete. Shifting to automatic controls.”

“Go ahead.”

The hero nodded to the helmsperson.

“Whew. Loleiya, could you make some coffee?”

Coffee?!

“Sir Hero, you have coffee on this ship?”

“Yeah. You want some, too?”

“Yes, please!”

The hero’s wonderful suggestion quickly whetted my appetite.

“Satou, you may have heard this in the legends, but coffee is very bitter. It’s not delicious in the slightest, you know.” Ringrande shrugged dismissively.

She didn’t understand the power of a cup of coffee in the midst of an all-night death march at work!

After a while, the priestess Loleiya returned with a coffee cup for me, her large bust bouncing all the while.

I closed my eyes, inhaling the nostalgic scent of coffee with pleasure.

Once I’d enjoyed the fragrance for a moment, I brought the black coffee to my lips, wanting to drink it before it cooled.

“Mr. Satou, wouldn’t you like some cream or sugar? It’s much too bitter for a first-time drinker.”

“Not at all. It’s absolutely delicious.”

The strong taste permeated my entire being.

This was no gourmet coffee from a specialty shop. It tasted like the cheap instant coffee I knew so well.

“Are coffee beans cultivated in the Saga Empire?”

“Yes. The blend you’re drinking now is a special product of the Kilimanjaro Marquisate in the west of the Saga Empire. Bluman County and Mocha Viscounty are also known for their coffee beans.”

That was good to know. There must be some companies importing goods

from the Saga Empire in the old capital. I'd have to ask Tolma if he knew of any shops that might sell me some coffee beans.

These familiar-sounding place names must have come from the first emperor of the Saga Empire. I was more and more convinced that he must have been Japanese.

For reasons beyond my comprehension, coffee didn't seem to be very popular in this world; aside from the hero and me, everyone else preferred black tea.

The sweets they provided to go with the tea and coffee were basically just balls of sugar, so I brought out some baked goods from Storage by way of the Garage Bag.

"My, how delicious."

"Agreed. They melt in your mouth for an elegant sweetness."

Princess Meriest and Priestess Loleiya praised my baked goods.

"It's impressive that you could preserve the freshly baked flavor like this..."

Oops. Meriest seemed a little suspicious about the freshness of my snacks.

"...You must know quite a talented magic-tool craftsman."

For a second, I didn't quite understand her meaning, but then I realized she must have assumed I used a heat-insulating tool.

"Mmmm! What are these?"

"They're cookies, right?"

"See? I told you Satou was an amazing chef!"

Miss Ringrande's response to Rusus's and Fifi's exclamations was to brag as if she'd made them herself.

"It's true. They're nice and crunchy."

Miss Weeyari, who normally had the air of a silent warrior, was popping cookies into her mouth one after another. I guess she liked them.

"So this is the work of a chef from a large kingdom... Even our royal chefs

could not produce such flavors.”

For some reason, Princess Menea seemed to be taking the whole thing personally.

I offered some to her escort knight as well, but he refused on the grounds that he was working.

During our in-flight teatime, Princess Meriest, Miss Ringrande, and the others taught me about the magic and magic tools of the Saga Empire, among other things.

When we were about six hours away from arrival, we decided to get some sleep to prepare for the fight against the dragon.

The girls went to separate sleeping quarters, while the hero, the escort knight, and I slept on the bridge in the reclining seats.

Around this time, my friends back in the old capital were probably curled up asleep in their big beds. I wanted to check in on them with Clairvoyance but didn’t want to set off some kind of anti-magic alarm on the ship, so I decided to refrain.

Instead, I muttered “good night” to no one in particular and went to sleep.



The next morning, I had coffee and some space food-like rations for breakfast.

“We should be arriving soon, yes?”

“That was fast.”

It had been only twelve hours since we departed.

In fact, we could have arrived even faster, but we took a slower pace in order to arrive at dawn.

“We’re reentering normal space. All hands to your seats.”

At the hero’s command, everyone went to their chairs.

I fastened my seat belt, as I would in a regular car, but that didn’t seem to be the standard here: Weeyari was the only other person who did the same.

“Reenter normal space.”

“Reentering normal space, sir.”

Natural color returned to the dull gray scenery outside.

Suddenly, my “Sense Danger” skill alerted me.

“Watch out!”

“Hard to starboard!”

Rusus and I shouted at the same time.

Just as the hull began to tilt to the right, something slammed into us, sending shock waves through the ship.

“Eek!”

Princess Menea was sent flying out of her seat, so I caught her in my lap.

I thought she would be angry, but she seemed more afraid of being thrown to the ground and simply clung to my neck instead.

The soft sensation was pretty enjoyable.

“Hang on to something, everyone!”

“Whoa, what’s going on?!”

“Forget it, Fifi, just grab the railiiiiing!”

The hero’s shouts and the women’s shrieks echoed as the silver ship was shaken like a leaf.

The more combat-oriented women had managed to hang on to their seats, but the support-type pair didn’t have a strong-enough grip.

“Eek!”

“Oh my~.”

Princess Meriest and a strangely unruffled Priestess Loleiya came flying from the front seats.

Considering their high level, they probably wouldn’t be seriously injured if they slammed into the wall of the bridge, but that didn’t mean I could just

ignore them.

Instead, I reached out to either side and caught them in midair.

The god of lechery must have intervened, because somehow I caught both of them firmly by the breasts.

But I couldn't just get embarrassed and let them go, so I simply pulled them in before shifting my hands down to their stomachs.

You can't blame me if I happened to enjoy the feeling of their ample breasts a little bit in the process.

Even in this situation, the sweet scent of perfume threatened to send my head spinning.

"Wee! Turn on the stabilizers!"

"They're already at full power!"

I heard this conversation at the front of the bridge.

Despite the multiaxial rotation tossing us around like an extreme theme park ride, these two seemed to be quite calm.

I activated my "Search Entire Map" skill, then used Magic Hand to help steady the spaceship.

Soon, its trajectory leveled out, perhaps helped along by my magic.

On the way here, I'd been told that the *Jules Verne* blocked any outside magic, but apparently magic used from inside still reached the outside just fine.

"Th-thank you, Sir Pendragon. You can release me now, if you would."

"Thank you, Sir Knight."

I relinquished my hold on Princess Meriest and Priestess Loleiya.

Then I brought the dazed Princess Menea back to her seat, securing her in place with a seat belt.

Her escort knight was sprawled in a corner of the bridge, but his life didn't seem to be in danger, so I decided to leave him be for now.

Opening my map to examine the red dot that indicated an enemy, I found

that we were being attacked by a level-68 adult dragon. That was lower than Hayato the Hero, who was level 69.

The dragon's status condition read **Rage**. Clearly, he was not in a good mood.

That last attack must have been a magic attack like "Dragon Breath" or something.

"Hayato! There's a dragon ahead! This sheer power must belong to the lord of the Black Dragon Mountains!"

Priestess Meriest had obtained the same information as I had from the terminal of the silver ship.

"Wee! Dimensional submersion, now!"

"...We can't! The dimensional submersion function is stalled!"

Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good.

"All right. Then I'm heading for the prow."

Taking up his Holy Shield, the hero plunged into the passage leading to the prow.

I ran along behind him, intending to support him from the shadows. Miss Ringrande shouted from the bridge to stop me, but I ignored her and kept moving.

As I passed through a narrow aisle, I was struck by a sharp wind and the smell of ozone.

Hayato had arrived at the prow and opened the hatch.

Using "Warp," I closed the distance between the hero and myself.

"A real dragon....," the hero muttered.

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up the sound through the uproarious wind and the lattice-shaped barrier that surrounded him.

Rearing its head back from its resting place near a giant tree, the black dragon stood and spread its wings in a menacing pose.

My "Sense Danger" skill reacted again.

“Crap, it’s a ‘Dragon Breath’ attack!”

Holding his Holy Shield at the ready, the hero exclaimed, “<Play,> Tunas!”

His armor shone blue, the light wrapping around his shield. On top of that, his Unique Skill Invincible Shield created a translucent wave of light in front of his Holy Shield, protecting not just the hero but the entire prow of the ship.

Just in case, I activated the intermediate Practical Magic spell Flexible Shield from the magic menu, making two more transparent shields that floated in front of the hero’s.

“Did you do that, Satou?!” the hero exclaimed without turning.

“Yes. It’s only magic from a scroll, so it won’t do much, but—”

I started to give my prepared excuse.

But the black dragon opened its mouth before I could finish, and a flash of light pierced the sky.

“Haaaaah!”

The hero’s Unique Skill and Holy Shield pushed back against the dragon’s breath.

Both of my Flexible Shields held off the attack for only a few seconds before vanishing.

I could have made up to thirty-two more at the same time, but I didn’t want to add to the chaos, so I decided not to interfere unless the hero couldn’t handle it.

“Raaaargh!”

The attack was pushing him back, lifting him off the hull.

“Watch out!”

Panicking, I grabbed his waist from behind, using my free hand to support the shield.

“Thanks a lot, Satou!”

I smiled in response, then pointed forward, where a change was beginning to

grow apparent.

The ripple of light from his Unique Skill was distorting, indicating that it was about to collapse.

“Tch, that’s not all I’ve got!”

You could call this a desperate situation, but at the same time, we were about to get a chance to turn it around.

Judging by the state of the black dragon, its “Dragon Breath” was about to run out.

I was fairly sure we would make it through, but I added two more Flexible Shields just to be safe.

The two new shields were destroyed in seconds, but they still reduced the load on the hero’s significantly.

“...Was that you?”

Shoot, he’s getting suspicious.

I decided we should finish this with sheer force of will.

Pointing at the black dragon, I shouted loudly.

“Now, Hero! Use the power of the Holy Sword!”

“Right! I’ve got this! <Sing,> Arondight!!”

Getting caught up in my enthusiasm, the hero activated his Holy Sword with the magic word.

On top of that, his Unique Skill Unstoppable Spear surrounded the Holy Sword with light.

“Try this on for size! ‘Shining Slaaaaash’!”

The full might of the hero’s attack blew through the weakened “Dragon Breath,” the aftershocks reaching the tip of the black dragon’s nose.

GROOOOOOOARRR!

Caught off guard by the unexpected counterattack, the black dragon yowled and shrieked.

> Skill Acquired: “Dragon Language”

Wait, that was language? I quickly activated the “Dragon Language” skill.

As the dragon reared its head back, I noticed a glint of light near a scale that was growing the wrong way.

...Huh?

My “Telescopic Sight” skill responded to my hunch and magnified the area.

Something that looked like a white knife was embedded deep into the gap under the scale.

With the dragon’s breath no longer opposing the silver ship’s propulsion, we suddenly accelerated forward.

Just as the ship was zooming past the black dragon’s side, I stretched Magic Hand to its limits to grab the knife.

The timing was close, but I managed to pull the knife out just in time.

“Hayato! The port skypower engine is down, and the starboard side is losing power fast. We’re making an emergency landing as far from the dragon as we can!”

Before I could even feel relieved, Weeyari’s tense voice reached us through a speaking tube.

“I’ll use my Wing Shoes to fly over and distract the dragon. Use that time to get away from the ship and hide!”

“No, don’t! It’s too dangerous!”

Priestess Meriest’s voice protested against Hayato’s suicidal plan.

Behind the silver ship, the dragon took to the skies.

It appeared much heavier than a wyvern, but its running speed and ascent were incredibly fast.

Looking behind us, I saw the black beast flailing in the sky, scratching at its neck.

RWOOOOOOLRGH!

Then its attitude suddenly changed, and it called to us in an almost friendly voice.

With the “Dragon Language” skill, I could tell it was saying something meaningful.

Completing its turn, the dragon began to fly away toward the distant mountain range I could see to the far south.

“What just happened?”

“It said it decided to let us go because it’s in a good mood.”

Most likely, the knife stuck in its neck had been making it angry.

These situations were common in fairy tales and such, so I’d just followed my instincts.

I didn’t know why it didn’t pull it out with its own forelimbs, but maybe they weren’t long enough to reach properly.

“Ha-ha, so that’s a dragon...and a demon lord is as strong as that or even stronger...?”

Watching as the dragon retreated until it was no larger than a black sesame seed on the horizon, the hero groaned.

I thought back to the demon lord I’d fought, the Golden Boar Lord.

The demon lord was definitely stronger overall, but in terms of pure attack power, I thought that dragon’s breath took the cake.

While I was waffling over what to say to the hero, our silver ship touched down on the ground, and I lost my chance to make conversation.

>Title Acquired: Dragon Turner



“That’s a pretty big tree.”

“I believe it’s known as the Tree of Healing Rest. According to legends passed down in the Lumork royal family, it was planted by the nomad elves many hundreds of years ago,” Princess Menea explained to the hero.

Entrusting the repair of the ship to Weeyari and the living dolls, the rest of us walked over to investigate where the dragon had been roosting.

In the center of a village at the bottom of a wide valley was the aforementioned Tree of Healing Rest, an arboreal giant like the kind you might see in a TV commercial.

Of course, it was an ordinary size compared to the Mountain-Tree in the village of giants, but overall it was still quite large.

By comparison, the black dragon must have been over three hundred feet in length.

The valley extended to the north and south; on the north side were several large black ditches, probably formed by the black dragon's breath. The walls of the valley itself showed signs of similar damage.

Checking on the map, I found that the inhabitants of this village had evacuated to a town on the other side of a mountain, so there was no one left in this area.

Since the road through this valley connected several small nearby kingdoms, including the Lumork Kingdom, to the Shiga Kingdom, this village must have flourished as a rest stop for travelers.

As for the Tree of Healing Rest, I'd heard about it from Mr. Kikinu, a magic-shop owner in the old capital.

I believe his hometown was located at the foot of the far-off Black Dragon Mountains, so these nomad elves must have planted similar trees in several places.

"Is this not a firefly lily?"

"It's difficult to tell in the light, but yes, I believe you're right."

"And jewel grass, a one-night lily— Aah! Even crystal mushrooms!"

"Let's collect them at once, Rin!"

"Yes, of course! I'm not sure what our current stock is for stabilizer, but we should collect as much as we can carry!"

Getting excited, Miss Ringrande and Princess Meriest celebrated with a high five.

Clearly they'd found some rare ingredients.

I recognized the names from my books, but this was my first time seeing the various soul grasses and spirit flowers, all blooming in crowded groups.

Among them was a spirit flower called a freezing flower. A pinch of its dried powder mixed with a recovery potion could heal even the most severe burns, so it was worth a high price. It even had antiaging effects.

"But this village is only known for its edi potato crops and the Tree of Healing Rest..."

Princess Menea tilted her head uncertainly at the sight of the rare plants flowering all around us.

The edi potato, she explained, was a small potato that could be eaten raw.

"It looks like they grew in the area where the dragon was resting."

"I detect the scent of liquor from that pool over there. Could it possibly be... the legendary dragonspring liquor?"

Rusus and Fifi called down from a tall nearby crag.

Legendary liquor? That does sound pretty interesting.

"Dragonspring liquor is a high-grade alcohol created by dragon magic, correct? They say it can extend your life span by a hundred years..." Priestess Loleiya gazed at the pool of liquid dreamily.

If they could create alcohol with magic, the dragons in this world must love their liquor as much as the ones in old Japanese legends.

"I'm going to investigate over there."

"Loleiya, don't drink too much, all right?"

"Yes, I know."

Humming a little tune, Loleiya walked over to the pool along with Rusus and Fifi.

Princess Meriest sniped at her on the way, but to no avail.

I started to follow them, but Miss Ringrande stopped me.

“Satou! Help us pick these! They lose potency if they’re not processed right away, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to gather rare ingredients!”

“Yes, it is as Rin says. Most likely, they grew because of the dragon’s breath, which means they will wither in a matter of days now that the dragon has gone.”

Wow, dragons were amazing.

They were so inherently fantastic that they could fill their surroundings with fantasy-like flowers just by sleeping nearby.

I loved that kind of thing, though.

Maybe when we crossed the Black Dragon Mountains, I’d try to befriend some dragons.

“Come on—hurry!”

Miss Ringrande grabbed my arm and dragged me over, forcing me to join the plant-collecting team.

According to her, I could keep any of the herbs I collected. I started to enjoy the work as they taught me how to properly pick each plant.

Normally, these plants would be the property of the Lumork Kingdom, but there was a good chance they would wither before anyone from the kingdom could get to them. Plus, Princess Menea gave us permission to collect them as a reward for chasing the dragon away.

Once she heard that the soul grass would fetch a high price, the princess and her guard gamely started gathering herbs as well.

Luckily, there were more plants than our small number could possibly harvest, so there weren’t any scuffles breaking out.

After about an hour, we wrapped up the foraging festivities when we had reached the limit of what the hero’s party could process.

“All right, let’s search the area. Princess Menea, stay with Loleiya. We’ll meet

back at this giant rock at noon.”

On the hero’s orders, everyone split up to investigate nearby.

I accompanied Princess Menea to find Priestess Loleiya, who was looking quite cheerful next to the pool of liquid.

“Oh? Hello there, Satou. Care to join me for a driiink?”

Her Shinto-priestlike outfit was slightly open at the chest, revealing skin flushed red with inebriation.

I wanted to join her very much indeed, but more than that, I was hoping to use this opportunity to find a dragon scale.

“C’mon, this is the chance of a liiifetime!”

The priestess tugged on one of my hands, pressing a cup into the other.

The arm she had grabbed was pressed into her bosom.

“Perhaps just one cup, then.”

I couldn’t bring myself to shake off such a blissful sensation.

Instead, I brought the small cup to my lips.

...Now, that’s delicious.

The drink was similar to dry sake. It felt a bit hard in the mouth, but once you rolled it around on your tongue, the sensation gave way to a rich depth of flavor.

It was so easy to drink that I could have easily downed several cups, but it would be a waste not to savor the taste of such fine liquor.

I wanted to take some back with me, but there were only a few bottles’ worth left at the bottom of the pool, so I collected just three small vials.

These I put away in Storage so I could share them with my party once they were old enough to appreciate the taste of sake.

Thanking Loleiya for the drink, I set off in a different direction from the rest of the hero’s party, walking along the dragon’s former bed.

As I walked, I tried searching the map for dragon-related parts.

Aha!

Fortunately, there were several black dragon scales lying around.

All of them were embedded halfway up a nearby mountain, beyond where anyone could easily find them.

I strolled close to them and used Magic Hand to put each one in Storage.

Then I took them out to inspect them. They all had their share of cracks and chips, but that didn't matter for making dragon powder.

The biggest piece was the size of a kickboard, and even the smallest was around the size of a paperback book.

While I was at it, I examined the daggerlike object I'd collected from the dragon's inverted scale.

The AR display labeled it **dragon claw spearhead**. According to the detailed information, it was a weapon made from the claw of a lesser dragon.

Someone must have stabbed the black dragon with the spear this tip came from.

On the end there was a black tar-like substance, which turned out to be cursed hydra poison. Hydra poison sure seemed like a popular choice.

I wouldn't want to wipe it with a cloth and get poisoned myself, so I put it in Storage to separate the poison from the spearhead, then took the spearhead back out by itself.

Experimentally, I tried scratching the dragon scale with it, but it was the spearhead that got damaged instead.

"...Hmm."

Getting curious now, I put a little bit of Spellblade on my own nail and tried to scratch the scale. There was some slight resistance, but it scratched easily enough. The same was true for Sacredblade, of course.

"...I'll just pretend I didn't see anything."

Shoving the facts to the back of my mind, I took the spearhead and the black dragon scales back to the meeting place to show the hero's party.

I kept one of the paperback-size scales in Storage for myself, but the rest I planned to share with the others.

It seemed like a useful material, so it would be unkind to keep it all for myself.

“Adult dragon scales!”

“Where did you find these?”

When I brought the scales and the spearhead back to the others, Princess Meriest and Miss Ringrande came in for a closer look.

Their eyes sparkled as they examined the scales from every angle.

“They were in the exact opposite direction of where you all went looking. When Sir Hero repelled the dragon, I thought I saw something fall from the area around the backward scale on its chest. So I thought perhaps a scale might have fallen...”

“Satou, what’s that dagger-looking thing there?”

“I’m not quite sure myself, but I found it near the scales.”

“Hmm. ‘Dragon claw spearhead,’ huh...? Loleiya! Come look at this!”

The hero took the spearhead and used his own “Analyze” skill to identify it, then called the drunken priestess over from the pool of dragonspring liquor.

Getting impatient with her stumbling approach, Hayato ended up walking over to her himself.

“Can you analyze this?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Rather than a skill, the priestess was using her knowledge to appraise it. She examined the cloth wrapped around the end and the remaining shards of the wooden shaft, touching and even tasting them.

“It was made by the weaselfolk, no doubt about it. The weave of the cloth points to the northern part of the Weaselman Empire, and the wood used for the shaft comes from a tree native to that same area.”

“I see...”

The hero nodded, his brow furrowed.

When I examined each of the parts in detail as Loleiya had, the same information showed up in the AR.

“So the weaselfolk were the cause of this incident, then.”

“Those people are always causing trouble!”

Princess Meriest and Miss Ringrande frowned indignantly.

Liza’s hometown was destroyed by weaselfolk, too, so I guess they were a race with a lot of problems.

The others came to the same conclusion I did: The dragon was wounded by this spearhead and likely took up camp near the Tree of Healing Rest in order to recover.

“Wasn’t there a prediction that a demon lord would appear in the Weaselman Empire, too?”

“True enough. No one in their right mind would pick a fight with a dragon, so maybe there really is a demon lord pulling the strings.”

“Fine by me. From what I hear, Nanashi beat the demon lord that appeared in the Ougoch Duchy, so this next one is mine.”

You can do it, Sir Hero! I silently rooted for Hayato, impressed with his willingness to confront the world’s problems head-on.

“Say, Sir Pendragon. About these dragon scales... I don’t suppose you’d be willing to part with one?”

“Powder made from an adult dragon’s scales would be invaluable in preparing anti-demon weapons.”

Meriest and Ringrande pressed in on me from either side.

“Of course. I had no intention of keeping them all in the first place.”

“Really?!”

“Thank you!”

Those youthful smiles were well worth giving up a few scales anyway.

“What would you like in exchange? For materials this valuable, you could have peerage in the Saga Empire, if you’d like. I could promise you the rank of baronet at the very least!”

“Or perhaps magic armor would make a better reward for you?”

“Being of common birth, my current rank alone is already more than I deserve. And magic armor would be better used in the hands of a noble warrior of the Saga Empire, would it not?”

The pair grumbled over my lack of avarice, grasping for something else to offer me.

I’d run into this situation a few times before. Usually, I thought the best route was to pick a modest reward.

“Perhaps you could allow me to peruse some magic scrolls or advanced spell books, then?”

“...What, are you trying to be a magic swordswoman like Rin?” Meriest raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“I don’t have any scrolls, but I could certainly show you my advanced wind and fire spell books. I have Explosion Magic and Destruction Magic books, too, but there aren’t very many chants.”

“That would be much appreciated. Perhaps on the way back to the old capital?”

“Sure. You can even copy the fire and wind ones, if you’d like.”

Miss Ringrande’s offer was more than enough for me, so my reward was decided.

The biggest dragon scale went to the hero’s party, while I kept two small scales and the dragon claw spearhead.

I did ask if it should be submitted as evidence, but they said that was unnecessary, since it wouldn’t be considered valid in most kingdoms.

Since it was made from rare dragon materials, perhaps I could test it out as an upgrade from Liza’s spear once we got back to the old capital.



“Here, please, Satou.”

At Miss Ringrande’s prompting, I laid the soft bundle in my arms down on the bed.

“She’s completely passed out.”

“Oh, Loleiya. For someone who loves liquor so much, she has an awfully low tolerance.”

Once Priestess Loleiya was settled in the simple bed on the silver ship, I followed Miss Ringrande back outside.

“Meri, how are the repairs going?”

Princess Meriest was having some of the living dolls set up a simple camp for us.

“The dimensional submersion device will be restored by tomorrow morning thanks to its automatic repair functions, but the skypower engines are in bad shape. The port engine is gone, and the starboard engine is malfunctioning.”

Princess Meriest looked at the starboard wing, where Miss Weeyari was dismantling and repairing the barrel-shaped skypower engine.

The hero and the two warriors had gone to the north side of the valley to investigate the aftereffects of the dragon’s breath.

Princess Menea and her escort knight were resting in the shade of a nearby tree.

“Could we not replace it with the spare in Hayato’s inventory?”

“I’m afraid not. The dragon’s attack severed the portside joint completely. If the starboard side’s skypower engine itself is malfunctioning, then replacing it will work, but if it’s the magic transmission circuits that are broken, it could take days just to figure out the cause.”

The ship seemed to be more damaged than I’d realized.

But in that case...

“Lady Ringrande, would you mind if I assist Lady Weeyari?”

“Satou, I know you’re a skilled swordsman and chef, but repairing a skypower

engine? Only a highly skilled magic-tool engineer could even begin to do that.”

“Well, perhaps I can still be of assistance in some way.”

In reality, I did have some knowledge of skypower engines from a book I’d bought in an old-capital magic shop.

“All right, you can go help. As long as you don’t get in Wee’s way.”

“Agreed. With your ‘Cooking’ skill, I would’ve liked your help preparing the magic potions, but you’re welcome to help Wee if you think you’re able.”

Now that I had permission, I headed over to Miss Weeyari.

“I’m here to help.”

“Oh? Then put magic power into one fin at a time and see if it’s broken, please.”

She accepted my help more easily than I’d expected, so I picked up the fin in question.

Up close, I discovered that the skypower engine was made up of an array of air-cooling radiator-like fins.

According to my reference book, these were made of a thin film from the fin of a monster fish. They produced buoyancy when provided with a steady flow of air and magic power.

Some of the monster corpses in my Storage, like the giant monster fish and the parasitic monsters that attacked the prince, had parts that could be used to make these fins, too.

Reining in my wandering thoughts, I watched Weeyari work and imitated her process.

She seemed to be putting a tiny amount of magic into each fin and observing the resulting buoyant force, so I did the same.

“So? Do you see how it works?”

“Yes, I believe this fin here seems to have a poor flow of power.”

I held out the malfunctioning fin to Weeyari.

“Number seventeen... Wait, seventeen? You’ve inspected that many already?”

Weeyari looked with surprise at the neat row of inspected fins lying at my feet.

All I had to do was send magic power through them, so I thought that was a reasonable pace.

“Fine-tuning magic power is one of my fortes.”

“I—I see... Could you check those transmission circuits, too, then?”

With all the fins inspected, I moved on to examine the connection between the engine and the ship itself.

The method was the same as the one we’d used for fins. I simply flowed magic through them and looked for any abnormalities.

I put my hand on the terminal and sent in a small amount of magic power.

Right away, I noticed a few areas where the magic leaked out or met with resistance.

Selecting See Through from the magic menu, I examined the problem areas.

Aha.

Part of the wing structure was warped slightly, putting pressure on the transmission circuit.

The living dolls were working on replacing the armor plates of the hull, so I had a few of them remove the armor from the damaged area to expose the problem.

“Lady Weeyari, I believe I’ve found the source of the problem.”

“Ah, you’re right. The transmission pipe has burst here.”

Leaving the repair itself to Miss Weeyari, I contented myself with handing off tools and providing magic power for testing.

In less than two hours, the work was complete. *Now we should be able to leave tomorrow morning, once the automatic repair of the dimensional submersion device is complete.*

Using the Telephone spell, I communicated our return schedule to Arisa in the old capital.

Magic sure was convenient.

“Oh? Taking a break?”

When we returned to the camp near the stern of the silver ship, the sharp-eyed Ringrande stopped working for a moment to call out to us.

Princess Meriest was still processing the rare ingredients from before, while Princess Menea and her escort knight were sitting at a simple table nearby, looking bored.

“We’re done.”

“...Already?”

Weeyari looked a little smug as Ringrande exclaimed with surprise.

“Yes, thanks to Satou.”

“All I did was follow your directions, Miss Wee.”

This was a fact, not just modesty. She really did do the difficult work. All I did was find the problem for her to fix.

“On a nickname basis already, are we? That’s rather unusual for you, Wee.”

“Not at all.”

Shrugging it off, Weeyari thirstily drank some fruited water from a pitcher.

“Whew, I’m finally halfway done... Wee, if you have any magic left, could you help me?”

“Can’t. None left.”

Princess Meriest looked exhausted, but so did Weeyari.

“If it’s all right with you, could I lend a hand?”

“You can do transmutation, too?”

“Enough to help with preparing ingredients for formulation and supplying magic power, at least.”

It was probably best not to admit that my “Transmutation” and “Formulation” skills were maxed out, but there was no harm in helping with some prep work.

I’d used only about twenty MP while helping Wee, so I should be able to use around ten times that much without contradicting my apparent level.

Following Meriest’s and Ringrande’s requests, I helped with the preprocessing work and magic-power supply.

“Satou, take care of this soul grass, please.”

“You want me to remove the roots and wash the leaves and stalks, correct?”

I accepted the bundle of soul grass from Miss Ringrande.

“Yes, that’s exactly right. How did you know?”

“I simply observed your process earlier.”

In actuality, I’d gotten that information from a rare book I’d read at a high-ranking noble’s home in the old capital.

“Sir Pendragon, could you supply this Transmutation Tablet with a bit of magic?”

“Certainly, madam.”

This time, the request was from Princess Meriest.

Since my speed at manipulating magic seemed to be unusually high, I tried to adjust my pace not to exceed theirs.

“You know, your speed with supplying magic is very impressive, Satou.”

“Erm, is it?”

...Huh? I thought I was slowing down to around their pace?

“Indeed. Even in the empire, there aren’t many people who can match my and Rin’s speed at magic manipulation.”

Shoot—I forgot that everyone here is exceptionally talented.

I guess I should have been holding back even more.

“I’ve just been frantic to try to keep up with the rest of you, that’s all.”

Princess Meriest giggled. “No need to be so humble. You’re quite talented, you know. You ought to ask Hayato to teach you how to use Spellblade after dinner. With gifts like yours, I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

She seemed to be in quite a good mood now.

Unfortunately, I already had Spellblade, but I appreciated her intentions nonetheless.

“Ta-daaaa!”

“We’ve got some big game!”

Rusus and Fifi returned from their investigation, carrying a huge monster called a fortress tiger.

Unused to seeing monsters, Princess Menea let out a scream, and the escort knight turned pale and grabbed the hilt of his sword.

“Th-the hero and his comrades are truly amazing. To think they could bring down a fort-destroying fortress tiger with just three people...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on a murmur of disbelief from the escort knight.

When I asked him later, he explained that defeating a fortress tiger normally involved setting traps or forming a base with a large number of people.

“We cleared the main road of any obstacles. It might need a bit more maintenance before carriages can use it, but humans and pack mules should be able to traverse it easily enough.”

“Oh, goodness! Thank you very much, Sir Hero!”

Princess Menea looked thrilled at Hayato’s report.

As it turned out, the Lumork Kingdom army dispatched to defeat the dragon was destroyed before it even reached its goal. Other monsters laid waste to their forces before they found the dragon.

“Hayato! This thing was inside the fortress tiger.”

“It looks like a whistle!”

Butchering the fortress tiger under a nearby tree, Rusus and Fifi called the

hero over to look at a broken flute-shaped magic tool of some kind.

“Meri, Rin, come take a look at this.”

“Why, this is...”

“The flute of a weaselfolk beast master?”

“I thought so...”

The three of them examined the flute gravely.

So the destruction of the Lumork Kingdom’s army was also the work of the weaselfolk.

I searched the map, but the only weaselfolk around were a few merchants in a nearby village, none of whom had any skills or titles that would indicate a beast master. Either the culprit had already left the kingdom or he was eaten along with the flute.

“Hey, you’re a chef, aren’t you?”

“C’mon, cook this meat for us.”

Rusus and Fifi trotted over to me cheerfully with some lumps of red meat in hand.

Evidently they were uninterested in having a serious conversation about the possible schemes of the weaselfolk.

“Make it reeeal tasty, mm’kay?”

“I want an extra-thick piece!”

“Sure, leave it to me.”

The cut they brought over was fairly lean, so I sliced off some fat from the partially butchered fortress tiger.

It seemed like it might get tough when cooked, so I cut it along the sinew and soaked it in a tray of sake.

Next I fried the heart and liver quickly, using seasonings from my Garage Bag. It was a little bit gamey, so I threw in some fragrant herbs to eliminate the smell.

“Oh man, that smells amazing!”

“W-watch it, Hayato. The first piece is mine!”

“And I’m second!”

“Wait, so I have to be third?”

“No, I’m afraid I’m third, so that makes you fourth, Hayato.”

This hastily decided order didn’t last long. Soon, the four vanguard members were pushing and shoving one another to get each piece as it was cooked.

There was plenty of meat, so I resolved to keep cooking until all of them were satisfied.

“My, that’s delicious. Now I understand why you buffoons made such a disgraceful display.”

“Right? I told you Satou’s cooking is amazing!”

Princess Meriest nodded approvingly when she finally got to taste the steak, and Miss Ringrande puffed up her chest with pride.

“Indeed. Now, if only I had a glass of red wine to go with it...”

“You’ve had enough to drink for one day, Loleiya.”

Miss Weeyari quickly shot down the priestess, who had just recovered from her drunken state.

“...Fortress tiger is quite delicious, isn’t it? I didn’t expect monster meat to taste this good.”

“N-no, Your Highness. I once ate the meat of a fortress tiger when I worked at a fort, but it was like chewing on a boiled old shoe. This doesn’t even compare.”

Princess Menea’s escort knight shook his head in amazement.

I’d done a lot of experimenting with cooking monster meat on my journey. At this point, I could make just about any kind of meat into a delicious meal.

Maybe someday I could try making the infamously disgusting wyvern meat taste good.

Once the meal was winding down, Princess Menea stood up.

“Sir Hero... Everyone. Allow me to thank you on behalf of my kingdom for saving our people from danger.”

She gave an elegant curtsy to the hero, then went around to each person to take their hands and thank them one by one, even me.

“Could I persuade you to come to Lumork Castle? We would love to express our gratitude for your great deeds.”

“Sorry, but I’m not really into that kind of thing. If King Lumork wants to thank us, tell him to just send a thank-you letter to the Saga Empire or something, please.”

The hero waved at the princess to have a seat, as if signaling an end to the whole affair.

Then, with perfect timing, Priestess Loleiya brought out some after-dinner coffee.

Damn, did I ever miss coffee.

“That was delicious! We never get to eat that well on the road.”

“I agree. You should join our party, too, Satou!”

Rusus and Fifi sat on either side of me, pounding my shoulders encouragingly.

It didn’t help that their chests were pushing against my arms, too.

“Don’t harass Satou, you two.”

Miss Weeyari’s cheeks were slightly pink as she pulled her companions away.

For a second, I caught myself conceitedly wondering whether she’d fallen for me, but then I realized it was probably because of the ale she’d been drinking.

“However, I agree with your suggestion. It would be a big help to have someone else who can assist with repairs for the ship besides me.”

Wee, reeking of alcohol, leaned against my back.

“I should think he would have a hard time with us at level thirty, though.”

“Yes, maybe we’ll talk if you gain another fifteen levels or so in Labyrinth City.”

Priestess Loleiya and Princess Meriest agreed that my level was too low.

I had no intention of joining the hero's party, of course, but I did feel proud that they thought of me so highly.

"I dunno, guys. What if Satou just goes off and gets the Hero title for himself?"

The hero grinned jokingly, unaware that I actually had it already.

"Ha-ha, Hayato, you're a riot!"

"That's so like you, Hayato."

Rusus and Fifi laughed. Apparently, it was rare for anyone to get the Hero title on their own.

"No, I mean it. Earlier today, if it weren't for Satou, that black dragon's breath would've blown me right off the *Jules Verne*."

"Not at all, Sir Hero. I was simply holding on to you and the railing for safety."

"You can just call me Hayato. Besides, you were backing me up with scrolls, weren't you? We might not all be sitting here safely without your help. I owe you one, Satou."

Without getting out of his chair, Hayato bowed his head deeply and thanked me.

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Hero

Humbly deflecting his flattery, I tried to change the subject by bringing up Holy Swords.

"Sir Hero?"

"Just Hayato."

The hero scowled, but I couldn't quite bring myself to get that casual.

"Sir Hayato, then."

"That'll do, I guess."

We compromised with "Sir Hayato" and moved on.

"Do all Holy Swords have a special key word, like the word <sing> you used

with yours today?”

“Oh, the scriptures? Rin would know more about that than I would.”

“Let’s see... The Holy Sword Durandal, which was used by a hero in the era of the ancestral king, has <for eternity,> and Joyeuse, the one belonging to the hero of the demi-human war, has <in the sun.> I think those are the only ones I know.”

Nice!

I had just learned the “scripture” word for Durandal, one of the Holy Swords I got in my initial windfall.

“If you want to know more, you should read Uncle Leon’s book *Holy Swords and Scriptures*. Since you’re his vassal and all, I’m sure he’d be happy to answer any of your questions on the matter.”

...Oh, right. Baron Muno used to be a hero researcher.

The Muno Barony was pretty far away, so maybe I could find out whether Mr. Kikinu’s magic shop in the old capital had a copy. He was a big hero fan himself, after all.

I thanked Ringrande appreciatively for the useful information, and soon our after-dinner tea was over.

“Satou, how would you like to do some training with me to work off the meal?”

Miss Ringrande grinned and pulled me up by the hand, so I crossed swords with her for a while.

After that, Rusus and Fifi wanted to try a round, too.

It was hard to go easy on them when they seemed to fight on pure instinct, but I was able to hold my own and lose to them gracefully enough.

“You’re pretty good, huh? Let me have a go, too.”

For some reason, the hero wanted a match, too.

His speed and power were considerably higher than that of his followers.

“You’re not half-bad.”

“Sir Hayato, perhaps you could go a bit easier on me.”

I had to be extra careful with him; if I wasn't, I risked miscalculating the amount of magic I was using to protect the fairy sword and invoking Spellblade by accident.

And if I caught a blow head-on, it could damage the fairy sword, so I had to watch my parrying angles, too.

“You really are quite strong, Sir Hayato.”

“Ha! It's been a long time since I fought anyone who could hold a conversation while sparring with me.”

The hero had a lot of battle-related skills, so he made for a pretty fun opponent.

He made use of skills even I didn't have, like “Blink” and “Predictive Evasion.”

Impressively, even though from his point of view I was a much less skilled opponent, he didn't seem to be playing around in the slightest.

“That's enough!”

As the referee, Miss Ringrande ruled Hayato the victor, and our mock battle ended.

Like when I'd fought Miss Ringrande, he came at me from the blind spot where my radar was usually displayed, so I couldn't quite avoid his attack.

“What's wrong, Hayato?”

“...No, it's nothing.”

The hero was tilting his head from side to side and flexing his hands.

I paid no attention to his behavior, instead replaying in my mind his movements from the battle and trying to commit them to my muscle memory.

The next morning, the ship's automatic repair was completed as planned, and we were able to get back to the old capital by evening.

For someone who was so uncivil on the way there, Princess Menea was strangely talkative with me on our return journey.

“...or so I believe. What do you think, Sir Satou?”

She was probably in a good mood now that her homeland wasn't in such dire straits.

“...Yes, I agree.”

However, I had stayed up all night reading the advanced spell books I'd borrowed from Miss Ringrande, so I was completely exhausted.

“Really, Sir Satou, are you even listening to me?”



“Yes, of course.”

I continued to absentmindedly nod along to Princess Menea’s stories for the rest of the trip.

Ringrande had to wake me up when we got back to the old capital, and Princess Menea looked so cross that she was practically harrumphing out loud.

I must have fallen asleep in the middle of our conversation.

I apologized to her for my rudeness and wound up having to promise to take her sightseeing in the old capital to make it up to her.

I didn’t want to spend a day babysitting, but you reap what you sow, I suppose.

The Wedding and the Lulu Fruit

Satou here. Whenever I had to go to a lot of weddings, all the wedding gifts were like a tornado sweeping through my bank account. But since it was a great way to meet women, I was willing to endure the frugal life until my next payday.

When I returned to the capital, I enjoyed a fun dinnertime with my friends that healed my exhaustion.

Then, that night...

“Nanashi the Hero?”

“Mm.”

I entered the duke’s private room in his castle, and he greeted me as a friend.

As I spoke, I kept in mind the simple sentences I’d used last time we met.

“A strange hero, to enter through the window like that.”

Sitting across from the duke was the king of Shiga—or rather, his body double.

His tone was like a grandfather scolding a naughty grandchild.

When I landed on the floor and came to the center of the room, the homely atmosphere changed slightly, and the expression of the king’s body double tightened.

“Mr. Nanashi the Hero, as the ruler of the Shiga Kingdom, I thank you for saving our land from destruction.”

The man bowed his head deeply.

Even in an unofficial setting like this, it seemed improper for a king to lower his head to anyone.

“Don’t bow.”

“I would like to reward you and grant you peerage in a public ceremony. Won’t you come with me to the royal capital in my private airship?”

When he looked up, the king said something even more troublesome.

If I accepted a high rank, I’d probably get dragged into all kinds of political struggles with other aristocrats.

“No need.”

“But on top of defeating a demon lord, you brought down a senior greater demon and even the seven giant monster fish it summoned. These are deeds comparable to the ancestral king! To let it go without a single repayment would be—”

I shook my head, interrupting the body double king’s words.

Better wrap up my business here quickly and make myself scarce.

“The prince forgot this.”

“The Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis...”

I held out the sword to the king, its blade wrapped in cloth.

However, the body double simply stared at it, making no attempt to accept it.

“Mr. Nanashi, I heard from my soldiers that you can produce the true form of this sword. Did I hear correctly?”

I nodded silently at the duke’s question.

Did they think this sword was a fake or something?

“Would you mind showing us?”

Drawing a sword in the duke’s private room seemed like asking to get arrested on the spot, but since he was requesting it himself, I didn’t have much of a choice.

I unraveled the cloth around Claidheamh Soluis’s blade, poured some magic power into it, and recited the scripture.

“<Dance.>”

Just like in the battle with the yellow demon, the sword broke into thirteen

smaller blades and floated around my body.

“Incredible!! So the legends were true!”

“Beautiful... The tapestry doesn't even come close to reproducing it!”

All right, calm down already.

The duke and even the king's body double looked like they were about to start foaming at the mouth. I wished they'd rein in their fanboying a little.

It seemed to me that they'd seen enough, so I transitioned the sword back into its regular state.

“A number of people have been able to use the scripture to make the sword ‘dance,’ but not since the ancestral king has anyone managed to release its true form...!”

I recovered the MP I'd charged the sword with, wrapped the blade again, and held it out to the king.

However, he still wouldn't accept it.

“...No, keep it. I wish to entrust it to the one who can bring out its true power.”

Hang on, Mr. Body Double... Should you really be making that decision?

“You sure?”

With those few words, I tried to feel out whether he needed the real king's permission.

But neither the body double king nor the duke seemed willing to change their minds.

“Of course. Then you must bring the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis to the Great Audience Ceremony on New Year's Day...”

“Not sure I can make it.”

I was trying to indicate that I definitely didn't want to go, but it didn't seem to come across.

“...and there I shall declare you the hero of the Shiga Kingdom.”

So if I don't go, the whole ceremony will be canceled?

Putting that aside for the moment, would the royal capital even be able to defend itself without Claidheamh Soluis?

It was a handy sword and all, but honestly, I could get by just fine without it.

“What about the capital?”

“Hmm. The capital has the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and their Magic Swords.”

The body double king responded with confidence, but I'd met one of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga. He was a bodyguard for the prince, and he had been virtually useless in the battle against the yellow-skinned demon.

If the other seven swordsmen were on the same level, could they defeat a greater demon without a Holy Sword?

“Besides, a Holy Sword chooses its wielder. As long as you are around, it likely won't allow anyone else to use it. Unless the ancestral king Yamato were to be resurrected from the legendary Dreamcrystal Mausoleum, of course.”

I see... Well, I guess there's no point returning it if they can't use it.

Oh, I know. Maybe they can use the Holy Sword Gjallarhorn to defend the capital instead?

Unlike most of the other swords, which were said to be gifts from the gods, I thought this one was supposed to have been made by the ancestral king Yamato himself.

“Trade.”

“Wh-why, this is the Holy Sword Gjallarhorn!”

“The Holy Sword that was stolen by the evil lord seventeen years ago!”

Looking at the Holy Sword I held out, the body double king and the duke leaped to their feet in surprise.

“Ooh! Dear God! The sword forged by our great ancestral king Yamato has returned to the Shiga Kingdom at last!”

“Thank you, Nanashi the Hero, thank you!”

I wasn't expecting them to get this excited.

Maybe I should have returned it sooner.

I thought the "evil lord" the double had mentioned was probably the Undead King Zen, who had given me this Holy Sword in the first place.

Unlike Holy Swords from gods, this one had no limits to who could use it, as evidenced by the fact that the undead Zen was able to do so.

Just in case, I kept my Healing Magic at the ready when I handed the sword over to the body double king, but nothing happened, just as I'd expected.

Incidentally, the third prince, who had rapidly aged in the battle against the yellow demon, had been sent back to the royal capital for rest and treatment.



With my business in the duke's castle finished, I used the Return spell to teleport to the labyrinth ruins under the old capital.

My plan was to make dragon powder from the black dragon scales I'd acquired the day before.

"...Damn, that's hard."

The blue steel tool I got from the kobolds couldn't even make a scratch.

If I pushed it much harder, the tool itself would probably get chipped instead.

"<For eternity.>"

I removed the Holy Sword Durandal from Storage and spoke the scripture Ringrande had told me about, and its chipped blade instantly restored itself.

It used up the magic power I'd charged it with in the process, but that was a small price to pay.

I didn't know whether it would work if the blade was completely broken, but either way, that was a pretty handy power.

Guess I'll start using the Holy Sword Durandal as my main weapon from now on.

"This thing always cuts so well."

I chopped the scales into small pieces with the Holy Sword Durandal, then rubbed them together to make them into powder.

It started getting pretty tiresome partway through, so I used a small amount of powder as an agent for the Polish spell, which turned the rest of it into powder all at once.

“...Highest quality?”

The completed powder had the status **Highest Quality**.

Curious, I tried turning a small amount of it into blue and making a single Holy Arrow. To my surprise, it came out three times stronger than the ones I’d made previously.

If they were too strong, I would have fewer opportunities to use them, but I could probably manage that by adjusting the amount of blue.

While I was at it, I mass-produced a thousand bullets with the combination of Magic Mold and Forge. Then I hollowed out a few of those with a Holy Sword and made a bullet version of the Holy Arrows.

I planned to launch these with the Shooter spell.

Next, I carved screw-shaped holes in a few of them. If I screwed arrow shafts into these, I could use them as Holy Arrows, too. I figured shooting them with a Magic Bow might be more powerful than firing them with the Shooter spell.

While I was at it, I made some Magic Bullets with blue made out of normal monster cores, too.

Firing bullets with Shooter proved less accurate than I expected, so I decided to work on a better version of the spell.

I was hoping I could improve their accuracy by adding a lateral rotation vector to their trajectory when fired, like bullets in my old world.

The rest of my scrolls should be ready for pickup in five days or so, so I intended to finish the spell by then.

As for the dragon claw spearhead that I would use to upgrade Liza’s spear, I was concerned about whether I could connect it securely, so I decided to do a little more planning before I attempted anything.



The next day, I was summoned to the duke's castle regarding the black dragon incident, where the hero and I both received the Ougoch Duchy Dragon Conquering Medal.

This seemed to be a rare medal in a different way from the Ougoch Duchy Sapphire Medal I'd previously received.

With this, I'd be treated almost as well as the head of an upper noble family anywhere in the duchy.

Not that this mattered much, since I already received excessive hospitality as it was.

We also received words of praise from the king's body double, who was present at the time.

We were also told we could receive medals from the kingdom at the Great Audience Ceremony, where nobles gathered in the old capital to celebrate the New Year.

Then, when I parted ways with the hero, Princess Menea, and the others at the duke's castle and returned to the mansion where we were staying, the butler informed me that a guest was waiting for me.

"I'm terribly sorry to keep you waiting."

"Hey, Sir Satou! Nah, I'm the one who showed up without any prior warning."

Tolma stood up from the sofa, greeting me casually.

He'd done a lot for me, from giving me information on other nobles to introducing me to the scroll workshop run by his family member Viscount Siemmen, so I wasn't about to give him a hard time for a minor breach of etiquette.

The bigger problem was the unwell-looking man standing behind him.

I'd met him at the duke's dinner party, but I couldn't remember his name until I saw it in the AR display.

"I believe you've met, but this is Viscount Kirk Emerin, head of the Emerin family."

“Yes, we were briefly introduced at the dinner party.”

Tolma was usually pretty oblivious, so it was a bit surprising that he actually introduced the man.

If I remembered right, this family managed an expansive orchard and had moved primarily into trade since he’d succeeded the title of viscount.

What did an upper-ranking noble like him want with me?

As far as I could tell from my memos, our only prior connection was that I shared a single dance with his second daughter at the duke’s ball.

“He says he wants your help with something.”

“My help?”

So I guess this wasn’t just an angry father coming to grump at me, then.

If anything, he looked more tired than angry.

“See, the trade fleet he organized with the help of various investors got wiped out near the Seadragon Islands, so—”

“Tolma, you didn’t have to tell him that part.”

Tolma’s cheerful explanation was cut short by a rather sullen Viscount Emerin.

Still, the Seadragon Islands sounded like a pretty exciting place. I quietly added them to my list of tourist destinations.

“What I want to ask you about, Sir Pendragon, is this fruit.”

Viscount Emerin called to a servant standing by the wall, who placed a pile of oddly colored, uneven fruit on the table.

According to my AR, it was called **Lulu Fruit**.

But the resemblance to my adorable party member Lulu ended there.

The fruit’s skin was the color of mulberry, with mottled gray patches. It had blackish discolored areas, too, like sugar spots on bananas.

It also emitted a nauseating stench like a bunch of thick perfumes all mixed together.

“That’s a very unique fruit you have there.”

My “Poker Face” skill helped me keep a businesslike smile as I made the most harmless remark I could muster.

“I’ve prepared tea, sir.”

“Thank you.”

For some reason, it was Lulu, not a maid, who came over with a tray.

I could see a few familiar young faces poking out beyond the doorway, like Arisa and Pochi, so she was probably sent in as a scout.

“With your cooking skills, would you be able to make some kind of confection that would help sell this fruit?”

That sounded pretty unlikely.

But maybe it actually tasted delicious despite the smell, like durian.

“Well, I can’t say for sure unless I know what it tastes like.”

“Have a taste, then.”

Viscount Emerin’s servant sliced up the fruit with a small knife and lined up a few small, sealed pots on the table.

The fruit was bright ultramarine in color, making me question whether it could even be eaten. The pots, meanwhile, contained the fruit pickled in various liquids.

I tried each one in turn.

Sour! It was a hundred times more acidic than a lemon. And after the sourness, it left a bitter aftertaste, too.

After trying the raw lulu fruit, I tasted it pickled in vinegar and miso, made into jam, dried, and so on, but every one of them was equally gross.

Its grossness rivaled the gabo fruit bread I ate back in Seiryuu City.

Not even sugar or honey would be enough to save this awful flavor.

I washed down the taste with the tea Lulu gave me.

“This is certainly a challenge.”

“I had hoped that a miracle chef like yourself might be able to find another use for this lulu fruit besides feed for livestock.”

“Feed for livestock...,” Lulu repeated gloomily under her breath.

It was enough to make me want to curse out Viscount Emerin, but this was my own fault for not getting Lulu out of the room in time, too.

“Wait a moment. This ‘lulu’ has a lot of potential.”

Though I was facing Viscount Emerin, I was really addressing Lulu.

She raised her downcast eyes to look at me.

“If you give me a few days, I promise you, I can awaken the true splendor of this fruit!”

My bold statement brightened Lulu’s expression ever so slightly.

Perhaps her inferiority complex was improving, little by little.

“A-are you quite certain?”

“Yes, just leave it to me.”

Viscount Emerin clasped my hand as if hanging on to his last hope for salvation.

For him, giving this fruit a higher commercial value was probably the only way to protect his family name.

When Viscount Emerin left with Tolma, the light of hope had returned to his eyes.

Now I just had to make good on my promise.

“That was rather unlike you, master.”

“Was it?”

I responded absently to Arisa’s words as I opened the memo pad from my networking menu and started working on a plan for Operation Lulu Fruit.

She was right, though. The truth was, I’d made the reckless agreement because I couldn’t stand to let this fruit with the same name as Lulu be so unfortunate.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Of course.”

The taste of the lulu fruit really was awful, but depending on how it was treated, its four main points of “sourness,” “bitterness,” “pungency,” and “stench” could be turned into strengths.

Certain forms, like the cooked jam and the dried fruit, even made it a little sweet.

Since Tama and Pochi had strong senses of taste, I recruited them to help with my testing. I wanted to surprise Lulu with the finished product, so I had her work on cooking sponge cakes with Liza.

Getting caught up in the experimental nature of the process, I tried boiling and steaming it at various temperatures, writing the results in my memo pad.

“Oopsie?”

“I-it’s very strong, sir. Makes me want some whale jerky to cleanse my palate, sir.”

At first, the two of them weren’t thrilled with the samples, but after a while...

“Pochiii?”

“Tama!”

...They were morosely whimpering each other’s names as they popped the samples into their mouths.

We’d gone through only half my ideas so far, but I didn’t want to traumatize them, so I let them off the hook for now and continued tasting on my own.

My “Self-Healing” skill managed to heal my paralyzed taste buds, so I could continue the tasting easily enough.

Thanks to that, I was able to come up with an ideal preparation method by the following morning.

“What do you think?”

“I-it’s delicious...”

Lulu, the first to taste the new samples, was speechless.

“Is this really the same fruit from yesterday? The color and smell are both completely different...”

The ultramarine color turned a vivid red in the process, so it was barely recognizable.

“Of course,” I said gently. “I told you, didn’t I? This ‘lulu’ has a lot of potential.”

Lulu looked like she was about to cry.

“...I’ll do my best, too.”

It looked like what I was really trying to say reached her. Lulu smiled through the tears in her eyes.

In Lulu’s case, she had more than just potential—she was already beautiful, but she’d be even more so if she gained some self-confidence.

Though if she got much more charming, the universe itself might be thrown out of balance.

“I told her ‘The Ugly Duckling’ as a bedtime story last night,” Arisa remarked helpfully behind me.

I couldn’t help but praise her for that, so I patted her head approvingly.



Once Lulu had calmed down a little, I offered samples to the rest of the group, who were already gathered around us.

“Go ahead—try it.”

“No thaaanks?”

“Pochi’s tummy is full, sir.”

After helping me yesterday, Tama and Pochi seemed leery of the fruit.

As soon as I held it out to them, their ears flattened and their tails hid between their legs.

I didn’t want to force them, so I offered it to the other kids instead.

“Mmmm! What *is* this? It’s so good I could scream!”

Arisa chewed on the sample with a look of happy surprise.

“Yum.”

“Master, it is sweet and delicious, I commend.”

“This iced version has a certain sweetness as well, with a wonderfully smooth texture.”

Mia, Nana, and Liza also gave it rave reviews.

Processing it in different ways seemed to have a major effect on its flavor and texture, so it would probably be worth investigating further.

“Yummyyy?”

“Is it really, sir?”

Drawn in by everyone else’s reactions, Pochi and Tama cautiously reached for the fruit as well.

“Mm-mm!”

Tama’s eyes sparkled as she chewed on the sample.

“It’s delicious, sir! You really are amazing, sir!”

Last but not least, Pochi wagged her tail and smiled brightly.

Lulu joined in with the rest of the group, sampling the different varieties.

Everyone always looked best with a smile.

I'd been up for three nights straight since the black dragon incident, so I needed a little rest before I put together a report on my lulu fruit findings.

After my nap, I received a response to the meeting request I'd sent to Viscount Emerin, so I had the butler prepare a carriage, and I set off.

"Huh? Why are you...?"

In the entrance hall of Viscount Emerin's home, I ran into a noble young lady in her early teens.

I'd danced with her at the duke's dinner party. If I remembered correctly, her name was...

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Lady Rina."

"Mello, Hister—M-Mr. Knight."

The viscount's daughter, Lady Rina Emerin, turned bright red. She sort of reminded me of Miss Karina.

I managed to remember her name because she was also the first person I'd danced with at the ball.

"Sir Knight, the viscount awaits you."

"I'm sorry; I'll be right there. If you'll excuse me, Lady Rina."

Viscount Emerin's butler led me into the drawing room.

For an upper-ranked noble's manor, the decor seemed rather unimpressive. I was no art expert, but my "Estimation" skill did tell me the market price of each piece.

"Since you asked to meet so suddenly, can I assume you wish to discuss your payment? As you may have already heard, our financial state is precarious at present, and so I cannot repay you with money. However..."

As he offered me a seat, Viscount Emerin was already in the middle of a long speech.

"Your Excellency. A wagonload of the fruit in question would be more than enough payment for me."

That might sound like a lot, but when I checked out the viscount's orchard on my map, I discovered that it was an enormous place enclosed with barrier posts.

Given the climate in the duchy, they could probably harvest about twice a year, so my request was a small one in comparison.

"More importantly, please taste these samples first."

I took out a container of processed lulu fruits. I'd chosen to bring three varieties this time.

"...Samples? You've already made samples in just one day?!"

"My lord, please wait a moment."

The viscount reached toward the samples, but his butler stopped him, ordering the young maid who'd just brought in tea to test the samples for poison.

Apparently, no one in the mansion had any item-analyzing skills.

"Can I really?! Oh, hooray! I get to taste the legendary Sir Pendragon's sweets!"

"...Salana."

"I—I apologize... I got overexcited."

The butler scowled at the maid, who looked ready to throw up her tray in excitement.

"Mm! It goes great with this fluffy white stuff! This one's great, too, and this one... I'm so happy it's almost scary!"

Seeing her intense joy at eating my food, I couldn't help feeling a little pleased myself.

Once the maid cleared all suspicions of poison, the viscount and his family gathered to taste the samples as well.

"I-is this really the same fruit?"

"But why is the color so different?"

“It changes during the cooking process.”

The viscount and his wife were especially fond of the sourness-free sweet version.

“Mm, delicious! I’d like to bring these out at my next tea party.”

The viscount’s eldest daughter, who was around high school age, seemed to like the slightly sour one best.

And Miss Rina loved the lulu fruitcake so much that she stuffed her cheeks with it like a chipmunk.

I’d made it into a cake to help soften the sourness and bitterness with cream.

This third variety was the most difficult to make. Right now, I was the only one who could pull it off, because I could see the temperature in my AR display.

“Do you like them?”

“My goodness! We should have no trouble at all selling these. No wonder they call you a miracle chef!”

“If you would permit it, Your Highness, I would like to present this lulu fruitcake at Lord Tisrado’s wedding. Would that be all right?”

“What’s this?! The young lord’s wedding, you say?! Why, that is more than we could have ever hoped for. I’m the one who should be asking you!”

Great. With the viscount’s permission, I could make the lulu fruitcake as the wedding cake.

That would be a perfect way to popularize the lulu fruit.

I presented him with the recipes for the three products and the report on my research.

“I-incredible... All this research in just one night?”

I couldn’t help but grin at the viscount’s surprise. The secret was that I used thirty-two portable stove magic tools at once to get all this done, but I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“I am glad that I was able to fulfill your request satisfactorily, Your Excellency.”

“Please, Sir Satou, call me Kirk. But your earlier request is not nearly enough of a reward. Since you are unmarried, Sir Satou, allow me to give you the hand of one of our extended family’s daughters as your wife.”

“W-wife?!”

Miss Rina jumped to her feet, fork still in hand.

“What is it, Rina?”

“O-oh, no... It’s—it’s n-nothing.”

Miss Rina dropped back down to her seat like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Maybe it was my imagination, but she looked a little pale.

At any rate, her outburst was enough to derail the conversation, so I managed to get out of the topic of the marriage proposal.



“Prettyyyy?”

“Sir!”

We could see the wedding parade proceeding through the streets from the roof of the duke’s mansion.

Today was the wedding of Tisrado, Ringrande’s younger brother, who was also the duke’s grandson and eventual successor, and the granddaughter of Marquis Eluette, whose territory was on the western edge of the Shiga Kingdom.

Miss Karina was attending the wedding with her younger brother, Orion, so she wasn’t with us.

Even at their young age, Tama and Pochi were very enthralled with the wedding dress.

Tama climbed up onto my head, and Pochi tugged on my clothes, waving her other hand excitedly.

Mia attempted to follow Tama’s example, but I decided it was safer to catch her on the way up and hold her under one arm.

“White dress.”

“How lovely,” Arisa cooed. “Kimonos are great, but it’s really not a wedding without a wedding dress!”

“Master, I would like a flower bouquet like the bride, I entreat.”

Along with the younger group, Nana was also hanging on to me today.

“It’s certainly a splendid procession.”

Liza was composed as always, but the way her gaze was fixed on the bride hinted that she was excited as well.

“Oh, she looks so happy. I’d love to be a bride like that someday, too...” Lulu sighed.

“I’m sure you will, Lulu.”

I patted her head lightly.

A pure-white dress would look wonderful with Lulu’s black hair. If she got married someday, I’d make a handmade dress for her as a present.

“Master...”

Lulu pressed close to my shoulder.

“Guilty?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure.”

Mia and Arisa squinted at us suspiciously.

“Sir Knight, a messenger has arrived from Viscount Siemmen.”

“All right, I’ll see them now.”

One of the housemaids led me to the visitor. Since I checked my map on the way, I already knew it was Natalina from the scroll workshop. She probably had a delivery, though it was earlier than I’d expected.

“Here’s your order, misterrr. Look good?”

“Yes, that’s everything.”

The scrolls I ordered were all finished ahead of schedule.

As usual, formality was not Natalina’s strong suit.

“Do you think the firework scrolls will be ready on time?”

“Yeah! We’ve all been working day and night to make sure we’re done in time for the end of the reception!”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I’d ordered some new scrolls, too. Shooter Version II and Multitool, plus a few more I’d been working on for a long time: Picture Recorder, Sound Recorder, Air-Conditioning, and UV Reduction. This last one was a request from Arisa.

Multitool was a spell that could make a tool of any size and shape. I reused a lot of code from Magic Mold, so it was pretty easy.

It would probably be possible to make swords and such with this spell. In my case, though, it would be faster to put Spellblade on my finger than to select Multitool from the magic menu, so I didn’t see that coming into play.

That evening, I worked as the chef at Tisrado’s wedding reception, with Lulu and Arisa as my assistants.

“Sir Satou, your tempura is truly divine.”

“Indeed! I believe that the pickled ginger tempura is its ultimate form, but I would never turn down any other kind.”

“I agree, Count Hohen. My opinion that shrimp is the ultimate tempura remains unchanged as well, but any tempura is a blessing to my palate.”

For some reason, the heavyweight gourmands of the old capital, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, had set up their seats next to my cooking booth.

According to Tolma, they got along like cats and dogs, but at the moment they were clearly the closest of friends.

“Sa... Sir Pendragon!”

Miss Karina appeared nearby.

In her impeccable makeup and dress, she was an impressive beauty even among all the attractive nobles at the reception. Naturally, I still thought Lulu looked even better, but it would be cruel to make that kind of comparison.

Behind her was her brother and the next Baron Muno, Orion, as well as two

young girls.

“Sir Pendragon, allow me to introduce you. This is my fiancée, Muse, the daughter of Baron Lagocho.”

Orion gestured to the plainer of the two girls.

She looked around middle school age, with light-blond hair and a timid expression. Her features reminded me a bit of Sara of the Tenion Temple.

According to my AR, she was part of the extended family of Duke Ougoch.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Muse. I am Satou Pendragon, a hereditary knight.”

“Th-the pleasure’s all mine... I’ve heard much about you from Lord Orion and Lady Karina.”

In spite of my friendly greeting, Miss Muse seemed nervous or even suspicious of me.

Had she heard some strange rumor about me or something?

“Sir Satou, do you know how amazing Mistress Karina is? She received invitations to dance from dozens of nobles before we even arrived.”

This was not Miss Muse but the girl behind her, the pink-haired Princess Menea herself.

She was dressed in a way that accented her beauty well; sandwiched between her and Miss Karina, I’m afraid Miss Muse was all but invisible. This seemed a shame, since she was fairly cute herself.

“B-but I refused them all, of course.”

Karina was quick to deflect Menea’s flattery.

“But you were quite popular yourself, weren’t you, Miss Menea?”

Orion’s cheeks were red as he complimented Princess Menea.

The stiff smile on Muse’s face behind them was painful to witness.

“Thank you, Lord Orion. However, my heart is already set on someone else.”

Alarmingly, Princess Menea’s gaze was fixed on my face as she spoke these

words.

“But Mistress Karina is ahead of me in line,” she continued with a giggle, “so perhaps I shall aim to be a viceroy’s second wife.”

I had no idea what she was getting at.

“Why, you little minx... If my master marries Karina to become a viceroy, you better believe his second wife will be yours truly.” Behind the cooking booth, Arisa muttered darkly, adding to the drama.

A bottom-tier noble like me would never become a viceroy, so this all seemed like a moot point.

“Sir Satou, it would be a shame to spend such a lovely reception cooking. Why not leave such silly work to your servants and share a dance with me, if you please?”

Menea took my hand eagerly.

Her attitude toward me certainly changed after the whole black dragon encounter.

I didn’t remember doing anything to curry her favor, so I had no idea what she was thinking.

“Silly work, you say?”

“Princess though you may be, I cannot abide such words.”

The two men who responded to Princess Menea’s words were Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen.

“Huh? I—I beg your pardon?”

“Satou’s cooking is like unto an art!”

“If you do not understand such an art...you are unworthy of the Lumork royal family’s rose-colored hair, which the ancestral king Yamato once called an untold treasure!”

These two were way too serious about cooking.

“Marquis Lloyd, Count Hohen, please. There is no need to be so harsh on my behalf.”

“Harrumph. If you say so, Sir Satou.”

“Yes, very well. We would hate to trouble our favorite chef.”

Princess Menea seemed unnerved, so I gently put a stop to their raging, giving her a chance to make amends.

“My apologies. I chose my words unwisely in my eagerness to invite Sir Satou to dance.”

When Princess Menea gave a sincere apology, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen nodded and returned to their discussion about food.

“Allow me to repeat my request. Sir Satou, please dance with me.”

Princess Menea took my hand again and batted her eyes.

For some reason, Miss Karina seemed to be glaring at her almost as furiously as Arisa.

Just then, a new intruder entered the fray.

“Satou! What’re you doing cooking here?”

The hero noticed me from a distance and came over.

Behind him was the rest of his party, all dressed up for the occasion.

They were every one of them beautiful with great figures to boot, so it was definitely a sight to behold.

“S-Sir Hayato Masaki the Hero?”

“Sister, is Sir Pendragon a friend of Sir Hero?”

Baron Muno must have brought up his children to be hero fans as well.

“Wow, is that tempura? Can I get some?”

“Good evening, Sir Hayato. Would you like some freshly cooked white rice as well?”

“For real? That would be awesome! Load me up, please!”

The women behind him also gave me friendly greetings.

Returning their greetings, I complimented each woman in turn. It was nice not

to have to stand on ceremony.

You're not getting too friendly, are you? Arisa mouthed at me, so I simply mouthed back, *Of course not.*

Before I started cooking, I decided to introduce Miss Karina and company to the hero.

"H-hang on. The hero of the Saga Empire came over to greet Sir Pendragon?"

"And Sir Pendragon called him by his first name, too..."

"Haven't you heard? Sir Pendragon accompanied the hero to deal with a dragon."

"I-is that true? We must get him to marry into our family, then..."

As I was chatting with the hero, I overheard some nobles gossiping about us.

That last line was a bit of an issue, but there wasn't much I could do about it, so I just ignored it and prepared a tempura set for the hero's party.

Arisa was the one to bring the food over to them.

"Thank you for waiting, Sir Hero."

"P-Princess Arisa?! Why are you doing the work of a servant?"

The hero's loud shouting sent a ripple of chatter through the nearby nobles and servants.

"I am a former princess, remember. And I could hardly go messing about while Lord Satou is hard at work. At any rate, isn't this maid outfit wonderful?"

Arisa did a little twirl.

"Of course! It looks amazing on you!"

Princess Meriest and Miss Ringrande frowned at the fawning hero, each tugging one of his arms in protest. It was a pretty cute gesture of jealousy.

"Would you like some of this as well?"

Trying to distract them from the hero's folly, I offered them some food.

"Oh, you brought this, too?"

“It looks like water, but it certainly smells remarkable.”

This was my consommé soup, a secret menu item of sorts.

Mia didn't like mass-producing it, so I made a single pot to give to special requesters only.

The portion I gave the hero and company came out of what little hadn't already been reserved.

“...Delicious... Truly, this is a miracle dish worthy of the gods' dining table.”

Princess Meriest reacted with exaggerated excitement when she tasted the soup.

Her bright smile made it clear that she wasn't just being polite.

“Did you hear that?”

“Wow, consommé soup really is amazing...”

“So even Her Highness of the Saga Empire is enchanted by the miracle chef?”

More gossip from the nobles.

I hope all these weird rumors don't follow me on my travels.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Your attention, please! The bride and groom are about to enter.”

After I chatted with the hero's party, Karina, and the others for a while, a voice rang out from the back of the reception hall.

The lighting in the room dimmed, and Light Magic shone a gentle spotlight on the bride and groom.

The two of them proceeded toward an enormous eight-layer wedding cake hidden under a cloth shroud.

The cake alone wouldn't be able to support the full weight, so all but the top three layers were strengthened with a firm bread core on the inside.

“Today we will participate in the famous cake-cutting ceremony outlined in the tales of the ancestral king. The legends say that this ceremony will ensure a healthy heir for the new bride and groom.”

A gentleman who seemed to be the moderator used the Wind Magic spell Amplification to announce the proceedings.

Cutting the cake was evidently a storied ritual in this world.

When the wedding cake was uncovered, gasps of admiration arose from a group of noble young ladies in the audience.

If I remembered right, I'd made a strawberry shortcake for that group at a tea party.

I held up Arisa so she could see the cake cutting over the crowd.

"How lovely! I'd love to cut a cake with you like that someday, master."

"I would like to wear a lovely dress like that, myself."

"Sure, why not?"

"Really?!"

"You mean it?"

"Sure. I'll make a dress for you, Lulu, and a cake-cutter for Arisa."

I made a joking response as the two pressed closer.

Of course, I really did intend to make a dress for Lulu someday.

"Don't play with a maiden's heart!"

Flustered, Arisa bopped me repeatedly on the head. As I attempted to calm her, a bright light from outside the window suddenly lit up her profile.

"Whoa! Are those fireworks?"

Forgetting her attack on me, Arisa looked up at the fireworks appearing in the night sky through the window.

The overtime from the workers at Viscount Siemmen's scroll workshop really paid off.

"How beautiful...", Lulu murmured as she gazed at the colorful fireworks.

Personally, I thought she was a hundred times more beautiful, but it would be unkind to interrupt her first-ever fireworks display with such a statement.

Glancing around, I saw that everyone seemed to be enraptured by the fireworks, regardless of their age or gender.

Throughout the room, lovestruck young nobles cuddled up together as they watched the show. Just for tonight, I decided not to inwardly curse their happiness.

As I looked around, I caught sight of the hero in the crowd.

I pretended not to notice the tears of homesickness rolling down his cheeks.

When the fireworks display was over, single young nobles crawled out of the woodwork to invite any free young ladies to dance.

Still in high spirits from the cake cutting and the fireworks, the girls seemed quite willing to indulge them.

On the edges of the lively dance hall, maids began to push around small wagons.

They were bringing slices of the wedding cake to all the visitors.

“Delicious!”

“Yes, it really is. What is this fruit?”

“This is the lulu fruit, which is cultivated in Viscount Emerin’s orchard.”

The ladies’ eyes sparkled as they ate the sweets.

Just as I’d hoped, many people seemed to be interested in the fruit, and the maids provided the information I’d given them in advance.

As thanks for the free advertisement, I’d made a cake for the maids and waitstaff as well.

“Here you are, Sir Satou.”

A maid handed me a plate of cake, which I gave to Arisa.

Because Arisa and Lulu were attending as my staff rather than as wedding guests, they had not been accounted for when the cake was cut, so I shared my piece with them.

“Sir Pendragon! So this is where you’ve been hiding.”

“Hello, Sir Kirk.”

Viscount Kirk Emerin, the owner of the lulu fruit orchard, approached with his daughter Rina.

“We’re receiving all kinds of requests for the lulu fruit, thanks to you.”

“I’m very glad to hear that.”

Some of the sharper nobles had already started business negotiations with Viscount Emerin.

“...E-erm, Sir Satou? If you wouldn’t mind, I...”

At the gentle prompting of one of her attendants, Miss Rina set down her cake and approached me.

“Mistress Karina, Sir Satou’s going to be stolen away if you don’t act fast.”

“Wh-what?”

Just then, Princess Menea cut in, bringing Miss Karina along by the hand.

“I’m sorry, but Sir Satou has already promised to dance with us first.”

Um, I don’t remember saying that...

Besides, there was no shortage of dancing time, so it seemed silly to me to argue over turns...

Before I could stop Princess Menea’s rampage, another contender entered the fray. I was in high demand this evening.

“Hello, Satou.”

“It’s been a long time, Lady Sara.”

It was Priestess Sara of the Tenion Temple. She’d been hiding out in the Tenion Temple sanctuary to escape from the third prince’s marriage proposal, but now that he’d been sent back to the royal capital, it was probably safe for her to venture out again.

Behind her were two more priestesses, from Parion Temple and Garleon Temple respectively.

As Nanashi the Hero, I’d rescued these two and Sara from being sacrificed for

a demon lord's resurrection. I hadn't seen them since, so I was glad they looked happy and healthy.

"This must be Sir Satou."

"Lady Sara thinks quite highly of him."

The two priestesses murmured behind her.

According to the AR label, they were relatives of Sara. One was blond and one was redheaded, but their features bore a strong resemblance to Sara's.

The important-looking figures behind them were some of the head priests and priestesses of the same temples. Unfortunately, it looked like the head priestess of Tenion Temple couldn't come due to her poor health.

"Would you like to dance, Satou?"

Sara gazed at me steadily.

Princess Menea was practically crawling on top of a table to protest.

But she was interrupted before she could speak up.

"Sara!"

"...Sister Rin."

Overprotective as ever, Miss Ringrande leaped to Sara's defense.

"You're pretty popular, eh, Satou?"

"I wouldn't say that."

I shrugged sheepishly at the hero's sly remark.

Yes, a lot of young women were clamoring over me, but they were all in their teens.

Unfortunately for them, my tastes ran at least five or ten years older than that.

In the end, with Princess Meriest's mediation, I agreed to dance with each of them in turn.

Sara, Miss Karina, and Princess Menea were one thing, but how did I end up dancing with the other priestesses, Miss Ringrande, and Princess Meriest, too?

Well, I got to dance with a lot of pretty girls and lovely ladies, so I guess all's well that ends well.

Workshop Visits and Magic Sword Casting

Satou here. The field trips I went on in my school days brought me nothing but pain, but I have clear memories of all the tours I went on as an adult. I guess it helps when you're actually interested in the subject.

"Yay! We can really spend the whole day together?"

"Yeah, of course."

Arisa gleefully latched on to my arm when I nodded.

All my nobility-related business and socializing were done for the time being, so I was finally able to spend a day sightseeing and touring workshops with my party.

Our first stop was the old capital's glass studio.

"What is that, master? Candy?"

Lulu looked curiously at the small tube one of the workers held.

They were currently creating glass vessels.

A magic user had placed a cooling spell on the passage we were observing from, so we weren't too hot, but I could see beads of sweat on the workers' faces.

"Candyyy?"

"Pochi loves candy because it's sweet, sir."

Tama and Pochi drooled a little.

"No, sillies. It's a tool for making glass," Arisa explained to the confused trio.

The worker blew into the tube, and a bubble of glass formed at the end.

It seemed much larger than what I remembered from when I went on a field trip to a glassblowing studio in school. Looking closer, I realized the pipe was

actually a magic tool.

“Weeeeird?”

“He blew and made a circle, sir!”

“Calm down, you two.”

Liza scooped the excited pair up into her arms.

But it was clear from the movement of her tail that she was intrigued, too.

“Balloon?”

“Master, it formed a bubble, I report.”

As the glass vessel grew larger, Nana looked as if she was about to stray from the passage for a closer look, so Mia and I held her back by the arms.

Lulu, who’d been about to follow suit, turned a little red.

“Master, closer observation is necessary, I propose.”

“We have to observe from here, okay?”

“Be good,” Mia chimed in.

In contrast with Nana’s fascination, Arisa looked so bored that she was stifling a yawn.

I couldn’t entirely blame her, I guess. Since this was an orc glass workshop, I was expecting something a little more fantasy-like than this decidedly ordinary glass studio.

“If you’re interested, would you like to try it yourself once you’ve had a look around?”

“Certainly, if that’s all right.”

The head of the studio was giving us a tour.

We were probably getting the VIP treatment because we were introduced to him by the head of the noble family who owned the studio.

The next room he showed us was where the basic materials for the glass were processed. The laborers here had cloths covering their mouths and noses, probably to keep out dust.

“Here we crush granite, quartzite, and other stones into powder. Then we mix it with this blue-gray powder, which is made from orc stone, and heat it up to form glass.”

Orc stone? What kind of fantasy substance was that?

I curiously asked the workshop head about it.

“It’s an ore that can be found near the Grapevine Mountains. If its powder is mixed with water, it forms bubbles. The bubbles are...”

Judging by the rest of his explanation, the orc stone was basically a natural soda.

I was pretty sure there was a similar ore in my old world, though I couldn’t remember its name. All this new information made me happy, although I wondered whether it was inconvenient for the man to have to give such a technical explanation to an observing noble.

The last room was heavily fortified, with guards stationed at the entrance.

“These are the magic tools we use to make sheet glass.”

The large room was the size of a gymnasium, containing several large magic tools running side by side. It reminded me of a modern factory.

Apparently, these tools were left by the Orc Empire that stood here before the Shiga Kingdom.

“Reminds me of a hydraulic press.”

I could see what Arisa meant. Red-hot glass was poured over a base that was about five feet by seven feet, then pressed by a mechanism above it to make plate glass.

I seemed to remember seeing an old video of glass being poured over molten metal to make plate glass, but here they used a sort of magic force field to form the flat sheets instead.

I might be able to reproduce it pretty simply with spells like Magic Mold and Cube.

In addition, they showed us the process of turning these glass sheets into

mirrors, which involved something called silver nitrate. The finished mirror wasn't much different from the kind I used in my old world. The process of making silver nitrate was in one of my alchemy books, so if I got my hands on this orc stone stuff, I could probably make mirrors myself.

Checking on the map, I found an alchemy store that sold it.

I didn't know how useful it would be, but I decided to stock up on some while we were in the old capital.

Then, after the tour...

"All right, let's see who can make the coolest glass!"

"Tama won't looose?"

"Pochi won't, either, sir."

As usual, Arisa was getting Tama and Pochi way too worked up.

Tama and Pochi breathed in deeply and blew into the pipes as hard as they could. Unfortunately, their lung capacity proved too much for the swelling glass, which burst with a loud popping sound.

Most of the other girls shrieked, startled by the loud noise.

A few of them were silent, like Mia and Nana, but they still froze with their eyes wide.

As a small mercy, the hot glass only flew away from the group, so nobody was hurt.

I took Tama, Pochi, and the agitator, Arisa, to apologize to the head of the studio.

"Not at all. I'm simply relieved that none of you were injured. Still, normally the worst that happens if one blows too hard is that a hole opens in the glass and it buckles, so I'm surprised it exploded like that..."

The man seemed bewildered, but at least he wasn't angry.

After that, we followed the workers' directions, and everyone was able to make a glass piece of their own.

I was particularly pleased, since I got the "Glassworking" skill in the process.

On our way out, I inquired as to the price of a full-length mirror. Unfortunately, their reservations were so full that it would be two years before they could make one.

They were able to make hand mirrors much more immediately, though, so I figured I'd buy a few.

"Your work must be very popular, then."

"Yes, we're quite fortunate. About half a year ago, we developed a technique for producing transparent glass at a low cost, and ever since then we've been flooded with so many orders that our magic machines never get a rest."

So there was a recent technological innovation, huh? I wondered whether it was the result of many years of research or the work of some brilliant new engineer.

Maybe it was even thanks to a mysterious note like the pottery recipe I'd gotten from the red-helmeted ratfolk man in Seiryuu County.



"Whew, I'm stuffed!"

Arisa sighed contentedly, her belly full of crab hot pot and grilled crab.

There was no such thing as crab forks in this world. I cut up the shells to make it easier to eat without them this time, but I planned to try making my own crab forks before our next crab hot pot.

"So fuuull?"

"I can't eat another bite, sir."

Tama and Pochi looked just as pleased as Arisa.

"Oh, Arisa, you can be such a glutton."

"Can you blame me? It was so good!"

Clearly Lulu's scolding wasn't inspiring any regret in her sister.

Pochi and Tama were all right, since they were training with the Saga Empire samurai Kajiro, but Arisa seemed to be putting on a bit of weight.

We might have to start watching our calories a little.

“So what kind of workshop are we visiting next? Tell me it’s not another silk workshop full of caterpillars or a smelly soy sauce factory?”

Arisa wrinkled her nose. The jade-silk workshop, with its greenhouse full of puppy-size caterpillars munching away on mithril scraps, certainly had been a sight.

But the cloth made from the thread these caterpillars produced, called jade silk, was very high quality.

This cloth had excellent magic conduction and cutability, not to mention incredible smoothness and glossiness.

I acquired a small thread-spooling machine and an old-fashioned loom at that workshop, so I was hoping to try them out next time I encountered some caterpillar-or spider-type monsters on our journey.

She didn’t want anything smelly, though, huh...?

“I was thinking of visiting an artist’s atelier this afternoon. Would you prefer a magic-tool workshop or a barrier-post maker?”

“Pictuuures?”

“Do they make picture books, sir?”

“Interested.”

The other children all wanted to go to the atelier.

In the end, Arisa had no choice but to give in.

“Now behold my watercolor magic!”

A noble in the prime of his life stood in front of a white canvas, holding not a brush but a short wand.

He was the owner of this atelier. At first, we’d watched other artists make ordinary oil paintings, but once the owner found out we were here, he came to give us a demonstration of his specialty: painting with magic.

The only relevant skills he had were “Water Magic” and “Painting,” though, so I gathered that there was no actual skill called “Watercolor Magic.”

Next to me, the clerk who'd been guiding us around the atelier shrank apologetically.

“...■■■ **Palette Control E No Gujizai!**”

The owner finished a rather long chant, and an array of colored blobs of water appeared around his wand.

With each wave of his arm, a colorful picture began to appear on the canvas.

Whenever he spoke the name of a color, the tip of his wand would change to match. He was even able to affect the nature of the brushstrokes with phrases like “vibrant” and “light as a feather.”

I could see why he went out of his way to show it off for us. Even aside from the quality of the picture itself, it made for an amazing performance.

“Prettyyyy?”

“It’s amazing, sir!”

Once again held in Liza’s arms, Tama and Pochi flailed excitedly.

Mia looked disappointed, since she had high standards for fine art, but the other girls all seemed very impressed.

“...Phew. What do you think? Not too shabby, I hope?”

“No, that was wonderful.”

Though his words were humble, the owner looked very proud of himself as he stood before the completed canvas.

“Sir, could you return to the office soon, please?”

“No, no, I must entertain Sir Pendragon...”

A butler-like figure dragged away the owner, back to the work he’d apparently been shirking to entertain us.

“Sir Knight, we have a painting classroom as well. Would you and your associates like to try your hand?”

At the clerk’s invitation, we all made paintings of our own.

Since I had the “Painting” skill, I was able to make a respectable attempt.

I couldn't come up with any ideas, so I ended up trying to reproduce the painting of the waving girl I'd seen in the old capital's museum.

"I see you excel at painting as well as cooking, Sir Knight. Is this a picture of one of your esteemed family members, perhaps?"

"No, this is a reproduction of a painting I saw at the museum. It was very interesting, since the girl in the picture actually waved at me. I think it must have been some kind of magic item."

"...A magic item that can make a painting move?"

The woman looked flummoxed by my story.

They had illusion-creating magic tools and optical illusions, but she seemed unfamiliar with the "moving picture" I described.

If even a worker at an artist's atelier had never heard of it, I must have seen some secret new work that hadn't been officially released yet.

That made me feel pretty lucky.

"Look, sir."

Pochi, the first to finish her picture, came to show me her work. It wasn't exactly polished, but it was very heartwarming.

"Wow, that looks great, Pochi."

"This is Pochi and master, sir. And over here is..."

Pochi pointed at each part of the painting and explained.

It had the flatness of a child's drawing, but her personality shone through in it. Pochi and I were depicted holding hands in the center, with everyone else forming a circle around us.

My favorite part was that everyone was smiling.

"Tama's done, too?"

"...Wow, very impressive."

It was so remarkably photorealistic that I was at a loss for words for a moment.

“Damn, Tama!”

“Wow.”

Peering over her shoulder, Arisa and Mia let out exclamations of surprise.

“It looks very tasty, sir.”

Pochi drooled a little as she looked at the painting.

Tama’s subject of choice was a hamburg steak, so of course she did.

Between the piping-hot steam and the demi-glace sauce dripping over the steak and onto the iron plate, the painting was full of lifelike touches.

If you used this image as a poster, you could sell hamburg steaks like crazy.

The other children showed me their paintings in turn.

“Ooh, a flower garden? Very nice, Mia.”

Mia’s painting depicted herself and me standing in a flower garden. Naturally, it was very good.

“Mm. Wedding.”

I decided not to comment on the title of the image.

“Master, I would like your evaluation, I entreat.”

“It looks good to me.”

To be honest, I couldn’t really tell what Nana’s painting was supposed to be.

“Chick?”

“Mia’s query is correct, I affirm.”

This exchange finally revealed the meaning of the yellow-filled canvas.

Liza painted a picture of Tama and Pochi, while Lulu painted Arisa. While they were clumsily made, both were wonderful paintings that showed the artists’ love for the subjects.

Since this was probably their first time ever painting something, I thought following their hearts was the best way to go.

Aside from Arisa, who had to be stopped from painting a nude picture of me,

everyone finished their pictures and left the classroom quite satisfied.

On the way home from the workshop, I stopped off to buy some painting supplies.

While I was at it, I inquired whether there were any merchants who could carry a letter to Seiryuu City for me and was directed to a purveyor for nobles who agreed to take it on his way to Kuhanou City.

My letter was addressed to the magic soldier Zena.

I was sending it in a sealed letter box, so I was able to enclose a few items I'd bought in the old capital.

This time, Tama and Pochi had letters to send as well.

Their letters were addressed to young Yuni, their friend who worked at the Gatefront Inn in Seiryuu City.

Tama's was only a single line, but Pochi wrote enough to fill a small novella.

Since it might be difficult for the recipient to interpret these on her own, Arisa added a supplementary letter to the landlady of the inn. Glancing it over, I found the kind of polite letter you might send to a business partner.

Rather than sending letters alone, I added some old capital souvenirs for the folks at the Gatefront Inn as well, including gifts for Yuni that Tama and Pochi picked out.

There was no easy way to send round-trip mail in the Shiga Kingdom, so I included some postage money for Yuni to write a reply.

The price of sending a letter in this parallel world was a bit high for children, after all.

"Boy, you really splurged on that."

"You think so? I only spent about three gold coins."

Arisa looked at me in astonishment as I thought over the enclosed gifts.

The jade-silk ribbons and hand mirrors were a little expensive, but the high-end hand creams, coral necklaces, tortoiseshell combs, and glass baubles weren't nearly as pricey as they sounded.

All told, it was still cheaper than a single one of the gifts I made for those tea parties.

When I said that, Arisa only stared at me even more.

“Let’s all make a picture book together!”

Arisa must have enjoyed the painting class, since she made this proposal after dinner.

“Picture book?”

Mia tilted her head at Arisa.

“That’s right! We’ll decide on a story, and we’ll each draw one of the pictures! It’ll be fun!”

“That could be entertaining.”

Surprisingly, Liza seemed to be on board.

I guess she’s always liked having picture books read to her, too.

“I’ll draaaw?”



“I want to make a story, too, sir.”

“Arisa, please present the algorithm for picture book production, I request.”

Tama, Pochi, and Nana were game, too.

“Perhaps we should use the big table in the dining room, then?”

““““Yeah!””””

At Lulu’s pragmatic proposal, everyone moved into the dining room.

As the one in charge of drawing the cover, I spent a fun evening with my comrades.

Once they’d worn themselves out, I put them to bed before using the Return spell to teleport to the labyrinth ruins and do some personal work of my own.



“All right, first I’ll try to make a knife-size Magic Sword.”

I selected Magic Mold and Forge from the magic menu and began casting a bronze short sword.

Of course, I’d already blanked out my name in the networking tab.

Once the blade started to take shape, I used Liquid Control to carve a magic circuit into the short sword before it hardened.

For this part, I used See Through to observe the inside of the sword as I worked.

The circuit I was making this time was the same one I’d used to make a wooden Magic Sword before.

Once I’d finished carving, I took the premade magic liquid out of Storage and used Liquid Control and Magic Hand to pour the liquid into the crevices.

Maybe thanks to my experience using 120 Magic Hands at once, I was able to finish this work pretty easily.

I kept using Liquid Control and Magic Hand to make sure the circuits didn’t warp before they cooled.

In a way, this was the hardest part of the process.

The density of the magic circuits caused an inevitable difference in temperature, so the magic I was using couldn't completely maintain its shape.

I gave up at first, but then I discovered I could prevent the warping by circulating a tiny amount of magic power in the circuit.

I later discovered that doing things this way also made the bronze blade itself better at conducting magic.

After about thirty minutes of cooling time, my first knife-size Magic Sword was complete.

"It holds magic pretty well."

The flow was so smooth that it was comparable to my fairy sword.

It wasn't nearly as strong as that, of course, but its power was roughly on par with the mithril short swords that Tama and Pochi used, so I thought it was pretty good for a first attempt.

Though it was fairly easy with the help of magic, it had taken a long time to get to this point.

After I'd gotten Forge and Magic Mold in the dwarf village, I tried forging swords in secret quite a few times, but every attempt was a total failure.

The heat from forging the sword always either destroyed or warped the essential magic circuits, rendering the blade useless.

"Now I can finally move on to the next step."

Muttering to myself, I pulled up in Storage the materials for making Magic Swords and Holy Swords.

Adding complicated functions would probably be pretty difficult, so I decided to start by trying for a Magic Sword that conducted magic well. Spears and polearms might be good, too.

There were a lot of failures in the process, but by dawn, I'd made a respectable pile of Magic Swords.

Unfortunately, since most of the more complex attempts failed, most of the completed pieces were simple magic-conducting types or swords with a

protective aura around them.

The yield rate was pretty bad, but I did manage to make a few Magic Swords with an electrification function thanks to Carving Magic.

Since I didn't have many lightning stones, I couldn't make any strong enough to produce bolts of lightning like a Thunder Rod or anything, but they should be able to send a shock through an opponent's sword or paralyze someone.

I used a similar mechanism to make a Magic Sword that would produce a shock wave when touched. However, the only way to control the degree of shock was the physical strength of the user, so I made only the one.

Just as I'd thought, using Carving Magic to add functions was limited compared to using magic circuits.

It was a lot easier, however, so until I learned to make more-complicated magic circuits, I could at least use Carving Magic to test things out.

As usual, I made a few weapons besides Magic Swords, including Magic Axes, Spears, and Polearms.

Using ordinary wood limited the power because of the handle's degree of magic conduction, so I had to either use special wood or divide the handle and carve magic circuits into it.

As it happened, I had a lot of extra wood from branches of the Mountain-Tree, so I used one of those to make some handles.

Now, as for the power of these weapons...

They were much stronger than the high-quality swords on the market, and some could even perform better than the mithril-alloy swords of the dwarves.

However, their only advantage over the fairy sword I'd made with Elder Dohal was their magic conduction, and they paled in comparison to the Magic Swords and Holy Swords in my spoils from the Valley of Dragons.

Plating the surface of the blade with a few of the mithril ingots I had on hand noticeably improved its power, so I believed using bronze for the blades was what was holding them back from being stronger.

If I could get some legendary-grade materials like orichalcum, I might even be

able to outdo the weapons I got from the Valley of Dragons.

Even mithril was difficult to purchase in raw form, so my best bet was probably to look for a vein of it on my travels.

Then I could get more serious about my Magic Sword-making.

I also tried crafting a few Holy Swords but stopped at three, since I didn't want to waste so much of the valuable blue.

One was a magic-circulating broadsword, while the other two were a similar concept modeled after Claidheamh Soluis.

If you're wondering why I made two, it was because I acquired the skills "Forgery" and "Counterfeit" after making the first one, so I activated those and made another.

It turned out to be worth it. The second fake Claidheamh Soluis was visually indistinguishable from the real thing.

In order to replicate the original's texture, I used a steel-based alloy for the blade, which meant that it couldn't hold magic power at all.

However, the evaporating magic would give off a faint blue light, so it looked just like a real Holy Sword that was rejecting its user.

I made this fake to give to the king's body double.

I didn't want him to get in trouble with the nobles in the royal capital for giving me the Holy Sword, after all.

So I left the fake Claidheamh Soluis and a letter explaining that it was a forgery on the body double's pillow in the duke's castle. The real king could decide how to use it.

Though I was completely exhausted, as I used Return to go back to the mansion, I felt thoroughly satisfied that I'd finally succeeded in making Magic and Holy Swords.



The next day, I went with my party and Miss Karina to visit the Tenion Temple in the noble district.

“Sir Pendragon, what brings you to the temple?”

For some reason, Karina’s younger brother, Orion, came too. Maybe he had a sister obsession or something.

“My attendants here have never been baptized at a temple, so I thought I would make a contribution and ask one of the priests to baptize us.”

“...Baptism? Really?”

Orion looked more surprised than I expected.

“Is that a problem?”

“N-no... Not a problem at all. Not at all...”

It certainly sounded like there was, indeed, a problem, but my real goal was to make sure my friends met the conditions of the Treasure of Resurrection just in case, so I didn’t intend to back down even if there was.

When I explained my business to the young priest who greeted us at the door, he ushered us into a waiting room. It was probably for nobles, because the sofa was very plush, and the rest of the furniture was quite luxurious.

“What a pleasure to have you visit us today, Mr. Satou.”

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Sara.”

Sara appeared in her shrine-maiden clothes.

Behind her was a middle-aged priestess. According to the AR label, she was in charge of handling contributions.

We exchanged greetings, and I explained why I’d come and handed her some contribution money.

I’d already explained the situation to Sara in a letter, so we were able to undergo the ceremony easily enough.

“This way, Mr. Satou.”

Sara guided us farther into the temple.

The windows of the corridor bathed everything in a pale-blue light.

“My, what a mysterious atmosphere.”

“Mm. Pure.”

Mia and Arisa seemed a little uneasy in the holiness.

Tama and Pochi, on the other hand, looked ready to fall asleep in Liza’s arms.

“Oh? So you’re Sir Satou, are you?”

The head priestess of the Tenion Temple greeted me in a soft voice.

Her complexion looked much better than when I last saw her as Nanashi.

It seemed that baptisms took place here in the sanctuary.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. I am Satou Pendragon, a hereditary knight and vassal of the Muno Barony.”

I’d met her a few times before as Nanashi the Hero, but this was her first time meeting me as Satou, so I introduced myself politely.

For some reason, though, she simply stared at me, unmoving.

“...Mr. Nanashi?” she murmured under her breath.

Huh? She knows?

I used my “Poker Face” skill to hide my inner distress.

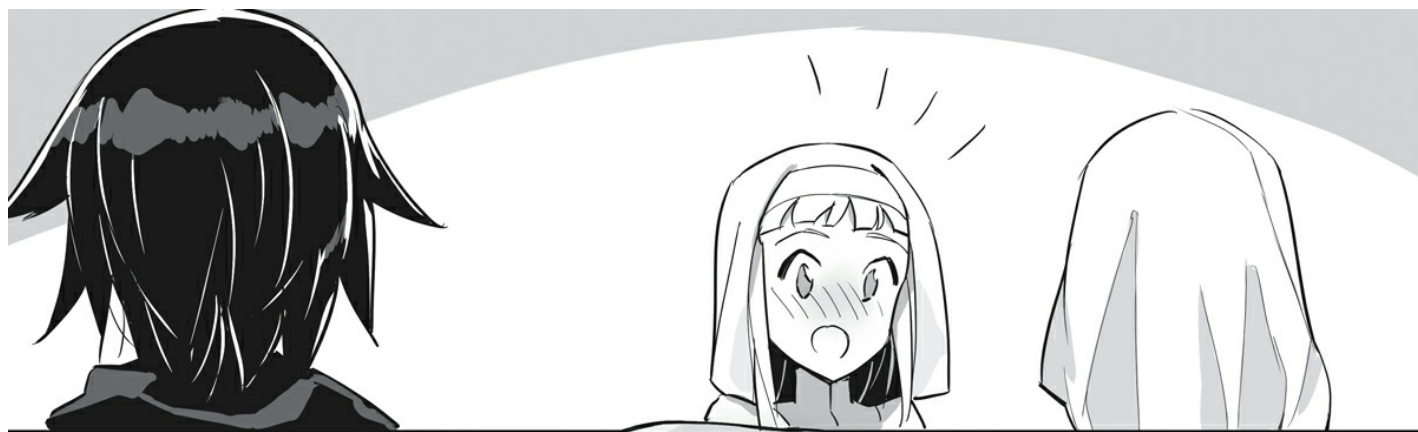
“Erm, Priestess?” Sara prompted.

“...Hmm? I’m sorry—my mind must have been wandering.”

The priestess hurriedly pulled herself together.

She must have muttered it without thinking. I guess I shouldn’t have underestimated the high-level priestess with her “Oracle” skill.

“Mr. Nanashi is the hero who saved the old capital recently, correct?”



“Yes, that’s right. He’s a very strong, humble, wonderful person.” The mature head priestess blushed a little, like a young maiden.

“And apparently, the priestess is in love with him.”

“Pardon? A woman never loses her penchant for the romantic, you know.” The priestess’s even response only made Sara giggle more. “...And who might you be in love with, Sara?”

“Wh-why, I’m not...”

Sara looked to me frantically, as if pleading for help.

I would have been happy to assist her, but given the timing of the glance, it would just make everyone think she was in love with me.

“Hee-hee. I suppose I shouldn’t tease you too much.”

The smiling priestess turned her gaze from Sara to me.

“Now then, Sir Satou. I’ve been feeling much better lately thanks to the delicious soup you sent along. So I would like to perform the ceremony for you as a show of my gratitude.”

I was happy that she would be performing the baptism, of course, but even happier to know that her health was improving when she had previously seemed so frail.

I would have to convince Mia to help me make the consommé soup at least one more time while we were in the old capital.

After this conversation, I introduced my companions, and we began the baptism ritual.

“I’m terribly sorry, but as I am a future lord, I cannot be baptized at any temple.”

With that explanation, Orion moved away from the area where the ceremony was being conducted.

Thinking back, I remembered that Arisa had told me that people who made contracts with City Cores, like kings and lords, couldn’t be baptized.

But since this didn’t affect people like viceroys and constables, who were put

in charge of cities and towns by their lords, people like Karina and me should be able to receive it just fine.

Perhaps Orion had been surprised at the temple entrance because I was planning on getting baptized, too.

“Now please kneel and clear your minds.”

The head priestess looked at all of us and spoke in a gentle voice.

“Now let us begin! ...■■■■■■■■ **Baptism Senrei.**”

When the priestess invoked the spell, beads of blue light fell over us softly from the temple ceiling.

The others’ AR displays changed to show **Baptism: Tenion Faith** in their hidden titles.

For some reason, though, Arisa and I didn’t gain the title. My level was one thing, but at Arisa’s low level, there was no way she could have resisted the high-level priestess’s spell.

The only common feature Arisa and I shared was that we both had Unique Skills.

When I checked the information of the other Unique Skill holder I had marked, Hayato, I saw that he had a hidden title, but it wasn’t **Baptism: Parion Faith**. Instead, it was **Blessing: Goddess Parion**.

I wasn’t sure what caused it, but for whatever reason, that meant Arisa and I couldn’t meet the Treasure of Resurrection requirements. I’d have to make Arisa’s survival my top priority from now on.

Not that I intended to let anyone die at all, of course.

“Priestess, I’m terribly sorry to trouble you with something else, but...”

Now that I was able to meet the head priestess as Satou, I decided to ask her if there was any way to break the Geis on Arisa and Lulu.

“That’s quite a predicament... Geis is a very dangerous gift, you know. It’s said that it was given to man by the god Orion to punish sinners.”

The priestess explained this as if putting together a long-forgotten memory.

There were three ways to remove it: have it canceled or overwritten by someone with the Geis gift, use a treasure passed down in the Union Temple, or have a high-level priest erase it using Prayer Magic.

The only known user of Geis was the dark sage who controlled various countries in the west.

The royal mage who had placed the Geis on Arisa and Lulu was killed when the Kuvork Kingdom was invaded.

Unfortunately, the head priestess didn't know where in the world the Union Temple was that held the secret treasure.

The only priest on this continent who was publicly known to use Prayer Magic was Zarzaris in Parion Province. The head priestess herself had been able to use it long ago, but it required summoning the goddess herself into the user, a process that would take too high a toll on her aged and weakened body.

"I'm sorry. If only I were a bit younger..."

Maybe she would be able to do it if I gathered a bunch of rejuvenating potions in some labyrinths for her?

As I was contemplating that, Sara stood up firmly.

"Don't worry, Mr. Satou! I shall train until I can use Prayer Magic myself!"

"Thank you, Lady Sara."

Sara grasped my hand in both of hers and looked at me intently.

What a kind girl.

"Oh my. Nothing can stop a maiden in love, eh?"

"P-Priestess!"

Sara's cheeks turned bright red as she protested the additional teasing.

The head priestess chuckled. "Why, the first time I used Prayer Magic, it was out of love for the previous hero. I'm sure Goddess Tenion is rooting for you, too."

I wasn't sure how serious she was, but Sara nodded, red-faced at her encouragement.

As we were leaving the sanctuary, my “Keen Hearing” skill caught the priestess murmuring to herself.

“The demon lord, the giant monster fish... An uprising is surely coming, just as it did in the time of the ancestral king or the first emperor of the Saga Empire. I hope you’ll save the world, just as you saved the old capital from destruction, Mr. Nanashi...”

Miss Priestess, please don’t raise such dangerous-sounding flags.



The next day, I went downtown with my group to the old capital’s orphanage.

We were helping Sara pay a sympathy call.

“All right, kids, gather round! We’re gonna play shadow tag.”

“Arisa, what’s shadow tag?”

“I don’t get it.”

“Me neither.”

“Tama, too?”

“I’ve never heard of it, either, sir.”

“Quiet down—I’m going to explain it now! Shadow tag is...”

Arisa, Tama, and Pochi played with the young children in the garden, with Liza watching over them.

Nana and Lulu cared for the babies, while Mia helped them by playing a lullaby.

“Mr. Knight, ah these bwicks?”

“That’s right. You stack them up, see?”

“Wow! It’s a house!”

“Wemme twy, too!”

Sara and I were playing with the babies.

Though it was officially a “sympathy call,” the real purpose for her visit was to

help heal sick children and locals for free.

Receiving Holy Magic treatment at the temples was too expensive for many of the residents of the downtown area, so the priests and priestesses often went out to them instead.

As Sara and I were chatting about this and tending to the children, a fuss suddenly broke out outside.

What happened? An emergency?

“Hey, Satou. You helping out at the orphanage, too?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Hayato the Hero and his follower Ringrande had arrived, and they were already surrounded by the staff. They were here for a sympathy call, too.

A young female staff member was staring at Hayato with a fiery gaze that practically emanated cartoon hearts.

“Satou! And Sara, too!”

“Sister Rin...!”

“...You’re scaring the children, you two.”

Concerned that a sisterly quarrel was about to begin, I politely reminded the two young women of their surroundings.

For some reason, the frightened children were all clinging to me.

“Satou, the spirit of ‘Yes, Lolita! No touching!’ must always...”

The hero started to lecture me with a disturbingly serious expression. Luckily, most of it was in Japanese, so no one else seemed to understand.

““““Sir Hero, let us join you!””””

A gaggle of nobles’ wives and merchants’ daughters gathered around, somehow already knowing that the hero was here.

They had their attendants with them, too, so the orphanage was getting pretty packed.

In the end, the hero decided that he was doing the orphanage more harm

than good and went off with his fans following close behind.

Guess it's pretty tough to be the hero.

The Japanese People of the Parallel World

Satou here. Once, I was talking to my middle-school-age cousin, and she didn't understand the phrase parallel worlds. I was so shocked that I ended up gazing at the spines of the SF masterpieces on my bookshelf and wallowing in nostalgia.

Two days after the baptism, Princess Menea visited the mansion.

"I simply couldn't wait for your invitation any longer, Sir Satou."

The princess was smiling, but I sensed a wave of irritation behind it.

Oh, right. I'd promised after the black dragon incident that I would go sightseeing with her in the old capital.

I was having so much fun with the workshop tours and Magic Sword-crafting that I forgot all about her.

"Hey, Your Highness, how much longer do we have to be quiet?"

Slouching in her seat beside Princess Menea was a young brown-haired girl.

"Yui!" the black-haired child next to her whispered, but the brown-haired girl didn't seem interested in behaving.

These two children were accompanying Princess Menea today, along with her escort knight.

"I apologize for her poor manners, Sir Satou. I'm looking after these two children, you see. You two, introduce yourself to Sir Satou."

Princess Menea apologized, then looked at them persuasively.

"Mm'kay! The name's Yui Akasaki. I used to be an idol. Do you recognize me, mister?"

The skinny young girl named Yui had dark eyes and shoulder-length brown hair and was less than five feet tall.

According to the additional information in her AR display, she was thirteen years old, level 2, and her only skill was “Acting.”

She called herself an idol, but I didn’t remember seeing her on TV or in magazines in my old world. She was definitely cute but not earth-shatteringly so.

Noticing that the movements of her mouth didn’t seem to match her words, I used my “Lip Reading” skill and discovered that she was speaking Japanese.

Since what was coming out was Shigan, she was probably using a magic tool with a translation function.

“Yui, don’t be rude to Sir Satou. Speak like a proper young woman.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Yui didn’t look particularly fazed by Menea’s scolding.

Next, the other child spoke.

“I’m Aoi Haruka.”

“He might not look it, but Aoi is a boy, y’know.”

For a boy, the timid-looking Aoi had slightly long hair and rather large black eyes.

Just as Yui said, I definitely would’ve mistaken him for a girl.

His AR information indicated that he was ten years old, level 1, with the skill “Arithmetic.”

Now, as their names implied, both the children were Japanese.

They must have been summoned in Princess Menea’s kingdom.

In keeping with the hero’s party’s explanation of a “summoning without a god’s blessing,” neither of them had any Unique Skills. In fact, they didn’t even have the Self-Status Check ability that Arisa had said all reincarnations and transmigrations held.

“So which Japan are you from?”

Yui hopped up and pointed at me.

“Are you from the Great Island Empire Japan, like Aoi? Or maybe the Southern Japan Federation, like me? Wait, you’re not from the People’s Republic of Northern Japan, are you?”

...What?

Great Island Empire? Southern Japan Federation?

Yui’s unexpected questions sent doubts racing through my mind.

It was only the “Poker Face” skill that stopped the distress from showing on my face.

Calm down, Satou. Let’s see what that obscenely high INT stat can do.

In less than a few seconds, I managed to calm myself down.

Once I wasn’t panicking, I was able to guess at what Yui’s words meant.

Those “what-if” alternate-history worlds were common in fiction.

They must have been summoned from a parallel-universe Japan.

Since Arisa and Hayato simply said “Japan,” I’d just assumed that everyone was summoned from the same world.

“C’mon, which one?”

“None of the above. According to records, my ancestors are from the country of Japan.”

I answered Yui’s question with the same fake backstory I told Miss Ringrande.

“Aw, man, you’re a native? Here I thought you might be the eighth person.”

Yui flopped back into her seat, looking disappointed.

At least I managed to get through it without raising suspicion.

As always, I owed it all to the “Poker Face” skill.

“Too bad, Your Highness. You seemed pretty excited when you thought you might’ve found the eighth person.”

Princess Menea was silent, looking troubled.

“By the ‘eighth person,’ do you mean one of the Japanese people who was

summoned to your kingdom, Your Highness?”

“I-indeed. They’re missing, you see.”

“Yeah, ’cause a demon got ’em.”

“Y-Yui!”

Princess Menea hurriedly silenced the careless Yui.

“What does that mean?”

“Th-the truth is...”

Princess Menea seemed reluctant to tell me, but she had no reason to keep it a secret, so she began to explain in a quiet tone.

“When the final summoning rite took place, a black greater demon attacked the royal castle. The demon destroyed the altar used for summoning, along with much of the castle, and carried off the person who’d just been summoned.”

The people performing the summoning all got trapped under the debris, so no one was able to help.

According to witnesses, the eighth person had short black hair and was likely a young boy. No one had been able to see their face, though, so it was possible it was a girl.

The story seemed somehow familiar. Searching my memories, what came to mind was Arisa.

It occurred to me that her kingdom’s royal castle had been attacked by a greater demon, too.

A black demon, though... Could that have anything to do with the “Great I” guy who had appeared in Seiryuu City?

“When did this incident occur?”

“A little over two months ago. Do you remember when countless meteors fell in the northern sky? It was the day before that.”

This kidnapped eighth person isn’t me, right? Right?

I was dying to ask that out loud, but even if I did, they'd have no way of knowing the answer.

I definitely shared some commonalities with this eighth person, but if the disposable Meteor Shower spell that destroyed the dragon god was given to me by a greater demon, why bother using me as an intermediary?

Besides, according to the hero's party, none of the others summoned in the Lumork Kingdom had Unique Skills, unlike me.

It's possible that I might be this eighth person, but let's not jump to conclusions.

I'd just make a note of myself as one of the possible candidates in the "important information" part of my networking tab's memo pad.

"Too bad you're not the eighth guy, though."

"Why is that?"

"Well, it'd be pretty cool if a normal person from Japan managed to become some big-shot noble, right? It'd give the rest of us hope that we can make something of ourselves here, too."

Yui seemed to have pretty big dreams.

"Wouldn't it be faster for you to just marry rich, Yui?" Aoi asked.

"Eh, I dunno, all the nobles here have sorta European features. I like Japanese guys, like Satou here. Oh, I know! Satou, if you become a high-class noble, wanna get married?"

Boy, this girl moves fast.

It was a generous offer, but I wasn't interested in marrying a girl who was barely into her teens.

"...Yui. If you want to marry a nobleman, you'll have to learn some etiquette, at the very least."

Menea gave Yui a cold look.

"Ohhh, my bad. You've already got your sights on this one, right, Your Highness?"

“Y-Yui! ...Sir Satou, I must apologize again for Yui’s rudeness.”

I wish she would’ve denied that she was going after me, at least.

“But Your Highness, don’t you need to nab a high-ranking noble of the Shiga Kingdom ’cause your fiancé got killed?”

“Yui, can’t you put things a bit more delicately?”

“C’mon, forget about some stupid prince whose kingdom got wrecked by the Weaselman Empire. You gotta live in the moment and find someone new! You said you hardly even knew the guy, right?”

Aoi’s chiding wasn’t enough to stop Yui’s comments.

However...

“Yui, that’s quite enough.”

“R-right.”

Princess Menea’s deathly quiet voice was enough to make her stop talking and straighten in her seat.

An upper noble, though, huh? That should put a bottom-rung noble like me far out of the running.

At the reception the other day, there was some talk about a viceroy, but I was pretty sure the chances of me marrying Miss Karina and becoming a viceroy were about a million to one, so I wasn’t too worried about it.

After that, I guided the conversation away from matters of the heart and back to the other summoned Japanese people.

Princess Menea and company told me about the other summons besides the eighth.

The first two started screaming strangely and charged at the royals, so they were executed by guards.

I felt bad, since it was possible they were just speaking Japanese and trying to get a handle on their situation.

The third was a young man in his late teens. They gave him a translation ring, but he fled the castle that same day and was devoured by monsters in the

forest.

By the time soldiers caught up, all that remained of him was the left hand wearing the ring.

If this were a *shonen* manga, the lack of a corpse would be a telltale sign that this guy actually survived. According to Princess Menea, though, the large amount of blood found in the area made that highly doubtful.

The fourth person was a man in his thirties. In the midst of his battle training, he attempted to attack a noble who'd come to observe him and was executed.

Coming from peaceful Japan, it was no surprise that undergoing horrifically intense battle training every day without any cheat-like advantage would drive him to desperation.

As I pictured myself in their shoes, a chill ran down my spine.

If I'd been dropped in that wasteland without any Unique Skills, I probably would have met with a similar fate.

The fifth person was a woman in her late twenties. After they gave her the translation ring and explained the situation, she committed suicide that same night.

"Suicide? Why?"

"The late king told her that we had no way of sending her home."

"Really? Couldn't the summoning rune simply be changed to return someone home?"

"Lady Yuriko's power, which was used to summon people from Nippon, is very unstable. Even with the help of the weaselfolk's summoning-rite device, she was never able to connect to the same world twice."

Apparently, this reincarnation named Yuriko had a Unique Skill called World Connection, which was able to indicate whether it was the same world.

"Finally, the sixth person is Aoi, and the seventh is Yui."

Menea fell silent.

In other words, aside from Yui and Aoi here, all the other Japanese people

had died or been otherwise lost.

No wonder the hero and his friends got angry when they heard the name of the Lumork Kingdom.

I didn't exactly feel warmly toward the Lumork Kingdom myself, but it wouldn't be fair to take that out on Princess Menea, who wasn't directly involved in the summonings at all.

More importantly, as the kids' senior of close-but-not-quite-the-same nationality, there was something I had to ask.

If they didn't have anywhere to go, I was willing to take Yui and Aoi with me.

"So how is the Lumork Kingdom going to look after these two children from now on?"

"They won't be left to the kingdom at all—I'm going to be studying abroad at the royal academy in the Shiga Kingdom, so I intend to bring them with me as my attendants."

I guess she did say she was looking after them.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Sir Knight, Sir Hero is here to see you."

"Ohhh, really? Awesome! I wanna ask that guy something."

Yui hopped up excitedly at the butler's words.

"Please show him in."

"Right away, sir."

Princess Menea scolded Yui in the background as I spoke to the butler.

"Yo, Satou! Sorry to show up out of nowhere."

"Whoa! He's a total hottie!"

Yui leaped for the hero immediately, but Ringrande promptly intercepted her.

Today, Miss Ringrande, Princess Meriest, and Priestess Loleiya accompanied Hayato.

"Hmm? Who is this improper child? She looks a bit like Hayato and Satou..."

“That’s correct. They’re from a Japan slightly different from Sir Hayato’s.”

“Ooh, so you’re victims of the Lumork Kingdom...”

The hero frowned and patted Yui’s head gently.

“Hey, don’t treat me like a kid! I was a pretty popular idol back in the day, you know!”

“Oh yeah? I’m sorry.”

“No worries. Anyway, there’s something I gotta ask you, Hero. Is it possible for us to get back to Japan?”

Yui asked this as brightly and casually as she could, but Hayato’s glum expression gave her the answer before his words.

“...Meri, Rin, Loleiya. Do you know anything about it?”

“No, I’m afraid it’s not been passed down in the Saga Empire.”

“As far as I know, there’s no method in the Shiga Kingdom, either. We could try investigating the forbidden books in the royal castle, but they’re off-limits to anyone but the king or the Lady of the Forbidden Archives, the sixth princess, Sistina.”

“The Parion Temple of the Saga Empire has no information, either. Perhaps the Parion Province in the west would know more, but I believe it would be best not to get one’s hopes too high.”

...Really?

I didn’t think I’d be told that getting home was basically hopeless before I even got the chance to investigate it myself.

“Gotcha. No dice, huh?”

“So we can’t go back... I won’t get to see my grandpa or my grandma or my friends from school...ever again...”

Yui looked fairly neutral, but Aoi started crying, so Princess Menea embraced him.

After watching Aoi for a moment, Yui slapped her own cheeks lightly.

“All right! The sulking ends now! From here on, I’m aiming to be the best idol in this world or maybe the queen of some kingdom!”

Yui raised her fist toward the sky to show her resolve.

Her positivity could give Arisa a run for her money.

“C’mon, Aoi. You’re pretty smart, so I bet you could be the best inventor in the world or something!”

“Leave me alone, Yui. I could never be the best at anything.”

“Oh, don’t give up before you even try. We’re still kids, so we’re supposed to just run forward as fast as we can, even if we fall on our faces!”

“...But what if I do fall?”

“Don’t be stupid. The important thing is that you keep running! That’s just how we are.”

“You mean that’s how *you* are, Yui...”

Still, a small smile returned to Aoi’s face at Yui’s encouragement.

If these kids could be optimistic, then an adult like me had no right to be discouraged.

I was already pretty used to life in this world, and with my absurd powers and riches, I could probably lead a better life here than I ever would back in Japan.

Still, I’d at least like to send a letter to the family, friends, and coworkers I left behind.

Upper-level Space Magic could open gates to “neighboring worlds,” so maybe I could use that to develop a spell to send an e-mail to all of the infinite parallel worlds at once.

Even if I couldn’t send humans, I could probably at least send a signal of a few hundred bytes. I bet the cost would be pretty cheap, too.

Besides, I still planned to investigate the “forbidden archives” Ringrande had mentioned and Loleiya’s Parion Province eventually.

“Sorry I couldn’t give you better news.”

“Nah, it’s not your fault.”

“All right. Sorry, Princess Menea, but can I borrow Satou for a bit?”

“Y-yes, of course. My business is by no means urgent, so I will excuse myself.”

At the hero’s prompting, Princess Menea bowed out, and I called Arisa to the parlor at his request.

For some reason, as Arisa entered, everyone but the hero left.

On the desk was a strangely shaped magic tool that Meriest had put in place. It was an anti-eavesdropping measure called a Saga Empire Type-A Counterintelligence Device Mark III.

“Now no one should be able to listen in.”

I tested it out with skills like “Clairvoyance” and “Clairaudience,” but everything was blurred out with white noise. This was clearly a high-performance device.

“Princess Arisa, will you not join me?”

Huh. I didn’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t Hayato attempting to solicit Arisa over to his party.

“I’m terribly sorry, Sir Hero. But I wish to stay with Sir Satou.”

“...You really mean that?”

“Very much.”

Arisa answered without hesitation.

“I see... So I’ve been rejected.”

Hayato shook his head jokingly.

“Still, I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“Whatever about?”

Arisa frowned, looking confused.

“Satou told me everything.”

Arisa shot me a look that screamed, *What did you say?!* but I had no idea

what he was talking about.

“I figured he was Japanese, but I had no idea he was a reincarnation with Unique Skills.”

“Geh! You told hi—”

“Arisa...!”

I tried to cut Arisa off, but it was too late.

If anything, my warning her was probably evidence enough on its own.

“So my hunch was right... I knew something seemed off when we sparred that night after fighting the dragon.”

So he’d been suspicious all this time...

“It’s got to be an imitation-based Unique Skill, right?”

Nope. That was just a normal skill.

“No one improves that quickly, no matter how much natural talent they have. I know because I have unusual abilities as well.”

“Sir Hero, could I ask why you’re bringing this up?”

He didn’t seem to suspect me of being Nanashi. Was he trying to get me to become an agent of the Saga Empire or something?

But something was strange here. If he was going to try to negotiate or coerce me, I would think he would send someone like Princess Meriest instead of approaching me directly.

“Sorry, Satou. I didn’t mean to alarm you. I actually just want to teach you my secret techniques.”

“...What do you mean?”

Now I was really unsure of his intentions.

“Satou, I think you know this, but this world’s difficulty curve is ridiculously broken. I’m fine, since I was level fifty when I was first summoned, but for the average person, it’s basically impossible to survive outside of a well-protected city.”

I absolutely agreed with that.

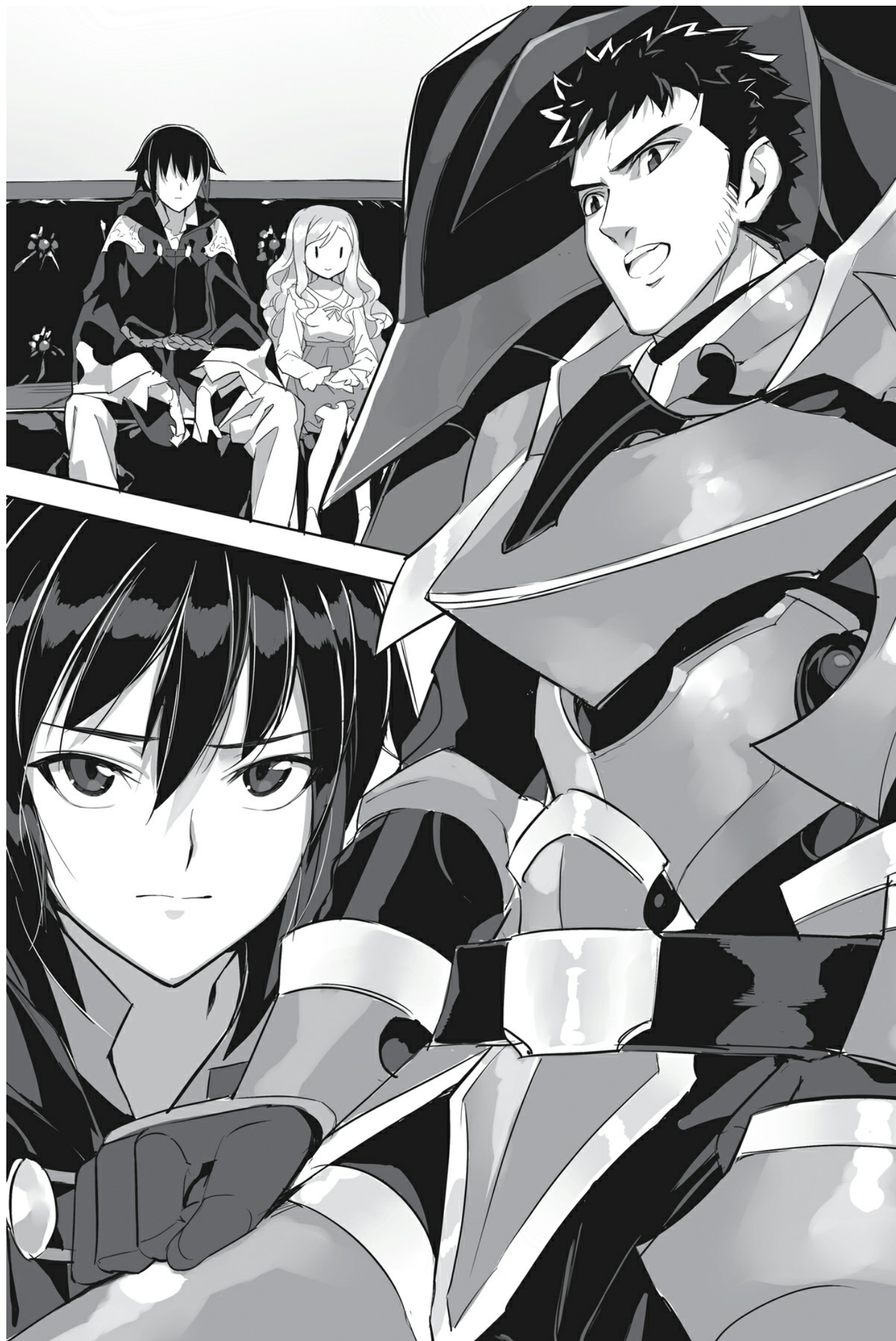
Without the advantage of being level 310, I would've probably been eaten by a wyvern before I made it from the Valley of Dragons to Seiryuu City.

"So I want to teach you the special moves and techniques I've learned. Especially so that you can protect Princess Arisa."

...Maybe he actually had 100 percent good intentions?

If it were anyone else, I'd suspect the whole thing was an act. But given Hayato's behavior patterns so far, I felt confident that he was being genuine.

"You're a very tenderhearted person, Sir Hayato."



People often said that sort of thing to me, but this was the first time I'd said it to someone else since coming to this parallel world.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. So you'll accept my offer?"

"Yes, if you'll allow me to presume upon your kindness."

Unlike Hayato, I didn't have a lot of battle-related skills.

"Do you know of a place where we won't be seen?"

"Yes, I do indeed."

I suggested the labyrinth ruins under the old capital.

We told Hayato's party that we were going to have a contest over Arisa, and we went to the ruins without them.

Since the duke had operatives watching Hayato, we took the silver ship to the entrance of the underground tunnels.

I'd gotten rid of the smell of the tunnels with a deodorant I made using "Transmutation."

While we were on the move, I saw a suspicious shadow. I thought it might be a spy, but it turned out to be an orc woman.

I didn't know what she was up to, but she ran away like a frightened rabbit as soon as our eyes met.

She was probably an employee of the downtown alchemy shop I'd seen on my map before.

I didn't want anyone to witness my sparring with Hayato, so I put a marker on her just in case.

"First, we'll start with the basics. Gather magic power at your feet, then release it as you step forward!"

Hayato demonstrated the skill as he explained it.

The explosive acceleration sent him running about a hundred feet.

I'd explained that I could imitate the techniques, not the skills themselves, and that I wasn't able to pick skills off a skill list like Hayato and Arisa. Thus, we

ended up with this kind of skill-acquiring lecture.

“This is ‘Blink.’ It’s indispensable for fighting monsters and demons with lots of long-distance attacks.”

“Is it anything like ‘Warp’?”

“No, that skill sucks. Sure, it takes zero movement time. But the distance is way too short to be useful.”

Huh? I think over three hundred feet is pretty good...

I silently questioned Hayato’s explanation.

“It can go a few feet if you get it up to level five, but the amount of skill points it takes to get there is totally not worth it. With that amount of points, you could raise ‘Blink’ to level nine, which is way more useful in combat.”

Aah. Well, that made it painfully clear just how unfair it was that I could raise a skill to the max with only ten skill points.

“So yeah, you should learn ‘Blink’ instead. For now, just try doing it how I showed you. It should be easy if you use an amount of MP around your DEX or your AGI stat.”

I appreciated the advice, but since the stat display only went up to ninety-nine, I didn’t actually know what the exact numbers were.

The amount of MP varied by the individual, too, so I decided to try about the same amount that “Warp” used.

Concentrate the magic power on my feet and step forward...

> Skill Acquired: “Express”

> Skill Acquired: “Blink”

> Skill Acquired: “Body Strengthening”

> Title Acquired: Skanda

I got a whole bunch of skills, so I slowed to a stop after dashing about fifty feet.

It didn’t honestly seem much faster than running, but that might be because I

didn't do it at my full speed.

"Pretty good, Satou. If you practice that every day, you should get the 'Blink' skill next time you level up."

I thanked Hayato and recorded in my memo tab the practice method he'd told me.

I didn't actually need it myself, but it might be useful training for the beastfolk girls, as physical attackers.

"Next, 'Body Strengthening.' You basically circulate magic power throughout your blood vessels."

Again, Hayato demonstrated as he spoke. With my "Magic Vision" skill, I was able to see the magic coursing through his body.

> Skill Acquired: "Magic Power Vision"

"This one uses magic power to strengthen your bones and muscles. There are lesser skills, like 'Strength' and 'Endurance Enhancement,' but 'Body Strengthening' is way more convenient. Skills like 'Defense Shell' and 'Iron Skin' concentrate magic power in your skin, but it makes it hard to move, so I don't think it'd work well for a light speedster like you. Anyway, just try circulating the magic power for now."

I obediently gave it a shot. Though I'd just gotten the "Body Strengthening" skill, I was interested in the other skills, too.

I used the minimal amount of magic power to try enhancing various parts of my body.

> Skill Acquired: "Strength"

> Skill Acquired: "Endurance Enhancement"

> Skill Acquired: "Muscle Enhancement"

> Skill Acquired: "Iron Skin"

> Skill Acquired: "Defense Shell"

> Skill Acquired: "Magic Power Armor"

I got the feeling I could get more if I kept going, but that was probably enough

for the time being.

“No wonder Wee said you were good at magic manipulation. Circulating magic power is hard, but you did it on your first try! ‘Blink’ works great in combination with ‘Body Strengthening,’ so you should try practicing both at once.”

“I will—thank you.”

“Body Strengthening” would be useful for the rear guard as well as the vanguard, so I should probably add it to all of their daily training routines.

“Now pull out your sword. First, put some magic power into it.”

“All right.”

I didn’t want my fairy sword to get damaged, so I decided to use one of the Magic Swords I’d made myself.

“A Magic Sword? It’s got pretty good power flow, too... Well anyway, try to extend the magic power past the edge of the sword and sharpen it. If you keep practicing, you should be able to learn Spellblade.”

That was actually very useful. Now I could use that explanation to teach it to Pochi and Tama.

“Okay, let’s get into the good stuff now. Try learning my techniques by sparring with me. I’ll try to hold back, of course, but don’t get distracted or you might die, got it?”

Hayato’s expression was serious as he pulled out the Holy Sword Arondight.

“Ready?”

“...Ready.”

As soon as I nodded, Hayato’s figure blurred, and in the next instant, he was directly in front of me.

I brought up my power-infused Magic Sword to block the Holy Sword that swung down at me.

Blue and red sparks illuminated the rock walls around us, and a high-pitched clang echoed through the ruins.

The Holy Sword danced to the left and right without pause.

As my focus was directed to the Holy Sword, he attacked me with the Holy Shield instead.

The attack came from the blind spot created by my radar and log window. He must have learned from our last mock battle.

I mentally manipulated the menu to turn off the displays.

Now my field of vision was incredibly wide.

I could sense the movement of his eyes.

The position of his center of gravity.

A slight shift in his outline indicating his muscle movement.

Even his breathing.

I was able to predict the trajectory of Hayato's sword before it even started to move.

The Holy Sword came toward me with six rapid thrusts, but I managed to bat it away easily with my Magic Sword.

"Damn, that movement! Are you really level thirty?"

Honestly, I was even more surprised by my own movements than Hayato was.

My body felt lighter than usual, and information seemed to come to me with startling clarity. It was as if a switch had been flipped.

Hayato made another volley of attacks with the Holy Sword, but I was able to predict their timing and aim.

I was familiar with Hayato's quirks after sparring and seeing him in battle several times, but that didn't explain how quickly I was able to predict his moves, like I could see the future.

Testing out this theory, I matched my sword with Hayato's.

I avoided his sideways swing with a short leap away.

It came back toward me at remarkable speed, so I blocked it with the wrist guard on the hand that wasn't holding my sword.

Hayato used this moment to swing a kick at me.

I kept predicting, analyzing, and occasionally deliberately taking a hit to throw off his balance.

It was like squaring off with a really strong player in a fighting game. I wanted to battle Elder Dohal of the dwarf village again now. This time, I should be able to hold my own a little more.

Come on, more!

From the slight wavering of the sword tip before a swing to the subtle shift of his grip on the handle, information was everywhere.

It was as if I could even feel the flow of the air and the vibration of the ground.

I was able to analyze and imitate all his moves, even the trickiest feints and stance changes meant to lure me in.

I absorbed my battle with Hayato in every inch of my body and made the information my own.

It seemed like it was over far too soon.

Time flies when you're having fun.

> Skill Acquired: "Foresight: Versus Human"

> Skill Acquired: "Field Control"

> Skill Acquired: "Sixfold Rapid Attack"

> Skill Acquired: "Gap Attack"

> Skill Acquired: "Gap Defense"

> Skill Acquired: "Saga Emperor Sword Style"

> Title Acquired: Sword Dancer



"I never thought anyone would land a clean hit on me like that."

Slumped against the wall of the ruins, Hayato pulled himself to his feet and grinned.

“Masterrrrrr!”

Arisa came half running, half tumbling at top speed from a corner of the hall, having broken through the barrier with Space Magic.

“Aaaah! Are you hurt? No? Your clothes are in tatters! You! How were you planning on taking responsibility if you seriously injured my master with those full-blown attacks?! I don’t want to be widowed before we can even get married!”

Arisa poked and prodded at me while complaining to Hayato.

At first I let her do it, since it was cute to see her so worked up, but I had to stop her once she realized I was all right and started trying to cop a feel instead.

“Sorry, Princess Arisa. I got carried away because Satou here was so good at learning my moves...”

Hayato rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

It certainly did surprise me when Hayato busted out “Shining Slash,” the same attack he’d used to deflect the “Dragon Breath.”

He didn’t use any attack-based Unique Skills or supply his Holy Sword with magic, so it was a lot weaker this time, but it probably still would’ve severely injured anyone but me.

“Satou, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but are you the eighth person the Lumork Kingdom summoned?”

“I’m not sure.”

I answered Hayato’s question honestly.

“...What do you mean?”

“You see, I don’t actually know how I was brought to this world...”

I gave him a short summary of my time here, leaving out certain details like the Meteor Shower and my Unique Skills.

I also didn’t mention that I was Nanashi the Hero, of course.

Hayato seemed like an honest guy, but if that information reached the Saga Empire, it might end up causing me some serious trouble.

“You took a nap and woke up in a wasteland, huh? And then got attacked by lizardfolk, no less... Boy, you’ve had it rough.”

Hayato patted my shoulders as if to comfort me.

“By the way, Satou, do you know Nanashi the Hero?”

“Yes, I’ve heard tell of him. It seems he saved Lady Karina in the incident a few days ago.”

I’d been expecting this question, so I was able to respond without even needing the help of my “Poker Face” skill.

“D’you think he’s a hero summoned by the Shiga Kingdom, maybe? I wouldn’t be surprised if Yamato the Hero—I mean, Yamato the ancestral king—passed down the art of Hero Summoning to future generations.”

That did sound like a possibility.

Maybe that information was hidden in the forbidden archives Miss Ringrande had mentioned before.

“But Nanashi was strong enough to beat that yellow demon without breaking a sweat. Maybe he’s actually the real ancestral king Yamato?”

Hayato’s expression was grave as he posed his extremely incorrect theory.

“I couldn’t say, myself.”

Hey, I didn’t say that I didn’t know.

“If that whole Dreamcrystal Mausoleum from the legends Rin was talking about is the real deal, maybe he was in some magical cryogenic sleep and somehow got revived...”

Hayato’s theory was getting more and more outlandish.

He seemed to be just as bad at solving these kinds of mysteries as I was.

Somehow, this strengthened my affinity for him.

“Since he has purple hair, perhaps he’s a reincarnation like me?”

“Oh yeah, that could make sense, too...”

Arisa offered another suggestion besides Hayato’s delusions.

Taking the opportunity to change the subject, I decided to offer him something as a thank-you gift.

“Anyway, Sir Hayato, please take these.”

“What are they? Bronze bullets?”

I handed Hayato ten Holy Bullets with screw-shaped holes. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any arrow shafts.

I didn’t give him the Holy Arrows, because the arrowheads were made with meteorites from the Meteor Shower.

“Try putting some magic power into one.”

“Whoa... What?! These are Holy Weapons?!”

“Yes, I received them from a masked alchemist known as Trismegistus. If you make shafts, you can use them as arrows, I’m told.”

Hayato gazed at the Holy Bullets in his palm.

Most likely, he was using the “Analyze” skill to investigate.

“...I see. Satou, is there any way I could meet this alchemist?”

I shook my head in response. He was fictional, after all.

My guess was that, since the name of the creator was blank, he was thinking of Nanashi, which means *nameless* in Japanese.

“Still, disposable Holy Weapons must be really rare...”

Hayato tried to return the bullets to me, but I gently pushed his hand back.

“Please use them, Sir Hayato. I would prefer you to have them.”

“You sure?”

I nodded firmly.

I had plenty of materials, so I could spare ten or so for Hayato without a problem.

I fervently hoped that no more demon lords would show up until the next Season of the Demon Lord, but the ominous words of the head priestess weighed on the back of my mind. Besides, they might come in handy if he ran

into any more powerful foes like the yellow demon.

“All right. Thanks a lot.”

Hayato reverently placed the bullets in his inventory.

We went back aboveground, and Hayato used his talisman to contact his party. Before long, the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* emerged from subspace.

“We have to go check out the other sites where the demon lord resurrection was predicted.”

“You’re leaving already?”

“Yes, that’s right. First, we’re checking the Labyrinth City Celivera in the Shiga Kingdom and the Yowork Kingdom, then heading to Parion Province.”

Unlike in games, being a real hero sounded like a lot of hard work.

“Princess Arisa, please take care until we meet again.”

“I shall pray that fortune is on your side, Sir Hayato.”

Arisa took Hayato’s hand and smiled, and the hero’s face turned red.

This guy was a genuine lolicon, all right.

Hayato hid his embarrassment by heading up the ramp of the silver ship, then turned back to call out to me.

“Don’t you dare laugh, Satou! Listen, make sure you don’t lose control because of Arisa’s cuteness, got it? Always adhere to the law of ‘Yes, Lolita! No touching!’”

I acknowledged his frantic warning with a wry smile, just as Arisa pinched my bottom.

Hayato and his friends waved good-bye from the door of the silver ship, so I gave a big wave in return.

With that, the ship turned west and soared away toward the setting sun.

“Well, there he goes.”

“Yeah.”

Arisa watched the ship until it disappeared.

I didn't know when we would meet again, but I decided to support him in any way I could if he ever needed my help.

I owed him a favor for teaching me all those skills, but more importantly, he was my friend.

Dark Auction

Satou here. Once, when I needed help with my homework, I asked my great-grandfather about his experience in the war, and he told me lots of made-up stories to tickle my fancy, about things like deep-fried frogs and boiled crayfish. I enjoyed our chat a lot but ended up having to redo the homework.

“An escort for an auction?”

“That’s right. I’m told it will be held in the black market across the God’s-Crossing Bridge.”

The day after Hayato’s departure, Princess Menea visited me again.

Accompanying her were Yui, Aoi, and her usual escort knight.

The God’s-Crossing Bridge was a large bridge across the big river near the city. It was only labeled as **Large Bridge** in my AR display, so I hadn’t known it had such an impressive nickname.

“Sir Knight...”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Sebaf?”

The old butler Sebaf approached me with a concerned expression.

He was normally exceedingly polite, so if he was willing to intrude on a conversation with a guest, it must be something important.

“The black-market district, Muraas, is a rather dangerous area. The auction Your Highness mentioned is known as a dark auction that trades in illegal goods, not an officially sanctioned auction.”

Princess Menea put a hand to her mouth to cover her surprised reaction to this explanation.

“With your prowess, Sir Knight, I doubt you would have any problems with

ruffians and their ilk. However, Muraas is home to many disreputable businesses, so it might lead to unfavorable gossip if you were seen there. If you do intend to go, I would encourage you to bring a recognition-inhibiting magic tool.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sebaf.”

Having relayed the necessary information, the butler bowed humbly and withdrew without judgment.

No wonder his family had served upper-ranking nobles for generations.

“What do you wish to do, Your Highness?”

I didn’t know what she needed at the auction, but I wondered whether it was important enough that she’d risk going somewhere unsafe for it.

“Why don’t you just get Mr. Satou to find someone to sell us some?”

“Yui!”

At first, Princess Menea got angry with Yui.

However, she must have decided she didn’t have much choice, so she explained why she wanted to go.

“It’s not that I have no money whatsoever, but if I’m going to study abroad in a major power like the Shiga Kingdom, I’m afraid I find myself a bit short...”

Basically, she needed to raise some money.

What she intended to sell was the soul grass from the dragon mission the other day, as well as some things she’d brought from her hometown, including a large lump of dark stone, fragrant wood, tea ware, art, and two memo pads.

“Is this Japanese?”

“Yes, it was given to me by the third person who was summoned.”

No doubt about it. It was a perfect match for the pottery notes I had.

“Have a look at this, if you would.”

I took the memo out of Storage by way of my pocket and showed it to the group.

“Hey, it’s the same!”

“Yeah, I’m no expert, but this looks like the same handwriting to me.”

Yui and Aoi compared the notes and nodded in agreement.

“Sir Satou, wherever did you acquire this memo?”

“From a gray ratfolk friend of mine. I haven’t met the person who wrote it, but...”

I trailed off then.

Princess Menea was starting to cry as she clutched the memo.

“Thank goodness...”

Aoi and Yui comforted her from either side.

At first I thought she might be acting, but it looked like she really was relieved that the third person was alive.

In the meantime, I skimmed over the notes she’d brought. One was *Raising Shellfish and Culturing Pearls*, while the other was *A Table of Alloys and Their Mixture Ratios*.

My “Estimation” skill put them at about one gold coin apiece, but I guessed they would sell for more than that to the right statesman.

I wouldn’t have minded buying them myself, but I was interested in seeing this “dark auction,” so I agreed to accompany her.

“Recognition-inhibiting magic tools vary in price by grade. We deal in grades one through six, and the inhibition rate increases with each grade. In addition, grades four and higher can only be purchased by nobles of the old capital.”

I took Princess Menea and her escort knight to the magic-tool shop in the noble district to buy recognition-inhibiting magic tools. Yui and Aoi were waiting back at the mansion, where Arisa and the others were keeping them company.

As it turned out, the grade levels indicated what skill level of “Analyze Person” the item could block.

For example, a grade-1 tool could prevent someone with a level-1 “Analyze Person” skill from analyzing the holder.

As I learned later, an original Yamato stone's level of "Analyze" was equivalent to grade 10, while replicas like the ones found at city gates were around grade 7.

There were a few guides for making recognition inhibitors in the magic-tool books I read in Marquis Lloyd's library, but it would be a pain to gather all the materials. Besides, I wanted to know how good the ones sold in stores were.

I actually had plenty of recognition-inhibiting magic tools—which must have belonged to the Wings of Freedom members—from grades 4 to 9 in my spoils from the demon lord battle in Storage. However, I wasn't going to use them this time for the same reason.

"Even a grade three would also make it more difficult for someone without the 'Analyze Person' skill to notice who you are, so..."

So it was a different type of item than Nana's Amulet of Humanity.

"...it should be more than enough for a little trip to the black market."

"How did you know?"

The shopkeeper chuckled. "Whenever there is a tournament in town, you can be sure that visiting nobles from other kingdoms and fiefdoms will want to visit the black market."

So that was why they seemed so well stocked.

The escort knight and I chose the mask type to hide the upper half of our faces, while Princess Menea chose the veil type.

"Grade three are three gold coins apiece, so I'll accept seven gold coins for three of them."

"That's quite affordable for magic tools."

"Well, grade three and below will lose their effectiveness after a few years, and they require the wearer to refresh the magic power supply every few minutes."

I pulled out enough money to pay for all three as I chatted with the shopkeeper.

“Wait a moment, Sir Satou. I think my guard and I will buy grade-one tools instead, please. Grade one would be a bit cheaper, correct?”

“Yes, that would be one gold coin apiece.”

Evidently, that was still too expensive for Princess Menea.

For someone raised in a royal palace, the princess was awfully frugal.

In the end, I settled things by buying three of the grade-three tools and letting them borrow the extras.

I was sure I could find plenty of uses for spare recognition inhibitors.

When we returned to the mansion, the butler had prepared a small, plain-looking horse-drawn carriage to take us to the black market.

“We’re higher than I expected.”

“Indeed. The height of a ship’s mast, perhaps?”

Partway across the long, long bridge, Princess Menea drew away from the window and pressed against me, trembling a little.

The breeze felt nice, but I guess it might’ve been difficult for anyone with a fear of heights.

Since it was a toll road, there was a relatively small number of passersby despite the convenient location.

Just as I was starting to get bored of the scenery outside, we finally made it across the bridge and entered the black-market district of Muraas, on the opposite bank from the old capital.

Most of the inhabitants were beastfolk, and I saw quite a few people wearing weapons and armor made with monster parts.

These individuals were apparently in the dangerous-sounding business of “mon hunting.”

Searching my map, I discovered there were several of them distributed among the woods and mountains to the east. Most likely, they were hunters who specialized in monsters.

“It’s quite crowded here.”

“Your Highness, please don’t show your face at the window.”

The escort knight sitting beside the coachman chided Princess Menea.

Eventually, the carriage stopped on a street lined with warehouses. The one in front of us appeared to be the site of the auction.

A group of middle-aged human men were filing inside.

...Oh?

Something was strange about them.

Their appearances were transparent, and underneath I could see the faces of white-furred tigerfolk.

According to my AR display, they were covered with some kind of illusion.

The staff checking people at the door didn’t say anything, so either they didn’t notice or a recognition-inhibiting magic tool was covering them.

As I was following the men with my eyes, the staff noticed our approach.

“Well! It looks like we have an esteemed guest here!”

Seeing my noble clothes, a short, stout man in a fancy outfit of his own approached me.

“Would you like us to prepare VIP seating for you?”

“That would be great, thanks. This is my first time here, so I’d appreciate an overview of the auction process as well.”

“Of course. You, guide this gentleman to the nobles’ seating, please. Be sure to give him a thorough explanation of the auction process, as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

At the short man’s command, a rather scantily clad woman who looked like a promotional model came over to escort us to the auction site in the basement.

The circular area, reminiscent of a college auditorium, was larger than one would expect a basement to be. The highest stage even looked big enough to play basketball on.

We were led to an area a bit to the right of the main stage, separated by a

partition. There was a small table and a sofa that looked like it would fit about four people.

The screen was probably set up so that we couldn't be seen from the other seats.

"Now allow me to explain. When you wish to bid on an auction, please raise these tags so that the auctioneer on the stage can see them. The white tags denote silvers, and the reflective bronze tags denote gold coins. They are used to indicate how much you would like to offer above the most recent price stated by the auctioneer."

With this explanation, she handed me four white tags and five copper tags.

Each of the tags was labeled with the number three. That was probably my seat number.

I appreciated the explanation, but I wasn't sure why she was so close to me. And at an angle that seemed designed to show off her cleavage, no less.

Maybe she was angling for a tip?

I would have considered folding a bill and slipping it between her breasts, but not in front of Princess Menea.

"Might I ask how one can submit an item for sale?"

Princess Menea's eyes and voice were rather cool.

"Anyone can submit an item by paying the exhibition fee of one silver. A seventh of the winning bid will be charged for handling and taxes to the duke. Incidentally, amounts less than one silver will be considered a donation to the less fortunate."

Fourteen percent? That seemed pretty steep. And fractions rounded down, too.

"Unidentified items can be sold, but appraised items tend to sell at a higher price. For two silvers, an expert appraiser of grade five or above is also available to write an evaluation, if you would like."

"Thank you, but they've already been appraised in my home kingdom. May I submit these items?"

“Yes, of course.”

The woman rang a bell located at the edge of the VIP seats, and a waiting staff member appeared and took the items for sale in exchange for deposit receipts.

There was about an hour to wait before the auction began, but there was a show on the stage in the meantime involving beautiful girls dancing and beastfolk doing acrobatics, so I never found myself bored.

If anything, I felt like they might make more profit if they sold tickets for this show.

“Thank you for waiting, ladies and gentlemen. The auction will now begin!”

Once about 70 percent of the seats were filled, the auctioneer appeared and started the auction.

The items for sale were incredibly varied, including magic potions, mysterious old documents, art, armor, and textiles.

In addition to the goods, there were rare birds and livestock and eggs of demi-dragons like wyverns, nagas, and even a creature called a lamia.

Incidentally, there was one ancient document with the fascinating title *Secrets of the Underwater City Nenelier*, so I bid on it and won for seven gold coins.

It was written in a completely unfamiliar language, but Tolma or someone might be able to introduce me to a scholar who could read the text.

In addition, I got a Ghost Magic spell book and a handbook by a shady alchemist who cut magic potions with water.

There were some other items that interested me, like a unicorn horn and a lesser dragon scale, but the other bidders got furious and the prices ended up many times higher than the “Estimation” price, so I quit bidding partway through. A so-called youth-restoring potion even brought in over three hundred gold coins.

Technically, I could’ve afforded it, but it wasn’t like I wanted it that badly.

The lesser dragon scale was the only real dragon scale, with the rest being a load of fakes. My “Analyze” skill told me they were the scales of creatures like

scale turtles, scale sharks, and nagas.

From what I overheard with my “Keen Hearing” skill, there were more fakes than usual this time because of rumors about the black dragon from the east.

“Next we have two memos, written in Nipanesese, the mysterious language of the hero’s country. These precious articles were discovered hidden in the treasure trove of a certain royal family! Let’s start the bidding at one gold coin!”

At last, the bidding began for Princess Menea’s items.

“Number fifteen, two white tags—one gold coin and two silvers.”

Unfortunately, the bids were going up pretty slowly.

“Number forty-three, one white tag—one gold coin and three silvers.”

After the bid went up by two more white tags, I decided to place a bid of my own.

“Number three, one bronze tag—three gold coins! Any other takers? Going once, going twice... Sold to bidder number three!”

I was trying to liven up the bidding a little, but I apparently raised it too high.

“Did you do that for me, Sir Satou?”

“No, no, I was already interested in them.”

As I talked to Princess Menea, the scantily clad model brought me the exchange tickets for the items I won.

During two periodic intermissions, these could be exchanged along with money for items won.

Among the rest of Menea’s items, I bought the batch of dark stones for forty-three gold coins. My “Estimation” skill placed the market price at sixty gold coins, so it seemed like a good bargain.

The fragrant wood and the tea ware sold at high prices, but the withered bundle of soul grass and the art ended up going rather cheaply.

In the end, her items sold for a total of 102 gold coins, but after commission and taxes, she would probably get about eighty-seven gold coins and two silvers.

There was still time before the intermission, so I sat with the pleased-looking Princess Menea to observe the auction.

“Next we have a Magic Sword called an Antwing Silver Sword crafted by an artisan in the Labyrinth City Celivera. We’ll start at an astoundingly low ten coins!”

The dull-gray sword on the stage could hardly be described as “silver.”

The auctioneer called it a Magic Sword, but unlike my Magic Swords that I forged with magic circuits inside, this one’s magic seemed to be added with “Transmutation.” That was probably why the blade was shaped like an insect’s wing.

Searching through the books in Storage, I found a guide to make a sword of the same name among the materials I’d acquired from Trazayuya’s study in the Cradle. It looked to require rather large-scale equipment to make.

I was definitely interested, but the mon hunters were all bidding like their lives depended on it, so I decided not to get in their way.

There were other weapons, like a broadsword made from praying mantis monster parts and a steel fan-shaped ax, which the mon hunters snatched up as well.

These monster-part weapons made in Labyrinth City seemed to be quite popular with that group.

There were some mercenaries bidding, too, but strangely, none of the knights or nobles seemed interested. I guess they probably preferred the mithril-alloy swords made by the dwarves.

Incidentally, the monster-part weapons sold for an average of forty gold coins, about a third of the price of one mithril-alloy weapon.

“Now, this is the final item for sale before the break!”

Up on the stage was a white tiger cub— No, wait. It was a white-furred tigerfolk child.

“According to the seller, this is a former princess of the White Tiger Kingdom, which was destroyed by the Weaselman Empire!”

The crowd at the auction heated up at the host's explanation.

"White Tiger Princess, give 'em a few words!"

"●●●? Raahrr... ●●."

I was overwhelmed with sympathy for the white tiger princess as she trembled before the fervor of the crowd.

> Skill Acquired: "White Tigerfolk Language"

For now, I raised it to level 3 so that I could understand her and activated it.

...Hmm? Something strange is happening on my radar.

I opened my map and checked on the details.

Other beastfolk were gathering near the auction house, especially tigerfolk.

Since some of them were youths of the same species as the white tiger princess, they might be a rescue team.

A few others had infiltrated the hall besides the group of white tigerfolk men I saw at the entrance, too. There was even a squirrelfolk girl crawling along a beam near the ceiling of the stage.

As I watched, she almost lost her footing and fell, so I used Magic Hand to subtly push her back up.

For the moment, I seemed to be the only person who'd noticed, but someone else could look up and spot her at any moment.

The bidding war for the white tiger princess was heating up, already reaching twenty-nine gold coins.

Both bidders were humanfolk. One seemed to be a noble of the old capital, but the other was a noble from a place I'd never heard of, the Makiwa Kingdom. He was wearing a flashy red cloak.

The former wore an expression of pure greed, but the latter's eyes were frighteningly bloodshot. It was as if he had some kind of grudge.

"Lady Menea, do you know of the Makiwa Kingdom?"

"Y-yes, I do. It's a relatively large kingdom in the east. I believe the king

passed away recently and was succeeded by the crown prince. It used to be a kingdom that was quite kind to beastfolk, but I've heard things have changed since the new king took over."

Princess Menea chose her words carefully, but I surmised that this probably meant the kingdom was now harsh toward beastfolk.

"And do you know anything about this white tiger princess's homeland?"

"Our kingdom has never had diplomatic relations with the White Tiger Kingdom, so I'm not clear on the details, but..."

According to the princess, the Red Lion Kingdom in the east, the Scalefolk Emirate in the north, and the White Tiger Kingdom in the south were the three major demi-human powers on the eastern end of the continent until the Gray Ratfolk Emirate appeared.

Each of these nations was very different. The haughty red lionfolk treated humans and beastfolk as equally inferior; the scalefolk formed a federation consisting of primarily the greenscale tribe, as well as Liza's orangescale tribe and other tribes; and the white tigerfolk ruled benevolently over the other beastfolk in their kingdom.

"White tigerfolk are said to be stern but courageous, making them very dangerous enemies. However, they are also known for being very honorable. If you make friends with them once, they will treat you like a blood relative forever, and if they owe you a debt, they are sure to repay you in kind."

Hmm. So was there a war between the White Tiger Kingdom and the Makiwa Kingdom or something?

At any rate... No matter what was going on behind the scenes, I couldn't stomach the thought of any adults laying a hand on this small child.

If I had to, I would bid on her myself and give her to the rescue team, but it didn't look like that was going to be necessary.

I sensed magic taking place next to the stage, so I looked up.

There was a young man producing what looked like black spheres. He seemed to be using them to put out the lights in this room.

“Fire!” A shout came from the exit as white smoke billowed throughout.

Once everyone was in a panic, the rescue team leaped in from the ventilation ducts to save the white tiger princess.

Leading the way was a white tigerfolk swordsman with a broadsword in his hands.

Through the smoke and darkness, I saw a silhouette stand in his way.

“I knew you’d show up, Gargaolon!”

“Hmph! Is your grudge so strong that you would bother to show up here yourself, Marquis?”

The Makiwa Kingdom noble and the white tiger swordsman seemed to have some kind of history. I had to adjust to the tigerfolk man’s hard-to-understand Shigan language.

The nobleman’s retinue pulled swords out of an Item Box and charged at the group of white tigerfolk swordsmen.

This was a pretty serious situation, but since it was happening on a stage and all, it sort of felt like I was just watching an action-packed play.

I might be getting a little too used to the savageness of this world.

“<This is all because of those damn weasels,>” the white tigerfolk swordsman spat in his mother tongue. One of the marquis’s retinue got up on the stage, only to be cut in two by the tiger’s broadsword.

Geh—spare me the gore, please.

I take back what I said before. Clearly, my Japanese sensitivity is still alive and well.

“Aah! Sir Satou!”

Princess Menea clung to me with a cry.

Her escort knight was standing guard in front of the nobles’ seats, but neither the white tigerfolk nor the Makiwa people seemed to have any intention of getting us involved.

“Your Highness, it’s too dangerous here.”

“S-Sir Satou, we should flee, too.”

Ignoring the escort knight’s urging, Princess Menea kept pressing against me.

“Wait a moment, please. I hear footsteps on the stairs. If we go that way now, we might get caught between the reinforcements from outside and the fighting in here.”

Even as I spoke, the guards charged in from the stairs.

Trying to assist the rescue team, I covertly used Magic Hand to roll obstacles at the feet of the guards.

Then, flames rose out of the darkness.

The Makiwa Kingdom nobleman was holding a staff with a large ruby-like jewel, which was emitting the flames.

“Oh no! That’s a Crimson Cane... A cursed staff that attracts fire monsters...”

Princess Menea explained this next to me in a whisper, but there was something else I had to do before responding.

“This is the end of the line, Gargaolon.”

“Tch! He’s going to use that here?!”

The noble’s staff glowed red, and the torchlight-size flames grew to the size of a campfire.

He was about to use a huge flame attack right here in the basement.

...What an idiot.

I used Magic Hand to grab a heavy-looking vase and smash it against the pyromaniac noble’s head, knocking him unconscious.

His level was decently high, so I doubted that would kill him.

“Whoever did that, I thank you!”

The white tigerfolk man shouted into the crowd and went back to taking out the noble’s followers.

Once the staff fell from his hands, its flame weakened and finally went out. His bright-red cloak was on fire, but a young boy who seemed to be his page

was hurriedly stomping it out, so he should be fine.

Once he'd defeated the last attacker, the swordsman knelt in front of the white tiger princess.

"<I've come to take you home, Princess Luniya.>"

"<I knew you would come to save me, Sir Gargaolon.>"

"<Brother Gar, we must make haste.>"

"<He's right. Those guards were one thing, but if the old-capital army arrives, we'll have a hard time getting out in one piece.>"

"<All right, then—let's go!>"

""""<Yes, sir!>""""

With the swordsman in the lead carrying the princess, the group of beastfolk fled, knocking over the guards as they ran.

Following them on my map, I saw that they were able to escape the district and make it safely down the river.

Once the pyro noble recovered, he gulped down a potion to heal his wounds and chased after them with his retinue in tow.

He seemed to have a serious obsession with the white tiger princess.

Later, after some more commotion, I was able to pay for and pick up the items I'd won.

On the way home in the carriage, I saw a few mon hunters being carried to a temple on wooden boards. They must have gotten caught up in the fight over the princess.

The dark auction was a little violent, but it was certainly pretty interesting. I hoped I would have a chance to come here alone sometime during my stay.



"Oh man! Japanese food!"

"Tofu, miso soup, and even natto!"

Yui and Aoi were overjoyed at the spread of typical Japanese food.

The day after the auction, I invited Princess Menea and the kids over for a farewell party for Miss Karina, who was heading to the royal capital.

The king was in the old capital, even if it was just a body double, so I thought getting an audience here would be good enough. However, it was considered important for a lord's proxy to go to the royal capital to report, so Miss Karina had no choice but to do so.

She was taking a large aircraft from the old capital to the royal capital, so there was probably no need to worry about her safety.

Incidentally, Arisa had stumbled on the natto when she was looking for coffee beans.

"How nice, Sir Satou! I can't believe you knew that we were departing on the same aircraft as Mistress Karina the day after tomorrow!"

Princess Menea looked delighted.

I couldn't bring myself to admit that I hadn't actually known that, so I just smiled back at her.

"All right, all right, that's enough~."

"Mm. Too close."

Princess Menea drew closer to me as she rejoiced, but the iron-wall duo of Arisa and Mia blocked her immediately.

Generally, that would be pretty rude behavior, but since one was a former princess and the other an elf, even Princess Menea had a hard time saying anything to scold them.

"Sir Pendragon, you're really going to have Her Highness Princess Menea sit at the same table as those beastfolk?"

"Yes, Lady Menea has given her permission."

I politely dismissed the complaints of Miss Karina's younger brother, Orion.

If Princess Menea had refused, I would have set up separate seats for the invited guests, but she had happily consented, so we could all eat together.

Her compliance was very helpful, since Miss Karina had insisted that she

wanted Tama, Pochi, and Liza to join us.

The three of them had set up camp in front of a mountain of steaks, eagerly awaiting the start of the feast.

“Thank you all for gathering today for Lady Karina and Princess Menea’s farewell party.”

I got things started with the kind of introduction you might hear at a company party.

I’d decided on a buffet-style party in the garden so everyone could enjoy eating and chatting without formalities.

We were planning to leave the public city ourselves in six days, once we received the other scrolls I’d ordered, but Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen had promised to throw us our own farewell party then.

“This *kobumaki* is delicious.”

“Right? Our master’s cooking is the real deal!”

“Are you guys old farts or what? The chicken and potatoes are way better!”

Aoi and Arisa were enjoying the traditional Japanese dishes, while Yui seemed to prefer the fried food and meat skewers.

“Oh, that’s junk food. But if that’s what you like, we have chips and soda water over there, too.”

“For real?!”

“R-really?”

Yui and Aoi got teary-eyed at the taste of the potato chips and the sweet soda water.

They must have been remembering their old homes.

“This is the last hamburg steak I’ll have for who knows how long...”

As Karina finished the last of the giant heap of hamburg steaks, she let out a contented sigh.

“Karina, come with uuus?”

“Tama’s right, ma’am! Let your maid person go to the royal capital so you can travel with us and master, ma’am!”

“...Could I really?”

Miss Karina turned to me with hope sparkling in her eyes, but unfortunately, it wasn’t that simple.

I had to make sure she carried out her duties as an important noble.

If Orion were an adult, she probably could have made him go instead, but it would be considered improper to send a minor as a proxy.

When Pina the maid and I shook our heads, Miss Karina slumped with disappointment.

Just then, one of the housemaids appeared with a fresh plate of hamburg steaks.

“Ah, another chance! Are you still at full power, Tama and Pochi?”

“Aye-aye, siiir.”

“Pochi is always at full power, ma’am.”

Those would be pretty cool lines if they didn’t basically mean “we’re going to binge eat.”

I’d better give them some stomach medicine later.

Miss Karina’s two escort maids were also working on dishes as they looked after their charge. This was their farewell party, too, after all.

“The tofu steak is delicious as well, I report.”

“Mm. Yummy.”

Mia had started promoting the tofu hamburg steak to the others.

Nana, her latest target, seemed to enjoy it.

“Is everything good so far?”

“Yes, this *ankake* sauce is quite delicious.”

“Amazing as always, master.”

Lulu and Liza showed me their dishes as they sang the food's praises.

I didn't want everyone to get sick of deep-fried whale, so I made a thick sweet-and-sour sauce called *ankake* to accompany it this time.

"Sir Pendragon, may I have a moment?"

"Yes, of course. If you'd prefer to speak alone, we can convene over there."

Orion looked rather serious, so I invited him to the gazebo.

"Sir Pendragon, I want to know what your real intentions are."

"...My intentions?"

Huh? Did he think I was planning to take over the territory or something?

"That's right. Given your valor and achievements, it's clear that you're aiming for the seat of viceroy. A few gossiping friends of mine were saying that you might be aiming for an even higher position, sir, but I saw for myself that you had no such plans when you undertook that baptism."

Orion fell silent and stared me right in the eyes.

I probably should have told him sooner that there was some sauce on his face.

It was definitely making it hard to take him seriously.

"However, if you intend to use Karina as a means of becoming a viceroy, I cannot allow that."

So he was a *siscon* after all.

Generally, political marriages were pretty standard among nobles here. Marrying for love like in modern Japan could never be more than a dream for them.

Magistrate Nina had informed me back at my induction ceremony in the Muno Barony that marriage was nothing more than a means of deepening ties between noble houses.

"Lady Karina is quite important to you, isn't she, Lord Orion?"

"Of course. Who wouldn't consider their family important?"

What an impressive declaration.

“I promise you—you have no need to worry. I have no such ambitions for power. The baron and Magistrate Nina did bring up the possibility of my marriage to Lady Karina, but I have already refused.”

“What?! What is there not to like about Karina?!”

Pick a story and stick with it, please.

“It’s not that, of course. It would simply be unfair for a lowly new noble like me to be paired with someone from such noble lineage as Lady Karina.”

“R-right, that’s certainly true.”

“So please rest assured that I will never attempt to woo Lady Karina.”

“I see now. My father must be pleased to have such an honest vassal as you, Sir Pendragon.”

“That’s very kind of you to say.”

Finally, I seemed to have cleared up Orion’s suspicions.

The next day was spent preparing for Miss Karina’s journey, and in a flash the day of her departure arrived.

“Karinaaaa?”

“I’ll miss you, sir.”

“Oh, you two...”

Tama and Pochi squeezed Karina tightly.

I hadn’t realized just how close this trio was. I guess they were on a similar wavelength.

Tama and Pochi started flailing around as they got squished between Karina’s enormous breasts, so I tapped her on the shoulder to suggest that she release them.

“Here, I made you a list of conversation starters. You don’t want to end up a spinster, do you?”

“A...what?”

Miss Karina blinked in confusion as she accepted Arisa's social crib notes.

"I bequeath this stuffed animal to you, I declare."

"Mm. Wind chimes."

"Thank you, my friends."

Nana's and Mia's gifts were very cute.

"Here, these are from Miss Liza and me. They're pastries, so you can have a snack on the journey."

"Oh my, pastries with nuts? I shall treasure them."

"N-no, you should eat them before they go bad..."

It was a rare comeback from Lulu to Miss Karina's airheadedness.

After watching this scene with a smile, I walked over to Yui and Aoi, who were waiting for the ship.

"Here, these are for you two."

"Oh man, potato chips! And is this flask full of soda? Dude!"

"Come on, Yui, thank him properly. We're very grateful, Sir Satou."

Along with the sweets, I gave them each an *omamori*-style charm.

There was a single gold coin tucked away in each one, just in case Yui and Aoi ever got lost or anything.

"What are these?"

"I heard that the Japanese have good luck charms called *omamori*, so I attempted to make them for you."

"Thank you very much. It's wonderful."

Aoi put the charm carefully into his pocket.

"Oh yeah? That seems kinda fishy...but I'll take it. Thanks."

Yui, too, accepted her charm and put it in her pouch.

Though we were saying good-bye for now, I resolved to see how they were doing when we went sightseeing in the royal capital.

Yes, Princess Menea was their guardian, but I wanted to look out for the closest thing I had to kin here.

“Sir Satou!”

Just then, Princess Menea dragged Miss Karina over to me.

“Come, Mistress Karina, give Sir Satou a farewell embrace.”

“Oh, I, um...ah!”

Karina hesitated, so Princess Menea pushed her forward.

Just like that, her voluptuous body was pressed against my chest.

Wow, that is soft.

“There!”

Menea embraced Karina and me with a bright smile.

Her chest felt pretty large for her age, too, though hers could not compare to Miss Karina’s.

Based on this scene alone, you’d think I was the protagonist of some harem series.

“Sir Satou, if you do marry Lady Karina and become a viceroy, please make me your second wife, okay?”

Menea’s voice was playful as she whispered in my ear.

I didn’t know how serious she was, but I hoped she would become good friends with Miss Karina, even if it was partly motivated by ambition.

“Excuse me! That’s way too close, even for a farewell scene!”

“Mm. Guilty.”

“Hee-hee, I’m sorry.”

At the iron-wall duo’s complaints, Princess Menea politely withdrew and apologized to them.

Miss Karina, on the other hand, was in a full-blown panic; her face was bright red and her eyes dazed, as if she was about to collapse.

Between her androphobia and her social awkwardness, that must have been too much for her to process.

Luckily, her maids came rushing over to take care of her.

“Well, have a safe trip.”

“Thank you, Sir Satou. Once you find a place to stay in Labyrinth City, please do write to me at the royal academy. I shall be sure to reply.”

“All right, I promise.”

I agreed to Princess Menea’s proposal, since that way I could also find out how Aoi and Yui were doing.

Overhearing our conversation, the revived Miss Karina came flying over.

“P-please write a letter to me, too...at Muno Castle. You simply mustn’t forget!”

“I won’t—don’t worry.”

I’d already planned to send letters to Baron Muno and Magistrate Nina once we got to Labyrinth City, so I could easily include one for her also.

“W-well then, I’ll be on my way. Satou, when you finish your business in Labyrinth City, please come back to Muno City— No, I know! I, too, shall obtain permission from Father and come to train in Labyrinth City myself!”

“Certainly. If the baron permits it, I would be happy to see you there.”

I barely disguised my surprise at her sudden declaration.

I doubted that Baron Muno would allow his precious daughter to go to such a dangerous city, but there was no point in saying that now.

Instead, I smiled warmly as Miss Karina, Princess Menea, and the others waved to us from the deck of the airship.





“Sold! The Magic Spear Ikazushi goes to bidder number seventeen for two hundred and one gold coins!”

After I saw off Miss Karina and the others, I went back to the dark auction alone.

Unlike the other day, I was in disguise and wearing a grade-9 recognition-inhibitor mask I had in Storage.

I even painted my skin in case someone tried to catch a glimpse under my large, unfashionable hood.

“Magic Ax Inazuma goes to number seventeen for two hundred and seventeen gold coins!”

The items selling for truly ridiculous prices were magic weapons I’d brought in.

This time, I’d brought only four: the two already mentioned, plus Magic Sword Akatsuki and Magic Sword Hibiki.

These names were gleefully given by Arisa, who said they were based on destroyers from the old Japanese Army. As usual, she was very knowledgeable about weirdly specific things.

Both the swords were simple ones with good magic power conduction. If charged with magic, the blades of the spear and the ax would become electrified and could knock out opponents with an electric shock.

They didn’t have flashy lightning-bolt effects like Miss Ringrande’s lightning broadsword did, but I guess the stun function alone was enough to make them sell for a high price.

The Magic Swords sold for 156 gold coins and 152 gold coins, respectively.

That made 726 gold coins in all... There were still the fees and taxes, of course, but at that rate, I could make a comfortable living just selling Magic Swords.

“You’re the best, sweetie!”

“We’re dancing again for the next intermission.”

“Make sure you watch us!”

I was impressed by the dynamic dancing of the half-naked ladies during the intermission, so I gave them a tip and was rewarded with a shower of kisses.

Sadly, I had to experience this through the recognition-inhibiting mask.

I should’ve worn one that left the lower half of my face exposed, like yesterday...

Once the beauties danced off the stage, they were replaced by a well-dressed auctioneer.

“Now it’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for! Our next item is none other than a Gift Orb!”

At that, cheers arose from the audience.

“In case any of our esteemed visitors are unfamiliar with these orbs, allow me to give a humble explanation.”

To summarize the points the auctioneer made through the impatient heckling of the crowd: 1. When you use a Gift Orb, you can learn the skill it contains.

2. Gift Orbs are one-use-only.

3. If it goes unused for more than ten years or so, the orb will lose its blessing.

4. They are found extremely rarely in labyrinth treasure chests.

That was pretty much it.

There were three Gift Orbs to be auctioned off: Farming, Horticulture, and Fire Magic.

Too bad... A Chant orb would’ve been nice.

Curious, I searched the entire scope of my map, but the only Gift Orbs were the three being sold here.

They must have been a very rare item indeed.

“Sold! The Fire Magic orb goes to bidder number three for two hundred and

five gold coins!”

The first one fetched a pretty high price. I’d been thinking of going for it myself, but the other bidders seemed so desperate that I decided to hold off.

I knew the price would vary based on the appeal of the skill, but I was still surprised when Farming sold for just one gold coin and Horticulture for thirteen.

After another round of dancing and more auctions, we finally came to the last few items.

“Now, this next item is so mysterious that even our appraisers could not identify it. Take a look at this strange treasure of an ancient magical empire.”

...A smartphone?

Just as the man said, “Analyze” didn’t show any information about it. All I could see in the AR was its model number.

I, along with a number of other dilettantes, bid on the item.

Although it would probably be locked with a PIN.

“Sold! The ancient magic treasure goes to number nine for eighty-five gold coins!”

After a fierce bidding war, I managed to emerge victorious.

Bidder number three, a baron in the VIP seats, scowled at me furiously.

He was wearing a recognition-inhibiting mask, too, but it was no match for my “Analyze” skill and AR display.

“The next item is another collection of Nipaneese writing from the home country of the hero, like the memos from yesterday. What secrets could be hidden in this mysterious book provided by a certain merchant? Only the winning bidder will know! Let’s start the bidding at one gold coin!”

The auctioneer was holding a notepad about half the size of a paperback book.

Judging by the glimpse of handwriting on the cover, it was the same author as my pottery memo.

Which meant it was definitely a treasure trove of knowledge.

I had to win this auction, no matter what.

“The mystery book goes to bidder number nine for thirty-seven gold coins!”

It was bidder number three who drove the price up so high.

If it hadn't been for him, I probably could've gotten it for around three gold coins, but that didn't really matter, since I would have bought it even if it took a thousand.

“The Magic Bag goes to number three for one hundred and thirty-five gold coins!”

“Yeeeeeeeees!”

I drove up the price on the final item, a Magic Bag, then made a show of losing dramatically to bidder number three. That way, number three seemed satisfied, and whoever sold the item got a high price, too.

“That was too bad...”

The dancer ladies invited me to spend an evening with them, but since I was in disguise, I unfortunately had no choice but to decline.

My plan was to return to the city by using “Skyrunning” under cover of darkness, so I walked toward the exit on the east side of the black-market district.

One section of the wooden outer wall was completely destroyed.

“You there. Do you know what happened here?”

“You haven't heard? It happened yesterday when a black dragon was chasing some stupid mon hunter. See how that area is black from the dragon's breath? A buncha knights were investigating all day.”

I handed the friendly young boy a few coppers as thanks for the information, then headed over to the thoroughly charred building.

The black dragon I'd fought with Hayato crossed my mind, but it couldn't have been that one.

Otherwise, this whole town would've been burned to ash.

It must have been either a lesser dragon, a young dragon, or a demi-dragon. I searched the map, but I didn't see any dangerous high-level monsters in the area.



After that, I spent the next few days touring workshops and socializing with old-capital nobles.

I received the scrolls I ordered, so now my business in the old capital had concluded, and we planned to leave the day after next.

I was even able to get the *Holy Swords and Scriptures* book from Mr. Kikinu's magic store.

There was also a public execution of the demon lord-worshipping Wings of Freedom cult members who'd been imprisoned in the castle dungeon, but I had no desire to participate in such a barbaric event.

In the case of upper nobles like the duke's third son and the former Count Bobino, they appeared to have been dealt with quietly, with the official story being that they'd died of illness.

Since the current Count Bobino was essentially a patron of the Wings of Freedom, he was supposed to pass his title down in the near future.

However, the family's misfortune continued. The eldest son, who'd been serving as viscount in Sutoandell City, was attacked and killed by a monster on his way back to the old capital.

On top of that, the second and third sons died in equally unfortunate circumstances, until finally the position was offered to the fourth son, the temple knight Sir Keon.

I'd exchanged a few words with Sir Keon when he was serving as Sara's guard in Muno City, but he didn't leave much of an impression.

Rumors on the street suggested that he'd killed his brothers to inherit the countship.

Really, I wished that sort of violence would only happen in murder-mystery shows.

“Sir Satou! We’re going out drinking!” At that invitation from Tolma, I was pulled into an excursion to a shady shopping district with him, Mr. Kikinu, Orion, and a few of Orion’s young male noble friends.

While I was away from the mansion, my traveling companions and the housemaids said they would have a girls-only pajama party.

This sounded like a recipe for chaos to me, but since I forbade them from drinking alcohol, it would probably be fine.

Tolma had insisted that he’d chosen a tamer route, since there were minors with us this time, but this seemed pretty hard-core to me.

“Sir Tolma, those ladies aren’t wearing any clothes!”

“Well, yeah. It’s called stripping.”

The young nobles’ jaws almost hit the floor as they stared at the beautiful woman onstage.

She had a remarkably well-toned body, mixing beauty and sexuality in the best possible way. Truly a sight for sore eyes.

“S-Sir Kikinu! Why are all the women in this restaurant p-pushing out their chests?”

“Because it’s a gentlemen’s pub. Just give them a silver for a tip.”

This next place was staffed entirely by large-breasted women. It was a pillowy paradise of prodigious proportions.

The third stop was another of Tolma’s favorites, but this place was a bit different.

“S-Sir Pendragon, isn’t there something strange about the women here?”

“Well, about that...”

He probably meant because all the companions in this place were drag queens.

At a glance, they looked like women, but you could tell from their physique and Adam’s apples.

I didn’t even need my AR display or “Analyze” skill.

When I was in college, my friend who moonlighted as a drag queen taught me all the telltale signs.

Tolma's parade of pubs went on for a while, so Orion and I got to know each other a little better. We might not have been close friends, but I thought we reached the point where we could have a normal conversation without formalities.

I left the drunken Tolma and Mr. Kikinu in one of the pubs, then called a street carriage and hustled Orion and his friends into it.

Now I just had to get the two drunks inside back home.

"Aaaargh!"

"Leggo a' my baaaaalls!"

Hearing a commotion, I turned to see several men getting into a scuffle.

It looked to be a spat between criminal guilds.

"Eek!"

"Gramps! Outta the way!"

One of the criminals raised a club to strike a homeless old man who'd been caught in the crossfire.

As I was taking a piece of gravel out of Storage to knock the club away, a shadowy figure kicked the would-be attacker down.

"Are you all right, sir?"

According to the AR label, the shadowy figure—actually a man in a hooded black robe—was the orc alchemist I'd found in my map search before.

Orcs had a reputation for being rather nasty, but this one seemed to be quite a gentleman.

"The guards are comin'! Let's scram!"

One of the criminals shouted when he saw a group of city guards approaching, and all of them scattered in a panic.

In all the commotion, the orc alchemist disappeared, too.

I entrusted Tolma and Mr. Kikinu to another street carriage, then headed to the underground tunnels of the old capital.

I wanted to talk to that orc alchemist from before.

For some reason, the sewer system that led to where the orcs were located was inhabited by a great deal of crocodiles.

The white crocodiles I occasionally saw among them seemed to be working for the orcs; as I passed them, they splashed their tails against the water, like they were sending a signal of some kind.

Maybe they were like alarm bells.

As proof of my theory, an orc who wasn't the alchemist was sprinting toward me from the open space ahead.

If I'd used some of my stealth skills, I could have gotten by the white crocodiles easily, but this wasn't an infiltration mission.

I kept heading toward the open area, and soon the orc appeared in the shadows before me.

Their outline seemed rather blurry. My AR display informed me that the orc was fully loaded with stealth-related skills and magic tools.

Of course, they still came up perfectly on my radar.

"Good evening to you."

"Mashette!"

I spoke in a friendly voice, but the orc panicked and ran away.

That was understandable, since I'd seen through their elaborate stealth system so easily.

> Skill Acquired: "Orc Language"

I enabled the skill so we could communicate.

The orc language seemed to be a subset of the language of the elves, but I didn't understand the word the orc had said, so they must have branched apart long ago.

As I opened the hidden door that led to the larger space, avoiding the trap, my “Sense Danger” skill warned me of danger beyond the door.

Peeking in through the door, I saw an enormous magic device shaped like a *torii* shrine gate glowing bright red.

“<We cannot let this place be revealed to humans. Farewell, Lo Han, Li Fu.>”

Standing in front of the magic tool, the orc alchemist muttered cryptically.

Judging by the AR display, the *torii* was in a very dangerous state of **Magic Power Overload**.

If I didn’t do something, this area and the old capital above it would be in peril.

With the help of my “Quick Change” skill, I transformed into Nanashi the Hero and sprang into the room.

“<You must forgive me for going on before you to enter the great cycle with Lu Heu.>”

He would have to save the rest of his would-be final words for later.

I used “Warp” to instantly arrive in front of the magic device and quickly absorbed all the magic without a word.

The Holy Sword Excalibur was already at its magic power reserve limit, so instead I siphoned it into the Holy Sword Caliburn.

Once the magic had been drained from it, the device turned from red to gray.

It looked exactly like the broken travel gates we saw in Seiryuu County.

“<How quick a thing is death.>”

“<Sorry to ruin the moment, but I had to absorb this device’s magic power or the situation would’ve gotten pretty dangerous. If you let this thing go out of control, it might affect the whole city, not just this place.>”

The expression of peaceful martyrdom slowly faded from the orc alchemist’s face when I spoke to him.

“<...Impossible. You’re saying you stopped a travel gate that was running in overdrive?>”

The orc alchemist's gaze swiveled frantically between the magic device—the travel gate—and me.

“No art of man should be able to dispel that much magic power in an instant. Are you a god? Or a god's apostle?”

After a quiet sigh, the orc alchemist switched from his own language to Shigan.

“I'm neither. Just a man.”

Technically I had siphoned the magic, not dispelled it, but I didn't want to make things any more complicated than they already were.

“But no ordinary human could... Ah. So you're a hero?”

He must have seen my official title with the “Analyze” skill.

Once again, I accidentally set it to regular Hero instead of True Hero, but it wasn't like I had to prove that I'd defeated a demon lord or anything.

“That's right. The name's Nanashi the Hero.”

“Have you come to destroy the orcs?”

The orc alchemist hid a smaller orc behind him.

“Of course not. I just wanted to chat with you. And I won't tell anyone about this travel gate—don't worry.”

Just saying that didn't seem like enough to convince them, though.

“You swear it?” the small orc asked in a high voice.

“Of course. I swear on the name of Goddess Parion and my title as Hero that I will tell no one of your secret.”

I didn't particularly worship Parion or anything, but I thought it would sound unconvincing if I just swore on my title, so I figured I'd throw in the name of a goddess for good measure.

“On the name of a goddess? No way...”

The smaller orc was visibly taken aback.

Was that really such a big deal? I guess so, since their attitude toward me

noticeably shifted.

“Are you sure?”

The orc alchemist sounded cautious.

His hood was pulled over his eyes, so I couldn't really see his expression.

“Yeah, of course. It's a big secret, right?”

“Indeed. It is the legacy of our race. We cannot allow it to fall into the wrong hands.”

“I see. So you guys must have made the broken ones I saw before, too, huh?”

The remains of the travel gates I'd found near Seiryuu City must be connected to this somehow.

First airships and now teleportation? Now, that was the kind of fantasy-world stuff I liked to see.

“Can I ask where it's connected to?”

“My apologies, but I cannot tell you. On the other side of this travel gate are some of my precious few remaining brethren. I cannot reveal their location for their safety.”

“Oh, is that so? Sorry for asking so casually, then.”

If I really wanted to know, I could just mark these two orcs and find out where the travel gate led.

But of course, I had no intention of stalking them like that.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ga Hou, the orc alchemist.”

“I'm the beautiful orc monster tamer, Lu Heu.”

Ga Hou was over a thousand years old, and Lu Heu was 670. I guess orcs lived a pretty long time.

Instead of the piglike heads that might come to mind, the orcs were characterized by pointed ears reminiscent of the fairyfolk, as well as short, slightly upturned noses.

They certainly didn't look to be the same race as the Golden Boar Lord.

His head must have transformed when he turned into a demon lord or something.

Once I apologized for startling Lu Heu, Ga Hou invited me to their living quarters so that we could talk more.

It was small, but clean and full of life.

Lu Heu brought out a crocodile dish and a special wine called Evil Spirit Killer, so I brought out my special mead and some fried whale meat for the occasion.

“I don’t know what kind of meat this ‘fried’ food is, but it is delicious.”

“It’s giant-monster-fish meat. Grated daikon makes a great topping for it, but if you don’t like that, grated onion works pretty well, too.”

“Giant monster fish?!”

“You have daikon?!”

Ga Hou and Lu Heu latched on to two very different points of my statement.

“Yes, a yellow demon appeared in the old capital recently and summoned some of them, so I’ve got more than I can ever eat. And I’m out of long daikon, but I have the round kind.”

“Y-you mean to say you defeated them? The aerial fortress that even the sky dragon could barely defeat?”

“I like the round kind best! Can I have some? I can, right?”

Having them talk to me in stereo was a little confusing, so I gave Lu Heu some round daikon to keep her quiet for a while.

“Wait, did you see the sky dragon and the fish do battle?”

“...Yes, I did. I was there the moment that crybaby Yamato and the sky dragon overcame His Majesty the Golden Lord.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

Ga Hou guzzled the highly alcoholic Evil Spirit Killer like it was water as he talked about his past.

“I first met Yamato in His Majesty’s castle. Yamato had been captured on the

front lines and was terrified of us orcs.”

I felt it was important to hear this story from a historical witness, but it was heavier than I’d expected.

The “Golden Lord” he spoke of was probably the demon lord called the Golden Boar Lord.

“I seem to recall Yamato saying some strange things, like *Don’t pull any tropey BS on me!*”

Well, that kind of ruined the serious tone of the story.

I felt like Yamato and I could have been friends.

“Despite being a human, Yamato had no prejudices against orcs and demi-humans. At first it was just His Majesty’s page, but soon Yamato formed friendships with the servants, the military officers, and the civil officials, too. In the end, even His Majesty the Golden Lord, who was always curt and aloof, came around to Yamato’s charms. It seemed as though we would soon be able to make peace with the Saga Empire...”

It sounded like Yamato was a pretty amazing person. No wonder he was able to become a king and found a huge kingdom.

“However, the path to peace was closed when the Flue Empire started massacring demi-humans and the weasels betrayed us, and then a war broke out between humans and all kinds of demi-humans, including us orcs...”

Ga Hou angrily tore off a piece of the crocodile meat.

So the weaselfolk had been causing trouble for a long time.

“Still, Yamato never gave up, and he went to preach peace to the kings and emperors of many countries. But it was all in vain: The war was fierce and far-reaching. We were able to destroy the Flue Empire, but Our Majesty ultimately exceeded his limits and was swallowed by the power of the demon lord...”

Ga Hou looked up at the relief on the ceiling with tears welling in his eyes.

The carvings depicted all kinds of races holding hands in harmony.

“The next time I saw Yamato was at the siege of the capital of the Saga

Empire. Yamato appeared to try to prevent the deaths of my brethren, who were being manipulated by the five greater demons.”

So the Saga Empire almost got destroyed, too...?

“I will never forget that day... The sight of Yamato shedding tears and blood alike, trying to get us to come back to our senses. The way his voice trembled and sobbed as it ordered the sky dragon to use its breath of light...”

Blood trickled from Ga Hou’s clenched fist.

It was cruel of me to ask him to tell such a difficult story just to satisfy my curiosity.

“I survived because I was riding a manticore, but by the time I returned to the capital, it was all over. The sky dragon had fallen to the ground, and Yamato’s Holy Sword was thrust into His Majesty’s chest.”

Lu Heu gently unfolded Ga Hou’s fist and healed it with Water Magic.

“His Majesty disappeared into black dust, and Yamato collapsed on the spot, completely drained and still in tears. When Yamato next awoke with my assistance, the fool’s first words were ‘You survived, Ga Hou... Thank goodness.’ I’d been planning on demanding a duel to the death to avenge His Majesty, but when I heard those words, I could no longer bear to be a warrior.”

Wow, talk about a legend.

“I helped my brethren escape to unsettled areas and settlements on other continents, but a few of us stayed behind to make sure the travel gate was never misused. All of that was only possible because of Yamato.”

Ga Hou explained that Yamato had worked hard to make sure the orcs weren’t driven out or mistreated.

“Of course, we’ve done a thing or two to help as well...”

Aside from continuing his work as an alchemist, Ga Hou had also volunteered to help purify the water in the old capital and establish a sewage treatment facility.

So that was why the river wasn’t dirty.

“You never wanted to try to live aboveground?”

“Some four hundred and fifty years ago, we were given a small dominion at the edge of the territory. We lived there peacefully for about thirty years... But the boy king Gartapht, under the sway of his beloved weaselfolk soothsayer, slaughtered all eight hundred inhabitants of the orc dominion there. After that, we have never again ventured to live in plain sight.”

That must have been the demi-human war that was mentioned at the museum.

But to slaughter the innocent civilians of an entire city...

“Do not look so sad. Fortunately, we have a friend in the little ogre princess, who excels at Barrier Magic. With her help, we were able to make a small hidden village untouched by the outside world. Even now, our surviving brethren live there peacefully.”

Ga Hou drained the last of his drink along with his sorrows, then poured some mead into a cup with a gentler expression.

“It’s a little sweet but delicious...”

“If that’s not to your liking, why not try this?”

“Th-this rich fragrance... Dragonspring liquor?! It’s been five hundred years, but I’d never forget that smell.”

To make up for the painful story I’d forced them to recount, I gave all my precious dragonspring liquor to the two of them.

My party members wouldn’t be able to try it now, but hopefully I could get it again in the future.

I changed the subject to the orcs’ customs and traditional dishes, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Thanks to that, we were soon friendly enough that I got to see some orc spell books and alchemy.

“Nanashi, please take this for me. If the leader of this kingdom is a wise man, give this to him. If he is a fool, then throw it into a crater or the ocean.”

With that, Ga Hou handed me a short horn, an item that turned humans into demons.

He explained that he'd managed to defeat a lesser demon that had appeared downtown and he'd acquired this horn.

"I wouldn't worry. The king and the duke already know about the short horns."

"I am glad to hear it, then."

Ga Hou opened the cover of a magic furnace in the corner of the room and threw the short horn into it.

The large magic furnaces in all four corners of the room were there to supply the travel gate with power.

"Ga Hou, please use this if you like. I think it'll come in handy if you have to fight another demon."

I gave him one of my handmade Holy Swords. This one was coated with mithril, of course.

I had no doubt that the orc would use it well to protect the old capital.

"...Why, this is a Holy Sword!"

Ga Hou exclaimed in surprise when he put magic power into it.

"It is. Sorry it doesn't have a name, though."

"Then allow me to name it now."

The name Ga Hou gave to the sword was...

...Holy Sword Nanashi.

The Town of Mon Hunters: Part 1

Satou here. Stories about antihero protagonists are pretty popular, but if I had to choose, I think I prefer the traditional good-versus-evil stories you see in prime-time TV anime. You can't beat the classics!

"Satou, I shall await your letter."

"I'll be sure to send one when I'm settled in Labyrinth City."

"Oh, Satou... Can't you send me one whenever you reach a big city? Even a short one is fine."

Sara looked a little pouty.

"Well, if you insist."

It wouldn't be too much trouble if I sent them along with Zena's letters, so I agreed to her request.

"Please come back to the old capital sometime, too."

"Yes, of course."

Sara took my hands and gazed into my eyes.

For a second I thought she was going to give me a kiss good-bye, but she probably couldn't in front of this big crowd.

"Lady Sara, may I?"

"My apologies, Viscount Emerin."

Sara stepped aside, and Viscount Kirk Emerin and his second daughter, Rina, approached me.

"Sir Pendragon, you have saved our family from great peril."

Sales for the lulu fruit were booming, with orders not just from old-capital nobles like Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen but even from merchants from the

royal capital and other nearby regions.

It was even rising in value as a high-grade fruit, like the muskmelon in the Showa era.

“This is all thanks to your skills at cooking and promotion, not to mention your willingness to share your research materials with the public.”

“I’m the one who should be grateful. The orchard you’re starting in the Muno Barony is a greater gift than I could ever have hoped for.”

Viscount Emerin had offered to make an orchard of the now highly profitable lulu fruit in the Muno Barony.

On top of providing seedlings, he’d sent over an experienced instructor from his own orchard to support proceedings there until everything got on track.

“S-Sir Satou... Once you finish your training, you will be returning to the Muno Barony, correct?” Miss Rina asked.

“Yes, that is the plan,” I answered.

After I revisited the Muno Barony, I planned to leave the Shiga Kingdom and travel around the world.

“A-all right! I’ll do my best.”

“...Very good. I’ll be cheering for you, then.”

“Thank you!”

I didn’t know what she was referring to, but I had to cheer for a young girl doing her best.

“Oh, Satou, you’re so cruel.”

“Tolma, keep your thoughts to yourself.”

As the Emerin family retreated, they were replaced by Tolma and Viscount Hosarris Siemmen.

They were accompanied by Mr. Djang and Miss Natalina from the scroll workshop.

“If anything interesting happens on your trip, make sure you write me about

it, all right? Here's some extra info for you."

Tolma handed me a bundle of paper tied with string.

It seemed to contain information about important nobles of the royal capital and even Labyrinth City.

"Sir Pendragon, do be careful in Labyrinth City. This is a letter of introduction to the guildmaster there. She is a bit of a difficult individual, so if she gives you any trouble, please turn to her adviser, Miss Sebelkeya."

I bowed to the polite Hosarris and the somehow-hard-to-dislike Tolma and said my farewells to them.

Of course, other good-byes were going on around me, too.

"Mia, say hello to Lady Aaze and everyone in our hometown for me."

"Mm, okay."

Mia nodded to Cyriltoa the Songstress, who had come out to see us off.

Bolenan Forest, in the southeast of the Shiga Kingdom, was the site of Mia's hometown, the elf village. The journey to bring Mia home would be over soon.

"You'll come back, won't you, Nana?"

"Nana and Nana's master, comin' back?"

"Larvae, my master and I shall visit this place again, I declare."

Nana tightly embraced the sealfolk children, who flailed around adorably.

"Lulu, come by anytime if you want a job."

"...Th-thank you, Chef."

Clearly, the chef of the duke's castle still hadn't given up on recruiting Lulu.

"Arisa! We came to see you off!"

"Take care, Miss Arisa."

"Let's play shadow tag again!"

"Aw, you came to say good-bye!"

The lively voices surrounding Arisa belonged to the children from the

orphanage, who'd become friendly with her during the sympathy calls with Sara.

They made sure to wave at Nana and me, too.

"Liza, Tama, Pochi, I know you can get even stronger. Defeat monsters and gain all the experience you can."

"Yes, sir. We won't forget your teachings, Sir Kajiro."

"Take care, everyone."

"Ayaume, too?"

"Yes, sir!"

The two Saga Empire samurai who'd been training the beastfolk girls, Mr. Kajiro and Ayaume, came to say good-bye as well.

Because of them, the vanguard team had gotten even stronger.

As thanks, I gave them three times the gold coins I'd promised for their pay.

"Sir Satou! It's not too late. You can still become the head chef of the Lloyd family!"

"No, no, Sir Satou must marry a daughter of the Hohen family and become the head chef *and* a member of our family!"

The chummy pair of noble gourmands, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, came to see me off, too.

Each of them gave me a dagger with their respective family crests, saying to use it if I got into trouble on my journey. I didn't want to take advantage, but each would be useful if there was a situation I couldn't deal with on my own.

There were lots of other familiar faces, too, like our hosts, the Worgochs; the future duke Tisrado; and other nobles I'd met in the old capital.

"Sir Pendragon, please try to avoid getting into danger. If things look impossible, turn back at once... And don't die."

"Don't worry. I won't do anything reckless."

Sir Ipasa Lloyd, the imperial knight, made a serious face and took my hands in

his own.

It seemed overdramatic to me, but journeys in this world were actually quite dangerous, so partings like this could sometimes turn into final farewells. I should know that, since I'd encountered a hydra on the road between Kuhanou County and the Muno Barony.

So many people came to say good-bye that we ended up delaying the departure of our ship. I'd have to apologize to the captain and the other passengers later.

Eventually, the ship set sail, and we waved to everyone at the port until they vanished over the horizon.

As the ship started to head down the main river, Arisa approached me.

"So are we taking the land route over the mountains to Mia's hometown? Or the sea route?"

"Viscount Emerin told us not to take the sea route."

"Oh, right. His fleet got destroyed near the Seadragon Islands, didn't it?"

"Yes, and that's the only way to get to the Bolenan Forest by ship."

I could probably handle it, but I didn't have anyone to give me a ship.

"So we'll be going through the mountains, then?"

"Yeah. Lady Cyriltoa said she went that way, too."

When I'd brought everyone to the music hall for her performance, the songstress, who was an elf like Mia, had told me about the journey.

"But is there a highway through there?"

"It's probably better to assume that there's not."

I'd actually asked the traders who sold me coffee in the city, but they said it had been over a hundred years since anyone had traveled across the Black Dragon Mountains to the Bolenan village.

"Mountains, huh...? I wasn't much of a hiker in my past life, just so you know."

“I wasn’t planning on walking, of course. Don’t worry—I’ve got a plan.”

With that in mind, I’d been testing out the possibility of aviation in the old-capital labyrinth ruins for a while now.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to make an aircraft with a skypower engine because the output was too difficult to adjust, but I did manage to use the Electronic Control and Lightning spells to make hydrogen, so I made a small blimp-style airship instead.

It might look soft, but the balloon was covered with giant-monster-fish hide, so it would be next to impossible to damage even with mithril-alloy weapons.

To ensure a safe and comfortable journey, I sealed it very carefully.

Of course, I updated my party’s equipment with new materials and technology, too.

Their new armor was made mainly with the aforementioned monster-fish hide.

It boasted better blade resistance than even mithril, was as fireproof as hydra leather, and was even shock resistant, so they’d be safe going into battle even with somewhat stronger opponents.

It would be a pain if someone analyzed them, so I camouflaged the armor using the thin white shell of hard newts.

Everyone had different weapons, too. For starters, Pochi, Tama, and Nana were now equipped with Magic Swords that looked like simple bronze swords.

These Magic Swords could be switched between two effects: Soft Stun for dealing with people and Sharpness for exterminating monsters.

For Arisa and Mia, I provided new staffs made with the wood of the Mountain-Tree. Instead of making them myself, I had them crafted at the best staff workshop in the old capital.

I gave Lulu a muzzle-loading musket with the Shooter Version II function built in.

Like Japanese swords, the gun itself was considered an “ancient weapon,” so it might be rare but shouldn’t be thought of as too unnatural.

They probably just fell out of use because of the convenience of magic weapons like Fire Rods and Thunder Rods.

I didn't notice it when we went to the museum, but apparently there were some on display there.



"What is that?"

It was our third day on the ship, the morning after we'd been stuck inside all day due to heavy rain, when I spotted something in the southeast.

"What do you mean? There's not a cloud in the sky."

"Spider threead?"

"It's thin and stretchy, sir."

Arisa couldn't see it, but Tama, Pochi, and I all saw what looked like a thin white thread.

"World Tree," Mia mumbled.

"Is that what that is?"

"Mm."

Mia nodded at me.

I knew she wouldn't lie, but I didn't see anything treelike about that thin line.

If anything, it was like a sci-fi space elevator in the distance.

...Is this actually a sci-fi world, not fantasy?

Doubts arose in my mind, but I figured they would become clear when we reached Bolenan Forest, so I put those thoughts aside for the time being.

By the next afternoon, we arrived in Couka, the southernmost town aside from the port city Sutoandell, to switch to a ship that would take us upstream on a branch of the river.

The only place with ships big enough to hold a carriage was in Kuuche, upstream of Couka, so we started our land travel from there.

This road was overgrown with grass, with very little traffic. As far as I could

tell, the local residents preferred to get around with small canoe-like boats.

Both Couka and Kuuche were enjoyable towns—lively despite the small population.

“Master, do you think the black dragon they mentioned in that town is around here?”

Arisa looked out the window at the scenery with a worried expression.

We heard stories while we were passing through Kuuche that a black dragon had attacked the town, so she was probably somewhat nervous about that.

Since the outer wall was a little charred, not burned down, I thought it must have just been a demi-dragon.

I searched my map for demi-dragons above level 30 in the area. Aside from the large amount of wyverns in the Black Dragon Mountains, there was a lamia in the northeast of the duchy, a few hydras at the western edge, and a sea dragon in the southern ocean.

Of course, there were no real dragons in the territory.

The marker I’d put on the black dragon was on another map far to the south.

“There aren’t any demi-dragons nearby, so perhaps they mistook a wyvern or a large snake monster for a dragon?”

“Wyverns are scary, too... Will Lulu be okay in the coachman’s seat? And the horses?”

“Don’t worry. I’m always on the lookout for enemies.”

I patted Arisa’s head, and she finally gave me a relieved smile.

“Master, the village up ahead seems to be in a rather strange state.”

“Master, I recommend battle preparations.”

Liza and Nana were fully armed on their runosaurs as they came over to report.

We’d sold our surplus horses in the old capital, so we had only the four that were pulling the carriage and the two runosaurs.

So the four younger kids and I were riding in the carriage Lulu was steering.

“Liza, come with me.”

“Understood.”

I called Nana over, borrowed her runosaur, and headed toward the village with Liza.

This village was positioned between a branch of the river and the highway, so they specialized in fishing and agriculture.

“Do you have some business in our village? You’re riding runosaurs, but you sure aren’t dressed like thieves or eastern savages.”

An elderly man who was likely the village head stood waiting at the crossroads leading to the village, along with ten or so armed villagers.

The weapons they held were unbelievably crude even for a last-minute situation, from sticks with pointed ends to spears made with shards of obsidian. Their eyes were full of hatred and fear.

“No, we weren’t really planning on stopping by.”

My flippant answer did nothing to relax their vigilance.

When I saw the state of the village behind them, I understood why they were being so cautious.

“It looks like some buildings have burned down back there. Were you attacked by bandits?”

At least half the villagers had burns on their hands and feet, and the rest sported various other injuries. I didn’t notice at first because of the ragged cloth bandages wrapped around them.

“No, much worse than that. It was a nobleman and his friends,” one of the young men next to the village chief spat angrily.

I felt eyes peering at me from inside the distant houses.

We didn’t seem to be welcome here, so I thought I’d better leave once I got the information I needed.

“Was this noble from around here?”

“No, we’d never seen him before.”

“Yeah, I didn’t recognize the crest.”

“They asked if we were sheltering any beastfolk, and when we said we didn’t know what they were talking about, they used magic to burn down our houses.”

“One guy held a fireball in front of my face and demanded a confession.”

The youngsters answered my question one by one.

A nobleman using fire, tracking down beastfolk...

This sounded a little too familiar.

My suspicions went right to the pyromaniac nobleman who’d tried to use Fire Magic at the dark auction in Muraas.

With a quick map search, I discovered that he was in Puta, the town we were heading toward next.

And the tigerfolk he was after were hiding in a corner of the same town.

This smells like trouble.

We could technically just avoid staying in that town to keep out of danger, but it was the closest town to the Black Dragon Mountains, and I was hoping to gather information about the mountain range for our trip.

For now, I just added markers to the lot of them to help avoid trouble.

“I’m sorry to hear that. We’ll be careful not to get mixed up with them, then. Here, please take this as thanks for the information.”

I reached into a compartment of the carriage, pulled out some salves and five potions that worked well on burns, and handed them to one of the young men.

“These are very effective for burns. Perhaps you can use them for the young ladies in town and such.”

He looked dumbfounded at first, but when he heard the words *effective for burns*, he practically threw himself down to thank me. The reason I gave him five was because there were five girls in the village with the condition **Burns: Mild**.

At that point, the carriage caught up to us, so I traded off with Nana and got back in.

“Well, aren’t you generous.”

“I made those with a special recipe, so they’re actually quite inexpensive. The cost might even be less than a single copper per vial.”

“Dang, that’s cheap!”

They were watered-down magic potions I’d made while consulting the shady alchemist’s handbook I’d bought at the dark auction. They were stored in cheap store-bought potion vials, too, so their shelf life wasn’t very long.

They were made by diluting my handmade lesser magic potions to a twentieth of the original strength, but they were still on par with a store-bought lesser potion.

The diluted liquid didn’t require any magic cores for production, but that was the only difference, so considering time and effort, it would probably be faster to just mass-produce normal potions.

However, the watered-down potions were low-cost and low-effect, so they were useful for selling or giving away to people.

These potions also contained freezing-flower powder from the black dragon incident, so they should heal burns without a trace.

After this, we passed more villages that had been attacked by the pyro nobleman.

In some towns, they said that a black dragon appeared right after the noble left, making them fear for their survival.

Suddenly, I remembered how Princess Menea had described the pyro noble’s Crimson Cane: *a cursed staff that attracts fire monsters*.

Maybe this black dragon was chasing after the pyromaniac noble.

“Slashy slashyyy?”

“Master’s Magic Swords are amazing, sir!”

“This sword is three times sharper than ordinary blades, I report.”

I'd let the vanguard group fight a level-20 naga that was hiding in the mountains to test out their new weapons, and they ended up winning even more easily than I had expected.

A naga turned out to be a large snakelike monster with bat wings and four legs.

Since we were testing out close-combat weapons this time, I cut off its wings before I had the girls challenge it.

"It seems you had no need of me for this battle."

"Easy peasyyy?"

"We're invincible, sir."

Liza's words struck a chord with Tama and Pochi, who promptly assumed a victory pose.

"Have a seat, you two. Listen..."

Before I could say anything, Liza gave the pair a good scolding for their pride, so there was no need for me to step in.

In the middle of the night, I had snuck out to dispose of any dangerous monsters that were above level 30 or had poison, petrification, or anything else that might pose a threat to my comrades. Maybe I should have left some stronger opponents for them, though.

"Say, do you think that naga was the black dragon we've been hearing about?"

"Dark brown."

Mia shook her head at Arisa's theory.

I also thought that misunderstanding was a possibility, but just as Mia said, the naga's scales were dark brown. More importantly, it didn't breathe fire.

The villages we passed were one thing, but the town of Kuuche definitely had burn marks.

And soon...

"Found iit."

“It’s flying over the top of that mountain, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pointed south from their perch on the coachman’s seat.

Beyond the lower mountains nearby, I could see the outline of the Black Dragon Mountains.

Near the white-peaked summit was something like a black string coiling around.

I couldn’t say for certain, since it was on a different map, but it was in the same direction as the marker I’d put on the black dragon, so they were probably one and the same.

“Great job, you two.”

I gave Tama and Pochi a pat on the head, praising them for spotting it at such a long distance.

We’d spotted a real black dragon, but it was probably unrelated to these incidents. If something that big had been flying around here, I would think it would have done much greater damage to the terrain.

I explained this reasoning to a worried-looking Arisa, then went back to evaluating the new equipment.

“The musket bullets didn’t seem to be working.”

“Mm. Nope.”

“I’m sorry; I’m not a good shot...”

“It’s not your fault, Lulu. The weapon just wasn’t strong enough.”

I’d used normal bronze bullets, but it seemed like the shooting magic circuit simply wasn’t strong enough.

Besides, unlike with a bow and arrow, the power of a gun had little to do with the strength of the user.

I reassured Lulu, then called our tank, Nana, over.

“Nana, let me see your shield.”

“Yes, master.”

“Huh. Not a scratch.”

This large shield was made by stretching giant-monster-fish hide over a Mountain-Tree wooden frame.

It was considerably sturdier than the shield I’d made with an ironshell fruit casing before.

I was glad that it seemed safe.

Incidentally, the naga meat was delicious when I broiled it in soy sauce. I decided to hunt them whenever I saw them.

Later, we were conveniently attacked by robbers near the town of Puta, so we got to test out the Soft Stun effect of my handmade Magic Swords.

It would be a pain to take them with us, so we just tied them to the nearest tree.

We weren’t far from town, so I figured we could just have the guards there collect them.



The town of Puta came into sight beyond the trees.

It was sandwiched between two mountains, with the constable’s castle built on the slope of the western mountain.

There was a mithril mine site on the mountain to the east, where they were now mining small amounts of tin and lead.

The population was a little less than the average around here, with slightly more beastfolk, like lizardfolk and ratfolk, than humanfolk.

The only nobles in the town right now were the constable Baronet Poton’s family and Marquis Dazaress, aka the pyromaniac noble from the Makiwa Kingdom, and his crew.

According to the information I got from nearby villages, the town of Puta was famous as a gathering point for mon hunters. If any demi-goblins or other monsters were seen wandering near the local villages, the town would hire the mon hunters to exterminate them.

This was very important, since the town's constable refused to take any real action until serious harm was already done.

As I thought about this, I searched the map and found dozens of demi-goblin nests in the nearby forests every mile or so. Most were small nests with less than ten demi-goblins.

Whenever their numbers got too large, they would get preyed on by other monsters or exterminated by the mon hunters, so there were no huge colonies like in the Muno Barony.

Even now, there were ten-odd parties of mon hunters prowling the forests in search of demi-goblins.

One of those parties was just on its way back into Puta and was having some kind of dispute within view of our carriage.

Honestly, this world had way too many issues.

Four women and one young man were arguing in front of the gate.

"Like I said, I can't pay the entrance tax unless you pay me in advance!"

"Why should we have to do something like that?"

"Exactly! You said you'd come in handy if we brought you along, but you haven't done a damn thing for us so far."

"You can't even carry our baggage, and you drink all our water."

"Worst of all, you sliced up the fire fox we worked so hard to take down and ruined its coat!"

The women scornfully dismissed the boy, who had only one arm.

They clearly saw him as a burden, but he refused to back down.

I had to admire the boy's guts.

"Hey, Kena, wait a sec."

"What?"

The guard, who'd been standing around like it was none of his business, spoke to the leader of the women.

“A fire fox, you said? Did you go all the way to the Blighted Valley?”

“Pfft, 'course not. If we went to a place like that, we'd be the ones getting hunted.”

“Then where...?”

“We found it in our usual spot in the Twin Mountains.”

“You did?”

I didn't recognize the place names, but evidently something was odd about the location of that monster.

“Yeah, we saw a goblin that used Fire Magic, too. Pretty crazy.”

“Was that in the Twin Mountains, too...?”

“Yeah, 'sright.”

Maybe I was reading too much into it, but I had to wonder whether all this was because of the pyro noble's Crimson Cane attracting fire monsters.

I wasn't sure of the range or conditions of the curse, but someone could wreak havoc on an enemy capital using an item like that.

However, it seemed like I was the only one with this theory. The guards were just confused about the unusual monster activity.

The mon hunter women waved to the guard and started to head through the gates, but the boy hurried over to stop them.

“Hey, we weren't done talking yet!”

“Fine. Come to the bar next to the buyer's shop by sunset today. If you show up, we'll give you three coppers for the six days, just like we originally promised.”

“Wait a minute! I defeated four goblins, too. You owe me four more coins for the commission for those!”

“Why, you little... You just snuck in the final blow on goblins we'd all but finished off, didn't you?”

“You've got some nerve trying to claim a reward for that. Cheeky brat.”

“That still means I beat them!”

The tall leader of the women shrugged scornfully.

“All right, all right. But you didn’t kill those four alone, so you get half the commission. That means two extra coppers. Just make sure you get to the bar before the end of the day.”

The women snickered at the relieved smile on the boy’s face.

“Heh, you better hurry, or we’ll spend it all on booze.”

“Okay, let’s make a bet on whether we can drink everything away before the kid gets there.”

“Great idea! I’ll put one large copper on yes.”

“Me too—five coppers on drinking it away.”

“Gah-ha-ha, c’mon, put some real money on it!”

They were probably joking, but I got the feeling it’d turn into reality if they drank for long enough.

The boy seemed to have the same hunch, as he hurriedly tried to negotiate with the gatekeeper.

“You heard them, right? Just let me through now and I promise I’ll come back to pay later.”

“Ha! If I believed every word you mon hunters say, I wouldn’t be fit to be a gatekeeper. Why don’t you just go hunt some game to pay in kind before sunset?”

“How am I supposed to catch a beast without tools to set traps?”

“Well, you better give up, then.”

Oh? You can pay in kind here? I didn’t know that.

Noticing our carriage approaching, the guard pushed the boy aside. The kid tried to charge into the town while the guard was distracted, but the second guard stuck his foot out and tripped him easily.

“Hey, welcome to Puta. Never seen you around here before. Are you a

peddler?”

“No, we’re just stopping by on our journey.”

I showed my identifying silver plate to Gatekeeper A.

Since I was just wearing plain robes instead of the fancier clothes I wore in the old capital, he didn’t seem to have recognized that I was a noble.

“My sincere apologies. So you are a noble, sir?”

“Hate to be rude, Sir Noble, but did you say you’re on a journey? This town is pretty much the end of the line, y’know. So where exactly are you going? Planning to head over the mountains to steal some wyvern eggs or something?”

“Cut it out, Jitts.”

Gatekeeper B must have been referring to the three or so wyvern nests on the other side of the Black Dragon Mountains, not the ones in the mountain range itself.

I had cleared out the latter last night to make sure my party would be safe, but I hadn’t found any wyvern eggs.

“Are wyvern eggs good to eat?”

“Really good, probably. They sell for a high price anyway. If you bring them to the royal capital or Siruga Kingdom on the other side of the mountains, rumor has it you can trade them for their weight in gold.”

“They say the spawn are raised as mounts for the Flying Dragon Cavalry.”

If one egg weighed over a pound, that would mean about 140 gold coins. Pretty impressive, since that was about the price of a single Magic Sword.

But the wyvern egg at the dark auction in Muraas sold for less than that, so they were probably exaggerating.

According to the info I got in the old capital, the Siruga Kingdom was close to the Black Dragon Mountains, with Makiwa Kingdom to its northeast.

Princess Menea’s home of the Lumork Kingdom was farther north, with two smaller countries in between.

Incidentally, our destination, the Bolenan Forest, was just beyond the Black

Dragon Mountains to the south.

As I was mentally sorting out my geography, the boy from before spoke up.

“Hey, Mr. Noble!”

“Quiet, you.”

Gatekeeper B quickly silenced the boy with the butt of his spear.

I didn’t think that was necessary, but I guess it made sense to be that harsh. Another noble might demand worse punishment for a commoner speaking to them out of turn.

“It’s all right. What is it, young man?”

I waved away Gatekeeper B and spoke to the boy, who was still lying on the ground.

“Mr. Noble, I need your help to get into the city. Please lend me a copper! I promise I’ll pay you back.”

“Speak a little more formally, would you?!”

“I don’t know all that fancy language. Isn’t ‘Mr.’ formal enough?”

Still, if he borrowed a coin from me and paid me back, wouldn’t he end up with only four coppers?

“Sure, I’ll lend it to you.”

“Really?!”

“Sir Knight, this kid is a mon hunter, you know. They never have enough money to last through the next day. He’s never going to pay you back.”

“Hey, stay out of it, will ya? He already said he’d lend it to me. I swear I’m gonna pay him back!”

The boy crawled out from under the feet of Gatekeeper B, so I handed him the copper.

The stench wafting off him was pretty powerful. Maybe he hadn’t bathed in a long time?

No, I could detect the smell of goblin blood and guts, too.

The boy practically snatched the coin from me with his only hand, then shoved it at Gatekeeper B.

“Oh hey, Mr. Noble! If you don’t know where you’re staying yet, you should go to that inn by the gate. It’s pretty expensive, but the food there is famous for being super good!”

The boy waved brightly as he sprinted up the main street.

Now, what to do about the disapproving looks these guards were giving me?

“Sir Knight, kindheartedness is surely a virtue, but there are lots of people in the world who’ll take advantage of ya...you...without a word of thanks, you know?”

“All right, that’s enough. Don’t insult his lordship.”

“It’s all right. Thank you for your concern.”

He actually did seem worried about me, so I nodded to him in thanks.

As Lulu started to move the carriage, Gatekeeper A spoke up as if he’d just remembered something.

“Sir, a noble from a rather troubled country is currently staying with our constable Baronet Poton. Please be careful of him.”

Evidently, the pyro noble was already up to no good in the town of Puta.

I gave two large coppers to the friendly Gatekeeper A as thanks, then asked for a bit more detail.

“The noble is called Marquis Lloyd Dazaress of the Makiwa Kingdom. He—”

“He goes around asking questions and setting things on fire if he doesn’t like the answer, if you can believe that.”

Gatekeeper B suddenly interrupted with his own explanation.

The pyromaniac had started threatening people with Fire Magic while asking about the beastfolk.

“I’m surprised the lord is willing to allow that.”

“He’s got Count Bobino’s support, you see.”

Count Bobino was a former noble, having lost his standing when he was found out as a supporter of the demon lord—worshipping cult Wings of Freedom. From what I'd heard, he hadn't been demoted, but he was removed from office and would soon be replaced as head of his family.

However, according to Tolma's information, Baronet Poton was aligned with Marquis Lloyd, not Count Bobino.

So I asked for a bit more information.

"It's all about the bribes, see."

"Shh! Jitts!"

Gatekeeper A scolded Gatekeeper B.

"My apologies, Sir Knight. Those are only rumors—"

"Yeah, but he suddenly got all that power half a year ago, and he's been bringing in boxes with the Bobino crest on them that we don't get to inspect? He's gotta be smuggling for someone, right?"

This information concerned me, so I checked again, but neither Baronet Poton nor the pyromaniac noble were Wings of Freedom members.

They were probably more like collaborators who provided them with money and accommodations.

I preferred to keep things peaceful, but if any trouble came up with the pyro noble or the baronet, I could probably deal with them by mentioning the bribes or showing them the crested dagger I got from Marquis Lloyd.

Incidentally, the reason this had been going on for half a year was that the black dragon I drove out with Hayato and company had been blocking the main road.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to avoid getting involved with Baronet Poton or Sir Dazaress."

I gave the pair a silver each as an additional thanks.

Unfortunately, though, as a noble myself, it would be considered rude not to greet the local nobles. The best I could do was make a minimal introduction to

fulfill my obligation, then avoid them as much as possible.

Considering that he was hosting the pyro noble and all, I decided to put a marker on Baronet Poton.

Before I left the gate, I also reported the thieves we'd left tied to a tree and the curse on the pyro noble's Crimson Cane.

Then I had Lulu take the carriage to the inn by the front gate.

"Welcome to our gatefront inn!"

When we rode the carriage into the courtyard, a girl who seemed to be a maid came rushing over.

I left Lulu and the others with the carriage and followed the girl into the inn, bringing only Arisa with me.

As soon as he saw me, the proprietor of the inn looked as if he'd discovered the goose that laid the golden egg.

That was strange, since I wasn't wearing particularly expensive-looking clothing today.

"What a pleasure, young master. We just happen to have an excellent room open for you."

The man rubbed his hairy hands together as he led me to see the most expensive room.

It was actually an entirely separate building with three stories, with the bottom floor serving as a warehouse that could hold one's carriage, horses and all.

There was a bathroom on that floor, too, but there was only one small bathtub, probably with no hot water.

Because it took a long time to boil the water, the proprietor asked that we try to avoid bathing during mealtime.

We were allowed to use the water from the irrigation canal for anything but drinking, but I was a little concerned that it might be mixed with the sewage.

Well, that would be fine as long as I cleaned it with Pure Water first.

“Because of its remote location, this town is not the most orderly...”

The innkeeper said that it would be best to pay an additional fee to hire a nighttime sentry to prevent robbery.

The lodging house was one silver per night, and the sentry cost an extra two coppers. I decided to pay for the sentry for the sake of getting a sound sleep.

The sentry was free if you stayed for more than five days, but I had no intention of staying here long, so I just paid for two nights in advance.

While I was at it, I asked the innkeeper to send a letter requesting a meeting with Baronet Poton.

I put the letter I got from Marquis Lloyd with it, too.

“Whoa, so this is where the noble’s staying, huh?”

A hunter who looked like a mob boss swaggered into the courtyard of the inn, carrying a large sack.

He spread the contents, which appeared to be cuts of venison, on a cloth.

“Oh-ho, pretty big prey for you, pal.”

“Yeah, haven’t had a catch like this in ages. How ’bout it, young noble? It’s ripe for the eating. Just no entrails, ’cause I ate those the day I caught it. Gah-ha-ha-ha!”

The guffawing hunter seemed to have come to sell his venison.

His asking price was two silvers, less than half the price in the old capital. He must not be a very good businessman to start at a price lower than the market value.

It was a little suspicious that he knew about me already, but he had probably just gotten the information out of the gatekeepers on his way back into town.

Our building didn’t have a kitchen, so I bought the meat and entrusted the cooking to the inn’s chef.

It would be at least a few hours before I got a response to my letter, so we decided to get dressed up and explore the town.

We put our valuables in Storage and the Garage Bag, so we were able to go

out together without a fuss.

I thought about putting on something plainer but decided I'd probably have an easier time if I looked like a noble, so I kept the same outfit on.

"Where are we goooing?"

"Sir?"

Tama and Pochi looked up at me, holding hands.

"To the harbor. I heard they sell some rare fruits there."

"Fun."

Mia took her mouth away from her grass flute long enough to voice her approval.

This was a small town, so it was only about a ten-minute walk to the pier.

According to the innkeeper, there wasn't an official market, but there would be a few carts and stalls selling food and drink to seafarers.

As we walked along the dirt road, I looked at the sparse buildings on either side.

Since this area had high heat and humidity, there were a lot of well-ventilated one-story houses.

All of them were raised a good foot or so above the ground, though not on high stilts like a beach house or anything.

The people in the streets were all pretty lightly dressed, too, many of them wearing short skirts.

Women in their twenties or older tended to have longer skirts but never long enough to cover their ankles. For minors, skirts that ended just above the knee seemed to be the fashion.

Not that I cared much either way about this, but many of the men were wearing wide-open shirts or were going shirtless altogether.

And most of the elementary school-age children had shirts that didn't quite reach their belly buttons.

This seemed to be more of a case of outgrown clothing than a matter of fashion.

Of the children too young for school, about half were wearing baggy shirts much too big for them, but the other half were practically naked. These ones were wearing loincloths and happily running around barefoot.

Maybe this was ignorant of me, but I kind of enjoyed the tropical atmosphere.

“Master, there are many larvae here. We must adopt them at once, I advise.”

“Yeah, no.”

I lightly dismissed Nana’s straight-faced yet ardent plea.

The young ratfolk and lizardfolk children innocently running around the town had clearly activated Nana’s protective instincts.

“Our destination is in sight, master,” Liza reported from the front of the group.

Peddlers were gathered in the streets and storehouse entrances, their wares spread on top of mats on the ground.

“Not a lot of salespeople out here in the sticks, huh?”

“Arisa, hush.”

I chided Arisa for her rudeness before walking up to the nearest vendor.

The mat was lined with baskets full of fruit, from miniature melons to citrus fruits to peach-colored pears.

Using a map search, I determined that these fruits grew naturally in the nearby forests.

“How about it? They’re all just a penny each. I just picked ’em in the forest, so they’re fresh and tasty.”

Damn, that’s cheap.

I bought a lot so I could share with everyone.

Some were a bit underripe, but the melon was pretty delicious, tasting like a less-sweet watermelon.

“Yummyyyyy?”

“So crunchy, sir.”

“Mm. Yum.”

Tama, Pochi, and Mia were especially big fans.

“I wish it were just a little sweeter.”

“Really? I think it’s sweeter than the Kuvork melons you loved so much, Arisa.”

“Well, there was hardly anything sweet to be had in that country.”

Arisa and Lulu reminisced as they munched on the melon.

“This fruit has quite a pleasant crunch to it.”

“E-excuse me, miss. You’re supposed to cut that and then eat it, you know. Don’t blame me if you chip a tooth...”

The fruit Liza was eating was about the size of a baseball, with a palm-fruit-like exterior.

It smelled good, so I cracked one open to try for myself.

Milky white juice flowed from inside, so I hurriedly tipped it into my mouth.

It was sort of like a thin yogurt, with a goopy texture but a pleasant aftertaste.

“I’m impressed you were able to crack that pearl fruit without a knife, young man. Are you a knight or something, perhaps?”

The surprised shopkeeper handed me a wooden spoon with which to eat the flesh of the fruit.

Unlike the juice that preceded it, this portion was dense and sticky.

“Is it yummy, sir?”

“Want to try it?”

“Aah, sir.”

Starting with Pochi, I gave everyone a taste of the fruit.

After it had gone around the circle once, I turned to Nana, the only one who

seemed preoccupied with something else.

“You don’t want a bite, Nana?”

“Master, I have located the criminal unit who assaulted the larvae, I report.”

Nana pointed toward the harbor.

There was a white tigerfolk man. He seemed to be having some kind of disagreement with a merchant.

I didn’t see any children around, so judging by Nana’s reaction, she must have identified him as the tigerfolk man who’d kicked the sealfolk kids back in the old capital.

“Permission to annihilate immediately!”

“No, Nana.”

That had just been an unfortunate accident, and a runaway horse had trampled him shortly thereafter, so he’d already been sufficiently punished.

It would be ridiculous to beat him up now.

“Please!”

“I told you: We don’t have any in stock.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up the conversation between the white tigerfolk man and the merchant.

The white tigerfolk man’s pronunciation was difficult to understand, so I mentally adjusted to compensate.

“I just need medicine for burns. It doesn’t have to be a potion.”

“I sold my last salve yesterday.”

“Then tell me who bought it. I’ll get them to give me some.”

“Not a chance. Can’t have you harassing my regulars.”

The tigerfolk man clung desperately to the curt salesman.

It looked like there weren’t any alchemy or magic shops in town.

A little concerned, I searched the map for white tigerfolk.

There were two of them with burns in the area.

It was the pair from the black auction: the white tiger princess Luniya and the knight Gargaolon. The former was in a normal **Burn** state, but the latter was in the state **Burn: Severe**.

“Damn it— Hey! You there! This is no play for your amusement!”

When his gaze met mine, the tigerfolk man shouted angrily.

“Master, target has taken hostile action. Commencing annihilation.”

“I told you—no.”

Nana tried to take a step forward, so I grabbed her shoulder.

“Please reconsider! I must avenge the sealfolk larvae, I entreat.”

Um, they aren’t dead.

They’re running around downtown in the old capital.

“...Sealfolk?”

The white tigerfolk man frowned for a moment, then gave a gasp of recognition.

“Wait, did those children die...?”

“No, we treated them quickly, so they’re all right now.”

“I—I see... I got knocked out by that runaway horse myself, so I’ve been worried about those children ever since.”

The white tigerfolk man sighed with relief.

He had a scary face, but it seemed like he was actually a good person on the inside.

“Are you all acquaintances of those children? I’m very sorry. I wanted to go apologize to them myself, but I wasn’t able to do so. Please forgive me.”

The tigerfolk man rolled over on his back in front of us in a show of submission.

I was a little tempted to rub his tummy or something, but this was probably his race’s way of showing their highest penance, so I didn’t want to mock him.

“I forgive you, I declare.”

Nana nodded, so I offered the man a hand to help him up.

I hadn't intended to demand an apology in the first place, so I changed the subject by indirectly asking about the medicine he needed.

“My comrades are near death because of their burns.”

“Burns?”

“Yes, Brother Gar and the young miss tried to save some people from a fire...”

There were no other white tigerfolk women on my map besides Princess Luniya, so she must be the “young miss.”

“Would lesser-grade potions be all right? I have enough of those to spare.”

“R-really?!”

“Sure. I have salves for burns, too, if you like.”

“Thank you... I'm in your debt.”

I gave him five of the watered-down potions and salves for burns.

I knew these would work, thanks to the villages where I'd handed them out along the way.

The guy pressed three gold coins into my hand for the medicine and sped off toward the mountain with the mining site.

He was tailed by a man with the “Spy” skill from a criminal guild.

As if to block the spy off, a couple of mon hunter men started fighting in the street.

“I'm telling you, Norma is my wife!”

“Just marry Gonzo instead!”

“But he's a man!”

Ah. It was on purpose, then.

They were deliberately having their tussle in the criminal's path.

Once the white tigerfolk man had gotten a good distance away, the spy finally

managed to get past them.

Not long after, the two mon hunters exchanged looks, grinned, and headed back into the bar with arms around each other's shoulders.

From the looks of it, the white tigerfolk must be getting support from the mon hunters in town.

"Satou."

Mia tugged on the hem of my robe.

"What is it?"

"Buy."

Mia pointed at a white horse tied up behind the trading shop.

"A horse?"

"Unicorn."

On closer inspection, there was a stub on the horse's forehead where a horn had been cut off.

I remembered seeing a unicorn horn for sale at the auction in the black-market district Muraas.

This probably wasn't the same unicorn, but it was definitely a victim either way.

"You wanna buy the no-horn? This thing's got a bad temper, y'know. Dunno what you'd use it for."

The price the merchant offered was no more than the cost of a donkey, so I agreed to buy it.

"Can you ride it?"

"Mm."

Mia easily hopped onto its bare back.

The hornless unicorn seemed to have no objections to letting Mia ride it.

"Well, I'll be damned! I never thought I'd see that thing let anyone ride it."

The merchant looked rather dour, so I bought a bunch of fruits and paprika-like vegetables from him and had them delivered to our lodging.

When I finished my business and left the trading post, an unfamiliar young man was standing next to my group. It was a humanfolk boy with the tan and physique of a manual laborer.

“Master, this person says he wants to buy potions from you...”

“Please, won’t you sell me some burn medicine? I’ll pay any price.”

This must be for another victim of that pyromaniac noble.

I asked the young man what had happened, and he said that his older sister had been seriously burned when she’d tried to help a beastfolk child.

On top of that, it turned out that the so-called protector of the peace, Baronet Poton, was throwing people in jail when they tried to submit complaints about the noble’s unchecked violence. The frustration of the townspeople was reaching a breaking point.

I had no obligation to clean up after Baronet Poton and the pyro noble, but Tama and Pochi were looking at me with eyes that said *Please help them!* so I gave in and agreed to the young man’s request.

I could give him as many potions as he needed, but instead I told him “the prescription might differ depending on the degree of the burns” and had him bring me to his home.

Magic potions were expensive for low-income families, so I wanted to make sure they actually reached all the people who needed them.

“Sis, I brought a doctor.”

The voice that responded to the boy sounded like it belonged to a hoarse old man.

But according to the information I’d found on my map, I assumed his sister was a twenty-two-year-old single woman...

...Erm, not that the “single” part mattered. At all.

I had my party wait in the room by the entrance while I followed the boy into

the back room.

This is terrible.

The girl's skin was burned from her right shoulder to the lower half of her face.

The boy sent the younger children who'd been watching over his sleeping sister into the other room to play with Tama and Pochi, clearing a space for me.

The burns were bad in places, but my watered-down burn potions should be able to heal them without a trace.

Swallowing seemed to be painful for her, so I used a feeding cup to pour it down the back of her throat.

Then I used Liquid Control and See Through from the magic menu to make sure the potion didn't go down her trachea.

"...Ohhh!"

Standing beside me, the young man gasped.

I understood the feeling. No matter how many times I saw it, watching the quick effects of a magic potion at work made me a little queasy. Even the areas where muscle tissue had been visible were growing fresh pink skin.

Healing potions didn't do anything for physical exhaustion, so I also gave her a high-calorie nutritional-supplement potion I'd formulated for seriously ill patients in Muno Castle. This way, she should be fine by morning.

The nutritional supplements were made with gabo fruit and gold-orange fruit from the Mountain-Tree, so the cost to make them was incredibly low. And I'd mass-produced a bunch back in Muno Castle, so I had several barrels' worth to give away.

"Thank you, Doctor! I'll scrape together the cost for the medicine, no matter what it takes!"

"Ah, wait a minute..."

The young man looked like he was about to charge out of the house, but I stopped him and asked if he could show me where the pyro noble had gone on

his rampage as payment.

“This is awful.”

“Mm. Bad.”

Before our eyes was a row of three tenements that had been completely burned down.

Several beastfolk were lying on planks in the shade of the houses' remains.

“What do you want with us, humans?”

As we approached, the beastfolk who were tending to their wounded raised their hackles.

An apefolk man who seemed to be a mon hunter blocked the young man's path.

“Wait! I'm Hyona's younger brother. I brought a doctor.”

“Right... I thought you looked familiar. Well, forget us; just have him treat Hyona. These guys aren't gonna make it. Even if we sold ourselves, we couldn't afford to buy them medicine.”

I'd forgotten just how expensive the potions in stores were, since I'd been making them myself for a while now.

The cause of the high price was the cost of the monster cores. Without a high “Transmutation” skill level like mine, it was impossible to make potions with anything less than high-grade cores.

Judging by the levels of the mon hunters in this town, their main prey was probably demi-goblins, which wouldn't yield high-enough-quality cores to make potions.

“Hey, you...”

I glanced over the prone beastfolk to see what kind of shape they were in.

Their burns were much worse than Miss Hyona's had been.

Their only relief seemed to be large leaves that were wrapped around the worst burns.

“Hey! Quit starin’ at ’em!”

“Don’t be rude to the doctor!”

It took some arguing between the apefolk man and the young boy, but eventually they allowed me to heal the children and elders who were hidden inside.

Personally, I was fine with leaving them alone if they refused to accept treatment, but the young man was so desperate that I ended up playing the role of the softhearted pharmacist.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I never thought I’d move this hand again! It’s all thanks to you, Doctor.”

“Thanks, mister.”

The people I healed, their families, and even people who seemed totally unrelated came up to thank me.

Some of the beastfolk were hard to understand because of the structure of their mouths, so I mentally adapted like with the white tigerfolk man.

“Sorry I doubted you before, Doctor. This is just us poor folks’ food, but I want you to have it.”

The standoffish apefolk man, who’d disappeared for a while, returned to offer me a basket of red fruit.

“Geh! You’re giving him redfruits?”

“Watch it, kid! We have an old saying, ‘A redfruit a day keeps the doctor away.’ He might be able to make medicine with it or somethin’, right?”

Like cats and dogs, the boy and the apefolk man were at it again.

But I would never use this redfruit for medicine.

“Thank you very much.”

To show my appreciation, I picked out one of the redfruits from the basket and took a huge bite.

It was a bit overripe but still juicy and delicious. I hadn’t tasted this in a long

time.

“I want a bite, too!”

“Sure.”

Arisa zoomed over and made grabby hands at me, so I handed her one.

“Do you two want to try it, too?”

“Aye!”

“Of course, sir!”

I handed one each to Tama and Pochi.

“Mrrr?”

“I prefer meat, sir.”

The two of them eagerly bit into the fruits, but their faces scrunched up as they chewed on their first mouthful of tomato.

They probably didn’t like the strange jellylike texture of the inside.

Arisa, on the other hand, munched away happily. “Mm! A little overripe maybe, but it’s been sooo long!”

“Finiiished?”

“It’s bad to waste food, sir.”

“Very good, you two.” Tama and Pochi managed to eat the rest of their tomatoes anyway, so I patted their heads and praised them.

The other children seemed interested, too, but hesitated when they saw Tama’s and Pochi’s reactions.

Lulu was the only one who worked up the courage to try it, although judging by her expression, she didn’t like it much, either.

“Are tomatoes a specialty of Puta?”

“Tomatoes? If you mean redfruits, the only villages that grow ’em are ours and a few birdfolk tribes.”

Using a map search, I confirmed there were only three villages that cultivated

them, but they grew wild in huge numbers along the mountains to the south.

The apefolk woman I had treated turned out to be the man's sister, who'd come from their home village to marry here.

"Are these the only redfruits you have? I'd like to buy more, if you have them."

"We don't need yer money, Doc. If we can even begin to repay you with these things, I'd give ya as many as ya like..."

But then the apefolk man's face clouded.

"...But these are the only ones ripe enough to eat. The rest still need some time..."

I actually wanted some less ripe than these, so I asked him to deliver them to our inn.

"Sure! I'll go pick 'em all right now!"

With that, the apefolk man sped off eagerly.

I didn't want to take all their food, so I sent a young apefolk boy after him to tell him half would be fine.

The man had said they didn't need money, but I was worried about how they'd get by, so I decided to pay them the market price anyway.

Now I could make ketchup, tomato sauce, omelet rice for the kids, and maybe even some whale-meat stew.

But all that could wait! More importantly: pizza!

I could make pizza!

I had over twenty different kinds of cheese from the nobles in the old capital, and in large quantities, too.

And for toppings, I had all sorts of veggies, meat, and seafood in stock.

Making a pizza oven in the middle of town would be a bit too conspicuous, so that would have to wait until we set out on our travels.

But I could start working on my tomato sauce until then.

“Hee-hee~?”

“Master looks happy, so Pochi’s happy, too, sir.”

Tama and Pochi, who were clinging to my legs, nuzzled against me gleefully.

Oops. I got so excited about making tomato-based dishes that my “Poker Face” skill must have cracked.

That was the power of tomatoes for you.

Clearing my throat and wiping the grin off my face, I thanked the beastfolk, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically, before we headed back to the inn.



“Are you Sir Pendragon?”

“I am. A pleasure to meet you, Baronet Poton.”

I had everyone wait in a nearby vacant plot while I returned to the inn alone.

This was because I’d seen on my radar that Baronet Poton had just made a grand entrance at the inn with an entourage of about ten guards.

He was a plump, balding middle-aged man whose gaze kept wandering around restlessly behind me.

It was as if he suspected that his enemies might come charging in through the door of the inn at any moment.

“Marquis Lloyd’s letter said to treat you as I would the marquis himself. However, I have never known the marquis to have an associate such as yourself...”

He seemed to think that the letter might be counterfeit.

But he probably didn’t want to insult the marquis by asking him, just in case it was real, so he came out to see me and judge for himself.

“Quite understandable. I have only had the pleasure of his acquaintance for roughly a half-moon now.”

I reached into my robe and pulled out the dagger with the Lloyd family crest, presenting it to the baronet.

“A dagger with Marquis Lloyd’s crest...”

Baronet Poton held the dagger and flowed magic power into it, and the crest glowed faintly with some ancient letters that must have been the family motto.

I believe I’d seen a plate engraved with the same words in the entrance of the marquis’s home.

“I-it’s real!”

The blood drained from the man’s normally ruddy face.

He must have been expecting me to be a fake.

“F-forgive my rudeness, Sir Pendragon. Please, you need not stay in such a miserable shack as this. Won’t you come to my castle instead?”

The innkeeper scowled at this rude comment.

But he obviously couldn’t complain to a noble in front of all those guards.

At any rate, I didn’t really want to stay under the same roof as that pyromaniac.

Oh, I know.

I could decline and threaten the baronet into doing something about that pyro at the same time.

“I am truly humbled by the invitation, but it may be in my best interest not to visit Your Excellency’s castle.”

I made a show of glancing toward the galley, where the flames could be seen burning on the kitchen range.

The whole-roasted deer looked quite delicious.

“S-Sir Pendragon, did Marquis Lloyd by chance give you some secret assignment...?”

Baronet Poton widened his eyes and made a clumsy attempt at sounding me out.

Good, he misunderstood me perfectly.

“No, not at all.”

The baronet breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“...However, I cannot imagine he would think kindly of a foreign noble harming innocent citizens. Not everyone is as forgiving as Your Excellency.”

At that, the man froze as suddenly as if he'd rusted over.

If he'd had a tail, it would've been between his legs.

I hadn't been planning to use my connections like this, but I might as well keep pushing now.

“Baronet Poton, I have heard that you are...”

I paused for a moment, looking straight into his eyes.

“...an *excellent* constable, so I am certain you would never knowingly allow a foreign noble to terrorize your townspeople.”

“B-but of course. Of course not! Please tell Marquis Lloyd that as long as I, Porolo Poton, yet breathe, the town of Puta shall always be secure!”

The baronet was sweating visibly now.

“I expected no less, Your Excellency. As it happens, I intend to write a letter to Marquis Lloyd tomorrow. I hope that I can inform him of Your Excellency's hard work.”

“I-indeed. I thank you for your consideration, Sir Pendragon.”

Baronet Poton practically tripped over his own two feet as he hurried out of the inn and threw himself into the waiting carriage, which quickly carried him away.

I might have been a bit too blunt, but he seemed to have understood my message: *Deal with that pyromaniac noble by tomorrow, and I'll tell Marquis Lloyd only good things about you in my report.*

Hopefully I could expect quick results.

If I had to meddle any further, it would only make Baronet Poton look bad, so this way was better for everyone.

“That was amazing, Mr. Noble! I've never seen that stuck-up constable look so scared!”

A boy with one arm, who'd been peering in from the back door, entered the room in high spirits.

It was the mon hunter boy who'd been arguing at the gates before.

"Hey, kid, if you're looking for alms again, go around back."

"N-no, not today. I came to return the money I borrowed from Mr. Noble here."

The boy looked flustered by the innkeeper's assumption.

"Mr. Noble, thank you again. Here's your copper back. You really helped me out there."

I accepted the copper he handed me. It must have cost him another fight to get his reward from those women. There was a cut on his lip and a bruise coming in on his right cheek.

This boy must lead a pretty violent life.

"Hey, innkeep, I got cash today. Gimme some of that tasty-looking deer!"

"Don't be stupid. That stuff's not for a greenhorn mon hunter like you."

"Psh, whatever."

"Why don't you get our famous grilled fish with white sauce special?"

"Yeah, that's fine, I guess."

The grilled fish meal set was two coppers. Considering what I'd heard about his income earlier, that was probably over budget for him.

"If you spend that much, how will you have enough to get back into the city?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. You never know when you're gonna die, so you gotta at least make sure you're eating good food, right?"

Was he being philosophical or just reckless? I was a little worried.

As we were talking, Arisa and the others came back, so we left the main inn building for the separate house where we were staying.

"Looks like you took care of that problem."

"Yeah, no worries."

I nodded.

Arisa had the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience, so she knew the whole story. I explained the situation to everyone else.

“Well, I hope the constable does his job right...”

“It should be fine, don’t you think? He seems very concerned with self-preservation, and he thinks I’m working for Marquis Lloyd.”

“Yeah, but small fries like that can do crazy stuff sometimes. I’d be careful.”

It would probably be best to keep Arisa’s advice in mind.

Just to make sure we didn’t get caught up in any trouble, I decided to do my information gathering tonight so we could leave the next day.

In the end, it wasn’t like I actually had any obligations toward this town.

“Master, I believe dinner is ready.”

A servant had come and informed Lulu that our food was ready, so we all headed to the dining hall.

No one seemed to have a problem with letting the beastfolk girls join us. Maybe it was because of the incident with Baronet Poton earlier.

“Hungry, hungry~.”

“Hungry tummy, sir~.”

Pochi and Tama held my hands on the way to the dining hall and swung them back and forth, singing their “hungry song” complete with musical accompaniment by Mia.

The hungry song’s lyrics seemed to change every time I heard it. I’d lost count of how many variations there were at that point.

“Looks like we’re at this table in the center.”

Arisa pointed at a large table in the middle of the room with eight chairs and food already laid out.

The meal was a simple whole-roasted deer.

From the looks of it, you were meant to shave off some meat, add white

sauce from a small bowl, and eat it wrapped in lettuce-like leaves.

There was also a separate plate with steamed vegetables and pilaf that I'd ordered for Mia.

The white sauce turned out to be mayonnaise.

They didn't seem to have it in the old capital, which I'd assumed was for health reasons, but I was glad to see that it existed.

Maybe it was a specialty of this region.

However, this particular mayonnaise...

"Wow, this lettuce-wrap thing is really good!"

"Mayooo?"

"It's mayo, sir!"

"Yes, the mayonnaise is delicious, but I think the meat is best enjoyed on its own first."

"Hmm? The mayonnaise does taste good, but..."

After taking a bite of the venison wrap with mayo, Lulu looked to me for confirmation. She was right: The mayonnaise here was extremely heavy.

Maybe they used a different kind of oil, or maybe the proportions of their mixture were off, but I felt like I was going to have heartburn by the time I finished eating.

As I prodded Mia's cheeks, since she was looking sulky while she ate her vegetable pilaf, I warned everyone not to eat too much mayonnaise.

"Sir, is the white sauce not to your liking?"

"It's quite tasty, thank you. Is it of your own devising?"

The innkeeper, who'd been watching from the galley, came over.

"No, this was taught to me by a one-armed mon hunter some half a year ago. Got me to pay out the nose for the recipe, too. He was a shrewd one, unlike that little dolt Kon over there."

"Hey, don't lump me in with that creepy-looking dude."

Having thoroughly cleaned the meat off every last bone of his grilled fish, the young mon hunter Kon glowered at the innkeeper.

“...Did you happen to catch that man’s name?”

“Yes, he called himself John Smith.”

John Smith... A common pseudonym back on Earth.

I asked the innkeeper what the man looked like, but all he remembered was that he had black hair, no left arm, and rather flat facial features.

Since he was missing an arm, I strongly suspected he was the unaccounted-for third man who Princess Menea’s kingdom had summoned.

“Come to think of it, he just up and disappeared outta town one day.”

“He was a mon hunter, right? He probably just got killed by a monster.”

“I don’t think that man would’ve gone down so easily.”

Even as he chatted with the innkeeper, Kon’s gaze was locked firmly on the venison.

I felt bad just letting him gnaw on a picked-clean fish bone as he watched the beastfolk girls eat, so I gave him a plate of the lettuce-wrapped venison.

“Are you sure?! Wow, thanks! You’re the best, Mr. Noble!”

The boy accepted it reverently with both hands, savoring it with tiny, careful bites.

After each bite, he mumbled things like “Damn!” and “Tasty!”

Watching him out of the corner of my eye, I set about enjoying my venison as well.

Just then, Nana, who’d been watching the entrance alertly, suddenly stood up.

She carefully hid her forehead and used Body Strengthening on herself, then zipped over to the door faster than the eye could follow.

Then she returned proudly, carrying two ratfolk babies under her arms.

The babies struggled frantically, but with Body Strengthening enhancing her

already powerful arms, they didn't stand a chance against Nana.

"Master, I have taken custody of these larvae. Permission to force-feed?"

Wait, why force-feed?

Well, everyone but the three beastfolk girls was done eating, and there was still food left, so no harm done.

I gave Nana permission to feed the children, and she happily gave each of them a venison lettuce wrap.

They seemed confused at first, but once they realized they were allowed to eat, the babies started gulping the food down like little birds.

As it turned out, they had lived in the orphanage in town until Baronet Poton closed it down, leaving them homeless. Today, at least, I made sure they could eat their fill.

"Mrrr, I won't lose, sir— Urk!"

"Pochi, waterrr?"

Feeling threatened by the new challengers, Pochi started eating even faster and ended up choking on her food.

Tama quickly handed her a cup of water.

"Mmph."

"Mrp-mrp."

The ratfolk children stuffed their cheeks like hamsters, filling up on meat and vegetables alike.

Liza tried to teach the ratfolk to savor their food slowly, and when I saw Kon watching them jealously, I invited him to join us at the table. It made for a pretty hectic dinner, but overall, it was a lively and enjoyable evening.



"...The Black Dragon Mountains?"

I was alone in the bar at night, gathering information.

Fancy noble clothes stood out in this town, so I dressed as a novice merchant

instead.

This bar's claim to fame was a sweet alcohol called trunk liquor. For such a light taste, it had a high alcohol content. It paired perfectly with the salted mystery fish snacks.

"I've been to the Farthest Village, and all there is beyond it is an old, overgrown highway, y'know."

"I'm pretty sure there's a mon hunter who specializes in that area."

I treated the merchants to some alcohol, committing the information they gave to memory.

"Isn't there a pioneer village at the foot of those mountains?"

"No, I think that village got wiped out twenty years ago by a huge avalanche of earth urchins."

Land-based sea urchins, big enough to destroy a village? That sounded... delicious. I could go for a giant helping of that over rice.

Tuna would be nice, too. There were flying whales in this fantasy world, so there ought to be flying fish, right?

Anyway, putting aside such stupid thoughts, that was about all the information I was able to gather about the Black Dragon Mountains.

But I did find out about something else...

"Man, a silver just for participating in some inn siege?"

"That's crazy. How many goblins is that?"

"One silver is twenty coppers, so...that's a lot."

"But that arsonist freak is gathering a buncha followers, right? Are we really gonna get paid?"

"C'mon, think, ya moron. We'll just steal anything of value when we attack the damn inn!"

"Should we really be attacking a nobleman, though?"

"Eh, we'll let the arsonist take the fall for that."

...A very concerning rumor.

From what I gathered, a man from a criminal guild was hiring up a bunch of the town thugs.

There were two inns in this town, but the only noble staying at an inn was me.

I thought I had talked Baronet Poton into dealing with the pyro noble, but either he failed to persuade or arrest him or he got talked into siding with him instead.

Still, I didn't think I'd done anything to make the pyro noble angry with me directly...

The gossip at the bar soon cleared that up, though.

"But what's the arson guy got against the noble at the inn?"

"I heard he's hiding the beastfolk the fire freak is looking for. They're with him at the inn."

"That makes sense. I heard he bought a ton of food supplies."

I must have purchased a little too much food at the trading post.

So the purpose of hiring the thugs was probably to surround the inn and prevent the white tigerfolk from escaping.

I left the tavern, ducked into an alley, and used Telephone to explain the situation to Arisa.

"Hmm. What a pain. Think that constable's got anything to do with it?"

I wasn't sure, so I did a map search.

Most of the guards who weren't on duty seemed to be in their homes, so it was unlikely that the constable, Baronet Poton, was involved in this incident.

"Then how about instead of preventing it, we let them pull off the siege and catch that stupid noble in the act? If it gets out that he gathered a bunch of thugs and attacked a sleeping noble, he'll never be able to talk his way out of it."

I contemplated Arisa's proposal.

It would be easy to crush them before the attack began, but that might prompt him to send an assassin or poison my food or something instead.

As long as things like poison and snipers weren't a factor, my party could easily handle the pyro noble and his thugs. Perhaps it would be best to set a trap and round them all up at once.

"Good point. Let's deal with this pyromaniac once and for all."

"Okey-dokey! We'll get ready, then. The great Arisa will demonstrate how much she learned about sieges from reading tons of Warring States manga!"

I was a little concerned about how gleeful Arisa sounded, but I agreed to leave her in charge of the inn while I headed to the tavern where the mon hunters gathered.

I was going to pay a visit to the mon hunter who specialized in the area of the Farthest Village.

"Come on—wait a minute!"

"Outta the way, Kon."

As I approached the mon hunters' tavern, I heard the boy Kon outside arguing with the leader of the mon hunter women.

"That noble is a really good person! He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"That doesn't matter one bit."

"She's right. We get a silver each just for surrounding an inn!"

"Yeah, do you have any idea how many goblins that is?"

"Even a good-for-nothing like you could get in on this, you know! You'd have to be a fool to let this chance go by."

The man from the criminal guild seemed to be gathering forces here, too.

Unlike the thugs at the other bar, the mon hunters had real weapons and were pretty high-level, so that was a bit of a problem.

Checking my markers, I saw that around two dozen thugs and hunters were gathering in an empty lot near the constable's castle. As of now, the common thugs outnumbered the mon hunters.

The only people in the vacant lot were the criminal guild's crew; the pyro nobleman and his friends were all still in the castle.

I activated Clairvoyance and looked inside the tavern.

"Hey, Ordo, put the drink down and get them to stop!"

"Why? Let those ladies do what they want."

"C'mon, Ordo!"

Inside the tavern were eight mon hunters, including Kon, the women, and a group of assorted beastfolk.

This "Ordo" fellow was a one-eyed rabbitfolk man, and his group ranged from levels 7 to 9, high even for mon hunters. The rest of the bunch inside wasn't much different from the mon hunters at the vacant lot.

The beastfolk group was staying neutral, refusing to help Kon.

"You better back off, or it'll be more than just a punch this time."

"C'mon, miss, please."

Kena, the leader of the female mon hunter group, raised a fist, but then Ordo called out to her. "Kena, I'd think on that a minute."

"What do you want, Ordo? It's not like you to stick your nose in other mon hunters' business."

"Just a piece of advice, lass. We're siding with the noble in the inn. He saved Borsch's sister's life, and besides, we got a request from the beastfolk alliance to protect him."

Oh? Maybe this was their way of thanking me for earlier.

I wasn't sure who Borsch's sister was, but she must have been one of the burn victims I healed.

If I hadn't overheard this, I might've just assumed that their group was with the pyro noble and taken them out from a distance.

"Are you serious, Ordo? I know you guys are strong, but there's more than just a couple dozen mon hunters here. The constable's guards are coming, too, y'know."

All right, standing outside listening wasn't going to do me much good.

I pushed open the well-worn door and cut in on the pair's conversation.

"I wouldn't worry about that. The guards aren't going to show up."

"Says who? Your mother? Just stay out of it!" Kena snapped at me without even turning to look.

She must have mistaken me for a fellow mon hunter.

"I used some connections in the old capital to put Baronet Poton in his place. Unless he's self-destructive or an even bigger moron than I thought, he won't send any guards."

As I continued, Ordo gestured toward me, and the others stopped to listen. Kena and her group stood up, hands on their swords.

Kena was holding back Kon, and I waved at him and introduced myself.

"Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Satou Pendragon, the hereditary knight."

I looked around the bar calmly, watching their reactions.

Most of them were less hostile than I expected.

"I wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but I happened to hear what you were talking about. Miss Kena, was it? I wonder if I could ask you and yours to stay here and keep drinking tonight."

"Drinking? You're not here to recruit us for your side?"

"No, nothing like that. I just came to get the latest information about the mountain range and the Farthest Village."

"What?! If you were listening, you must have some idea of what's going on, right? Shouldn't you be leaving that inn and running for the hills? I'm sure Ordo could open the gates for you if you ask nicely."

Well, that was a surprise. I wasn't expecting anyone to give me advice. These folks weren't actually that bad; they were just won over by the promise of a silver.

In that case, maybe I could get them to take part in blocking the pyro noble's escape route instead.

“Can we talk for a minute? I might have a job for you.”

As I explained my plan, the mon hunters all stared at me, dumbfounded.

[The Town of Mon Hunters: Part 2](#)

Satou here. There's something called "follow-through" in Japanese martial arts. It means keeping your mind on the battle and not getting overconfident and letting your guard down, even if you've defeated the enemy. It's easier said than done, though.

The attack on the inn began not too long after midnight.

Tama and Pochi were immediately on the alert, so I had them wake up everyone who'd been resting, and then I took a break from the work I'd been killing time with.

I'd had the others get armored up before their nap, so they were ready for battle almost immediately.

Since we were trying to make it look like we'd been asleep, all the lights were off. Peering out from the third-floor window, I saw three suspicious groups of people with torches approaching from across the street.

The attack group consisted of five members of the pyro noble's retinue, ten criminal guild members, twenty mon hunters, and ninety thugs. Definitely more than I'd expected.

The pyro noble himself wasn't in the group, but he was waiting on horseback by the castle entrance, so I figured I'd lure him over by dragging out the battle.

Baronet Poton, his servants, and his family were all being kept in a room in the back of the castle in the Paralysis state. We could rescue them after we dealt with the pyro noble, though.

Still, why didn't he use the City Core to deal with the paralysis?

Kena and her crew had infiltrated the opposing side and were lurking at the back of one of the groups.

I'd asked them to capture the pyro noble's retinue or at least prevent them

from escaping.

“Three booows?”

“The one on that roof makes four, sir.”

Tama and Pochi were keeping an eye on the outside, reporting any hidden archers they found.

I used my Remote Stun spell to quietly knock them out. The archers were all stationed alone, so hopefully they would just assume they’d been ambushed.

Some other criminal guild members tried to approach along the rooftops, too, so I knocked them out with Remote Stun as well.

Timing the stuns so they wouldn’t fall and severely injure themselves was a bit of a pain, but I managed.

Next, I used Enchant: Magic Protection and Enchant: Physical Protection to up my party’s defense; Enchant: Shield to protect Arisa, Lulu, and Mia from snipers; and Enchant: Sparking Blade to help the vanguard group with close combat.

As long as nothing crazy like a black dragon or a hydra showed up, they should all be perfectly safe.

“All right, shall we?”

Leaving the magic users Mia and Arisa, plus Lulu with her Magic Gun, on the top floor, I brought the vanguard group downstairs.

Mia and Lulu were to repel any would-be invaders at the back, while Arisa was using Space Magic to keep an eye on any monsters approaching from a distance.

When we got to the first floor, the inn’s sentries informed us that the door had been broken down.

So they’d finally noticed that something was up.

The sentries seemed surprised to see us coming out fully armed, but I simply sent them to defend the main building of the inn.

I had already sent the innkeeper and other guests to take refuge, so the

sentries were just there to fend off any opportunistic robbers.

“Foolish upstart who dares to side with the accursed white tigers, take heed!”

Once the inn was surrounded, Attendant A of the pyro noble’s retinue began a dramatic speech outside.

“You have committed a grave sin by siding with those filthy beastfolk!”

It sounded like a rallying cry for some demonstration.

“Your sins are...”

Attendant A went on about my so-called sins for a while.

I wasn’t actually sheltering the white tigerfolk, so the whole thing was a misunderstanding in the first place. But this was a good chance to figure out their motives, so I heard him out anyway.

To summarize the speech: Marquis Dazaress hid the white tiger princess and company when she was being pursued by weaselfolk, but the tigerfolk supposedly turned on them one day and killed the marquis’s family, stole all their treasure, set the territory’s houses on fire, and massacred his people.

To make matters worse, they killed the former king who happened to be visiting at the time.

That certainly sounded like a good reason to hold a grudge, but the whole thing seemed highly suspicious.

The tigerfolk wouldn’t have gained anything by murdering the family who was hiding them, much less setting things on fire and slaughtering the masses.

It seemed more likely to me that certain parties who didn’t want the tigerfolk and humanfolk to become allies had framed the white tigerfolk.

Anyway, now I understood the situation, but that didn’t make it all right to burn innocent people in the process.

My plan to stop the arsonist had not changed.

I activated Clairvoyance, opening a window that displayed the inn and its surroundings from a bird’s-eye view.

There. Now I had no blind spots.

I opened the courtyard gate and stepped out in front of the mob.

“Foolishness! You plan to fight us for those white tigers?! You should be pleading for your life!”

Attendant A’s reaction to seeing us fully armed was to fly even further into a frothing rage.

“There aren’t any white tigerfolk here in the first place, you know.”

“A bald-faced lie! We know you gave them medicine and bought supplies to aid them in their escape! Your feeble excuses won’t fly here!”

“I did sell them medicine, yes, but the rest is all a misunderstanding.”

“Hmph, enough nonsense!”

Here I thought I’d try to enlighten them, but clearly they had no interest in listening.

“We won’t let you buy time for that white tigerfolk filth to escape! Get them! Kill them all!”

“““Kill the men! Capture the women! Steal everything!”””

The outlaws raised their weapons and shouted in response.

What a motley bunch.

“I am your opponent, you stupid VGs, I declare.”

Nana flung a “Taunt” at the charging outlaws.

By “VGs,” she likely meant “virgins,” although I wasn’t sure what purpose censoring herself served.

Nonetheless, more than half the approaching mob turned toward her, so maybe it worked after all.

Tama and Pochi darted around next to Nana, bopping the outlaws with their Soft-Stun-activated Magic Swords like something out of an action comedy.

“Piece of piie?”

“Piece of meat, sir!”

I thought they probably meant “piece of cake.”

Nana was using Body Strengthening, too. It was impressive to watch her shove multiple people back with her shield and use her own Soft-Stun-activated sword to repel an ax-wielding mon hunter.

Liza was next, her spear tracing a red line in the air as it pierced Attendant A's shoulder.

...Wait, what?

A red line?

Uh, Liza...

As far as I could tell from her rather abashed appearance, Liza had just gotten a bit carried away.

She didn't actually activate Spellblade, so the attendant wasn't dead or anything.

Still, the injury was enough to draw the attention of some of the mob, who started to back away.

"H-hey, isn't that a Magic Spear?"

"Those three are using Magic Swords, too."

"And they've got some kinda magic defense!"

"Hey, I didn't hear nothin' about this. I ain't about to fight those guys for one lousy coin!"

Many of the outlaws turned and ran.

No, you're not getting away.

"Urk, what's this?"

"A throwing net! There's someone else here!"

I'd hidden a net in the shadows before the battle began, and I used Magic Hand to cast it over them.

When it comes to catching criminals, I show no mercy.

"Gaaaah, my eyes! My eyesss!"

"Guh, c-can't breathe..."

A few outlaws tried to climb over the wall behind the inn and met with Mia's Water Magic spell Irritation Mist.

The effect was so strong that they kept writhing around on the ground even after they dropped off the wall.

...Okay, maybe we should show a little mercy after all. Overkill is never a good thing.

As I used Clairvoyance to check inside the wall, I went to spray some water over at anyone else on the other side.

"Mia, your turn!"

"Mm, got it."

Mia used the water to knock the outlaws down with spells like Balloon and Water Hammer.

Once Mia had defeated them, Ordo and his beastfolk slipped in from the shadows to tie them up and deliver them to the town guards.

They were arriving late because they had been explaining the situation to the guards at the city gate.

If the guards had been hostile, Ordo and the others would have had to take control by force, but judging by the movement of the dots on the map, it had gone well.

Our group was stronger overall, but since we were outnumbered, there were some individuals who made it past the four vanguard girls and came toward me.

But since they were so weak, I could simply knock them out with the fairy sword, even sheathed.

"They've got reinforcements! The beastfolk are coming from the eastern mines!"

The outlaws who'd been attacking from the east started yelling fearfully.

"Nooooo!"

"St-stay awaaaay!"

A broadsword flashed behind them, sending a spray of blood through the air.

Outlaws were falling like trees, filling the street with corpses.

“<It is I, Frost Knight Gargaolon! I swear on Princess Luniya’s name that I will help you!>”

The white tigerfolk man struck a pose with his bloody sword.

I appreciated the help, but I would’ve preferred he do it without all the violence.

I have a very low tolerance for the smell of blood, you know.

“Gargaolon! So you’re here after all!”

“I knew you were involved with him!”

The knightlike Attendants B and C, who were matching swords with Tama and Pochi, noticed Gargaolon and further bought in to their master’s propaganda.

“Brother! Don’t run ahead without us!”

“That’s right! We’re here, too!”

Two white tigerfolk men lined up next to Gargaolon, with another ten or so assorted beastfolk close behind them.

I decided not to look too closely at the carnage they’d left in their wake.

“Capture that man! Ten gold coins to whoever catches him!”

Attendant D shouted at the outlaws, trying to sic them on Gargaolon.

But they were terrified of the tigerfolk man’s ruthless fighting.

“Hmph, cowards! I, Oin the Goblin Eater, will be the mon hunter to claim those ten gold coins!”

A young man charged at Gargaolon, shield in one hand and ax in the other. Five more mon hunters came along with him.

“Pretty impressive, boy!”

“You’re not bad yourself!”

Oin the mon hunter parried Gargaolon’s broadsword with his shield and

swung his ax, which Gargaolon dodged with an acrobatic leap.

I decided to let him and his bunch deal with the east side.

“Hey, mister! He’s coming!”

I heard Kon’s shout from outside the siege encampment.

I’d asked him to keep an eye on the castle.

“It’s Marquis Dazaress! The Flame General has arrived!”

At Attendant D’s cry, the outlaws turned to look at the road toward the castle.

“Gotchaaa?”

“All’s fair in tug-of-war, sir!”

Tama and Pochi delivered the knockout blows to Attendants B and C while they were distracted.

Okay, that one has to be “all’s fair in love and war,” right? I was beginning to suspect that Arisa was teaching Pochi these incorrect idioms on purpose.

The silhouette of the mounted noble approaching was accompanied by a flame several times the size of a normal torch.

Clearly, he’d already activated the Crimson Cane.

I didn’t think he would attack indiscriminately while his attendants were here, but then again, he’d already shown he was willing to use Fire Magic on innocent civilians. I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Mia, use Mist Coat, please.”

“Mm, roger.”

This spell would make the surrounding structures temporarily more fireproof.

All it really did was coat them in water to make fire less likely to spread, so there were no guarantees, but it was certainly better than nothing.

“So you’ve finally emerged from your hole, Gargaolon!”

“You are quite persistent, Marquis.”

The pyro noble and Gargaolon started shouting at each other.

I wished they could settle their score without dragging other people into it.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, the pyro noble pointed his staff toward me next.

“You! The fool who supported these beasts! You and Gargaolon shall burn!”

His Crimson Cane started to produce even bigger flames.

That’s not happening.

I pulled out a pearl fruit from storage and chucked it at the pyro noble.

I held back on speed so it wouldn’t kill him, and it hit him in the head and knocked him unconscious just as he loosed a flame my way.

The flame licked toward me like a snake’s tongue, narrowly missed my head, and disappeared into the sky.

The pyro noble fell onto his back but was still holding the Crimson Cane, so the flames shooting out of it started flying toward his own allies.

“Enemy of Lord Dazaress!”

Blackened spear in hand, Attendant E slipped past Pochi and charged at me.

“Yaaaah, sir!”

Pochi body-slammed into Attendant E’s side, sending him staggering.

I used that opening to kick the man in the chin and yank his spear out of his hands.

“Thank you, Pochi.”

“Hee-hee! Sir.”

Pochi scuffled her feet shyly.

“Watch ouuut?”

A mon hunter leaped toward Pochi with a poison dagger, but Tama brought him down.

“Pochi! You must never let your guard down on the battlefield!” Liza’s voice

was full of concern.

“...I’m sorry, sir.”

Pochi smacked her own cheeks to pull herself together.

“Master! In the sky to the south!”

Arisa’s voice reached me through our still-connected Telephone spell.

At the same moment, a fast-moving red dot appeared on my radar.

Soaring above the inn was a ten-foot-long naga.

“Fiiire?”

“Meat, sir!”

Sure enough, the naga was breathing fire.

According to the AR, it was called a **Fire-Eater Naga**. It was smaller than the naga I’d seen before, and it had black scales.

The pyro noble’s Crimson Cane must have drawn it here.

Belatedly, a warning bell rang out from the watchtower by the gate.

They must have been too distracted by our battle to notice the monster’s approach.

I thought there was an anti-monster barrier around this town, but I guess the lure of the cursed staff was stronger.

“D-dragon! It’s a dragon!”

“Run for it! We’ll all be eaten!”

As soon as they saw the naga approaching, most of the outlaws threw down their weapons and fled.

“You’re not getting away.”

Gargaolon and his beastfolk followers cut the outlaws down mercilessly.

Until Nana’s shield and Liza’s spear stopped them, that is.

“What foolishness is this?”

“Master forbids needless killing, I report.”

“We intend to capture these men and sell them as criminal slaves. Please refrain from destroying my master’s property.”

I do prefer to avoid killing, but that’s not the reason, all right?

“Fine, then. We’re just here to help. We’ll abide by your master’s intentions.”

I was glad that Gargaolon was willing to relent, since I really didn’t want to see any more blood.

The reason I didn’t participate in this exchange myself was that I was checking the map for monster movement.

There was a horde of them coming toward the town, including demi-goblin mages, fire-eater nagas, and regular nagas.

The reason that non-fire-attribute nagas were also approaching seemed related to the fire-eater nagas.

The swarm was following the small number of fire-eater nagas like a cloud. Considering that the former were male and the latter female, maybe they were originally the same species.

Individually, they were pretty weak, but if that many of them descended on the town, everyone would be in danger.

Luckily, the Crimson Cane was currently with the pyro noble headed to the constable’s castle on the side of the western mountain, so as long as they were dealt with quickly, they shouldn’t cause any harm to the town.

I threw a spear at the fire-eater naga above us as it turned to head toward the castle, bringing it down midflight.

“Liza, I’m leaving you in charge here.”

“Understood!”

The beastfolk girls rushed toward the fallen fire-eater naga.

I couldn’t blame them. The soy-roasted naga we’d eaten before was delicious.

“Sir Gargaolon! Deal with Dazaress’s attendants!”

“Tch, fine. But I’ve got a score to settle with that bastard.”

“All right! Once I catch him, I’ll let you give him one good punch.”

“Heh. Looking forward to it!”

Gargaolon and company started to follow me at first, but I had them stay behind to deal with the rest of the outlaws.

It would be harder to dispatch the monsters quickly if they came along.

I headed toward the castle under cover of darkness.

Passing through the streets, I headed up the slope. In the distance, I saw the drawbridge of the constable’s castle rising.

One fire-eater naga landed on the castle gate, then another.

It would probably be too noticeable if I took them out from a distance with Remote Arrow, so I threw some pebbles to take out most of the monsters that were approaching the town. I left a few alive just to harass the pyro noble, Dazaress.

Let him sweat a little, since he’s responsible for this whole situation in the first place.

The castle was fortified against monster attacks, so as long as he stayed inside, he probably wouldn’t be killed.

The nagas who’d been chasing the fire-eater nagas descended on the castle walls and ramparts like an avalanche, breaking through the areas that were less structurally sound.

Ah, that damn idiot. Making my way up the slope, I cursed inwardly as I noticed movement on my radar.

Dazaress and his retinue had come out into the courtyard of the castle to fight the nagas.

His flames engulfed a group of them on the castle wall.

Seeing this, the rest of the nagas swarmed toward Dazaress and company.

I wasn’t obligated to help them, but I didn’t enjoy watching people get killed, either.

Diving into the forest next to the slope, I did a “Quick Change” into Nanashi.

No Illusion effects this time, since it would've been too much of a pain.

Then I used “Warp” to arrive at the castle gate in an instant.

Just as I got there, a pillar of fire rose up from inside.

Huh?

The nagas that were trying to flee from the castle were sliced to pieces by a narrow, laser-like flame.

One of them managed to escape, only to be caught by a giant flame-covered hand and dragged back over the castle wall.

The situation became clear to me as soon as I leaped onto the top of the gates to check it out.

An intermediate demon, wrapped in flames, was slaughtering the nagas.

Shining on his forehead was the jewel from Dazaress's Crimson Cane.

I should've known when I heard that he had “Count Bobino's support.”

Count Bobino was a patron of the demon lord—worshipping cult Wings of Freedom. He must have given Dazaress a long horn, an item that turned someone into an intermediate demon.

I wasn't sure whether he himself understood exactly what using the long horn meant, but that didn't matter anymore.

Having finished off the last naga, Dazaress—no, the demon—spread his four wings and took to the sky.

I didn't want to risk burning myself by getting too close, so I decided to defeat him with magic.

A blast should be able to put out a fire, right?

I picked out Implosion from the magic menu.

This spell caused an inward explosion effect in a sphere-shaped range, so it did less widespread damage than most other intermediate magic.

That being said, using it from this position would probably destroy the castle in the process, so I used all 120 Magic Hands to hurl the demon into the sky.

Just then, my “Sense Danger” skill reacted to something far south of here.

Again...? Come on—this isn’t a wanko soba restaurant. Don’t bring me seconds I didn’t ask for.

I turned around with a sigh and was greeted with a blinding flash of light.

The light evaporated the intermediate demon instantly and disappeared into the sky. A red shard of light fell into the river next to the town.

An enormous flapping sound and a powerful blast of wind blew down on the castle and the town of Puta alike.

And a blue dot appeared on my radar.

Fighting to raise my head, I squinted up at the peak behind the castle and saw a black dragon spreading its wings.

GWROW, GWROW, GWLOROOOOOURGH!

The dragon roared.

It must have been more than a mile away, but I still felt the vibrations prickling on my skin.

On the map, my party members’ status conditions all changed to **Fear**.

Same for the rest of the people in town.

But since I could understand dragon language, the roar that struck fear into the hearts of others sounded like this to me: “WEAK! SO WEAK! I CAME ALL THE WAY DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN FOR THIS?!”

I guess it was disappointed that its battle with the demon ended so quickly.

I used “Skylarking” and “Warp” to approach the black dragon.

“GWROO...”

Damn, that’s hard to pronounce.

“<Good evening, Sir Dragon.>”

It was all but impossible to speak Dragon with human vocal cords, so I managed to do it with the “Ventriloquism” skill.

This skill definitely didn’t work the same way as regular ventriloquism.

“<I apologize, but our children are sleeping. Could I ask you to lower your volume, please?>”

“<You speak Dragon, little one?>”

“<Yes, I learned it recently.>”

“<Very impressive, little one.>”

The black dragon lowered its voice as I requested. It was surprisingly accommodating.

“<You must be eager to challenge me to a battle!>”

...Huh?

“<A dragon never turns down a challenge from anyone!>”

With that, the dragon picked me up in its claws and took off into the air.

“<Wait a minute, you battle junkie...>”

“<Little one! You are correct! We dragons are ever in pursuit of a good fight followed by a good sleep!>”

Wow, it didn't even deny it.

I continued protesting over the loud wind in dragon language, but the black dragon just roared happily and circled around above Puta.

“<We'll damage the town if we fight here! If we must battle, let's at least do it somewhere else!>”

“<As you wish, little one...>”

The black dragon nodded lightly.

“<...If I kill humans needlessly, I may never hear the end of it from the sky dragon of Mount Fuji.>”

Ignoring that particular name for now, did that mean there was a dragon monitoring other dragons like a human supervisor?

The dragon's flight leveled out.

I couldn't believe how fast we were moving.

It felt like we might break the sound barrier at this rate.

The wind flying into my face was hurting my eyes, so I used Canopy from the magic menu to protect myself from it.

Really, if I had a choice, I would've preferred to ride on its back instead of being carried around like prey.

Since I'd left town without saying anything, I sent Arisa and Liza a quick message with the Telephone spell: *"Gonna hang out with a dragon. Back in a few."*

Both of them were still in the **Fear** state, so there was no response.

Meanwhile, the black dragon didn't slow down. In an instant, we left the Ougoch Duchy and entered a new area: the Black Dragon Mountains.

I used my long-neglected "Search Entire Map" skill to gather information about the place.

There were a few small villages among the mountains.

I added markers to the villages so I wouldn't hit any by accident, along with the flag icons for quests. I'd never used them before, but they worked just fine.

When we arrived at the snow-covered peak of the tallest mountain, I could see an enormous forest on the other side of the range.

I couldn't say for sure, since it was on a different map, but it was probably Bolenan Forest, the location of Mia's hometown.

I could see a thread-shaped World Tree in the center, like the one we'd seen from a distance before.

I continued to gaze at the stunning scenery until the black dragon spoke to me.

"<Can you fly, little one?>"

"<Yes, I can.>"

Once I answered, the dragon slowly opened its claw, so I hopped away with "Skyrunning."

Once the black dragon saw this, it descended onto the peak with a loud *bang*,

sending a cloud of fresh snow flying up around it.

“<I am the black dragon, born of the Valley of Dragons! No other dragon can oppose me, save an ancient dragon or a sky dragon! Long have I waited at the peak of this mountain for a worthy opponent, but none hath appeared before me. Tonight, we shall enjoy a battle to the death.>”

The black dragon spread its wings, looking excited as it declared its warlike intentions.

I definitely felt obligated to fight it now.

Judging by the difference in our levels, I didn't think I would lose, but I didn't want its “Dragon Breath” to burn up my good robes.

“<I am Nanashi the Hero: a simple human. Go easy on me, please.>”

Once I'd given a brief response, the dragon breathed in deeply.

I put some distance between us with “Skylarking,” then produced the max amount of thirty-two Flexible Shields in front of me.

A flash filled my vision, and a thunderous roar crashed through the mountains.

I dodged right away with “Skylarking,” but two of my Flexible Shields still disappeared.

Judging by how that felt, I was pretty sure seven or eight of them could protect me from even a direct hit, but I still activated my “Magic Power Armor” skill just in case.

The attack that had just missed me melted the ice on the peak, and the boiling-hot stream of muddy water began to cause an avalanche.

Behind me, no less than two ridges crumbled to pieces.

“<Here I come!>”

The black dragon sprang into the air with just its rear legs, accelerating to top speed in the blink of an eye as it charged toward me.

The roar just before the speed increase must have been some kind of dragon magic.

The rapidly approaching dragon's horns bore down on me.

I fired a Lightning spell from the magic menu.

But it vanished almost immediately.

The spell had somehow dissipated before it even reached the dragon's scales. It came nowhere close to paralyzing it.

I avoided the black dragon's horns by a hairbreadth and smacked it point-blank with an Air Hammer spell to the back of the head, but that disappeared, too, before reaching its target.

The black dragon must have been able to negate lesser magic, just like that demon lord.

Still, using intermediate magic would be dangerous. Those spells made short work of the giant monster fish, which was much higher level than the black dragon.

I couldn't just murder what might be one of the last living dragons.

As I was watching the back of the dragon's head while thinking about these things, I suddenly felt a "Sense Danger" reaction behind me.

The tail.

To be precise, the spike on the end of the dragon's tail was fast approaching.

I used "Skylarking" to accelerate in a downward slant, narrowly avoiding the giant spike.

However, the "Sense Danger" alarm didn't let up.

Behind me, I saw the black dragon twisting around in midair.

Come on, what about the laws of aerodynamics?!

The centrifugal force sent the tail flying toward me like a whip, right in my blind spot.

Judging that I couldn't possibly dodge it, I quickly crossed my arms in front of me to block the tail.

One of my Flexible Shields got destroyed, but that was the extent of the

damage.

Normally, the enormous weight difference would be enough to send me flying, but my absurd STR stat and the secure foothold “Skyrunning” provided managed to prevent that.

Without losing its momentum, the dragon swung its right claws toward me next.

I could have dodged them, but I decided to parry instead.

They had less than half the force of the tail attack.

This one was no worse than the physical attacks of the black greater demon in Seiryuu City and was far lighter than the blows from the Golden Boar Lord.

If it hadn’t been for our vastly different physiques, I could have pretty much fought on an equal level with the dragon in terms of close combat.

I used “Skyrunning” to brace myself, then flung the black dragon through the air with the help of Magic Hand.

“<What—?!>”

The black dragon roared with surprise as it tumbled backward, taking off chunks of the mountainsides as it went.

...This dragon would have had a good career as a stuntman.

The black dragon shook its head to rid itself of dirt and rocks, and its eyes glittered as it launched itself back into the sky.

As the black dragon flew toward me, it unleashed a single roar—and a flash of black lightning struck me from above.

> Skill Acquired: “Lightning Magic: Dragon”

> Skill Acquired: “Dark Magic: Dragon”

That must have been a spell of some kind.

That was the first time I’d acquired two different skills from a single magic attack.

It was pretty powerful, perhaps because it was a combination of two

attributes. Even with my Flexible Shields in high-density mode, it managed to find a gap and reach me briefly. Only one of my Flexible Shields got destroyed, but my clothes got burned a little.

My skin tingled for a moment, but there didn't seem to be any lasting effects.

Using the lightning as a distraction, the black dragon flung its left fist toward me.

I intercepted it with a fist of my own.

KABOOM!

With a sound like a wooden board cracking in two, a broken scale flew off the black dragon's fist.

I quickly stowed the blood spraying from the wound in Storage, narrowly saving my clothes from disaster.

As before, I felt a slight resistance just before the scale broke, like glass cracking.

There must be some kind of magical defense field over the scales.

The dragon's fist kept on flying toward me, so I blocked it with my Flexible Shields this time.

That way, I wouldn't end up bloodying the black dragon unnecessarily.

As if to punish my arrogance, the black dragon threw a knee kick at me while I was stopped in place.

I was completely taken by surprise, since I'd never expected a dragon to do a kick.

I guess I'd been relying on "Sense Danger" too much.

The kick knocked me into the air, where a "Dragon Breath" attack followed close behind.

My Flexible Shields were getting destroyed one after another.

If this were an old-fashioned tabletop RPG, the dragon would only be able to use its breath up to three times, but apparently the real world wasn't so forgiving.

Just then, I suddenly felt someone watching me.

I recognized the sensation as someone monitoring me with Space Magic. It didn't feel like Arisa, though.

As I dodged the breath with some careful maneuvering, I used magic to reel in the would-be watcher.

What I saw was a beautiful platinum-blond woman, somewhere in the direction of the World Tree in Bolenan Forest.

> Skill Acquired: "Reverse Sonar"

> Skill Acquired: "Sonar Blocking"

For now, I activated the latter skill, cutting off the beautiful woman's view.

Now I could concentrate on fighting the black dragon.

After the "Dragon Breath," I avoided the barrage of ultrahigh-speed fireballs that followed like a bullet-hell game.

When one occasionally came at me with a curved trajectory, I parried it with a Flexible Shield.

> Skill Acquired: "Wind Magic: Dragon"

So the dragon was manipulating the fireballs with Wind Magic... What a versatile fighter.

However, it was far too focused on firing at me.

When I was right above the black dragon's head, I put up fresh Flexible Shields and took out a huge meteorite from Storage, holding it above my head.

Of course, I wasn't going to hit the black dragon with this.

That would probably just kill it.

I used Magic Hand to press myself against the giant meteorite.

Then I kicked with all my strength.

The resulting high-speed hail and a few fireballs both hit me in the process, but I was fully protected by my diagonally arranged Flexible Shields.

Although I did lose half of them.

I pushed the remaining half against the black dragon, slamming it down on a mountain.

The tough bedrock cracked, creating a circle of rocks and dust.

I finally touched down on solid ground again and, with the help of Magic Hand, grabbed the dazed dragon's tail and swung it around and around.

"GROWWWWWWR."

Ignoring its meaningless shrieks, I kept swinging the tail in giant circles.

The dragon struggled to stop the spinning, but its sharp claws worked against it, leaving deep scratches in the ground that scarcely slowed it down at all.

When I'd built up enough acceleration, I flung the dragon as far as I could.

The target was a particularly sturdy-looking ridge.

I chose it because it had an exposed mithril-ore streak and looked more solid than the others.

The black dragon crashed hard into the ridge, and I chased after it with "Warp," then used "Skyrunning" to deliver a fighting game-style kick to the dragon's chest.

The Flexible Shield I'd put between us to cushion the blow shattered immediately.

Uh-oh.

Panicking, I skidded my kick to a halt with "Skyrunning."

The scale on the black dragon's chest broke, but the kick stopped before piercing the dragon's heart.

Half-buried in the ground now, the black dragon's limbs sagged.

Phew. Looks like I won.

That was a careless mistake.

The black dragon's final attack wasn't magic or its deadly breath.

It was a simple bite.

Inside the jaw closing down on me, the white fangs sparkled.

Their radiance was enchanting.

I remembered what Miss Ringrande had said before.

A dragon's fangs can pierce anything.

Dragon fangs are the ultimate blade—they spell destruction even for a demon lord.

The dragon's fangs broke through all ten of my remaining Flexible Shields like paper.

The white glow of death was closing in—

"I don't think so!"

Just as a fang was about to pierce my shoulder, I punched it with all my strength.

The broken fang cut the black dragon's mouth, sending fresh blood everywhere.

I used the momentum of the punch to twist myself around, delivering a kick to the side of the dragon's face. Spiderweb-like cracks formed in several of the scales on its face, and I felt its jaw break underneath.

The black dragon's status condition changed to **Fainted**, and it crashed into the surface of the mountain, sending tremors through the ground.

Now I truly understood why it was so important to never let down your guard.

I never imagined that something could break through intermediate defense magic like Flexible Shield so easily.

I was planning to make a counterattack once the Flexible Shields stopped the fang's approach, but they got crushed so easily that I panicked.

All things considered, it probably would've gone the same way even if I'd had all my Flexible Shields out.

Nullifying defense like that was the kind of power only the worst video game bosses had.

I gazed at the black dragon, which was still lying motionless beside me.

Did I kick it a little too hard?

I thought I'd felt some bones cracking, but since its status condition was only **Fainted**, it was probably fine.

Still, it didn't move even after I waited awhile, so I used the intermediate recovery spell Healing: Water on the damaged scales and other injured areas.

An intermediate spell shouldn't have the power to regenerate missing parts, but it somehow caused the broken scales to grow back anew. Unfortunately, the fang was still broken.

I was guessing it worked that well by merging with the black dragon's own self-healing ability.

Since there was nothing else I could do, I contacted Arisa and the others with Telephone to see how they were doing.

"Everyone's safe here. The attackers have all been captured and handed over to the guards, and that Gao-Gao guy and his friends apologized for something and went home. The mon hunters who helped us are finishing up with transporting the captured outlaws."

As I listened to Arisa's report, I used Clairvoyance and my map to see the situation in Puta for myself.

There didn't seem to be any need for me to hurry back, then.

"I'm almost done here, but it might take a little longer before I get back. I'm sure you're all tired, so make sure everyone goes to bed soon, all right?"

"Okey-dokey!"

Ending the call with Arisa, I looked up at the unmoving black dragon.

Sitting around waiting for it to wake up was a bit boring, so I killed time by collecting the scales that had fallen in battle and mining the exposed mithril ore.

Eventually, the black dragon's status condition changed from **Fainted** to **None**.

Its eyes opened slowly but snapped shut in a hurry as soon as it saw me

looking.

Um, it's a little late for that.

“<You’re awake, aren’t you? Why not share a drink with me as we speak of each other’s prowess in battle?>”

I placed a cask of sake near the dragon’s nose.

It was a particularly strong sake called Rock Fairy Slayer, which I’d acquired from a sake-loving noble in the old capital. Its alcohol content was high enough to compete with dwarf spirits; the name came from its rather harsh taste.

I broke the lid open with my fist, sending the scent of rich sake wafting all around us.

Soon enough, the black dragon’s nostrils flared.

I knew it. Dragons loved drinking.

“<Hmmm. Very well. I suppose we can call it a draw, just this once.>”

The black dragon made a show of reluctance as it pulled itself upright.

I understood that it was trying to preserve its dignity and all, but the way it was staring at the cask the whole time kind of ruined the effect.

What a goofball.

“<What boon shall I grant you in commemoration of our draw?>”

“<How about...we become friends?>”

This was a serious suggestion; I’d grown pretty fond of the lighthearted dragon.

“RWOOOOOOLRGH!”

The black dragon roared with amusement.

“<Very well! Then friends we shall be. As proof of our friendship, I grant you the name Kuro. It was the name of a human child I raised long ago.>”

A name as a present, huh? That’s a new one.

Come to think of it, I noticed that the black dragon didn’t have a unique name in its AR display.

“<I’ll give you a name, too, then. How about...Hei Long?>”

I couldn’t actually think of anything creative, so I went with a name that meant “black dragon” in Chinese.

Honestly, I’d forgotten how bad I was at making up names.

“<Excellent! From now on, I shall be known as Hei Long!>”

The black dragon roared happily, and his name in the AR display changed to **Hei Long**, while my name in my networking tab changed from blank to **Kuro**.

This made me a little nervous, so I quickly checked to make sure I could still change it.

That roar must have been the dragon using the “Name Order” skill.

“<Whew... I am parched.>”

Hei Long glanced furtively at the barrel, so I tactfully offered up some sake.

“<Mm, very good. Human-made liquor truly is delicious.>”

The black dragon lifted the barrel carefully, poured some sake into his mouth, and let out a satisfied “Ahhhh.”

“<But dragon liquor is no lesser, mind you. Here, a drink for a drink...>”

The black dragon gave a long howl that was almost like a song, and the ground reshaped into a concave mirror.

After a while, spring water gushed from the center.

The water gradually turned into liquor bearing the same translucent green color of melon soda.

Dragonspring liquor.

But it was miles above the stuff I’d tasted before.

Freshly brewed dragonspring liquor was beyond comparison to dregs that had sat for a while. It had an incredible scent; a smooth, clear mouthfeel; and a deep, all-encompassing flavor.

“<Delicious.>”

“<It is indeed, is it not? Come, come, drink more!>”

The black dragon gleefully offered me more of the dragonspring liquor.

I would've loved to spend the night partying together, but I still had things to do in the town of Puta.

The dragon was toying with the now-empty barrel, so I provided a new one and stated that I had to head back but promised that we would have a real party soon enough.

I was too far away to make it with my Return spell, so Hei Long brought me to a mountain near Puta.

"<Well then, I'll see you again in seven days' time.>"

"<Indeed. Do not forget the sake and the goat.>"

"<Of course.>"

We grinned at each other as we made plans. Having a party with a dragon sounded like way too much fun.

I watched the black dragon fly away before I headed back toward Puta.

On the way home, I stopped off to pick up the Crimson Cane that had fallen into the riverbed. All that remained was the part with the jewel, but it would be dangerous to just leave it lying around.

Then I snuck back into town and made my way to the forest near the castle.

The official story was that I'd chased Marquis Dazaress there.

Some guards were looking for me, so I let them "rescue" me.

When we returned to the path that linked the castle and the town, we ran into some mon hunters heading toward the castle.

"Mr. Noble!"

Kon came flying toward me from the crowd.

He seemed to have been worried about me.

"I'm glad you're all right!"

"Kon was whining that you might've gotten eaten by the demon or the dragon."

“I know you already paid us, but I’d hate to see a young kid like you die.”

Kon’s comrades, the female mon hunters, all greeted me as well.

“Kena, we’re going on ahead!”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there! See ya later, Mr. Knight. We’re going to go save that stupid constable now.”

Smiling despite their exhaustion, the mon hunters followed the guards toward the castle.

Checking on the map, I saw that Baronet Poton was still trapped in the remains of the castle.

No one inside was seriously injured, so the situation wasn’t too urgent. As soon as I determined that, I headed back to the inn and crawled into the giant bed where the rest of my party was already asleep.

Well, good night.



I had only a few things left to do in Puta.

I threw a big party in the mon hunter tavern to thank the people who’d helped me. For the young boy Kon, who’d convinced the others not to join up with the enemy, I made a simple artificial arm and some good-quality equipment.

The white tigerfolk had nowhere safe to go, so I suggested they head to the Muno Barony. Baron Muno and Miss Nina wouldn’t discriminate against demi-humans, and Gargaolon and company would make powerful allies for them.

The outlaws who participated in the attack became criminal slaves, and the surviving members of the pyro noble’s retinue were taken to the old capital.

As for Baronet Poton, the assistant secretary sent from the town of Kuuche confirmed that he hadn’t participated in the attack on the inn.

However, the rumors about him taking bribes turned out to be true. I decided to let the leader of his faction, Marquis Lloyd, decide what to do about that.

Between the sale of the criminal slaves and the reward money for maintaining

public order (which was really more of a solatium), I ended up receiving quite a bit of cash.

I didn't want to hoard it all for myself, though, so I decided to redistribute it to the less fortunate people of Puta.

Specifically, I donated it toward the reopening of the closed-down orphanage and the establishment of a mon hunter training school. For the teaching staff, I suggested some of the mon hunters who had retired due to injuries and such.

I left the management of these facilities to the former director of the orphanage.

As for its continuing operation funds, I planned to give my ketchup recipe and exclusive sales rights to it by way of Marquis Lloyd.

Then, on the day of our departure...

"Larvae, we must say farewell for now."

"Hey, are you leaving? Where're you going?"

"Nana, stay with us? Please?"

"Don't go, Nana!"

Nana patted the children's heads as they clung to her.

I half expected her to ask to take them with us, but she was surprisingly realistic about it.

"These larvae have a base here. The journey would be too dangerous for them, I conclude."

The "base" she was referring to was probably the orphanage.

So far, all it had was some mats and beds, but that was probably still better than letting them sleep under trees or in alleyways.

Nana had gathered about fifty children from the streets to live at the orphanage. There were actually almost three times that many orphans in total, but she wasn't able to gather them all. The director and the citizens could probably take care of the rest.

"Mr. Noble, come see us again sometime!"

“Heh-heh, thanks again, Sir Knight. You didn’t need to give the rest of us such nice equipment, too.”

Kon flexed the hand of his artificial arm while Kena and the rest of her group struck a sexy pose in their new armor.

I gave them some mon-hunter-style leather armor, with breastplates and shoulder pads made from beetle monster shell.

The sets looked like ordinary leather armor, but the interior used hard newt and hydra skin, so their defense was higher than it looked.

“Sir Knight! Take these freshly picked tomatoes with you!”

A young apefolk boy handed me a big basket.

Some of the other burn victims I’d healed and their families had come to see us off, too.

The people of Puta—children, beastfolk, and mon hunters alike—all gave us a grand send-off as we left the town behind.

Some of the faster children sprinted alongside the carriage for a while, but they soon got tired and went home.

Nana looked back at the town several times, looking as sad as she could with her expressionless face.

And so the carriage rattled down the weed-covered dirt road.

We traveled along a road even bandits feared to tread, crossing the mountains and valleys.

“Master, we have repelled the lance beetle, I report.”

“Companyyy?”

“This one’s a one-horned serpent, sir.”

“The nagas from yesterday were delicious, but this monster looks as if it would have a splendid texture, too.”

We exterminated any monsters that showed up to be hunted, enjoying the gradually changing vegetation around us.

There were even some tree and mushroom monsters.

“Mushroooms?”

“Figs.”

Between Tama’s sharp eyes and Mia’s wide knowledge of plants, we were able to collect a lot of rare plants.

“Master! Look at this fruit!”

“Hey, it’s a pomegranate! Man, I’ve missed that seedy texture!”

“Mm. Yummy.”

There was an abundance of natural growth out here, probably due to the lack of settlements in the area.

“Here’s as good a place as any, I’d say.”

We’d been traveling about half a day since we passed the Farthest Village, so I stopped the carriage, planning to switch to the air route from here.

Checking on the map, I made sure there was no one else around.

No one human anyway.

“We’re taking an airship from here, right?”

“Well, that was the plan at first...”

On my map, a blue dot quickly approached from the south.

“Dangerrr!”

As I was talking with Arisa, Tama suddenly scabbled up onto my head, her eyes wide. She must have sensed the black dragon’s approach.

Soon, the sound of flapping wings filled the air as he descended from the sky.

I lifted the horses and runosaurs up with Magic Hand so they wouldn’t run away.

“<Kuro! I’ve come to collect you!>”

“<Hello, Hei Long.>”

The impatient black dragon had arrived to pick us up two days ahead of

schedule.

“<Are these horses and lizards for me?>”

“<No, they’re our traveling companions. Please don’t eat them.>”

“<Very well. I’ll just eat a wyvern or a land urchin later.>”

“<Sounds good. I’ve been wanting to try land urchins, myself.>”

After a brief chat with the dragon, I turned around to introduce him to my party, only to find them all frozen and pale-faced.

Hmm?

I’d told them ahead of time that I’d made friends with the black dragon. What was the big deal?

“N-nice to meet you, Mr.... What was it again?”

“Hei Long.”

“Wow, lame... All right then, Hei Long. My name’s Arisa!”

“Tamaaaa.”

“P-Pochi, sir.”

Once Arisa greeted the dragon, Pochi and Tama crept out from behind me and timidly followed suit.

Their ears were still flattened with fear, and Pochi’s tail was between her legs.

“<They said, ‘Nice to meet you.’>”

I interpreted everyone’s statements for the black dragon.

“<Greetings, little ones. I am the black dragon Hei Long.>”

“I am the youngest elf of Bolenan Forest, Misanaria Bolenan, daughter of Lamisauya and Lilinatoa.”

Mia gave her usual lengthy introduction.

“L-Liza of the orangescale tribe.”

“I am Nana, I declare.”

“I-I’m...Lulu...”

Liza seemed nervous, while Nana was indifferent. Lulu looked like she was about to faint.

Well, that should do it for introductions.

Hei Long wanted to get the party started right away, but we were a little too close to the nearest village, so I suggested we go somewhere else.

“Nya-ha-haaa?”

I never thought we’d get to travel on top of a dragon’s head.

Tama was playing around by putting her weight on the horn in the center of the head, and Hei Long responded by tilting in the corresponding direction. He was as playful as ever.

There were several other horns besides the one Tama was playing on, too.

I was leaning against one of them like a chair, sitting on a cushion and enjoying the breeze.

Normally, the wind and the movement of the dragon’s head would be enough to send us flying off, but I was using Canopy to fend off the strong wind and supporting everyone with Magic Hand to make sure no one fell.

“Oh, what a view!”

“Mm. Pretty.”

Arisa and Mia were scared at first, but they had calmed down enough to enjoy the view.

“Tama, let us go faster, I entreat.”

“Okaaay!”

Like Tama, Nana seemed to enjoy the thrill-ride aspect.

But other riders were not so happy.

“It’s not okay, sir! We’re gonna fall! We’re gonna fall, sir!”

“Precisely! Tama, get down at once. We are in the sky, you know. If you fall, you won’t be able to fly on your own.”

Pochi was sitting on my lap, and Liza was glued to my left arm.

“Sfiiiine.”

Tama was unfazed by their protests.

“I-it’s not fine, sir.”

“Listen, Tama. You’re in for the scolding of your life once we’re back on land.”

Clearly, Pochi and Liza were not good with air travel.

Both their voices were frighteningly serious.

I’d figured Pochi would be scared, but I definitely hadn’t been expecting this from Liza.

“Master! Stop laughing and keep your hand here, sir! If you don’t support me, I might fall, sir!”

Sitting in my lap, Pochi flinched every time the black dragon tilted his body.

Her ears were flat on her head again. Just sitting in my lap didn’t seem to be calming her down, so I let her put my hand on her stomach.

Incidentally, Lulu was silently clinging to my right hand with her eyes closed the whole time.

My hands were occupied, so I used Magic Hand to make a silk glove pat her head reassuringly.

Our mostly pleasant air trip continued halfway across the Black Dragon Mountains to a plateau blooming with flowers.

“<Is this location acceptable?>”

“<Sure. Let’s set up the party.>”



The black dragon stretched his wings to the ground, and Nana and the younger kids slid down them into the flower garden below.

Liza and Lulu were still latched on to me, so I carried them down to earth with “Skyrunning,” then sat them gently among the flowers.

The sleeping potions I’d given to the horses and runosaurs to keep them from getting frightened didn’t seem to have worn off yet, so I used the Magic Hands supporting them to lay them down on the ground.

“...M-master, I apologize for my shameful behavior.”

“I’m sorry, master.”

“No need to apologize. It was your first time traveling by air, after all. Anyway, would you help me get the party ready?”

“Understood!”

“Yes!”

Liza and Lulu still looked somewhat pale, but they perked up a little when I gave them jobs to do.

Next, I took out the gifts I’d procured for Hei Long.

Namely, several barrels of liquor and thirty freshly slaughtered goats.

I’d bought these in the old capital in the dead of night. It would’ve looked strange if I’d suddenly shown up there, so I’d disguised myself, of course.

“<Ooh! You brought goats! How considerate you are!>”

The black dragon roared excitedly. Goat was apparently one of his favorite foods.

Everyone else flinched at the black dragon’s roar, but they calmed down once I explained that he was just excited.

Pochi’s tail was still between her legs, but Tama was gazing up at the black dragon with great interest.

“<And these barrels must contain sake! Then I shall call forth some dragonspring liquor!>”

Hei Long gleefully created a spring of the delicious liquor, then picked up a goat and skillfully roasted it with a small fiery breath.

“<Gah-ha-ha-ha! Goat is so delicious!>”

The black dragon proceeded to chomp on the goat from the head down, bones, horns, and all.

“Yummyyy?”

“I-it does look tasty, sir.”

Tama and Pochi started drooling as they watched the black dragon eat.

He certainly knew how to make food look tasty.

The goat wouldn’t last long at this rate, so I decided to bring out some whale meat, too.

I produced from Storage several pieces of whale that I’d divided into two-hundred-pound chunks, cutting them into giant skewers for the black dragon and barbecue-ready pieces for us.

We’d gathered other monster ingredients on the way, too, like land urchins, monster mushrooms, and rocket bamboo.

“Meeeat?”

“The skewers are bigger than I am, sir!”

“What a wonderfully large cut of meat.”

The beastfolk girls smiled brightly when they saw the skewers for the black dragon. I guess they didn’t particularly care whether they got whole-roasted goat or not.

“<What are you cooking down there, Kuro?>”

Taking a break from chowing down on goats, the black dragon peered at the giant skewers with interest.

“<Giant-monster-fish meat.>”

“<G-giant monster fish?! Those gluttonous creatures?!>”

Hei Long’s long neck recoiled in surprise.

"<I hunted them a good while ago. Would you like to try some?>"

"<C-certainly, yes.>"

The black dragon eagerly dug in to the three chunks of meat on the skewer.

"<D-delicioooooos!>"

I'm glad you like it, but please stop firing breath attacks into the sky to express your happiness.

"Yummyyyy!"

Tama bit into a regular-size skewer and imitated the black dragon.

"Dangerlicious!"

"Dragons certainly are lively."

Pochi and Liza didn't seem to be quite as relaxed as Tama.

Pochi's comment was probably a combination of *dangerous* and *delicious*, although I wasn't entirely sure whether that was on purpose.

It took a while for everyone to get used to the black dragon, but eventually they followed suit after Tama and me.

"<What in the world is that?>"

"Th-this is called mustard mayonnaise..."

I interpreted for Lulu.

Lulu put some of her freshly made mustard mayonnaise on one of the giant skewers, and the black dragon gleefully popped it into his mouth.

"<This is especially delicious! The spiciness is rather addictive.>"

As it turned out, dragons were big fans of mayo. Who knew?

"Hmm? What's this glass-looking thing?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Dodging Arisa's question lightly, I used Magic Mold to make an instant kiln, spread some tomato sauce on some thinly stretched dough, and sprinkled shredded cheese and various toppings over it from above.

“N-no way... Could it be?!”

Arisa opened her mouth to guess, but I stopped her by putting a finger over her lips, then slid the covered dough into the flame-filled oven.

As the scent of bubbling cheese filled the air, even the beastfolk girls stopped eating meat long enough to look over curiously.

I took out the finished product with a huge wooden spatula, then cut it into fan-shaped slices.

“All right, it’s ready.”

“I knew it! *Pizzaaaaa!*”

Arisa shrieked and grabbed a slice with both hands.

I made two kinds to start: a standard pizza with bacon and salami and a veggie pizza with plenty of sliced tomatoes, asparagus, eggplant, paprika, and other toppings.

“Careful—it’s hot.”

“Stretchyyy?”

“So hot, sir.”

“Oh my God, this is so freakin’ good!”

“Mm, yummy.”

The pizza proved especially popular with the younger crowd. Tama and Pochi were dripping with cheese, so I’d have to make sure they washed their faces later.

“Master, I have been burned by the pizza, I report.”

I comforted the teary-eyed Nana with some Healing Magic.

“Master, this would go well with teriyaki chicken, would it not?”

“I think the dwarves’ sausages would be good, too.”

Liza and Lulu correctly guessed some classic pizza toppings.

Those two really were good at cooking.

“<Kuro! I would like to try that dish as well.>”

“<Sure, no problem.>”

I had figured the curious black dragon would want to try it, so I made plenty of pizza dough in advance.

And since the oven was made with Magic Mold instead of physical materials, I could resize it however I wanted.

I used Magic Hand to spin the pizza dough in the air, stretching it to thirty feet in diameter.

“So thiiin?”

“The sunlight goes through it, sir!”

Tama and Pochi gleefully ran around the circumference of the giant pizza.

“Make sure you don’t hit the dough, please.”

“Don’t worry, be happyyy!”

“We won’t, sir.”

The pair barely looked back as they chased the fluttering pizza through the air.

Just then, a mischievous wind blew through, flipping up a few girls’ skirts, like Lulu’s and Nana’s.

And of course, it did more than just that.

“Pochiii!”

Tama’s warning came a little too late: The wind knocked Pochi off her feet, and she tumbled right into the pizza dough.

“Waaah, sir!”

“Yaaargh!”

The impact sent the pizza dough flying around, engulfing the nearby Arisa in the process.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Ugh, my hair’s all sticky now...”

I collected the unsullied dough with Magic Hand and used the Soft Wash spell to clean the dough off the two girls.

“Arisa, I’m sorry, sir.”

“As long as you know better now. If you bring me a reeeeeeally tasty skewer, I’ll forgive you, Pochi.”

“Roger, sir!”

Watching the pair out of the corner of my eye, I finished up the black dragon’s pizza.

“<Mm, quite the peculiar delicacy. Perhaps not as delicious as the goat or the giant monster fish, but it’s certainly tastier than wyvern meat.>”

At first, I thought this meant the dragon didn’t really like it, but then he added, “<By the way, is the next one ready yet?>” so I guess he did find it pretty good after all.

We weren’t exactly eating from the same pot, but after spending the party enjoying delicious food together, we all ended up being great friends with Hei Long.

Once the festivities had concluded, we rode dragonback again to cross the Black Dragon Mountains, coming down to earth at the base of the mountains on the Bolenan Forest side.

“<Kuro, my friend, this is as far as I can take you. Though I would like to help you go farther into the forest, that wretched high-elf woman becomes cross whenever I venture too close.>”

The black dragon grimaced.

I’d gotten the hang of reading the dragon’s expressions over the course of the day.

“<The last time I got too close, she rained lightning down upon me and broke half my scales. It hurt for a hundred years till next I molted. Kuro, you would be wise to refrain from approaching by air.>”

Wow, so the elves' defenses were strong enough to repel a dragon.

"<Thank you. You've done more than enough by bringing us this far.>"

Before we parted ways, I wanted to make sure of something.

"<Are you sure it's all right for me to take the leftover dragonspring liquor and your broken fang?>"

"<I have no further use for them. Consider them thanks for the delicious goat and giant m—erm, proof of our friendship.>"

Was he about to say it was payment for the food?

The black dragon carefully looked away, so I decided not to press the matter.

"Bye-bye, Hei Looong."

"<Yes, let us fly together again someday!>"

Tama hugged the black dragon's nose sorrowfully.

"Tama! Don't be rude to Sir Hei Long! ...Please pardon us, and I pray that you shall triumph in all your battles."

This dramatic greeting was apparently a common saying in Liza's tribe.

"Good-bye for now, sir."

"I am saddened to part with such a good friend, I report."

"See you."

Pochi, Nana, and Mia all gave friendly farewells.

"E-erm, Sir Hei Long, please take this pot. It's the mustard mayonnaise that you liked from before."

"<Ooh! A splendid gift for a mayonnaise enthusiast such as myself. Take this spike, child. It will make a fine staff.>"

"Th-thank you."

Lulu gingerly accepted the spike, which looked like an iron spear.

Seeing this, Arisa and Mia seemed a little envious.

"<Until we meet again, Hei Long. I'll stock up on goats and sake for our next

party.>”

“<Indeed. And do not forget the giant-monster-fish meat and mustard mayonnaise.>”

With these casual parting words, the black dragon took to the air.

He circled around us a few times as we waved, then headed back toward the peak of the Black Dragon Mountains.

I’d set up a few seal slates at the peak and the plateau there, so I could visit anytime with the use of a Return spell or two.

Magic really was convenient.

Bolenan Forest

Satou here. My city-born friends sometimes envied me for having a hometown in the country. Personally, though, I believe that as long as you have a place that can evoke some happy childhood memories, there's nothing to envy other people about.

"<Forest.>"

"Is this Bolenan Forest? It's kind of...normal."

Mia and Arisa muttered in front of the forest, the former speaking Elvish.

Riding on four horses, two runosaurs, and one hornless unicorn, we had arrived at the outermost edge of the forest, the Bolenan Forest barrier.

Since Arisa couldn't ride horses on her own, she was riding with Mia on the unicorn.

Mia dismounted and spoke the words *open gate* in Elvish, and ripples appeared on the barrier, creating an opening about ten feet around.

Looking too excited to stand still, Mia rushed inside.

"Hey, Mia, wait!"

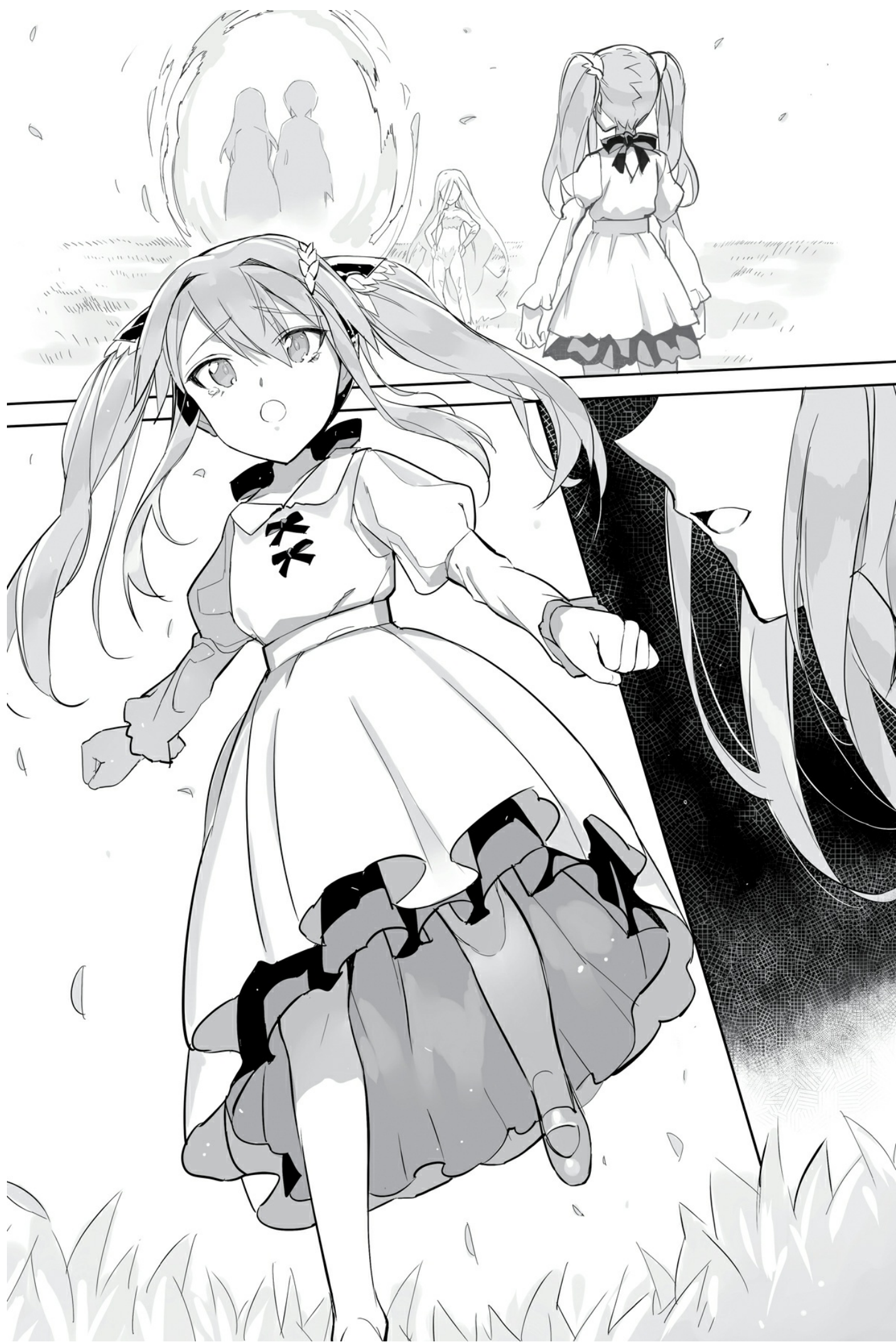
Arisa ran after her, followed by the rest of us.

Aside from the giant trees in the distance that messed with my sense of perspective and the World Tree that definitely still looked like an orbital elevator, it was a decidedly ordinary forest.

As we followed Mia down the narrow path, it led into a slightly more open area. There were no other paths leading out of the clearing.

Throughout the clearing were little rings of mushrooms.

They looked exactly like the fairy rings that served as travel gates in the Cradle, where I'd rescued Mia.



Mia's eyes wandered around the grove.

Maybe she didn't know the way from here?

"<Oh hey, it's the human! Hiyaaa.>"

A green-skinned young girl emerged from one of the trees: a dryad.

"<Dryad.>"

"<Oh, hey, kid.>"

"<Open.>"

Mia was asking the dryad to activate the right fairy ring.

"<Sorryyy, no can do.>"

"<Whyyy?>"

Mia looked distraught at the unexpected refusal.

"<Dryad, if you don't have enough magic, I can provide some.>"

"<That's not why, but sure, I'll take your magic.>"

The dryad grabbed my cheeks to plant a kiss on my lips.

Quickly, I held her back by the forehead.

"<Only if you open the travel gate.>"

"<Hmm... I guess maybe it'd be all right now?>"

The dryad looked around thoughtfully, then nodded.

"<Yeah, okay.>"

With that, she stole a kiss from my lips, and the fairy rings in the clearing started to glow phosphorescent green, one after another.

Soon, two human forms emerged from one of the rings.

It was a young boy and a young girl, only slightly bigger than Mia.

"<Laya! Lia!>"

As soon as she saw them, Mia rushed toward them so fast it looked like she would trip and fall.

Their full names displayed in the AR were **Lamisauya** and **Lilinatoa**—the names of Mia’s parents.

Mia tripped on the grass and tumbled to the ground.

““<Mia!>””

The pair hurried over to her and crouched down.

Pulling herself up, Mia embraced them, repeating their nicknames.

“Master, look over there.”

“Lots of Miaaas?”

“So many elf people, sir.”

The beastfolk girls pointed at the other fairy rings.

Elves were appearing from them one after another.

“Master, I have located winged larvae. Permission to capture!”

“Oh, how cute!”

Nana and Lulu squealed as they looked at the fairies that appeared next to the elves.

They were accompanied by an elf in shrine-maiden clothing and the beautiful platinum-blond woman I saw using Clairvoyance on me before.

The latter was definitely my type, so I started examining her AR information, but then Arisa yanked my head back.

“E-excuse me, master! How long were you planning on kissing her?!”

“<C’mon, just a little more?>”

I was so distracted by Mia’s reunion with her parents that I forgot the dryad was still sucking up my magic.

Since I wasn’t resisting, she ended up stealing almost a third of it.

“<You gave me lots and lots of magic today, so I’m gonna throw you a real welcome party!>”

The dryad waved her hand, and the trees and shrubs in the clearing all lit up

with green light.

“<Here we gooo!>”

The light kept spreading throughout the forest.

Even the giant trees in the distance started to grow.

The grass at our feet began to sprout and bloom flowers.

The trees sprouted, too, colorful blossoms springing from the branches.

The leaves of the trees swayed gently and began to play soft music.

“<Heh-heh! This is a once-in-a-lifetime service from me, y’know.”> The dryad grinned triumphantly, and a blizzard of glowing petals whirled through the clearing.

The elves began to sing a song celebrating Mia’s return, and the fairies danced through the air with the petals.

As Mia wept tears of joy and clung to her parents, the entire forest seemed to say: *Welcome home, Mia.*

This is where you belong.

Afterword

Hello, Hiro Ainana here.

Thank you for picking up the seventh volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

Thanks to all your support, the book version of *Death March* is celebrating its second anniversary!

I'll keep coming up with new ideas to keep things exciting, so I hope you'll continue to read *Death March* for a long time.

The comic version of *Death March* by Ayamegumu is going wonderfully as well, and a lot of new readers have come to the novels because they liked the manga in *Monthly Dragon Age* or on ComicWalker.

If you haven't read it yet, please check it out right away.

I'm sure you'll get so sucked into Ayamegumu's version of the *Death March* world that you won't be able to wait for the next chapter.

Personally, I always look forward to checking over the latest thumbnails, and getting to read the finished product when it comes out is a constant source of pleasure.

There are even a handful of original scenes in the comic version, so I always enjoy trying to spot those. (For instance, when the beastfolk girls get shoes in the labyrinth, Pochi says, "We can take turns wearing them, sir." That was such a wonderful addition, since she would definitely say something like that.) If you're at all interested, definitely try out the first chapter, which you can read for free on ComicWalker. I guarantee you'll be just as addicted as I am.

That advertisement went on a little longer than planned, so let's talk about the highlights of this volume now, shall we?

As with the previous volume, this one includes new scenes and a better-

organized story, and most of it is newly written for the book version.

For instance, the first chapter, “Princess Menea’s Request,” is a completely new story that wasn’t in the web version. If you haven’t read the book yet, I hope you’ll enjoy it!

This volume begins with Princess Menea, a character who was introduced at the very end of the previous volume.

In the web version of *Death March*, she was supposed to meet Satou in Gururian City, but in the books, her spot was stolen by Sara, who traveled all the way to the Muno Barony, so it’s taken until Volume 7 for her to finally win the role of guest heroine.

In the web version, she was making eyes at Satou from their first meeting, but things go a little differently here, so keep an eye out for that.

I feel pretty pleased that I made her into a different kind of heroine from the girls we’ve seen so far in *Death March*.

Since Satou’s interactions with Hayato and his relationship with Ringrande have changed from the web version, too, we’re on a different route now. I added more scenes with the rest of the hero’s party, as well, since they didn’t originally appear outside of battle scenes.

In the old capital, there are more interactions with the nobles, and I got to write more about the workshop tours and Satou’s non-cooking-related craftsmanship.

He upgraded his party’s equipment, too, and the beastfolk girls trained a lot with Mr. Kajiro, the samurai from the Saga Empire.

I’m sure this will all help express the “heartwarming” nature of the series.

Well, I’m reaching my page-count limit now, so I’ll wrap up the talk about Volume 7 here.

Incidentally, this isn’t directly related to *Death March*, but there’s a new web-novel site like the one where this story was born, called Kakuyomu.

As of the writing of this afterword, it hasn’t officially opened yet, but by the time this book comes out, it should be fully operational.

I've only gotten as far as making my account, so I haven't posted anything yet, but I'm interested in seeing what new stories will be born on the stage of Kakuyomu.

Now then, it's time for the usual acknowledgments.

My editor H's advice and revisions helped me to vastly improve a lot of different scenes.

H is especially good at pointing out the exact things that authors tend to miss, which is very helpful.

Please continue to guide and encourage me in the future.

Also, I always have to thank shri for illustrating the world of *Death March* so wonderfully.

This volume's highlight is definitely Princess Menea's pink hair! Those loose, wavy curls look so soft, you almost want to touch them!

Please keep up the great work on the visual side of the *Death March* world.

I also want to thank the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone else involved in the publication and sale of this book.

Finally, the biggest thank-you of all goes to you, the readers!!

Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end of the book!

I hope to see you again next volume for the Elf arc!

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DEATH MARCH 7 TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

