

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

# DEATH MARCH Rhapsody

TO THE  
PARALLEL WORLD

21
















Ninja training in the  
Village of Adept's!  
...Or at least that was  
the plan, but maybe  
we're too strong?!

POCHI

A dog-eared girl.

TAMA

A cat-eared girl.

SATOU

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





# DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

21

★ ★ ★  
HIRO AINANA  
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

YEN  
UN  
NEW YORK



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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 21

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## Adepts

***Satou here. When someone stands out in their field, people tend to say they have natural talent, but I don't agree with the idea that everything comes down to the gifts someone was born with. It seems to me that it was the person's effort to polish their skills that really makes them shine.***

"Lively."

The first to comment on the throngs of people along the high street of Parion Province was Mia the elf.

In an attempt to blend in, she was dressed in the traditional garb of Parion Province residents, but when she turned around, her veil fluttered to reveal a glimpse of her pointed ear tips and light blue twintails.

"Paraaade?"

Tama clambered up my body in a blur of short white hair, cat ears, and a cat tail, pointing at the parade on the other side of the crowd.

"Mr. Holy Sword is on the palan-keen, sir!"

Pochi, who sported a brown bob with dog ears and a tail, exclaimed in excitement when she saw someone she knew.

The acquaintance in question was Sir Mezzalt, a Parion Temple Knight and wielder of the Holy Sword Blutgang. He must have been invited to join the parade for his efforts aiding Hayato the Hero with defeating the demon lord.

"The parade is magnificent, I report."

This straight-faced murmur came from Nana, a busty blond beauty who was actually a homunculus just over a year old. The Parion Province accessories woven into her ponytail jingled in the breeze.

"Maybe we shouldn't have turned it down?"



Wearing a blond wig to disguise her purple hair, the tiny Arisa got Nana to lift her up for a better view of the parade.

We did indeed decline an offer to participate in the parade.

Princess Mariest and the rest of Hayato's party had turned it down as well, so it seemed strange for us to participate without them.

In fact, the hero's loyal followers had already boarded the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* that very morning to return to the Saga Empire, with some Parion Province officials and our group seeing them off.

"You do enjoy this sort of thing, don't you, Arisa?"

Arisa's elder sister Lulu gave a quiet giggle. With her glossy black hair and gorgeous Japanese features, the word *beautiful* could only begin to describe her.

The intricate garments of Parion Province suited her wonderfully, too.

"But would it not have seemed arrogant for us to participate when the hero and his party are absent?"

Liza of the orangescale tribe spoke her opinion coolly and politely as always. The scales on her neck and wrists sparkled in the Parion Province sunlight.

"Yeah, I guess so..." Arisa sighed, then perked up. "Oh, the parade's heading this way."

The procession was moving from the main street toward the front of the great cathedral.

As we watched, the parade came closer, and I made eye contact with Sir Mezzalt on the palanquin.

"Mrrr?"

"Wow, he's glaring daggers at you, Master."

Was he angry that I'd borrowed his Holy Sword without asking when he was unconscious during the fight against the demon lord?

"That's ridiculous. If he's going to blame anyone, he should blame himself for being too inexperienced to hold his own against the demon lord for long."



“Yes, Liza. Mezzalt should remember that Master saved him from danger, I remark.”

Despite my companions’ harsh judgments, I thought that Mezzalt and the Saga Empire’s black knight Ryukken fought pretty hard in the demon lord battle.

“Liza, did you really have to wear armor instead of the traditional dress?”

“Of course. I am Master’s bodyguard, after all.”

Liza’s eyes glinted with pride.

Unlike the others, she wore light armor underneath her veil, and carried her Magic Cricket Spear wrapped in cloth.

The white armor was in my Storage; it would stand out too much in the city, and it needed some maintenance anyway.

“How’s the modified spear working out?”

“I’ve only tested it a little thus far, but I can already tell that it is incredible. I look forward to trying it out against a strong opponent.”

Liza clenched her fist, her fighting spirit on blazing display.

Her beloved spear was sorely outclassed against the likes of a demon lord, so with her permission, I tried fusing it with a shard of Dragon Fang.

When my Ghost Magic spell Bonecraft couldn’t fuse them completely, I added a thin coating around the tip. The fang belonged to the Evil Dragons from the Bottom Stratum of the labyrinth and was enough to enhance its attack power considerably.

The coated Dragon Claw short sword I’d made as a prototype for the spear upgrade was still collecting dust in Storage. Once I improved on it somewhat, I’d have to make more for everyone.

“I’ll find you a chance to do that soon, then.”

“Thank you, Master.”

Of course, we don’t run into demon lord–level opponents very often. But there were bound to be some giant monsters by the inland sea that I could find for her to fight.

“Master, there’s stalls, sir!”

“Smells good?”

“Shall we pick up some snacks?”

“Yaaay!”

“Yes, sir!”

We bought and ate some street food as we headed for the airport of the holy city.

“Mr. Noble!”

When we arrived at the airport, an energetic boy with sandy-colored skin spotted us from the crowd of people in undyed native clothing.

His name was Raito, which sounded like a local version of the English word *light*. He was a motivated young man who came all the way from a neighboring land to Parion Province to look for his father, who had the regionally unusual name of “Iyusahk.” After a chance encounter, I wound up becoming his guardian and bringing him to the holy city.

Now, thanks to the sage’s referral, he was on his way to the Village of Adepts, where his father would likely be found.

While he called it the “Training Village,” this was evidently a nickname. Its official name was the “Village of Adepts.”

He had a rare skill called “Intuition,” and was scouted to go to the Village of Adepts when this natural talent was discovered.

“Didja come to see me off?”

“No, we’re going to the village with you. I am technically your guardian for now, after all.”

I had to at least make sure he was going somewhere safe. Besides, I was a little curious about this “Village of Adepts” myself.

“You’re goin’ on this ‘airship’ thing, too, then? I’ve never seen a flyin’ machine in my life.”

Raito was gazing up at the airship with the same sparkling eyes as the other



kids.

A relic of the Flue Empire era, the hull had a design that was reminiscent of Jomon pottery. It had wings on either side that looked like the masts of a sailing ship.

There was only one airship at the airport's dock this time, as opposed to the four from last time. This must be our ride to the Village of Adepts.

"The airship will be departing soon, children. Please come aboard."

A laid-back middle-aged man in a priest's robes called out to Raito and the other kids. He seemed to be the manager in charge of the group being sent to the Village of Adepts.

The man protested our joining the group at first, but when I showed him the talisman I received from Pontiff Zarzaris as a reward for helping to defeat the demon lord, he quickly changed his tune and permitted us to board.

Clearly, the talisman had more influence than I realized; he lavished us with the royal treatment for the entire journey, making me a little uncomfortable.

"This airship is awfully slow, isn't it?"

"It seems about right to me. Aside from a little support from wind mages, it's mostly only propelled by the wind."

"Mm. Weak wind."

It certainly felt slow, but even this speed was still three to five times faster than the average carriage.

"But they must at least have a propulsion system for accelerating, right? There were openings on the stern for that. Why don't they use it, I wonder?" Arisa tilted her head.

"If I may, it's to save on fuel. Monster cores are very valuable in Parion Province."

The manager, who'd been trying to calm the excited children, paused to answer Arisa's question.

"Recently, we've had an abundance of cores from defeating the Sandstorm

Soldiers, minions of the demon lord who appeared suddenly. However, this is a rare situation. Usually, Parion Province has few monsters, thanks to the goddess's protection, and we must either send people to neighboring monster territories to collect cores or import them from merchants."

After that explanation, he went on to tell us about the fuel-saving methods.

In addition to depending on the wind for propulsion, they also filled half the cargo spaces with air sacks full of light gas to make the ship more buoyant, minimizing the stress on the engine. At one point, they'd used hydrogen but had switched to a more stable alchemized gas.

"Wow, that's very eco-friendly. I bet it reduces operation costs, and probably has lots of other uses, too."

"Eco-ecooo?"

"Echoes are very important, sir."

Tama and Pochi latched on to Arisa's phrase, nodding along wisely.

If there were no monsters that would get in the way of flying in Parion Province, aside from near the Dens of Evil, then it would probably be safe to use a fast airship for travel within their borders, too.

We gazed out the window and chatted with Raito and the other children to pass the time.

Eventually, the scenery changed from a flat wasteland to a hilly area and finally to a foreboding mountainous region.

"We're here?"

"Goooal, sir."

The airship landed in a clearing near the mountain village.

"This is the Village of Adepts?"

It was an oddly sized settlement, a bit big to be called a village but too small to be a town.

"It seems average, I report."

"Not quite, Nana. Take a closer look at that mountain."



“Yes, Liza. Very mysterious, I report.”

For some reason, only the slope of the mountain behind the village was strangely lush with greenery.

No doubt the sage was doing some kind of forestation experiment.

“And the outer walls are very high for Parion Province.”

Lulu’s observation was right: The wall was over fifteen feet high, a size we hadn’t seen outside the holy city.

Maybe there were monsters or dangerous animals living in this area.

When we descended from the airship, we heard voices clamoring nearby.

“Lively.”

“Yes, this village is full of activity.”

The people on the streets were hurrying along busily, and loud voices rang out from the houses.

“It seems there is extensive practice of martial arts, too.”

Liza was looking toward a distant training field, where a group was calling out drills energetically.

“Mr. Noble! I’mma get registered now.”

We decided to go to the village office with Raito and ask about his father while he was filling out registration paperwork.

I wanted to look into it right away, because his father didn’t show up on my village area map.

“Iyusahk, is it? Just a moment, please...”

At the town hall, a woman in priestess robes flipped through a bulky ledger, looking for the name.

“...It appears he left on a trip to the mines a half moon ago. He was sent to help the priests there.”

That reminded me that Raito said his father had a power similar to Pontiff Zarzaris’s, whose Unique Skill Heal All could cure anyone’s ailments.

“Could I ask for directions to the mine?”

“I’m terribly sorry. I’m afraid only those with the permission of the sage or the pontiff are allowed to visit that area.”

I tried showing her the talisman and asking again, but even then, she just apologized profusely and couldn’t give me permission.

Well, if it was a top-secret area, I supposed there was no point in pushing the subject. Especially since she’d said Raito’s father should be back in ten days or so.

“Mr. Noble! I’m all done!”

When I updated Raito on his father, he grinned and scratched under his nose. “So I’mma see my dad in ten days? Heh-heh, I can’t hardly wait.”

“Oh, are you Raito? I’ll bring you to meet your instructor. Please follow me.”

“Cool! Can Mr. Noble come, too?”

“Mr....?”

The village office priestess looked at me in confusion. “I’m his guardian for now,” I explained.

“His guardian? I suppose some high-ranking priests have their apprentices check in on things here, although it’s rarely a foreign noble. Still, if you are his guardian, that ought to be fine.”

She gave a slight nod, permitting us to follow.

“Ding, ding?”

“Ding-dong, sir.”

As we passed through the square on our way to our destination, roughly thirty men and women were broken into a few teams having a mock battle.

“The instructors here are very skilled.”

“Yes, Liza. They are watching their students very closely, I praise.”

While no one in the training group particularly stood out, they were all engaged very seriously, clearly not holding back. The instructors were weaving



their way through the students, correcting any bad habits and giving them hints.

“Music.”

“Are these local folk instruments, I wonder?”

“What an unusual sound.”

They were clearly practicing, repeating the same phrase over and over.

Some of them had a poor sense of rhythm, which was rather relatable for me.

“Sculptuuure?”

“There’s pottery and woodworking, too, sir!”

There were workshops scattered here and there, all giving lessons, which were fun to watch.

“Hey, Master...” Arisa tugged on my sleeve and whispered in my ear. “Doesn’t something seem kinda off to you?”

“How so?”

“Try ‘Appraising’ them.”

I “Appraised” the students as instructed but didn’t find any with unusual skills.

When I told Arisa as much, she nodded, as if I’d hit the nail on the head.

“For a Village of Adepts, doesn’t it seem like most of the kids don’t have any skills? It doesn’t look like they’re all brimming with natural abilities or talent, as far as I can tell.”

“Aah, I see what you mean...”

Now that she pointed it out, I noticed that while they all seemed enthusiastic, plenty of the students didn’t seem to be naturally “adept” at their field of study.

Maybe it just seemed that way because the teachers were so talented, though.

“This will be your training area.”

As Arisa and I were talking about this, we reached our destination.

Raito entered the building the priestess indicated, and we followed behind her.

“Hello there. Could you tell me your name?”

“My name’s Raito. I know it’s a weird name, but my dad says it means ‘light’ where he grew up.”

*Hmm. Maybe it’s just a coincidence?*

Raito’s father’s name didn’t sound Japanese, so he probably wasn’t a reincarnation. All the reincarnations and heroes I’d met so far had Japanese names, almost without exception.

“That’s a nice name. So, what is your ‘aptitude,’ hmm?”

“Huh...?”

“The boy’s aptitude is ‘Intuition,’ Guru Alcal.”

As Raito hesitated, the priestess intervened on his behalf.

“I see. Very unusual. Raito, there are lots of children here like you who are too rare to fit into normal classrooms. It’s not bad to be different from other people, though. Trust the sage who discovered you and devote yourself to your training, and I’m sure the Holy Woman will recognize you in time, too.”

With that, the guru introduced Raito to the other children in the classroom and had him sit at a circular table.

Only half listening to the other children’s introductions, I stood in the corner so I wouldn’t disrupt the class, feeling like a guardian on parents’ day.

“I’m Raito. What’s your name?”

Raito started talking to the entitled-looking boy next to him.

“I am Jijireaz, second son of Pastor Yubel of the holy city. Judging by your skin, I’m guessing you’re sandfolk?”

“Yep. Nice to meetcha, Jijireaz.”

“Ha-ha. Damn. I’ve never seen a sandfolk be so casual with a pastor’s son who they just met.”



An impish kid interrupted when he heard Raito's frank response.

"Cut it out, Karkas. You know the sage says stuff like race and class doesn't matter in this village. Besides, the Holy Woman taught us..."

"Yeah, I know, Jijireaz. Everyone is born with the equal right to be happy, right?"

This Holy Woman sounded relatively forward-thinking for someone born in this world.

Come to think of it, the sage didn't really show any prejudice toward beastfolk, either.

"I don't like sayings that just sound pretty," Karkas huffed. "I prefer the pontiff's way of thinking, being practical instead of going on about principles."

"Gotcha. I'll tell the Holy Woman you said that next time I see her, then."

"H-hey, c'mon, don't do that! I was just joking! I love the Holy Woman, flowery beliefs and all! If she got mad at me, life wouldn't be worth living."

Yikes, that wasn't very nice.

I felt like I was getting a good idea of the Holy Woman's personality just by listening to the boys.

"Is this Holy Woman pretty? I wanna see her."

"Yeah, she's real dainty and beautiful. She's got white robes that look like clouds, and they look awesome with her hair that's as black as the night sky. Even when I say stupid stuff, she just smiles and never gets mad."

*I wouldn't mind meeting her myself.*

"Guilty."

Mia pointed at me, as if she'd read my mind.

Come on, it's not like I was planning on cheating. Besides, I should be allowed to think whatever I want, at least.



"All right, we're heading out. If you need anything, just send me a letter. I'll

help out however I can.”

“Thanks, Mr. Noble. I’mma be fine, though. My dad’s gonna be back in ten days.”

I said my farewells with Raito outside the classroom.

Originally, we planned to stay in the village for a few days, but our plans changed when a horse arrived from the holy city with an urgent summons from Pontiff Zarzaris.

The letter from the pontiff said that he was having a celebratory banquet in honor of the Saga Empire party and wanted me to participate as well. The group from the Saga Empire that joined us in exploring the Dens of Evil to defeat the demon lord must have returned to the holy city.

Along with the letter, he even sent a large carriage to pick us up.

It would take some time to reach the holy city by carriage, so we were apparently staying a night in a village along the way.

We decided to have a late lunch at the village’s dining hall.

They served cold carbonated water instead of normal spring water. Evidently, there was a carbonated spring nearby.

“...I can’t say it’s very good.”

“There’s no meat, but it’s not...*bad*, sir...”

Arisa and Pochi were right. The food at the general dining hall was mediocre at best.

“That’s ’cause we get food that the chefs in training made for practice. Least it’s free, though. If you want good grub, you gotta go to the teachers’ dining hall. The cooking gurus and advanced students make some real good stuff there.”

“Even Adepts gotta train before they get good.”

“Yeah, like how people doing the Rite of the Crescent Moon—”

“Shh...!”

One of the men who was chatting to us cheerfully silenced the other one in

the middle of what must have been a slip of the tongue.

It was probably some secret training or ritual that only residents of the village were allowed to know about.

After a moment of awkward silence, one of the men quickly raised his glass and shouted, “To the sage!” prompting another to toast “To the fair Holy Woman!” and soon the room was full of people praising the saint and Holy Woman.

That was a little strange in itself, but at least the awkwardness was cleared up.

We quickly finished our meal and headed toward the carriage that was apparently waiting for us at the entrance to the village.

“Moron! Don’t let your guard down till the very end!”

“But sir—”

“Don’t talk back to me! This is all part of the sage’s teachings!”

“...All right. I’ll do it.”

As we walked down a narrow road, we heard the voices of a master and student from inside a workshop.

“Like I’d work with some stupid sandfolk!”

“Silence, foolish youngster! All the great sage seeks is Adepts! Your race doesn’t matter one bit! If you can’t work together, leave this village right now!”

While it sounded like some of the newbies still had prejudiced views, the gurus who had been trained by the sage had no patience for such things. I was glad I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone treating Raito poorly because he was a sandfolk.

“Now then, everyone. Let us give thanks to the Holy Woman for another blessed day.”

A group of priestesses were praying in some kind of place of worship.

I assumed it was a Parion Temple, since there was a statue of Parion, but they seemed to be praying to the Holy Woman.



Maybe they were worshipping Parion by way of the Holy Woman or something?

“Master, carriage located, I report.”

“Fancy.”

The carriage waiting to pick us up at the village entrance was of the luxurious sort reserved for bishops and higher-ranking priests in the holy city. This might be my first time riding in a carriage pulled by six horses. Hopefully, that meant the ride wouldn't be too hard on our rear ends.



“Starviiiing?”

As we approached the village where we'd be staying the night, Tama gazed out the window and commented quietly.

“What, you're hungry again already?”

“Nooooo...”

Tama pointed outside the carriage.

A number of sandfolk were slumped in the shade of trees that looked like baobabs.

“Maybe they're just cooling off?” Arisa suggested.

There was indeed a cool breeze coming from the direction of the shade where the people were resting.

The breeze had an unusually high moisture level for the normally dry air of Parion Province. There were short shrubs and moss growing around the trees, almost like a natural green carpet.

“But they're skinnyyyy?”

“They don't have much energy, sir.”

Checking my map, I saw that many of them had the “Hunger” condition, and a few were even all the way to “Starving.”

I decided to bring food to the local temple later and see if they could run a

soup kitchen.

“Do you think they had a poor harvest?”

“But the field over there looks like it’s bearing plenty of fruit.”

Lulu pointed at a field that was full of black leaves.

According to my AR display, it was a vegetable called **nilbok**. I hadn’t seen any in the holy city.

Just then, a human man with a healthy complexion approached the people resting beneath the trees, his shoulders squared and lackeys in tow.

“Damned lazy sandfolk! Get back to work!”

“B-but milord, we’re too hungry to move...”

“Quit complaining! I just fed you some nilbok yesterday!”

The sandfolk laborer didn’t appear to be a slave, but he was certainly being treated like one.

“...That nasty stuff don’t even count as food.”

“How dare you!” The human man flew into a rage at a muttered comment from one of the sandfolk. “We’re only stuck growing nilbok because you bastards won’t let us cut down the breezebranch trees! If you don’t like nilbok, I’d be happy to get rid of those awful trees that kill the rest of our crops!”

Considering all the weeds and moss growing near these “breezebranch trees,” I suspected that rather than spreading toxins, they were simply stronger at drawing water out of the soil than were ordinary plants and produce.

“P-please don’t!”

“The breezebranch tree is our guardian deity!”

“You can’t cut them down, no matter what!”

The sandfolk stood up shakily, putting themselves between the man and the breezebranch trees.

Although the situation seemed like it might escalate at any moment, the man’s lackeys managed to calm him down and avoid disaster.

“Hmph, if you don’t want those trees cut down, you’d better make do with nilbok!”

At this, the sandfolk were driven back to their farm work.

“That’s right, work, you scum! This is part of your training! If you build up good deeds and earn the blessing of Goddess Parion, you might be lucky enough to be reborn as humans in your next life.”

Now that was some serious hate speech.

Arisa started rolling up her sleeves. I managed to stop her from jumping out of the carriage and giving him a piece of her mind.

“How awful...! Here I thought there wasn’t much discrimination in this country. Obviously, some people still manage!”

Arisa muttered darkly.

Discrimination was still widespread even in twenty-first-century Earth. Maybe some humans will always be like this no matter where you go.

“It’s like this within the town, too, huh...?”

The provincial town was so destitute that it was hard to believe it was so close to the flourishing holy city.

All the manual labor was done by sandfolk and other demi-humans, and we saw several priests and other humans abusing them horribly in the name of ascetic “training.” Treatment of the sandfolk was especially poor.

“The temple is very elaborate.”

“Hmm, I smell an evil priest at work here...”

Given that this nation is named after Parion, I don’t think it’s all that unusual for a temple that also serves as a government building to be so notable.

“Good evening, honored guests. We have prepared an evening meal for you as well, humble though it may be. We would be most appreciative if you might regale us with stories of the conquest of the demon lord at the dinner table.”

An exceedingly humble holy overseer welcomed us in, and an amiable priest led us to get settled in our lodging, which was normally reserved for high-



ranking priests.

“This place is even more luxurious than the nobles’ hotels in Shiga Kingdom.”

“Pretty carvings?”

“Mm. Elegant.”

Tama and Mia took a keen interest in the carvings on the furniture and pillars.

“Please relax and make yourselves at home until dinner. If you wish for any assistance, you need only ring this bell, and I or one of your assigned priests-in-training will come to your aid at once. Please do not hesitate to call on us.”

This priest didn’t seem to have any prejudices or reactions toward other races; he treated the beastfolk girls and Mia exactly the same as the rest of our group. He seemed like a trustworthy guy.

“Well, I would like to distribute some food to the less fortunate. Is there any way I could get permission from the holy overseer or the head priest?”

The “holy overseer” was the local equivalent of the Shiga Kingdom’s “constable” or “viceroy.”

“By ‘the less fortunate,’ am I correct in thinking you mean the sandfolk and other minorities?” The priest lowered his voice as he asked.

I nodded. “Why, will that be a problem?”

“I’m afraid both the holy overseer and the head priest are firmly human supremacists...”

“Would it help if we made an offering to the temple?” Arisa asked, poking her head in through the doorway.

“That is certainly a possibility. Each has all manner of expenses for their expected service in the holy city, I imagine.”

If money could solve the problem, then the rest was simple.

I handed the priest a pouch full of gold coins as an offering to the temple. Though I tried to give him a few coins for his trouble as well, he rejected that as unnecessary. *I guess not all the priests at this temple are corrupt.*

Before long, he returned with the permission I requested, and I gave out

ingredients and wages to the staff they assigned to give out the food. It wasn't much, but the subordinate workers of the temple happily accepted it. I figured people would be more likely to accept food from temple workers than from a stranger like me anyway.

Since it was nearly time for dinner, I sent the rest of my group back to our rooms to get dressed.

Since many of the priests attending the dinner were prejudiced against other races, only Nana and I were joining. The temple staff agreed to bring food to the room for the rest of our members.

"Discrimination runs deep here, I declare."

Nana and I were all dressed up and on our way to the banquet.

"The existence of the demon lord's minions, the Sandstorm Soldiers, worsened the discrimination against sandfolk. However, it's also because they were considered savages that attacked humans since before Parion Province was founded."

The priest looked sheepish as he explained why racism against sandfolk was so strong.

It was similar to how people in Seiryuu City were strongly prejudiced against beastfolk.

All the priests, save for the holy overseer, were already seated at the banquet hall.

"Welcome, Sir Pendragon. And is this your wife, I presume?"

The head priest spread his arms wide from the host's seat, welcoming us.

"Pleased to meet you, Head Priest. This is Nana—my vassal, not my wife."

"Oh-ho, is that right? Small wonder that as an upper noble of a large nation even your vassals are beautiful."

This was my first time meeting the head priest, but he was already very friendly. Maybe that was due to the donation I made through the priest.

Finally, the holy overseer entered the room, and the banquet began.

The luxurious temple dinner was in stark contrast with the starving people on the streets. I had seen most of the dishes served at our lodgings in the holy city, many of which involved a lot of time and preparation.

Each of the seats had a young priest or priestess in training on standby to wait on us. Despite the fact that most of the guests were priests, who I thought believed in living a modest lifestyle, their finely tailored robes and expensive accessories would have fit right in with those of any nobles.

Still, I kept my opinions to myself. It wouldn't be mature to insult people who were welcoming me.

Nana and I told the story of the hero's defeat of the demon lord, at the priests' request. I sprinkled in some extra embellishments about the Temple Knights' contributions, since I figured they'd appreciate the lip service.

"Welcome baaack?"

"Welcome back, sir."

When we finished the banquet and returned to the room, we were greeted by some odd-smelling food.

"Is this what they gave you for dinner? There's only one plate..."

"Ah-ha-ha, no, no. We had ourselves a whole feast."

Arisa explained that since the vegetable called "nilbok" wasn't used in their dinner, she asked them to prepare some as an experiment.

"It resembles a black carrot, I report."

"Yes, I'll admit its appearance isn't very enticing..."

Lulu laughed as Nana prodded the food with her chopsticks.

"We were just about to do a taste test. You should try it with us, Master."

The scent wasn't terribly appetizing, either, but I was curious to at least try it. I braced myself and picked up a piece with my chopsticks.

"...Blegh, tastes like gabo fruit."

Arisa was right: The nastiness was a close match for gabo fruit, the utterly disgusting fantasy vegetable produced in Shiga Kingdom. The combined



bitterness and sourness resulted in a violently unpleasant tap dance on the tongue.

According to the priest who was looking after us, it was a famine relief crop imported from the Garleon Alliance; despite its dreadful flavor, it was also so nutritious that one could eat it for every meal and not get sick.

It was able to grow in even the most barren soil, and it served as a staple food for the poorer residents.

“This stuff is their staple food? That sounds horrible.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Maybe the power of the Parion Province City Core was used more for fending off monsters than for successfully growing crops.

I traded some wheat for a small supply of nilbok so I could at least research whether there was any way to make it taste better. I might as well do some experiments during our stay in Parion Province. Maybe it could be used to make a nutritional supplement, like we did with gabo fruit.

While I thought about all this, I made my way alone to Bolenan Forest to work on the silver armor.

I managed to avoid the interference of the winged fairies long enough to enjoy a little rendezvous with Miss Aaze, then headed to the research lab I was borrowing.

“...Huh?”

When I searched my Storage to take out the silver armor for repairs and tweaking, it came up with a list of nearly twenty hits.

“What’s going on?”

It was only then that I realized my silly mistake.

I’d made the silver armor as the girls’ public-facing equipment for the demon lord battle...but before that, I’d made a sort of economy-style white armor along with some scarlet leather armor.

“Oh well, I guess that’s fine...”

I didn't quite trust the economy version in a demon lord battle, so it wasn't a big deal that I'd forgotten about them. I could probably modify the sizes to fit Nana's sisters and Miss Karina.

I would have to make more in that case, since I didn't have enough in adult sizes. Maybe I should make some for Zena, too?

While I did maintenance on my group's silver armor, I also started manufacturing more adult-size frames and adjusting the magic circuits. I changed my name before doing any of this, of course, even though my recognition-inhibiting circuits are good enough that very few people would ever be able to read the creator's name in the first place.

I put all my attention into my work. By the time it was all done, the sun had risen.

Luckily, there was enough of a time difference that I figured I could have a nice breakfast with Miss Aaze before I returned.

## Holy Woman

***Satou here. When I hear the phrase Holy Woman, I tend to picture a mage who's really good at Holy Magic or a talented healer, not just a female saint. I've probably got manga and video games to blame for that.***

"Master, we've arrived at the holy city."

It was only after Liza's observation that I realized the cart had stopped. I was spending the travel time in the carriage thinking about solutions for the poverty in Parion Province and didn't notice we'd reached our destination.

We got out of the carriage and proceeded on foot, since there was a chaotic crowd gathered outside the cathedral.

"I see a lot of injured folks."

"Maybe today is the pontiff's healing day?"

I didn't know if that took place on a fixed date or not, but the square certainly was crowded with sick and injured people, like it had been on the day we first arrived.

"There he iiiis?"

"It's Mr. Pontiff, sir."

Pontiff Zarzaris emerged from the cathedral, concealed by hanging curtains on all sides.

The people in the crowd prostrated themselves immediately, giving me a clear view of the pontiff's location. The sage was once again accompanying him.

A brilliant blue light arose beyond the curtain and began to spread across the square.

At the same time, the cloth fluttered, and I caught a glimpse of the pontiff



and his lengthy white beard. I couldn't help thinking that he looked very tired. Maybe using his Unique Skill was hard on him, especially at his advanced age.

"Feels nice."

"I can feel the tiredness from the journey lifting away."

Mia and Lulu leaned into the soft light.

The pontiff's Unique Skill Heal All appeared to have reached us.

"Mom, your burns are all better!"

"My son's fever went down!"

The light seemed to have healed the injuries and illnesses in the crowd. I heard people celebrating the pontiff's miracle to one another.

"We're so lucky...so blessed..."

"The pontiff really is Parion's apostle!"

"Huzzah for the pontiff! Glory to Goddess Parion!"

The faithful began cheering for the pontiff with tears of gratitude.

"I'm gonna be a priest when I grow up so I can be useful to you, Pontiff."

"Same here! I'm gonna work real hard for you!"

"Me too!"

As the pontiff retreated, my "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on comments from the fresh-faced young boys and girls whose parents had been healed.

He looked exhausted when I caught one last glimpse through the curtain, but the children's pure declarations put a gentle smile on his face.

He staggered on his way back inside, and the sage had to support his weight. Was he really all right...?



"We haven't been to the Heavenly Room in a while."

That evening, we gathered in the Heavenly Room at the top of the great cathedral, to take part in the pontiff's celebratory banquet.

“It feels strange to have a party in a religious institution, though.”

“It’s not really that different from a reception at a church wedding, is it?”

I guess those usually take place outside the church, though.

“Smells goooood?”

“I’m excited to find out what kind of foods there are, sir.”

“It appears there are many goat-based dishes.”

Once the pontiff gave his celebratory address in the Heavenly Room, the banquet itself would take place in an event hall one floor below. The beastfolk girls were sniffing eagerly for the faint whiffs of cuisine that drifted up from downstairs.

“Instruments.”

Mia spotted a group of musicians setting up in one corner.

“That’s a very impressive instrument.”

“It’s almost like they stuck two harps together to make a heart shape. What a crazy number of strings.”

“I am curious about how it sounds, I declare.”

Mia, Lulu, Arisa, and Nana headed toward the band.

I wanted to go with them, but I had to resist and greet the other invitees instead.

“Sir Satou! A most welcome surprise.”

Mr. Kwandoh, a Saga Empire samurai and Pochi and Tama’s beloved Sin Kaage-style master, approached me.

Behind him was Rudoruu, a fellow samurai and master of the Zi-Gain style.

“Did you two just get back today?”

Like the Saga Empire’s black knight Sir Ryukken, the pair of samurai had returned home for a time on the dimensional submarine *Jules Verne* with Hayato’s party and the rest of us. However, their scouting party was left behind in a Den of Evil, so they went to collect their men and ensure their safe return.

“No, we returned yesterday.”

Seeing how tired they looked, I asked if they’d run into trouble retrieving their squad.

“Well, the journey home was not a problem, per se...”

They gave an evasive explanation until I managed to read between the lines.

From the sound of things, their superior, Sir Ryukken, tried to leave them with all the work of finding their men and returning home so he could return to the Saga Empire on a high-speed airship, and they had a great deal of difficulty stopping him.

“I am sure he wishes to report the defeat of the demon lord to His Majesty the Emperor and bask in his reward, and yet...”

Yeah, it was definitely a bad look to leave your subordinates stranded on an expedition while you went home first.

“Well, if it isn’t the honorable Temple Knight who got knocked out cold by the demon lord. I pity the poor Holy Sword that has to suffer such an unworthy wielder.”

“How dare you! I won’t hear any mockery of the holy Parion’s knights from a scoundrel in rust-proofed armor!”

Just then, we heard voices arguing loudly.

The black knight and the Holy Sword wielder Sir Mezzalt were going at it again. *Those two really don’t get along.*

“...This again, eh?”

“I do wish they would simply endeavor to avoid each other for the sake of a celebration, at least.”

The two samurai exchanged weary glances.

Still, after heaving a sigh, they quickly strode toward the source of the shouting to drag their superior out of yet another argument.

The two samurai held back the black knight, while a group of priests formed a human barrier to physically separate the Temple Knight, driving them into

opposite corners of the room.

That should keep the peace for a while.

Soon, the band began to play music with traditional Parion Province folk instruments, clearing away the awkward atmosphere. Though I'd heard the instruments played on the city streets before, these musicians had far more polish, lending the music enough emotional power to touch my heart.

The player on the heart-shaped double harp that Mia and the others had been looking at was especially talented.

She was a priestess of Parion Province, with the title **Student of Musical Saint Solulunia**. Her master's name sounded elf-like to me.

"The holy instrument of the Flue Empire era certainly lives up to its name."

"Yes, you can really feel the weight of history in its tones."

My "Keen Hearing" skill caught this conversation from a couple of slender priests.

Since it was such an interesting instrument, I was hoping to acquire one, but that might not be possible if it was a relic of a civilization that perished hundreds of years ago. Maybe later I could ask some of the musicians if it was possible to get a replica.

While I was listening to the lovely music, the pontiff and Cardinal Dobbunaf arrived. The Saga Empire black knight and the samurai duo, along with the captains of the scouting parties, were summoned to the front to begin the ceremony.

We joined the Temple Knights in the front row to bear witness.

The black knight and the two samurai had already been heavily rewarded by the pontiff, along with the hero's party, the Holy Sword user, and my own party, but now they were participating in this ceremony as the commanding officers of the returned scouting parties.

The priest squadrons, the sage's information specialists, and others who also provided support and intel for the defeat of the demon lord were going to be rewarded on a future date, once all of them had safely returned.

The ceremony finally ended just as I was starting to hear a rhythmic backing beat from Pochi's and Tama's stomachs, and the priests led all of us to the banquet hall.

"Mr. Plates are very pretty, sir."

"Tablecloth, toooo?"

On top of a white tablecloth embroidered with blue thread was an array of porcelain plates and perfectly polished tableware, all sparkling in the light of the enchanted candlesticks.

"It's like we're dining in the heavens." Lulu smiled.

"Nameplates."

"Master, there are names designated at each seat, I report."

"That means we don't have to worry about where to sit."

After Liza's observation, a priest guided us to our respective seats.

We were seated close to the pontiff and the cardinal—though not directly next to them, since the Holy Sword wielder and black knight were in the seats of honor. Luckily, the bickering duo were on opposite sides of the table with the pontiff in the middle, so hopefully we'd get to eat our meal in peace.

"We give thanks to Goddess Parion for our daily blessings..."

As befitting a religious nation, the meal began with a prayer to Parion.

A series of increasingly elaborate Parion Province dishes were served one after another. The cuisine made good use of seafood delivered from the West Gate Area just for the occasion, and even the bishops and pastors who were accustomed to fine cuisine still gave sighs of satisfaction and smacked their lips.

"Eggplant, yummy."

"The grilled eggplant and flame-broiled vegetables are delicious."

"These seashell sauce dishes are very cute, I praise."

Fresh vegetables were evidently a fine delicacy in a desert nation like this. They really were delicious, especially with the expert preparation that brought out their natural flavors. The subtly sour tang of the yogurt-like sauce made for



a unique and enjoyable taste.

“The fried chicken is yummyyyy?”

“This long, skinny Mr. Hamburg is yummy, too, sir.”

Pochi was referring to a meatloaf-like dish of ground goat meat, grilled in a sweet-and-spicy sauce.

“I wouldn’t mind a bit more crunch, but it would be a sin to make any additional requests in the face of such a sumptuous meal.”

Since we were at a fancy banquet, Liza couldn’t crunch on the shrimp and small crabs with their shells and all, lest she draw strange looks from the other attendees.

“Do you not like the food, Arisa?”

Arisa had been quiet for a while, so I prodded her gently.

“Mm, I wouldn’t say that. It’s just...knowing there’s a serious food shortage in the next town over, it’s hard to enjoy this without feeling guilty, you know?”

*Aah, so that’s what’s on her mind?*

“No, Arisa. Eating and enjoying delicious food is respectful to the living things that were sacrificed for the meal, I declare.”

“She’s right, Arisa. Instead of feeling guilty, it’s much more your style to think about what you can do to help those people, don’t you think?”

“...I suppose so. Yes, you’re right! I can appreciate tasty food *and* think of solutions!”

“Yes, Arisa. That is logical, I report.”

Nana and Lulu finally convinced Arisa to cheer up and start eating her food.

After the banquet, Arisa and I would discuss some solutions for the hungry and impoverished citizens.

After the dinner, we went back to the Heavenly Room to chat and listen to music.

There was now a stage set up in the room, where women in priestess robes

were performing a slow, rhythmic dance. Despite the modest outfits, their movements were still rather sensual.

“Did you find the food to your liking?”

As I watched the dance with a glass in one hand, Pontiff Zarzaris and the sage approached us.

“Oh, yes, quite so. There’s nothing quite like the taste of vegetables tended by citizens who don’t even have enough to eat.”

Still seething over the unfortunate scenes we witnessed in the region, Arisa made an uncharacteristically cutting jab at the pontiff.

The target himself only looked sad, but of course the people around him reacted more strongly.

“What a horribly rude girl!”

“How dare you speak to the pontiff that way!”

The pastors who’d been following the pontiff around and flattering him wheeled on Arisa with rage.

“Now, just a moment. You mustn’t blame this young lady... Dear girl, it is just as you say.”

Rather than getting angry at her, the pontiff stopped the pastors from accusing her, and stooped down to Arisa’s eye level to speak to her sincerely.

“It truly is shameful for we who speak the holy teachings to enjoy such luxury while our people cannot eat their fill. I think of it myself quite often. If only we could share the wasteful extravagance served at such gatherings with the populace...”

Judging by his tone and expression, the pontiff really did feel this way.

“Your Grace, haste will not serve you. The only way to achieve your noble ideal of bringing prosperity to all the people is by steadily taking one measure at a time.”

The sage soothed the self-deprecating pontiff.

“I know, Sorijeyro. Thanks to the nilbok you acquired on your travels to other

nations, the number of deaths by starvation has decreased considerably. Now, if we could only get the difficult matter of fish farming sorted out..."

So nilbok, the gross-tasting vegetable that looked like a black carrot, was one of the sage's acquisitions.

It sounded like he was putting in the work to make the pontiff's ideal a reality.

Arisa, evidently reaching the same conclusion, bowed her head meekly to the pontiff. "I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn without knowing the whole story."

"It's quite all right. Without brave souls like yourself who speak their mind, we might simply get accustomed to the current state of things, lament it without taking steps to solve anything, and decline into idleness."

The pontiff magnanimously accepted her apology.

"Well said as always, Your Grace!"

"Our pontiff has such a generous soul."

"I, Jihusoos, am deeply moved by Your Grace's words!"

The surrounding pastors promptly heaped hollow praise on the pontiff. Clearly, they had already forgotten about Arisa and her comment.

*I'm glad they all settled things peacefully...or so I thought, until I noticed the cardinal standing off to one side, staring at the pontiff with a cool impression.*

I guess he didn't think much of the pontiff's intentions and ideals.

"If only they would let His Grace rest..."

The sage seemed to be fed up with the pontiff's hangers-on.

"I apologize for my vassal's outburst, Sir Sage."

"Not at all. His Grace has already granted forgiveness. Besides, a hero who aided in the defeat of the demon lord is surely allowed a minor misstep or two."

The sage didn't seem particularly bothered, dismissing the incident easily.

"The pontiff mentioned something about 'fish farming' earlier. Are they having technical difficulties with it?"

"Are you interested in aquaculture?"

“I just thought I might be able to help in some way.”

“Unfortunately, the problem is with the allocation of magic on a citywide scale. No one person would be able to make a difference alone.”

*Maybe the City Core doesn't have enough magic?*

Even if they wanted to support it with a Magic Furnace, Parion Province doesn't seem to have enough cores to go around.

“Alas, if we had enough water stones three times a man's height to place one in each city, there wouldn't be a problem. Although then again, if that were the case, we could grow far more vegetables and grains without need for cultivation.”

Sadly, even I didn't have that many large water stones in stock.

I had a huge amount of fire stones from labyrinths, and some giant wind and ice stones from the Black Dragon Mountains, but I didn't have that many of the other elements.

“Use thiiiiis?”

Tama produced a small water stone from her Fairy Pack.

She'd probably picked it up from a submerged labyrinth section or on the sugar route.

“...Hrm.”

The sage stared closely at the stone Tama handed him for a moment, then flipped his palm over and turned it into a flower.

“Mew!”

“The stone turned into a flower, sir!”

Tama and Pochi widened their eyes at the sage's parlor trick.

“This, too, is ninjutsu. Would you like to try?”

“Aye!”

“Pochi too, sir!”

With that, the sage handed Tama and Pochi a flower and a water stone.

Despite the girls' excitement, they couldn't copy him that easily without any knowledge of magic tricks and sleight of hand, and their initial attempts all ended in failure.

Still, they kept at it with determination, putting smiles on the faces of the adults around them.

Thanks to Pochi and Tama, the heavy mood in the room lightened a great deal.

"Sir Satou, what are Pochi and Tama doing, hrm?"

"Magic tricks."

"I see. Now that you mention it..."

Mr. Kwandoh and Mr. Rudoruu ambled over while enjoying some fruity Parion Province wine.

"Kwandoooh?"

"And Rudoruu, sir!"

As soon as they spotted the Saga Empire samurai pair, Tama and Pochi abandoned their magic trick and ran over.

They'd gotten close while training together, hence the delight on the girls' faces when the samurai patted their heads.





“Sir Satou, may I ask of your plans henceforth?”

“If you wish to visit Saga Empire, I do recommend coming along on our airship, I daresay.”

“I appreciate the offer, but we have to travel around the western regions for work first...”

It is technically my job as Vice-Minister of Tourism, even if we’ll mostly just be relaxing and sightseeing.

“Is that right? Then perhaps you might like to meet the samurai general of Blacksmoke Island or the master swordsmith of Titan Mountain?”

“Oh? What are they like?”

The names seemed pretty self-explanatory, but I figured it didn’t hurt to ask.

“We ourselves have never met them in person, I daresay. The samurai general is said to be the most skilled samurai in all the west, so strong that even the hero offered a place in his party.”

“Blacksmoke Island is where samurai who have broken off from the Saga Empire gather. As such, many sword styles mingle there and develop in unique ways. I am sure it would be valuable training for one who aspires to be a samurai, such as Pochi.”

“That’s amazingly amazing, sir! Pochi wants to train, sir!”

Pochi jumped up and down with excitement.

“And ninjaaas?”

“I believe there are some who ended up there as well, though I hear little about them in rumors.”

“Too baaad?”

Tama’s ears went flat with disappointment, and Rudoruu patted her on the head.

“What sort of person is the master swordsman? I inquire.”

“We have not met, either. They served the previous hero—Sir Hayato’s

predecessor—and were also teacher to Sir Juleburg of the Shiga Eight Swordsmen.”

“Rusus and Fifi once said, ‘Master swordsman is too polite a way to put it. More like a sword monster, or a sword beast.’”

If this swordsman taught Sir Juleburg and drew such a reaction out of warriors like the tiger-eared Rusus and the wolf-eared Fifi, they must be seriously impressive.

“In that case, I would love to request a sparring match.”

“Yes, Liza. I want to defend against a master swordsman’s blade, I declare.”

Liza clenched her fist with fire in her eyes, and Nana took the same pose, albeit without any expression.

Despite the contrast in their faces, they both clearly wanted to train with this master swordsman.

“Sounds like our itinerary’s filling up fast.”

“Fine by me.”

There was no rush on this journey. We could take things one stop at a time.

“Mrrr.”

“Don’t make that face, Mia. There’s apparently a place called the ‘Sage’s Tower’ in the western regions—you might be able to learn some new magic there.”

“Interested.”

Mia puffed up her cheeks sulkily until Arisa piqued her interest.

I wondered if the tower had any connection with this sage, Sorijeyro. Either way, I was very interested myself, if only to investigate whether they had some way of turning the chimeras from Yowork Kingdom back into their human forms.



“So this is the cardinal’s home...”

The day after the banquet, I visited the mansion of Cardinal Dobbunaf, the number two of Parion Province.

I was there on a lunch invitation that I'd received after the banquet, though I wasn't sure why.

The carriage that came to pick me up passed through the gates without stopping and headed toward the parking area at the entrance.

*...A black shadow.*

On the way in, I saw someone dressed all in black, which was unusual in Parion Province, where white or beige clothes were common.

At first I thought it was the sage visiting, but according to my AR display, it was actually his apprentice.

He was probably at the cardinal's place on an errand for the sage.

"Welcome, Sir Pendragon."

"It's an honor to be invited to your magnificent home."

The cardinal came to the entrance to greet me personally and led me to the dining room.

I noticed at once that the long dining table in the center of the large room was only set for the cardinal and myself.

Feeling uneasy about the situation, I decided to find out what he wanted before lunch.

"So, if I might ask what you wished to discuss with me today...?"

"That can wait until after we eat. I gathered some western delicacies for your gourmet palate today. I would very much like to hear your thoughts on them."

*Oh-ho, now that sounds interesting.*

I decided to focus on the food for now and let his business wait until later. Delicious dishes are much more important than such matters, after all.

"For an aperitif, we've acquired 'God's Mercy' from the 'judicial state' Sherifardo. It has the rare distinction of an alcohol that neither causes hangovers nor drunken stupors."

A small amount of an amber liquid was poured into a transparent glass, and the sweet scent of honey wafted subtly to my nose, suggesting that it was some kind of mead.

“...Aah, that’s good. Such fine drink is wasted on the people of Sherifardo.”

Even though this was supposed to be a tasting, the cardinal drained his glass in one go. I guess it must be a favorite of his.

“I understand why that ascetic lot at the Urion Central Temple are so reluctant to part with it.”

Evidently the main Urion Temple was in this Sherifardo place.

After our sampling, the cardinal nodded, and the waiter filled both our glasses with the fine golden liquor.

“Let us toast.”

We raised our glasses to each other’s good health and happiness, and I brought my drink to my lips.

The silky-sweet honey taste and the light spirits tickled my taste buds, followed by the scent of nectar-rich flowers filling my nose. It was undoubtedly one of the most delicious meads I’d ever tasted. The only one that might top it was the elves’ top-shelf mead that I drank in Bolenan Forest.

We enjoyed our drinks in silence until the first course was brought out to the table.

“The appetizer is from Aubehr Republic, the ‘land of love and flowers.’ It’s a ‘flower of love’ salad, made in the ‘goddess’s sigh’ style. This one is extra special because we brought in a chef directly from Aubehr Republic to create the top-secret dressing.”

*Ooh, hiring a chef from abroad just for an appetizer? How luxurious.*

There was a flower on top made from thin-sliced ham and gelatin—no, wait. According to my AR display, they were real flowers. They were edible, not just a garnish. Maybe that wasn’t too unusual, since there were edible flowers like chrysanthemums and dandelions in Japan.

As much as it was already a feast for the eyes, the chef was watching from the



shadows in obvious suspense, so I decided to dig in.

*Now that's an interesting sensation.*

The pink flowers that looked like thin ham broke into pieces once I put them in my mouth, leaving behind a sweet and slightly sour taste as they dissolved. The flowers I mistook for gelatin melted on the tongue with a slow, savory spread, followed by the popping of carbonation.

After the sharp carbonated flower, the secret honey-based dressing enveloped my tongue in soft sweetness, cleansing my palate without leaving any aftertaste. That made it easy to enjoy the varied tastes of the salad free of the influence of other tastes and with no need for periodic sips of water.

“Mm-hmm, what an entertaining mouthfeel. And the flavor is excellent. I can see why the envoy from Tenion Central Temple is always bragging about it.”

Whoops, I got too focused on savoring the flavor. When the cardinal voiced his thoughts in my place, the chef hiding behind a pillar breathed a sigh of relief.

They requested my opinion as well, so I tried to convey how delicious it was without prattling on too much.

“The soup is from Pialork Kingdom, the ‘land of transformation.’ Allow me to present ‘rainbow soup in praise of the hero god,’ flavored to your fancy. You may use the seasonings from the other dishes however you please.”

Next to the bowl of amber soup was an assortment of small dishes in the shape of seashells. In addition to rock salt and pepper, they were also full of things like powdered pepper and even cinnamon. When the seasonings were mixed in with the ear pick–like spoon, the color of the soup would change. It was a very fantasy-world dish.

As for the all-important tasting, the initial soup base without anything added had a fairly standard creamy taste. However, when I added the flavorings in the recommended order, it changed for the worse every time.

“...This is a very unusual soup. Since the flavor changes every time you add seasoning, it's exciting to the very last drop.”

“No need to mince words. The Zaicuon Central Temple has always been much

too boastful.”

Clearly, the cardinal didn’t think much of the soup, either.

As soon as we both put our spoons down, the next dish was brought to the table.

In the background, the waiters and kitchen staff were doing a great job of making sure the meal proceeded smoothly.

“This seafood dish is from the Garleon Alliance, known as the ‘maritime nation.’ It is called ‘swordtip tuna and kraken with vinegar-flower sauce, fit for a legend.’ We’ve had Parion Temple priestesses thoroughly cleanse the miasma away, so please enjoy it without fear.”

*I guess it’s sort of like tuna and octopus carpaccio?* The thinly sliced sashimi was amply arranged, like flowers.

The generously filled serving plate was made to look like the blade of the “swordtip tuna” fish. Maybe the swordlike shape was what made it “fit for a legend”?

“...Delicious.”

As soon as I tasted it, I blurted out without thinking.

The swordtip tuna had a rich flavor that melted in the mouth. As it faded, it was followed by the gentle fragrance of the vinegar-based sauce. The kraken was crisp, firm, and just as tasty. The only way to get it like this was to expertly kill it as soon as it was caught and serve it soon after. A lot of good work went into this dish.

On top of that, the cool carpaccio was very refreshing in such a hot region.

“I’m glad it’s to your liking, Sir Pendragon. You seem to be well-acquainted with kraken. Are they common in the Shiga Kingdom seas?”

“They aren’t found directly off the coast very often, but we saw them often by the peninsula and on the sugar route.”

Since I caught them whenever I saw them, there was more octopus kraken and squid kraken meat in my Storage than I could ever possibly go through, especially given the enormous size of each one.

While we were discussing the monsters in the Shigan seas, the carpaccio vanished in the blink of an eye. Luckily, I had a good idea of what kind of vinegar to use to make the sauce so that I could reproduce the dish for my friends once I had all the ingredients.

The next dish was carried out on a serving dish covered by a silver cloche.

“Today’s meat dish is ‘rebirth of the Orange King Sheep, bathed in sunlight,’ from Sania Kingdom, the ‘land of the sun.’ The beast was dismantled on the spot once hunted, and its meat placed into an Item Box with an ice stone, transported from Sania Kingdom by air via transfer from three wyverns in total. The highly skilled chef who prepared it trained in Sania Kingdom for ten years and even worked as a royal chef there. Please be sure to savor every bite.”

This seemed to be the main course, judging by the head waiter’s enthusiastic explanation.

There were several different preparations of meat on the plate: roasted ribs with an orange sauce in front, liver pâté with a thin naan-like bread on the right, giblet stew on the left, and in the deep-dish center...miso-stewed Orange King Sheep brains.

“Sir Pendragon, if this is your first time trying this dish, I recommend starting with the deep dish in the middle and proceeding clockwise to avoid any mingling of flavors. You can also rinse your mouth out with lemon water.”

The cardinal was being very kind. As a fellow gourmet, maybe he considered helping other people to enjoy food just as important as enjoying it himself.

I thanked him for the advice and spooned out a bite in his suggested order.

Despite its elastic-looking appearance, the miso-stewed brains gave way under my spoon like tofu. I brought it to my lips with some of the broth and let it slide into my mouth. The first flavor I tasted was the mellow soup.

Made with bouillon and coconut milk, it cleansed my taste buds as it washed over my tongue, bringing out the delicate flavor and viscous texture of the brains. It was delicious. I’d been a little reluctant to try sheep brains, but now I had to fight the urge to gobble it all up.

The liver I tried next was rich and tasty, with none of the unpleasant

bloodiness or coppery taste you might expect. Even someone who didn't like liver could probably enjoy this.

Next, I tasted the roasted ribs. The fat was strongly savory. Instead of using a knife and fork, I tried eating it with my hands, at the cardinal's suggestion, which filled me with satisfaction during a wait that awakened my wild appetite. I'd have to find a way to have the beastfolk girls try this dish.

Finally, I enjoyed a variety of textures in the giblet stew, then cleansed my mouth with the lemon water and went back to the beginning.

Although the dish was quite substantial, I repeated the cycle of deliciousness until I found my plate completely empty.

"...The Heraluon Central Temple priests are right to pride themselves on this dish. Were it not for those pesky scorpions in the sand sea, we could trade far more freely with them..."

Finishing his dish before me, the cardinal muttered to himself as he sipped his wine.

"For dessert, we present 'holy font of knowledge, lava style, flower garden flavor,' from the 'Tower of Wisdom,' in the City-State of Kalisork."

A transparent jelly and globular fruits were presented to us in cocktail glasses on a large plate.

The waiter reached over my shoulder and tapped on the fruit jelly with what looked like a glass muddler.

Immediately, the fruit jelly turned a bright vermilion, and produced petals that flowed over the sides of the glass onto the plate like lava overflowing from a volcano. There was already sauce on the plate in the design of flowers, creating a faint gradation as the fruit spilled into it.

"What a delightful performance," I said to the cardinal, who looked just as surprised as I was.

"It would seem even those research-obsessed boors at the Parion Central Temple are capable of entertaining people."

The cardinal cleared his throat, then picked up his spoon.

I took a bite of the dessert after appreciating it with my eyes a little longer, curious if it was as delicious as it looked.

Although the jelly was just normal jelly, the fruit that produced the vermilion color had a delicious flavor. The sweetness of the round fruit softened the slight sourness. In addition to being cut into perfect spheres, some of the fruits were coated in sugar or a layer of different jelly.

It was so tasty that I ended up leaving the cocktail glass spotless.

In the end, I enjoyed my dreaded lunch with the cardinal much more than I expected. He might get along with the Ougoch Duchy gourmet noble pair or the prime minister of the Shiga Kingdom.

“Trade, you say...?”

After a deeply satisfying meal, we moved to the salon for the main order of business.

“That’s right. I want to increase trade with the Shiga Kingdom.”

*Go ahead and increase it, then?*

“Achieving the pontiff’s ideal will require more money than taxes and charity alone can provide. That is why I want to augment our trading.”

“That does sound like a good plan, but I’m a tourism minister, not a diplomat. I don’t have any authority over foreign trading, although I can certainly inform the appropriate department.”

I’ve seen Parion Province trade ships in Shiga Kingdom before. Surely there was no point in asking me for an introduction now.

“Yes, I know. We already conduct trade with Duke Ougoch of Sutoandell and Tartumina’s viceroy Count Hoinen. But that is not nearly enough. Jade silk and other local specialties will not catch the discerning eyes of the merchants of the inland sea.”

*Aah, so he wants some new product?*

Incidentally, the “inland sea” he mentioned is an inlet in the center of the western regions, connected to the ocean at the westernmost tip and extending far to the east. It sounds similar to the Mediterranean Sea in Europe back on



Earth.

“Trade with the western regions has flourished by way of the inland sea. The food we just dined upon was also brought here by ship. But because of this thriving ship transport, there is always a demand for new products.” The cardinal looked me square in the eyes. “As Vice-Minister of Tourism, you must be familiar with the local specialties of your kingdom, correct? And I am told you even operate a fleet of trading ships on the famously dangerous sugar route.”

I didn’t expect him to know about Dragonpen Trading Company. That’s especially impressive intelligence gathering in a world where information moves so slowly.

“I am only an investor in that trading company. Their actual management is up to the people who run it.”

“That’s fine. If there is profit to be made, the merchants will take interest.”

With that, the cardinal spread out a scroll on the table.

It was a list of high-cost products from the Shiga Kingdom, including some I had never heard of and others I’d seen there before.

I pretended to inspect the list closely as I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact the manager of the Echigoya Company. She confirmed that they were all likely to be very profitable. Even if their market prices varied here, the payoff was probably worth the risk of losing trade ships to storms or monsters.

“That’s a very tempting list.”

...If it didn’t mean putting people’s lives on the line.

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic, hmm?”

“Well, I’m concerned about the safety of the crew on such a long-distance journey.”

“Such risk is natural. Any sailor worth his salt is a gambler willing to stake his life for the chance of a high profit.”

Maybe so, but the seas in this world are way too dangerous.

Even if I was willing to fund people who were already sailors looking for a fresh start, like with the Dragonpen Trading Company, I was reluctant to put lives in danger for my own benefit.

“And I’d be willing to provide a Lamplight and a priest to maintain it for each ship in the fleet. Then there would be no problem, yes?”

He was referring to Parion’s Lamplight, which was apparently a monster repellent used on the high seas; most monsters feared the light and would avoid the ships. That being said, it wasn’t a perfect solution because monsters from the deep seas or the skies might still attack anyway.

When used normally, it would only last for the round trip to the Garleon Alliance at the far end of the inland sea at best, not nearly long enough to reach the Shiga Kingdom. However, if a priest who’d received special training to maintain a Lamplight was on board, the ship could make the round trip to the Shiga Kingdom and back.

“There are a few dangerous areas like Blacksmoke Island, but it would still be far safer than journeying without a Lamplight. I have been told that the sailors of this land fear storms and rough seas far more than any monsters.”

The cardinal seemed quite confident.

I connected to the manager of the Echigoya Company with Telephone again and used my Kuro voice to explain that a cardinal from Parion Province had approached me about trading the items on the aforementioned list. She approved the proposal before I could even talk about preparing ships for the journey.

She said she had leads on an experienced captain and crew, so I left the rest in the manager’s capable hands.

“Very well. If you have such confidence in the matter, I will seriously consider it. I just need some time to discuss things with the trading company I frequently work with.”

“Excellent! I’d be happy to provide a wyvern messenger to deliver your letter.”

The cardinal shook my hand in high spirits and told me about all the best

cuisine of the lands surrounding the inland sea.

I learned that many nobles and artisans evacuated to the western regions when the Flue Empire fell, making for an especially rich culture of food and art there. I was looking forward to making some fun stops and exploring, in addition to my group's training.

"Incidentally, Sir Pendragon, are you familiar with either of these substances?"

The cardinal gave a signal to a servant, who placed two ampoule-shaped vials on the table, one red and one purple.

According to my AR display, the red vial contained a concentrated version of demonic potion called "archdemonic potion," while the purple vial contained a magic recovery potion called "high-concentration magic stimulator." Both were marked as lethal illegal drugs in the notes column.

"No, I've never seen these before."

"I see. They were found at a Light of Freedom base in the West Gate Area territory. If they've never been found in Shiga Kingdom, perhaps they are newly developed drugs."

It was no surprise that the lethal illegal drugs were connected to the demon lord-worshipping cult Light of Freedom.

"What sort of effects do they have?"

"A level-three death row convict who drank the red archdemonic potion transformed into a grotesque creature of ogre-like stature and went on a rampage. Three level-thirty Temple Knights were finally able to restrain him, but not before six prison guards were killed. I am told that the prisoner had a cowardly personality until he drank the potion, after which he was as violent as a raging camel."

It would be a real problem if they mass-produced and distributed a drug like this, then.

"Did he turn back to normal after he was restrained?"

"No, it seems he died not long after. The drug is probably just meant to make

sacrificial soldiers. Those demon lord cultists do truly horrible things.”

As an official in charge of justice, the cardinal must see such a terrorist weapon of a drug as a serious threat.

“And what does the purple drug do?”

“We don’t know. They tried it on three death row prisoners and were only able to confirm that it restored their magic, as the name suggests. Within seconds of drinking it, all of them gushed blood from every orifice and died.”

*Oogh, I didn’t want to picture that.*

What a nasty drug.

“That’s a frightening notion. How are such substances handled in Parion Province?”

“We dispose of them all, obviously. I only preserved these two samples to report to the pontiff. The rest were poured into sand and burned to ashes under my direct supervision. They had to be destroyed before any warmongers saw them, or Parion Province would set off the powder keg of the western regions.”

Oh, right. Parion Province mediates conflicts between the western regions, much to the annoyance of nations that want to go to war.

As I talked about this with the cardinal, a priestess-in-training in a maid-like outfit brought a letter to him.

“Sir Pendragon, this one is for you.”

The cardinal brought out a second envelope contained in the first one and handed it to me.

Though I didn’t recognize the wax seal, my AR display told me it was that of the Holy Woman’s shrine.

“It’s from the Holy Woman?”

I removed the seal and found that the letter inside was an invitation from the Holy Woman.

*Why was it delivered to the cardinal’s mansion?*

My confusion must have shown on my face, because the cardinal caught my eye and told me about *his* letter. “It said to pass that on to you.”

Using the number two most powerful person in the province as a gofer? Now that’s bold.

“Why him, and not me...?”

My “Keen Hearing” skill caught a quiet grumble from the cardinal.

Evidently, his slightly disgruntled mood was because I was the one being summoned instead of him, not because he was being used as a delivery boy.

I couldn’t blame him for being disappointed, since I heard in the Village of Adepts that the Holy Woman was a beautiful black-haired woman.

“Listen, Sir Pendragon. The Holy Woman is a medium to the great Parion herself. She has dedicated her entire life to Goddess Parion, a true Holy Woman among Holy Women. Be exceedingly careful not to insult her in any way.”

As I left the mansion, the cardinal gave me this last warning.

He seemed to be sincerely devoted to the Holy Woman.



“Looks like this is the Holy Woman’s shrine.”

The day after my visit to the cardinal’s mansion, I went to the Holy Woman’s home.

Although I was the only one invited, the rest of my group came with me as far as the gate, wanting to see what kind of place it was.

“...It’s very beautiful.”

Lulu’s cheeks flushed with awe as she looked up at the Holy Woman’s shrine. Lotus flowers floated in the waterways that lined the white building, which was also decorated with blooming flowers and lush plant life.

“Pretty.”

Mia produced a lute from her Fairy Pack and began plucking out a tune.

“Shoooooom?”

Meanwhile, Tama took out her sketchbook and sat down next to Mia to start sketching.

The Holy Woman's shrine appeared to have struck a chord with them.

I was curious to see what kind of songs and pictures they would produce, but it was almost time for my appointed meeting. I left Liza and Arisa in charge of the group and headed into the shrine alone.

When I was stopped on my way in, all I had to do was show them my letter to confirm that it was me. They seemed to already know that I was expected.

"The Holy Woman's sanctuary is right this way."

A priestess-in-training with a soft, clear voice guided me.

There were at least five priestesses and shrine maidens at the Holy Woman's shrine with the "Oracle" skill. That was much more than the average in other nations, though not surprising, since this nation was named after a goddess.

"Madam, Sir Pendragon has arrived."

The priestess-in-training gestured for me to enter the sanctuary.

Blue light glittered in the clear, cool air. Each breath I inhaled felt consecrated, filling my body with a sacred euphoria. It was a strange but pleasant feeling.

The elderly lady sitting on the sofa inside appeared to be the Holy Woman. According to my AR display, her name was Yu Parion. The head priestess in the old capital had a similar name, Yu Tenion.

She had pure white hair and wore an innocent, childlike smile.

This was very different from the Holy Woman I'd heard about in the Village of Adepts. Were there two Holy Women, maybe?

"So you're the boy the goddess was talking about, mister?"

The elderly Holy Woman spoke in a childish manner.

"By 'the goddess,' do you mean Goddess Parion?"

"Uh-huh." The old Holy Woman nodded. "The goddess said to tell you... 'Stay in this land for a while.'"







“How long is ‘a while,’ exactly?”

Hopefully it wasn’t on a god’s scale of time.

“Mmm, I dunno.”

*Well, that’s helpful.*

“But I don’t think it’ll be that long,” she added. “So don’t worry.”

With that, the goddess swayed and collapsed onto the sofa cushion, as if from anemia.

“Madam...!”

The priestess standing by in the chamber rushed to support the Holy Woman and checked her pulse.

“The Oracle prophecy is over. I apologize, but as the Holy Woman is in poor condition...”

At the prompting of a different but equally beautiful shrine maiden from the one who’d escorted me inside, I turned to leave the room.

“Please...save them.”

A faint voice reached my ears.

It sounded like the Holy Woman, although I couldn’t see for sure, since she was surrounded by priestesses and shrine maidens.

But who did she want me to save?

“Each time the Holy Woman communes with the goddess, it affects her mind and causes her to speak and behave like a young girl. However, she is full of wisdom and clemency that the likes of us could never begin to understand.”

I wondered if that effect was from the influence of Parion being a childlike goddess.

That wasn’t the case with the head priestess of Tenion Temple...unless she was influenced by Tenion somehow and I just didn’t notice? She certainly was very sweet and lovely for an elderly lady.

I promised the shrine maiden I wouldn’t tell a soul, and left the Holy Woman’s

shrine behind.

## West Gate Area

***Satou here. As fun as it is to go sightseeing in lots of different nations, I think making a travel plan is part of the fun, too. I've even heard that some people are content just to read travel magazines.***

"I see iiiit?"

"I smell salt from far away, so we must be getting close, sir!"

Swaying on the camel at the front of our caravan, Tama and Pochi strained to see into the distance.

The day after my visit to the Holy Woman's shrine, we went to see the Saga Empire group off on their travels. Then we spent three days sightseeing in the holy city, and now we were on our way to the West Gate Area that overlooked the inland sea.

Arisa, who was sharing a camel with me, looked at me over her shoulder.

"I dunno...if she told you to stay in Parion Province for a while, doesn't that mean something's going to happen in the holy city?"

"Wouldn't she have said 'stay in this *city* for a while' if that were the case?"

Besides, I had seal slates set in the Holy City of Parion so that I could return at any moment with the Space Magic spell Return, if necessary. As long as I didn't leave the nation's borders, it should be fine.

"I see...a wall."

"Yes, Mia. This is the ultimate lookout position, I declare."

Sitting atop Nana's shoulders, Mia must have spotted either the outer wall of the West Gate Area beyond the sparsely green hill, or the Great Barrier Wall that surrounded the entirety of Parion Province.

Pochi gazed enviously at Mia's high vantage point.

“That must be the outer wall,” Liza reported. “I can see the higher Great Barrier Wall far in the distance.”

Liza was standing directly on top of her camel. I was impressed that she could balance like that.

“Mew!”

Tama used her agile ninja movements to climb onto Liza’s shoulders and stand there.

Arisa grinned. “You look like some acrobatic troupe, or a circus act.”

“Pochi wants to do the act-o-maticus troop, too, sir!”

With that, Pochi tried to clamber up Liza’s legs and promptly lost her balance, nearly taking Liza and Tama down with her when they tried to hold her up. Luckily, they managed to right themselves on the camel without me needing to use my telekinetic Magic Hand to support them. Another win for muscles and athletic movements.

“That’s a lot of boats.”

“Sailing ships, galleys, even an express ship with jib sails...there are so many different kinds.”

As the gateway to the western regions on the edge of the inland sea, the West Gate Area had countless ships docked at its piers, and dozens more offshore waiting to be let into the harbor.

In addition to the merchants and sailors, there were dock laborers bustling around the harbor busily, and so many warehouses for temporarily storing trade goods that I couldn’t even see them all from a distance.

“Everyone’s dressed so fancy here! Especially after all the plain-colored clothes in the holy city.”

“It looks like they come from all over the world.”

Arisa and Lulu gazed at the clothing of the merchants and sailors.

Since almost everyone in the holy city wore black or beige, it really was a colorful feast for the eyes.

“Busy.”

“There is more variety than in the trade city in Shiga Kingdom or the sugar route, I declare.”

Nana was right: the races, clothes, and colors were all very diverse.

I did notice that the sandfolk seemed to be overworked as manual laborers here, too, but I didn’t mention that, since it didn’t look like the girls had noticed.

Tama’s and Pochi’s stomachs growled musically.

“Hungryyyy?”

“I guess we could have some lun—”

“Something smells good over there, sir! I bet it’s Mr. Food Stalls, sir!”

Before I could finish speaking, Pochi was already moving toward the pier where fishing boats were docked. I decided to trust her hungry-tummy senses, although I didn’t smell anything yet myself.

The source of the scent turned out to be stalls on the other side of the fish market.

“There’s so many colorful fish. It reminds me of the sugar route.”

“The shellfish are strange shapes, I observe.”

Lulu and Nana pointed out fish that were very different from the kinds found on the Shigan coast.

“The more colorful the fish, the better the taste! This here gangazi is in peak season right now. Buy some and you won’t regret it, trust me!”

“Gangazi’s great and all, but modogazi’s the way to go if you’ve got lots of mouths to feed! This stuff’s the best boiled in soy sauce, ya hear?”

“I’ll take fourteen of each kind, then.”

“Oh-ho, now this guy gets it. Gangazi tastes best filleted with vinegar, I tell ya. I’ll throw in a couple extra for you to practice with.”

“Then I’ll give ya an extra modogazi on the house, too.”

“C’mon, don’t be so damn stingy. We got a foreign customer here, go all out

for 'em!"

"Fine, fine. Goddess Parion's Lamplight burn me, I'll throw in two more!"

Lulu smiled as she purchased fish from the enthusiastic fishmongers.

Meanwhile, Nana's expression was as blank as ever while she bought up enough shellfish to overflow from her basket.

"Say, mister, how about some isugazi? It's great for a little nighttime fun."

Before my gaze could get pulled into the cleavage of a sexy saleswoman, Mia tugged on my sleeve with a grumbled "mrrr," saving me from purchasing fish that might give me extra vim and vigor.

"How's about some kraken, missy?"

"We got flying squid, too."

The kraken in this water must be young or something; their bodies were only six feet or so in length. I didn't buy any, since I already had tons of kraken in Storage.

However, the winglike ears of the "flying squid" piqued my interest enough to purchase a few.

Thus, by the time we made it through to the other side of the fish market, we'd purchased tons of different kinds of seafood.

"Yummyyyy?"

"Grilled shrimp and crab have such excellent crunch."

When we finally reached the food stall area past the fish market, we were all smacking our lips for some fresh seafood.

Next to Tama and Liza, Pochi was tearing into her grilled squid with intense concentration. She must have been extremely hungry.

"The modogazi stew is rich and delicious, I praise."

"This pickled gangazi and seaweed is tasty and refreshing, too."

Nana was working on a chilled stew, while Lulu had selected a vinegar-based dish.

“Yes, that’s the stuff! Simple is best!”

Holding a salted fish skewer in one hand and a shrimp skewer in the other, Arisa struck a pose like a character from a gourmet manga. You really can’t beat fresh fish grilled over charcoal.

“Satou.”

Mia brought over a bowl full of what looked like agar-agar jelly strips.

My AR display told me that they were actually thin slices of jellyfish, not dessert gelatin.

“Yummy.”

Mia held out one of the jellyfish strips with her chopsticks and said, “Aah,” so I obligingly opened my mouth.

It didn’t have as strong a taste as I expected. The texture was firmer than gelatin and very springy. This would taste great with *sanbaizu* sauce, or even with brown sugar syrup as a dessert.

Mia’s action set off a strange competition where everyone started trying each other’s chosen foods. For some reason, they all insisted on feeding me directly like Mia did.

“Were you able to get more Lalagi Magic Items in stock?”

Upon hearing the name of a familiar place, I automatically turned my attention to the speaker.





Several merchants were drinking together in a seating area behind the stalls.

“Unfortunately, the Garleon Alliance— and Kalisork-employed merchants made off with all of them.”

“You too, eh...? The Shiga Kingdom jade silk I was after went to the likes of Sania Kingdom and the Tenion Republic, too.”

“Nations with a central temple really do have an edge.”

Central temples, like the Parion Central Temple here in Parion Province, were basically head temples devoted to each of the seven gods. They were positioned around the inland sea.

“Well, places that use their wealth to do all the talking aren’t so bad. Not compared to the bastards like Pialork that use their authority to threaten other nations, even ones that also have a central temple.”

“Zaicuon Temple is flexing its might right now, too. I wish they’d all calm down a little...”

The head priest of the Zaicuon Temple back in Seiryuu City caused a lot of problems, too. Apparently, there were others who were equally prone to stirring up trouble.

“It’s really only Sherifardo State that stays quiet, I guess...”

“That place is full of hardheaded lawyers. I’ve heard they’re not often in the market for luxury goods, eh?”

“They’re Urion’s loyal dogs, after all. I heard a merchant who smuggled in contraband there recently was strung up right along with the pirates.”

“That’s harsh, all right. Though you have to admit, bringing contraband into a place with so many Eye of Judgment holders was a stupid thing to do...”

If I remembered right, the Eye of Judgment was a Gift directly from Urion.

While I was reflecting on this, Arisa tugged my sleeve.

“Master! There’s a foreign merchant’s stall over there, and guess what they were selling!”

“Ooh, is that pasta?”

This was a rare find, since noodles weren't very widespread in this world.

Arisa gave me a bite of her seafood pasta and requested a bite from my own plate in return.

“Arisa! Over here, sir!”

“Hurrrrrrry?”

Arisa went running over to where Pochi and Tama were calling for her.

They seemed to have found another rare food.

Still, the food stall area was getting crowded, probably because it was past noon.

“Say, pilgrim, won’t you let me buy you a drink?”

“Thank you for your kindness, good sir. May you all be protected by the gods in your travels at sea.”

The merchants were treating a group of pilgrims in plain clothes to food and drink.

From the sound of things, the pilgrims were traveling around the central temples the merchants mentioned one by one; the merchants were asking the pilgrims for rumors and information to use for their trade.

“Is Parion Province here the last stop in this seven-god pilgrimage of yours?”

“No, there wasn’t any sea route to Pialork Kingdom. We’re on our way to the south coast to go there, then perhaps visiting Sania Kingdom by land.”

“Land it may be, yet the sand sea that surrounds Sania Kingdom is no different from any ocean. Please be careful on your way.”

"I appreciate the advice. May the gods bless your trade and travels both."

Sania Kingdom, the site of the Heraluon Central Temple, didn't border the inland sea.

I decided to offer a few bottles of my nicer sake to get in on the merchants' conversation and hear more of their interesting tidbits of information.

Gathering local gossip is part of the fun of travel, too, you know?

“Would you mind if I joined you for a while?”

“Oh-ho! You sure can!”

“Any fine young lad who knows the worth of good drink is always welcome here.”

They had no problem including an outsider. Maybe that was the nature of a port town.

“I’d love to get to the Purple Flame continent just once.”

“Does it really exist? I thought the Garleon Alliance sent a whole fleet of ships to find it and not one of them returned. Even the long-distance research airship from the Sage’s Tower went missing on that expedition, didn’t it?”

“It’s written in manuscripts from the Flue Empire era: ‘If you proceed ever westward across the sea for one month’s time, you will find a continent surrounded by purple flame.’ It’s definitely real, we just can’t get there.”

*Oh-ho, a different continent?*

When I was getting rid of the Evil Jellies—parasitic jellyfish monsters that were harming the World Tree—I got a glimpse of the planet below, but I was too preoccupied to make special note of the names of continents. At the very least, I do remember another continent besides this one off to the west, which must have been the Purple Flame continent.

“Forget about some continent that might not even exist. If I could go anywhere, I’d go to Valauris, the pleasure city. They say you can get a taste of all the pleasures this world has to offer there.”

*Ooh, now that sounds intriguing.*

“If you’re not careful, you could lose everything you own there, just like the vice city Sibe.”

“Don’t lump it in with a place like Sibe, where only thieves and pirates do business. The vice city is so dirty that even slave traders won’t go near.”

“Scoundrels or not, it’s amazing anyone thought to build a city on the island where the red dragon Welsh makes its nest.”

“That’s probably why the neighboring kingdoms don’t dare mess with them, though.”

Sounds like the kind of place where a game master in a tabletop RPG would be delighted to launch a campaign.

As much as I’d love to meet a red dragon, it would probably be better to stay away from a dangerous place known as a “vice city.”

“The pirates of the vice city Sibe are dangerous, sure. But fer my money, it’s the isles between the Heroic Peninsula and the Twin Peninsula that’s the most dangerous of all.”

“Yeah, there’s wyvern nests there, not to mention lots of places for pirates to hide. You never know when you’re gonna get attacked there.”

“Seems the marines of Sherifardo State have their hands full with those pirates.”

The Heroic Peninsula was on the southern coast where Pialork Kingdom was located, while the Twin Peninsula was on the northern coast with Sherifardo State and the City-State of Kalisork at its root.

“The pirates of the Sea God’s Cape in the Garleon Alliance have been getting more active, too.”

“All the more reason to be cautious.”

“Speaking of the Garleon Alliance, I met the ‘Wandering Wizard’ in the Garlelork City harbor.”

“Interesting... That’s the mountain man said to have lived since the Flue Empire era, right?”

*A mountain man? I wonder if he has a white beard.*

“As far as the west coast goes, I met the ‘Deviant Chef’ of Aubehr Republic. His appearance and attire were just as the rumors say, but his food’s flavors were even more extraordinary.”

“I envy you that. They say his cooking is fantastic. Though I’m curious about the ‘Miracle Chef’ who recently appeared in the Shiga Kingdom. Even the finest gourmets of the nation said his transparent soup had a ‘miraculous flavor’ or

some such thing.”

“Yes, I’ve heard those rumors as well. What I wouldn’t give to meet that chef just once.”

*Yeah, sorry, that would be me.*

Since I couldn’t very well say “you’ve already met him,” I just smiled with the aid of my hardworking “Poker Face” skill.

“Sir, it’s about time to have the Lamplight conferred upon the ship’s lantern.”

A servant came to fetch one of the merchants, who excused himself and headed off to the temple.

“Are they referring to Parion’s Lamplight?”

“Yes, the very same. It’s incredibly effective at repelling sea-dwelling monsters.”

“It does come at the cost of a hefty offering. Safety is paramount, though.”

“The cost’s not so bad. It used to be that only faithful followers of Parion could borrow a lantern, after all. Now anyone can use it if you only have the coin.”

“True enough. Ever since Pontiff Zarzaris’s reign began, port fees have been next to nothing, too. And with enough funds, they’ll even let you hire a priest to lengthen the effect of the Lamplight for travel abroad.”

That all seemed to add up with what the cardinal told me.

“Speaking of which, I heard the hero from the Saga Empire was in the holy city.”

“I’m told he worked with Sir Mezzalt, the Holy Sword wielder of Parion Temple, to defeat the demon lord who appeared in the Dens of Evil.”

“Sir Mezzalt is truly amazing. No wonder he was chosen by the Holy Sword Blutgang.”

“On the subject of Sir Mezzalt, I’ve heard he’s fond of flower sake from the Aubehr Republic. If that’s all it takes to befriend someone who helped defeat a demon lord, it’d be a small price to pay.”

“I smell a business opportunity...”

The merchants grinned at each other.

I guess true businessmen can still keep an ear out for profit even when they’re just chatting about gossip.

“Masterrr!”

Arisa’s voice drew my attention away from the merchants.

The girls had finished eating and were shopping at a nearby stall.

Lulu was staring intently at something. I excused myself from the merchants and headed over.

The stall was lined with small bottles containing what looked like pretty rock candy.

“These are salt gems from Sania Kingdom. Try it once, and you won’t be able to get enough of that full-bodied flavor.”

The salesman used a hammer to shatter one of the small salt gems and handed it to us on a piece of paper.

I touched my finger to the salt and tasted it. It was a sort of rock salt that was chock-full of minerals. Although it tasted a bit odd, it would be great for grilling meat with a strong taste.

“How much is it?”

“One gold coin if you’ll buy a bottle.”

“That’s very expensive. I’d buy one for half a silver coin.”

Lulu immediately began haggling down the absurdly high price.

According to my “Estimation” skill, they were worth about one silver coin. The gold coins in Parion Province were on the large side, while the silver coins were a bit smaller, which meant that twenty silver coins was equal to one gold coin. Silver was apparently less valuable in the western regions. Instead of large copper coins, they had “half-silvers,” which were silver coins cut in half, and “quarter-silvers,” which were small square pieces.

“Oh, all right. For you, I’ll make it three quarter-silvers.”



Lulu had come out on top in the bartering battle.

“You’re not going to buy any, Master?”

“Since we’re planning on going to Sania Kingdom eventually, I’ll stock up straight from the source.”

One bottle should be more than enough to test it out in the meantime.

“They’re really cute-looking, though. Maybe they’d make a good souvenir?”

I hadn’t even thought of it that way. It might not appeal to nobles, but they’d probably make a good present for the next time I visited Hikaru or the Echigoya Company. Zena, Karina, Nana’s sisters, and our other friends in Labyrinth City might like some, too.

I retracted my previous statement and stocked up on the bottles of salt gems. It goes without saying that Lulu bargained for an even better bulk price.



“Looks like you’re having fun, young master.”

A man passing behind me murmured in my ear.

It was the former Phantom Thief Pippin, who now worked as an intelligence agent for the Echigoya Company.

“Hey, Pippin. Thanks again for your help before. The hero sends his thanks, too.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I had Pippin fend off poisoning and assassination attempts on Hayato the Hero in the holy city.

“What’re you up to today?”

“A new job from Lord Kuro.” Pippin shrugged lightly. “He wants me to do some location scouting and stuff for opening new branches in the western regions.”

Of course, I already knew that—I was the one who gave the order on my way back from the cardinal’s mansion.

I was planning to bring some branch manager candidates and employees from the company via teleportation after the wyvern messenger the cardinal sent reached them, which should be the following day.

“Now, I don’t mind Lord Kuro working me to the bone, but he didn’t give me the funds I need for all this.”

Whoops. I forgot to give him the necessary capital.

“I see. So you want me to lend it to you?”

“You’re quick on the uptake. A hundred gold coins or so would be ideal...”

“I don’t have that many Parion Province gold coins.”

“I can exchange them myself.”

I handed Pippin a pouch of Shiga Kingdom gold coins.

Next time, I should probably start using the Space Magic spell Material Transfer.

“Heh, thanks a bunch... Wait, isn’t this a bit too much?”

“The rest is a reward. It’s my way of thanking you for protecting the hero from the shadows.”

“Thanks, young master. You’re a real stand-up guy... Say, if this is your first time in the city, you should check out the bazaar on the south side. They’ve always got lots of unusual goods and rare sights fresh from the inland sea.”

With that, Pippin disappeared into the crowd, gold-stuffed pouch in hand.

“That was the phantom thief guy, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I had him protect the hero from being poisoned. Next he’s going to handle preliminary scouting to set up new Echigoya Company branches.”

As Pippin left, Arisa arrived, done with her shopping.

“Anyway, he told me about a bazaar. Let’s go check it out.”

The rest of the group was equally excited, so we headed south toward the bazaar Pippin told me about.

“Larvae spotted, I report!”

“Wait.”

Mia stopped Nana before she could run off.

“If I wait, they will be purchased, I protest. Arisa says every meeting is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, I insist.”

Nana had spotted some strange accessories in the shape of small animals.

As soon as I gave the okay, she took off toward the stall, dragging Mia by the hand.

“That’s byootiful?”

“Tiny and cute, sir.”

Tama and Pochi locked on to a stall of wood carvings in a local folk art style.

“What are these for, I wonder?”

Behind the little duo, Liza looked at them and tilted her head.

“They’re launching devices for javelins. You press the butt of the javelin into this part and fire.”

Evidently, the wooden birdlike tool Tama and Pochi found was actually a weapon. The salesman explained that they made javelins fly faster than a normal throw, so I bought a set of one of the devices with the accompanying javelins.

“Arisa, look at this. It’s some kind of strange nutcracker. And I wonder what that is?”

Lulu was excitedly exploring a shop with cooking tools. For once, she was the one dragging Arisa around, instead of the opposite.

This place really was full of rare sights, like Pippin had said.

“Master! Master! Come here!”

I hurried over to Arisa.

From her urgent cry, I assumed something was wrong, but she’d just spotted another interesting item.

“It’s a transforming Magic Sword!”

“A Magic Sword...made of wood?”

It was a wooden sword carved with notches and grooves.

The carvings made for a somewhat unusual decoration.

“Look, just try putting some magic into it. Only a tiny bit, okay?”

At Arisa’s prompting, I sent a tiny amount of magic into the sword.

“...Ooh.”

The wooden sword transformed.

From the blade of the sword, a monster part–like shell-patterned prong appeared.

“Pretty cool, right?” Arisa grinned.

It certainly was cool, although it didn’t seem terribly practical to me.

“And this shield has a blade that pops out.”

Arisa held up a kite shield.

“Say, mister, you and yer friends have some mighty fine clothes. Are ya foreign nobles?”

“Yes, from the Shiga Kingdom.”

“Whoops, ’scuse my rudeness. Yer not swaggering around like you own the place, so’s I thought you was merchants...” The shopkeeper scratched his head. “I got some stuff special for nobles, too.”

He produced a small item in a box from behind the counter.

It was an odd combination of crystals.

“This ’un’s from the same magic tool workshop as them others. When ya put magic into it... Well, have a look-see.”

As soon as magic entered the strange, spherical object, it took on a much pointier shape. It was evidently made from monster materials, not crystals like I first thought.

The object glowed beautifully from within, possibly equipped with a light stone on the base.

“It’s very pretty.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

*Oh-ho? So there’s more?*

Interested, I peered at the item in the shopkeeper’s hand.

*Oooh.*

The spiky outer parts split off from the center and began floating around the object in a circular orbit.

On closer inspection, they seemed to be connected to the main part by some kind of thread.

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“I know, ain’t it just?”

The shopkeeper grinned widely at Arisa.

“So, what does this magic tool do exactly?”

“...Nngh.”

The man froze at her question.

“What’s wrong?”

“...Th-this is it, see.”

“That’s it?”

“For the most part, Magic Items from Joppentelle workshop just transform, an’ that’s it. There’s some what have weaponry like the wooden Magic Sword, ’cept none of ’em are much more ’n toys.”

The shopkeeper looked despondent.

He must be a big fan of this Joppentelle workshop’s creations.

“What’s wrong with toys? Besides, I’m sure fine engineering like this will find usage in many other fields in the future.”

“D-do ya really think so?”

“Of course.”

The shopkeeper practically clung to my hand. I nodded firmly.

Then, as if to prove it, I bought up just about all of his Joppentelle workshop products.

I figured they might be useful reference for when I make and tinker with my own Magic Items and weapons.

“Wowser, upper nobles from big kingdoms ain’t no joke... That’s the biggest sale I ever made in my life. If ya ever go to Kalisork, ya gotta stop by Joppentelle’s workshop, ya hear?”

The shopkeeper threw in all kinds of extras with my purchase.

At any rate, this transformation-obsessed workshop did sound intriguing. It made me think of Professor Jahado, who was obsessed with rotation-based devices. They’d probably get along.

We spent the rest of the day until evening checking out accessories and other small goods, with several similarly fun discoveries along the way.

Seeing such a wide variety of products was pretty exciting.



“Welcome back, Lord Kuro!”

After dinner, I went over to the Echigoya Company to have a meeting about opening branches in Parion Province, only to be met with a greeting in perfect unison from all the executive staff girls who happened to be in the manager’s office.

I nearly automatically responded with “I’m home,” which would have been out of character for Kuro. Instead, I coolly raised one hand in response and asked Manager Eluterina if there was anything new.

“Everything’s going smoothly, Lord Kuro.”

The manager’s eyes sparkled as she responded.

While she looked like a gorgeous blond woman, she seemed more like a pure young girl in moments like these.

The door to the office opened, and a silver-haired beauty with sharp features

walked in: the manager's secretary, Tifaleeza.

"Welcome back, Lord Kuro. Here is the list of candidates for merchant ship captains, per your request. I had hoped to gather twenty, but I'm afraid I've only been able to reach out to twelve so far. I got a positive response from seven of these."

Tifaleeza was ridiculously competent.

It hadn't even been three days since I'd brought up the subject, yet she already had seven candidates to captain the ships.

Glancing at the list, I saw that three of them were veterans who had traveled the western route before, while the remaining candidates were young up-and-comers with trade experience on the sugar route.

"Since it's a long journey, ten would be ideal. I acquired ten ships at the trade city Tartumina and brought them here, if you could prepare them for travel. And I've got golems on guard, so don't forget to bring an executive with you."

These were actually all drifting or wrecked ships that I'd acquired on the sugar route.

I'd stopped at the harbor and popped them into the water on the way here.

"Very well. May I ask the classifications of the ships?"

"They're all large galleons."

Since it was such a long route, it seemed best to pick big oceangoing ships for the fleet.

"Lord Kuro, we were told by the fleet captain candidate—Captain Looklar—that it would be best to have a few high-speed vessels as well."

"Got it. I'll round up three or so of those, then. If that's not enough, we'll find more."

I might as well leave it up to the professionals how to use them.

I still had some midsize and smaller crafts that might be good for shorter-distance trade routes once we had more personnel.

According to Miss Manager, they'd already secured a few rented storehouses



and bases in the trade city Tartumina and were beginning to recruit sailors and gather supplies. I'd left the actual products for trading entirely up to Eluterina, so I was just going to trust in her instincts.

"As far as the personnel for the Parion Province location, I thought I'd send Merina, since it seems like there might be a lot of sales."

Merina was one of the executive girls who'd distinguished herself in a big purchase of wholesale cotton from Vistall Duchy. She was currently in charge of things like jade silk and dressmaking. However, it was clear from her expression that she was raring to go, so I granted permission.

"All right. You'll be perfect for this."

Merina had exceptional instincts for bulk purchases and estimating market value. She might eventually be a good general manager for all our future branches in the western regions.

"I, Merina, shall work my absolute hardest on this new branch in order to live up to your expectations!"

Okay, that level of zeal was kind of scary. Hopefully, she'd relax a little.

"When will you be done preparing and passing on your previous duties? I will bring you to Parion Province once you're ready."

"Really?! I'm already done with all that. I can go as soon as tomorrow morning!"

Merina looked sheepish as the rest of the girls cheered for her enthusiastically. Maybe being sent by me personally was some kind of status symbol?

Eluterina and Tifaleeza were both grimacing, although they smoothed their expressions over when I met their gazes.

Based on the whispers my "Keen Hearing" skill picked up, it seemed like the girls were discussing how I generally picked people up to teleport them. It must be a sexual harassment issue or something.

In that case, instead of picking Merina up like usual, maybe I should lift her with Magic Hand to teleport her like I did with Pippin. Yeah, that should solve

everything.

Miss Manager cleared her throat and went on.

“We’ve received word from Louna in the north that she’s arrived in Kageus County. According to her traveling companion Sharururuun, the internal strife in Yowork Kingdom has accelerated, leading to more refugees coming across the mountains.”

Manager Eluterina declined to mention something else that Louna, the executive who loved riding on a stone wolf, had written in her letter: “Saw a dragon. It was super cool!” I guess the lesser dragon that was freed from Yowork Kingdom’s control must be doing well if it was flying around like that.

“Costohna, who’s been establishing branch offices from west to east, has reached Seiryuu City. Since Sir Pendragon requested a great deal of sheep and goats to be procured, she’s buying them up slowly from Seiryuu County and Kageus County so as not to ruin the market price before transporting them to Kuvork Kingdom.”



Providing goats and sheep to Kuvork Kingdom was a request from Arisa that I'd passed on to the Echigoya Company.

Costohna was another one of the executives; though quiet and unassuming, she was persistent and did reliable work. Thus far, she'd been assisting Merina and negotiating deals for our franchising plans.

"We've mostly finished setting up branches within Shiga Kingdom. The scale of trade in the neighboring central and eastern nations is much smaller, so we're thinking of hiring locals to make subbranch offices instead of full-blown stores. We've already hired widely connected individuals in Siruga Kingdom and Makiwa Kingdom to the east, as well as in Kazo Kingdom and Saga Empire to the north. We'll send personnel ahead to those places within the next few days."

So the branch setup was going smoothly, too.

"As far as the Muno County airship emigration project, Magistrate Lottel has given us a promising response. Skilled artisans, engineers, civil officials, and other intellectual types will be sent to Muno City, while the rest will go to Brighton City, where they intend to appoint Viscount Pendragon as viceroy, and to the surrounding abandoned settlements."

*...Appoint me as viceroy? Since when?*

I'm sure it's just a temporary assignment, since they don't have anyone else they can make viceroy right now, but still, come on.

Brighton City was formerly overrun by monsters until we secretly cleared it out in spare moments during our stay in the royal capital.

"I thought I heard that Brighton City was destroyed by the 'Undead King' and became a monster territory?"

"Well, you see...it seems the monsters have been cleaned out at some point. A former mithril adventurer who's a vassal of Count Muno went and confirmed it. Apparently, even Magistrate Lottel doesn't know what happened..."

I guess word finally reached Count Muno that the city was free of monsters.

"...but she did question whether it might be the work of the 'silver-masked hero,' also known as 'Sir Nanashi.'"

The manager looked at me questioningly. I nodded.

“That’s right. My employer and some of his other followers cleared it out. He said it could host more refugees than mass-producing a bunch of villages.”

That reason was just an afterthought, of course.

At the time, I basically just did it as part of my companions’ training.

There was still a lot to be decided about the emigrants to Muno County. I settled a few payments, gave solutions and strategies for some of the problems that were brought up, and left the rest in the executives’ capable hands.

I’d have to make sure to set up some housing complexes and farmland to be certain that people could live in Brighton City when the time came for them to actually move in.

“Now that we’ve begun several new projects and expanded on our existing ones, we’re shorthanded for managerial positions. While we do have applicants from the intellectual classes, many of them have problematic personalities or attachments to other nobles, making it difficult to hire anyone.”

*Shorthanded again already? We just hired more people recently...*

Tifaleeza handed me a file that made the reasons clear.

The company had already tripled in scale since the end of the year alone. If there was such explosive growth in such a short period of time, it was no wonder they were short on management. At this point, the Echigoya Company was already one of the top five biggest companies in the royal capital alone.

“We’ll just have to select senior staff members to promote to managerial roles.”

I contacted Arisa about it with the Space Magic spell Telephone, and she kindly offered to make an educational program for new managers. “Leave it to me!” she said. “This was my specialty way back when!” Given her confidence, I told the managers that I would commission outside help to create an educational pamphlet and left it at that.

Next, I received reports from the executive staff, thanked them for their hard work, encouraged them through difficult patches, praised their

accomplishments, and so on. By the time I was done, it was too late at night to stop by the sales floor or the factories. I resolved to come in the afternoon next time so that I could see the redheaded Neru, the security specialist “big sis,” and the others, too.

While I was in the royal capital, I stopped by Hikaru’s place, too.

“Are you still awake?”

“Ichiroooooou!”

I sat down next to Hikaru, who had set up cushions on the rooftop to drink sake and gaze at the moon.

This mansion was serving as the boarding house where the orphanage kids from Labyrinth City were staying to study abroad at the royal academy; I’d put Hikaru in charge as their caretaker. If anything, she was more like a dorm mother, but Hikaru insisted on the term “caretaker.”

“Congrats on taking down the demon lord.”

Hikaru toasted me with a cup of Shigan sake.

“Thanks... This is really good.”

“Hee-hee-hee, Sete and the others keep giving me stuff like this. I’m working my way through it.”

Sete was her nickname for the king.

A few of the authorities, like the king and the prime minister, knew Hikaru’s secret identity: the ancestral king Yamato, who founded the Shiga Kingdom. As such, they kept sending her gifts.

“Was the demon lord strong?”

“Yeah, very.”

I told her about the extraordinary efforts of the hero’s party, my own group, and everyone else.

“Those demon lords who make lots of spawn are one of the worst kinds, you know. And it doesn’t help that the ruins of the Evil God’s Prison have entrances all over the place—no wonder they had such a hard time tracking him down.

Were there any demons?”

“Yeah, a green greater demon showed up again.”

“Green, huh...? Green and pink are really tough. The green one is always running away and making Avatars to do its dirty work, and the pink one hides in little gaps and splits up and stuff.”

“Sounds like you had your work cut out for you, too, Hikaru.”

“Yep, I sure did. Even when Sky all but destroyed the pink one with her breath attack, it can still revive if there’s even a chunk of flesh left, which is super annoying. And the green one has a crazy strong nose for danger. After Micchy finally made me a tracking item, it never showed up again.”

Hikaru complained at length about the demons.

*Hmm, wait a minute.*

“What do you mean by a ‘tracking item’?”

“This thing. It’s called a ‘Dream-Chase Spinning Wheel.’ If you tie the end of the thread to a demon, it won’t be able to get it off, no matter how far it runs. And then if you reel it in, you can launch an attack on the demon’s base.”

Hikaru produced a spinning wheel from her Inventory and showed it to me.

Aside from a mithril arrowhead at the end of the thread, it looked like a normal spinning wheel at a glance. According to my AR display, the thread had special properties and could astrally project in certain conditions.

All it required was piercing the demon with the arrowhead or winding the thread around it.

“So does the spinning wheel have teleportation abilities or something?”

“No, it’s nothing that fancy. It just retains traces of the demon’s path. You still need to get a Space Magic user to follow those traces to teleport there. I bet Arisa could do it, don’t you think?”

Bringing Arisa into a demon’s lair sounded a little too dangerous.

I wanted to research other methods, like turning the arrowhead into a miniature seal slate.



“Could I borrow this?”

“Sure. If you defeat the green one, I’m sure Micchy would be happy, too.”

Hikaru smiled as if at a fond memory.

I poured some of the Parion Province sake I’d brought as a souvenir into her cup.

“Okay, that’s enough dwelling on the past!” With that, Hikaru drained her cup and grinned broadly. “Oh, right! I actually went to Labyrinth City the other day. That teleport gate is wicked useful! I wish we had that back in the old days.”

Hikaru let out a sigh that smelled of sake, then giggled.

Going along with her, I poured more sake into my own empty cup.

“Zena, Karina, and Hachiko and the girls have all gotten a lot stronger, too.”

“Oh yeah? I can’t wait to see for myself.”

Beaming, Hikaru explained that she’d gone into the labyrinth several times and put them through HBC (Hikaru Boot Camp).

“Oh, and Usasa and some of the other Pendra kids said they wanted to get stronger, too, so I put together a special training program for the little tykes. And then the teachers—like Kajiro, Iruna, and Jena—were all like ‘Please instruct us, too!’ and joined in.”

It sounded like everyone was training hard in the labyrinth.

When I’d checked in on my friends in Labyrinth City recently using the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance, they’d almost looked exhausted, like their souls were on the verge of leaving their bodies. I’m sure that was just my imagination, though.

In any case, at least Hikaru was having fun.

“Now that I’ve got two more people to help me with the dorm, I’ll go stay over in Labyrinth City to check in on everyone again sometime soon.”

“I appreciate it. That reminds me... Once they get to the point where they need better equipment, could you give them these?”

I gave Hikaru the economy-style silver armor sets.

I'd made these in the laboratory in Bolenan Forest when I was developing the Phalanx system as a simplified version of the girls' golden armor. It could probably hold up to an enemy on the level of an areamaster, even if it wouldn't be strong enough to go up against a demon lord. As for their origin, maybe I should say I found them on the sugar route?

It might be good to make Japanese-style armor for Kajiro and Ayaume, too.

"Speaking of which, Zena said she won't be making a trip home anymore."

When we met at the beginning of the year, Zena had mentioned that she might need to return to Seiryuu City in a month or so to give an interim report. Evidently, however, that was no longer the case.

I'd been thinking of revisiting Seiryuu City while she was there, but I guess her job doesn't have as much freedom as that of an office worker.

According to Hikaru, the reason this trip was canceled was that the second small airship built by the Echigoya Company was rolled out sooner than expected; when it was delivered to Seiryuu City, they brought along a Labyrinth City Celivera Elite Training Corps member with a written report, rendering Zena's visit unnecessary.

"Oh, also! A kid who studied musical instruments under Mia in Labyrinth City said something about wanting to study abroad in the royal capital someday."

"Huh. If they're serious about it, we'll have to lend some support."

"Hee-hee, I figured you would say that."

Hikaru and I continued drinking the royal family's finest sake as we caught up on each other's latest news.

I'd been planning to stop by Bolenan Forest, too, but it got later than I expected. My beloved Miss Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest, was probably off in dreamland by this point. I decided to give her a morning call via Telephone instead.



"What's thaaat?"

"It's a lighthouse."

The next day, we were touring some of the port city's landmarks.

The lighthouses here were hard to recognize at first, since they stood on a three-pronged base.

Parion's holy seal was inscribed on the side that faced the ocean, with delicate Parion Province-style reliefs carved into the base as well.

This was one of their popular sightseeing spots, if the crowd of tourists was anything to go by.

"The larvae are having fun, I report."

I followed Nana's gaze and saw a young couple with an adorable baby.

"Ah...!"

The wife, who was shading her eyes with her hand, suddenly collapsed.

While her husband caught her, the baby flew out of the wife's hands and tumbled headlong toward the ground.

I saw the beastfolk girls and Nana take off toward them with "Blink," but they wouldn't make it in time. I used my always-active Magic Hand to support the baby's weight and guide its trajectory toward Nana.

Sliding headfirst like a baseball player, Nana caught the baby.

"Nice caaatch?"

"Nana's amazing, sir."

"Safe, I declare."



The baby started crying in Nana's arms.

"You're not holding her quite right."

Arriving later than the others, Arisa took the baby from Nana.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-yes, thank you. I just got a little dizzy."

The wife must be suffering from heatstroke.

Mia healed the woman with Water Magic, which worked great on that sort of thing.

"...I couldn't find the guy you asked me to look for. I did pay someone in the other organization to keep an eye out for him, though."

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on a somewhat suspicious-sounding conversation. I turned around and saw a familiar face at the source.

It was Sorijeyro the Sage.

He was standing in the shadow of a warehouse some distance away, talking to a captain from a foreign nation.

"Understood. Keep looking on your next voyage."

"Sure thing. I'll search some more while I'm escorting your students."

The sage handed something to the captain.

According to my AR display, it contained gold coins.

*...Urk.*

The sage turned in my direction.

We were pretty far away, yet somehow he seemed to have noticed me watching.

Feeling somewhat awkward, I waved, as if I'd just spotted him.

"Eek! Hey, stop that, you!"

Hearing Arisa cry out, I turned and saw that the baby had pulled on her hair, tugging her wig enough to show a hint of her lilac roots.

“Oh, that little troublemaker. I’m sorry, miss.”

As Arisa fixed her wig, the wife apologized to her, looking much better after Mia’s healing.

At least it wasn’t anything serious.

When I turned back, the sage was already gone.

“Hurry, Master, hurry!”

I climbed the lighthouse as the girls shouted down to me.

“Wonderfuuuul?”

“Wonderiffic, sir!”

Everyone was very excited by the 360-degree view of the clear blue sky and the ocean stretching far into the distance.

We gazed at the ships of various nations anchored in the harbor below, and I answered the kids’ questions as best I could.

We could see a lot of the harbor facilities from here, too.

“That was more fun than I expected.”

Once we’d had our fill of the gorgeous view, we headed back down to the bottom of the lighthouse.

“...Master.”

With a warning tone, Liza stepped in front of me.

In front of her stood the sage.

There were two people behind him with the self-explanatory title “Sage’s Student.” One of his students was a pretty girl with straight bangs, while the other was a man with a rugged face.

“Hello there. Are you and your students touring the lighthouse, too, Sir Sage?”

Given that he was waiting for us downstairs, I had no doubt that he was here to make sure I didn’t tell anyone what I’d seen or heard between him and that ship captain.



“No, I’ve come to do some recruiting.”

But instead of being on me, his eyes were on my companions behind me.

“Recruiting, you say...?”

“That’s right. It’s a chance to become more adept at your natural talent. What do you say...”

His eyes were fixed on...Arisa?

“...young Tama?”

*Huh?* I thought for sure he was after Arisa, but the sage invited Tama instead.

Even the students behind him murmured in surprise at that.

“I am very intrigued by your ninjutsu. We have a small handful of real ninjas from the Saga Empire in the Village of Adept. Would you be interested in training with them? I am sure it would be a great boon to your abilities.”

Tama looked up at me.

From her expression, she was clearly interested in the sage’s proposal.

But I was worried about sending Tama off by herself.

“Sir Sage, would it be all right if the rest of us came along?”

“But of course. No one would question whether any member of the Pendragon group is enough of an Adept after you aided in the defeat of a demon lord.”

With the sage’s immediate agreement, we decided to train in the Village of Adept for a short time.



## The Sage's Students

***Satou here. When I was a kid, my family took me to see the Iga and Kouga ninja houses. Wearing a children's ninja outfit and exploring the traps and gimmicks of a ninja house, I felt like a fully-fledged ninja myself.***

"Here we are."

The sage pointed at a place that looked like a large assembly hall.

This was the Fooma ninja house in the Village of Adept. There was also a place called the Eega ninja house, but the instructors there were currently away on an expedition, which left this one by process of elimination.

The sage guided us into the building.

No one was inside the classroom-like area. We heard voices that suggested they were practicing in a courtyard or garden.

"If the instructors do not suit your needs, please notify the caretaker. We will do our best to accommodate you."

"We appreciate it very much."

The "caretaker" was apparently similar to the helpful fortysomething-year-old woman we'd met at the town hall before.

"Run with all your might! No dinner tonight if the cloth touches the ground!"

Entering the garden, we found an elderly instructor in ninja clothes putting some kids through their paces, most of whom looked to be around the age of ten.

A few of the students were a little further into their teens.

"Hard workers, sir!"

"Go, gooo?"

Pochi and Tama cheered on the struggling students.

“Miss Liza. Miss Nana.”

While we observed, the sage spoke to Liza and Nana.

“I was very impressed by your spear and shield skills, respectively, in the Den of Evil.”

“I am honored.”

“Praise registered, I report.”

Liza looked rather proud, while Nana was, of course, expressionless.

“Is there any chance you’d be willing to demonstrate that strength for the younger generation?”

The sage explained that he wanted to hire the two as guest instructors in the village’s spear and shield classes.

“Our path lies ever with our master.”

“I would not ask you to stay on permanently,” the sage persisted. “Only as long as Sir Pendragon is staying here. I wish to show the skills of true masters to our ‘Adepts’ in training.”

The two looked at me; I nodded.

“Request accepted, I declare.”

“I shall do my best, though I have never taught others before.”

Nana and Liza accepted the guest lecturer positions.

“I should like to make similar requests of you three, too...”

The sage asked Arisa and Mia to teach a magic class, and Lulu a marksmanship class.

“Sure, I can do that. We taught classes at the royal academy before.”

“Mm. Agreed.”

“U-um... I’m, erm, not so sure...”

While Arisa and Mia readily agreed, Lulu looked reluctant.

“Ah-ha-ha, I think Lulu would prefer to teach a cooking class or something,” Arisa suggested with a smile.

“Then I would gladly hire you as a guest cooking instructor. We have been looking for someone to teach classes about cuisine from beyond Parion Province and the inland sea.”

The sage was quick to change his request to suit Arisa’s suggestion.

“A-all right,” Lulu agreed timidly. “Cooking I can manage, I think.”

“Sir Pendragon, if you would teach swordsmanship or hand-to-hand combat...”

“My apologies. I was hoping to study at the ninja house with Tama.”

I wasn’t sure if I could teach anyone, when I just use my high level to brute-force everything. Besides, I was worried about leaving Tama alone at the ninja house.

I had concerns about the others, too, of course, but I could always keep an eye on them with Space Magic.

And admittedly, I was a bit curious about the ninja classes.

“I see. I had hoped that learning from one who has fought demons and demon lords would be good stimulation for our students...but I would be remiss to deny your wishes.”

The sage quickly accepted my decision despite looking briefly dour.

Meanwhile, Pochi was obviously waiting eagerly for the sage to ask her to teach swordsmanship. However, he never requested anything of her.

“...Boo-hoo, sir.”

“Don’t worry, be happyyy?”

Thus, my days in the ninja house with Pochi and Tama began.



“I am Gozaroh the Thirteenth, chief of the Fooma ninja house.”

After the sage left with my companions, the elderly ninja introduced himself

in a haughty tone.

“I am Viscount Sa—”

“No need for that!”

He interrupted me before I could introduce myself in kind.

“You are mere *genin*, low-ranking ninja. Thus, I shall call you with the black hair *genin* thirty-one, the white-haired-ear girl *genin* thirty-two, and the brown-haired-ear girl *genin* thirty-three. If you wish to be called by your names, you must first prove yourself by completing your training!”

A pretty lady on standby in the classroom brought us ninja clothes with numbered tags.

We changed into our new attire and joined the training.

“Hippity-hop, sir.”

“Ka-boooing?”

The students were practicing jumping over some reeds, or at least local plants that looked like reeds, set up in one corner of the training area.

“Too slow! Hurry up, over here!” the ninja instructor bellowed mercilessly. “Let’s see you jump, too, new blood.”

The reeds in question were cut to only a foot or so in height, so the students were leaping over them easily.

“Easy-peasyyyy?”

“No problemo, sir.”

Tama, Pochi, and I jumped over the reeds just as smoothly, of course.

“Ninjutsu is about constant practice. If you keep jumping over these red reeds that grow a little every day, eventually you’ll be able to jump reeds as high as these ones!”

He pointed to a cluster of reeds that was close to ten feet tall.

“Can you jump that high, too, sir?”

“But of course!”

The old ninja's response was immediate.

*Can he really jump that high when he's not even level 20? That's impressive.*

I couldn't help being awed as I looked at the old man's level.

"Amaziiiiing?"

"I wanna see, sir!"

"Thing is, I was fighting alone to buy time for my comrades to escape, and a cowardly opponent shot me with a poison arrow in the knee. Can't hardly even walk anymore. 'Tis a shame, truly."

The old ninja unabashedly shook his head at Pochi's request.

(My AR display didn't show anything wrong with his knee.) "Too baaaad?"

"Pochi will jump for you, then, sir."

"Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha, that's far beyond a child with no ninja training."

Tama looked worried, while Pochi attempted to comfort the man, who looked down at the two and snickered.

*Whoops. I forgot to mention that they're both over level 50... Oh well.*

Pochi and Tama strode up to the tall reeds.

"Here we go, sir!"

"Time for you kids to learn a lesson."

The old ninja jerked his chin toward the reeds.

"Hi-ya, sir!"

After swinging her arms around a few times to charge herself up, Pochi leaped over the reeds in a pose like an alien from Nebula M78.

"NWHAAAAAAAAA?!"

The old ninja's jaw nearly hit the floor in shock. The ninja students watching from behind reacted with similar surprise.

"Wheeeee?"

Tama followed suit with the elegance of an Olympic high jumper.

Now I was curious to try it myself. After Tama, I jumped over the reeds as well.

“Huh, they’re pretty low.”

At level 312, I didn’t even need my “Jumping” skill to clear it.

“I-inconceivable! Only the top ninja of Fooma are able to leap such heights...!”

The old ninja looked shaken.

Maybe he wasn’t actually that great of a ninja in the first place. I noticed he had titles like “Runaway Ninja” and “Fooma Genin.”

Unlike the teacher, who was trembling in shock, the students erupted with excitement.

“Ahem, ahem... Silence!” Coming back to his senses, the teacher scolded the students. “Th-this is only the beginning. On to the next exercise!”

The old ninja led us to an area where the exposed ground was rugged and uneven.

It looked like the students all knew what exercise was next; all but the most physically confident ones wore a look of dread.

“Next, we practice *doton*, the earth ninjutsu.”

At the teacher’s declaration, the students picked up wooden shovels that were stuck into the ground.

“Begin!”

As soon as he gave the signal, the students dug as fast as they could, then hid themselves in the holes they’d created.

Their speed was impressive, even if the areas were probably soft from being dug up so many times already.

“It may seem unimpressive, but this technique is ideal for losing pursuers in a wide-open wasteland,” the old ninja declared. “Now you try.”

When we picked up shovels and moved to dig next to the students, the teacher stopped us. “Wait. You three do it on that soil there.”

The old ninja pointed to an area that didn't look like it had been dug up before.

"Come on, isn't that area super hard?"

"Even our upperclassmen can't do it there."

"Master's being awfully mean."

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up murmurs from the students in their holes.

"Hurry up and do it," the old ninja ordered triumphantly.

*I already know how this is going to end, though.*

I gave Pochi a "go" sign via hand signals.

"Yaaah, sir!"

Heedless of the hard earth, Pochi dug her hole in a matter of moments.

"N-not bad."

The ninja teacher seemed to have been prepared for this as well; he was calm enough to begrudgingly compliment her work, albeit with cold sweat on his forehead.

*We'll see how long that lasts.*

"Pochi, you forgot ninjutsuuu?"

"Oopsie, sir. I'm such a sillyhead, sir."

"Wh-what are you saying?"

Sensing something ominous about Pochi and Tama's exchange, the old ninja reached out as if to stop them. The girls didn't notice.

"Show me how it's done, Tama, sir."

"Aye-aye!"

Tama walked to the appointed area empty-handed.

"You've forgotten your shovel, child."

"No worriiiiies?"

Tama was unbothered, as usual.



“Nin-niin?”

Tama scattered something that looked like sand on the ground, and a hole appeared instantly. She must have used earth stone powder for her “ninjutsu.”

“What in the world?!” the old man shrieked.

If this were a cartoon, his eyes would probably have popped out of his head.

“Ninjutsuuu?”

“It most certainly was not!”

The old man stomped indignantly, practically steaming.

“Mew...”

As he raised his voice, Tama’s ears went flat, and her tail hid between her legs.

“Sir, if I may, this is Tama’s ninjutsu. The sage has seen it and brought her here to improve her techniques.”

I stepped in front of Tama protectively as I spoke.

Though the old ninja didn’t look satisfied with this explanation, he stopped yelling at her.

We should probably try to go along with it, since he was technically showing us how to do normal ninjutsu.

“Tama, let’s learn some traditional ninjutsu, too.”

“Aye.”

I handed Tama the shovel, and we started digging together.

The ground was hard, but not as hard as solid rock. I didn’t even need to use “Spellblade” on my shovel to dig a hole in no time flat.

“...All right, you pass.”

The old ninja nodded reluctantly.



“Lunchtiiime!”

“I’m staaarving!”

Our morning classes concluded, and lunchtime began.

I’d heard that having just two meals a day was common around Parion Province. In the Village of Adept, however, they had three meals a day under the sage’s policy.

“Quiet down! We’re handing out this week’s meal!”

The children quickly lined up in front of the old ninja. Next to him, a pretty lady in a ninja outfit poured some sort of grains into the small bags that the young students held out. Incidentally, the woman had the title “Kunoichi.” I wondered what sort of ninjutsu she used.

We didn’t have bags, but luckily the female ninja had bags prepared for us.

“Do we just eat this as is?”

Maybe it was something like the dried cooked rice they used for travel rations in the olden days?

“That’s right! This is ninja food! The lifeblood of a true ninja!”

“Mew!”

The phrase “ninja food” seemed to pique Tama’s interest: Her eyes sparkled, and her ears and tail straightened up.

Pochi kept sniffing the air, intrigued about the contents of the bags.

“Chew it thoroughly,” the old ninja instructed, then left the room along with the pretty ninja lady.

As soon as he was gone, the students relaxed and started gathering around us.

“So where’d you come from, huh?”

“How come you can jump so high?”

“What’d you use to make a hole real fast like that?”

The students peppered us with questions.

I guess kids are always curious no matter where you go.

As I gave them simple and safe answers, one of the students started imitating the old ninja.

“A true ninja must tolerate a diet of simple food!”

The kid sounded just like him.

“Is this all we get to eat, sir?”

“Yeah, basically. It comes with broth in the morning and evening, though.”

The students crunched on mouthfuls of the millet-like grains.

Eating this every day would probably give you some serious jaw muscles.

“That’s rooough?”

“Pochi will share some of her Mr. Jerky, sirs.”

Pochi produced some jerky she’d hidden in a pocket of her ninja outfit and started handing it out to the kids, who threw up their hands in delight.

Everyone started blissfully biting into their jerky.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

The old ninja teacher practically kicked the door down as he charged in.

“What is this?! Ninja food is a way of training your bodies so you can survive in even the harshest environments. You can’t just go eating whatever you want!”

The old ninja snatched the half-eaten jerky out of the students’ hands.

“If you want to be a true ninja, eat ninja food!” he bellowed.

Maybe that was why there was a bit of weak poison mixed into the grains?

“You must prioritize becoming a top-class ninja in order to be of use to the great sage and the Holy Woman!”

Invoking these names seemed to persuade the children. Those who hadn’t had their jerky taken away yet handed it back to Pochi and reluctantly returned to their ninja food.

Only one pudgy child quickly swallowed the jerky without the sage noticing.

“You don’t get special treatment, either. I’m confiscating these.”

The old ninja took the bundle of jerky out of Pochi’s hands and left the room.

“My Mr. Jerky...”

Pochi hung her head dejectedly.

“Let’s eeeat?”

“Okay, sir.”

Tama and Pochi each popped a fistful of the grains from their bags.

“It’s yummier than weeds, sir.”

“Aye.”

The pair wore dubious expressions as they chewed on the grains.

Following their example, I popped some into my mouth as well.

*Yeah, this is even worse than I expected.* I bet the dried rice rations from ancient times were much better than this.

It tasted like food that was meant to turn one’s body and mind into a machine.



In the afternoon, we trained in ninjutsu techniques like water-walking and water-escape.

The old ninja teacher was shocked to find that Tama and Pochi could already walk on water by using “Skywalking,” and alarmed by the remarkable amount of time they could stay underwater, thanks to the lung capacity granted by being over level 50. For the most part, though, the exercises passed without much difficulty.

“Grrr...the final exercise will be—five laps around the outside of the village!”

A ten-kilometer marathon after a day of training? Ninja classes were pretty intense.

“No one beats us when it comes to running!”

“Yeah! We even won against our beastfolk upperclassmen!”

Two of the students challenged Tama and Pochi to a race.

They were probably looking for a rematch in their field of expertise, since they couldn't beat the girls at ninjutsu.

Both boys had the "Sprinting" skill, presumably the source of their confidence.

"Tama won't lose?"

"Pochi doesn't even lose to Usasa, sir!"

Tama and Pochi accepted the challenge head-on.

On the old ninja's signal, the kids started running. I started from the back, giving advice to kids with poor running form as I jogged along, until I somehow caught up with the front of the pack.

"Master's heeere?"

"You're right, sir! Master! Pochi's right here, sir!"

Tama and Pochi seemed to have been waiting for me.

"Dammit!"

"How are you...so...relaxed...?!"

I passed the boys who were chasing Tama and Pochi with bright red faces, and fell into step beside the girls.

"Pochi's in serious mode now, sir."

"Bye-byye?"

Pochi and Tama started running at full tilt, more suited to a short-distance sprint than to a marathon.

"H-hmph, they think they can keep that up the whole rest of the way?"

"We're gonna win...in the end...!"

I heard the boys muttering sour grapes as I followed behind Pochi and Tama.

Later, I'm pretty sure I heard their hearts breaking when Pochi and Tama fully lapped them and all the other kids.

Sprinting skill or not, they never stood a chance with a difference of over forty levels between them. Hopefully this wouldn't discourage them from living strong.

I felt eyes watching me from the direction of the village several times during the marathon, but it didn't feel hostile, so I just ignored it.

The combination of a young man running with a bunch of little kids all kicking up dust was bound to attract some curious glances.

"I'm first, sir!"

"Gooool?"

Pochi seemed to have a slight edge at long-distance running.

"Y-you little scamps! You must have taken a shortcut, right?! Fess up!"

The old ninja came running over, bellowing with rage.

Tama and Pochi took cover behind my back, trembling.

"Meeew?"

"We didn't take any shortcuts, sir."

The pair poked out their heads from behind me to protest.

"Inconceivable! You expect me to believe that you came back that fast without taking any shortcuts?!"

As soon as he retorted, the pair zipped right back behind me. It was a little cute.

"Please listen, sir. They're telling the truth. We only ran normally."

"...Chief. I can confirm that they did not cheat in any way."

The ninja lady hopped down from the village outer wall to support my statement.

It must have been her gaze I felt while we were running.

"Grrr..."

The old ninja scowled at us.

Then his lips curled into a sneer, as if he'd thought of an idea.

"Well, you're not sweating at all. I take it you haven't run enough yet? Then run all the way to the tower over there and bring back a few flowers that grow at its base."

The old man pointed at a watchtower at the peak of a mountain some distance away.

"Aye!"

"Yes, sir!"

Tama and Pochi were happy to take on the extra mission with all their extra energy, although I had a feeling it was intended as some mean-spirited hazing.

"Grr...be sure not to let any petals fall off on your way back. If even a single petal is missing, you'll have to do it again!"

"Aye-aye, siiir?"

"Roger, sir!"

Tama and Pochi took off toward the distant tower.

"Be careful—there are Dens of Evil near the tower!"

I thanked the lady ninja for the warning and followed after the pair.

"Den of Evil fooound?"

"It's small, sir."

Tama and Pochi discovered a Den of Evil entrance about two kilometers away from the village.

It was narrow enough that only a child would be able to enter. I stuck my head in briefly and used my "Search Entire Map" skill. It was just a winding cavern about sixty feet long, with nothing more than bats and bugs hiding inside.

"There's a cave over there, too, sir!"

"And here, and back theeere?"

Pochi and Tama spotted more Den of Evil entrances in fissures in the crags

and on a far-off slope.

There were a lot of small empty areas on the map, suggesting a cluster of Dens of Evil in this area. I was a little curious, but the terrain was too rugged to walk, and if I used “Skysrunning,” I’d be clearly visible from the watchtower.

“I smell water, sir!”

Pochi clambered onto a nearby boulder.

Tama and I followed, and we saw a familiar growth in the hollow beyond the boulder: a breezebranch tree. Small animals and deerlike herbivores were drinking from the puddles that formed at its roots.

Noticing us, the animals fled at once.

“Meeeat?”

“Aw, they ran away, sir.”

Tama and Pochi moved to chase after the animals, so I grabbed them by the belts to stop them.

It was rather nice and cool here, probably a boon of the breezebranch trees that the sandfolk called their “guardian deity.”

As we plucked flowers around the base of the tower, rough voices called down to us.

“Hey there! Training, are ya?”

“Better work hard to impress the Holy Woman and the sage!”

Some men in soldiers’ uniforms waved at us.

We waved in return, then headed back toward the village, being careful not to scatter the flowers’ petals.

Although the old ninja looked dissatisfied when he saw the flowers without a petal out of place, we were able to finish our afternoon training without any further incidents.

“Yaaay?”

“Dinner, sir!”



Tama and Pochi sniffed at the smells coming from the kitchen and cheered along with the other kids when they saw the lady ninja carrying out a large pot.

The vegetable-heavy dumpling soup–style broth was a whole lot better than the plain ninja food we were given for lunch.

As I watched the kids dig in with healthy appetites, I got a call from Arisa.

*“Helloooo? This is your beloved Arisa speaking.”*

*“Me too.”*

Mia’s voice followed Arisa’s.

She must have connected everyone via Tactical Talk.

*“How’s the magic school?”*

*“Good kids.”*

*“I think we’ll be fine. One of the teachers was a bit of an obnoxious elitist, but the head of the department handles things well.”*

That was good to hear.

*“...Oh, and the sage gave us local Water Magic and Fire Magic spellbooks as a reward in advance. He also showed us a few older spellbooks that we could only borrow.”*

*“Satou, guess what? The spellbooks are amazing. They had lost theories and everything! There was one really, really old theory that even the elves had lost. Miss Aaze might know about it. But I’d never seen it before. It’s true, you know?”*

Mia expressed her excitement with one of her rare lengthy rambles.

I’d have to visit them tonight and get a peek at these books myself.

*“He also lent us a few scrolls that are apparently materials left by a chant researcher from the Flue Empire era.”*

*“Scraps.”*

*“Yeah, some parts are missing, so you wouldn’t be able to use it as is. You might be able to make an original chant if you research the information written*

*in them, though.”*

*“Wow, very cool.”*

I couldn't wait to take a look. I love that sort of thing.

*“Master, I wish to speak, too, I declare.”*

After Nana chimed in, I had each of them tell me about their classes.

By the time they wrapped up, our dinnertime was over, and we'd moved away from the other kids, allowing Pochi and Tama to tell everyone about the ninja classes.

Once everyone had a turn, I asked how teaching went for them.

*“How did your magic class go?”*

*“We practiced chants in the morning. In the afternoon, we gave a lecture on convenient uses of magic in everyday life.”*

*“Mm. Basics.”*

That was a far cry from the contents of the specialized classes they taught in the Shiga Kingdom royal academy.

They added that since there were a lot of troublemaking kids, Arisa and Mia wore glasses and used pointing sticks to seem more teacher-like.

*“They said we should do training tomorrow to help them learn skills like ‘Chant Shortening’ and ‘Meditation.’”*

*“Not actual magic lessons?”*

*“Yeah, there's not much of that. We checked out the other teachers' classes, and they're all just practical training.”*

*“No theory.”* Mia sounded disgruntled.

*“Maybe the idea is to learn by doing here.”*

*“Not to mention, teaching skills to the kids who don't have any seems to be the top priority.”*

*...Hmm?*

How did those kids get invited to the Village of Adepts if they're not adept

enough to have any skills?

I asked Arisa for a bit more information.

*"They seemed to know how to use magic. They just did it without the skill and put up with the headache."*

I wonder if that counts as being an Adept.

*"The students I taught were a little strange as well,"* Liza volunteered.

*"In what way?"*

*"I suppose I would say their bodies couldn't keep up with their sharp eyes? I've seen explorers who recently recovered from serious injuries before, and several of the students reminded me of that."*

*"Master, there were a few in my class as well, I report."*

Hmm. If it's more than just one or two, that does seem a little odd.

*"What about you, Lulu?"*

*"Me? Well, all of my students worked hard."*

No problems in Lulu's classes, then? *Oh, wait a minute.*

*"Did any of them season food strangely?"*

*"Hmm? I suppose so. Their food tasted better once I told them to follow the amounts specified in the recipe, though."*

I wasn't sure if that made them similar to the students Liza and Nana mentioned, or just plain bad at cooking.

*"Didn't you see any kids like that, Master?"* Arisa asked.

*"Sorry, I don't remember. I wasn't really paying attention to that sort of thing."*

I was mostly too busy enjoying the old ninja's reactions.

*"What about you, Tama and Pochi?"*

*"They're good kiiids?"*

*"They are, sir! They all worked really, really hard, sir!"*

They didn't seem to have noticed anything, either.

I said I would pay closer attention starting the following day, and we ended our call for the evening.

While I was at it, I checked in on Raito with the Space Magic spells Clairvoyance and Clairaudience. It looked like he was working hard and getting along well with the other kids. Nothing to worry about, then.

By the time I finished up the call, it was already time to sleep.

"I don't mind a wooden floor, but isn't there any bedding?"

"Nope."

"Our master says ninjas should be able to sleep anywhere."

Evidently, sweeping the wooden floor where we'd just eaten dinner was the only step in preparing for bed.

Since all the students were here, it looked like we'd be sleeping in a coed jumble.

*I guess it's fine if I just think of it like camping.* The windows stayed open even at night because this was such a warm region anyway.

"Hey, tell us about the outside world!"

"I wanna hear stories about the hero."

Clearly unable to sleep, the kids started pestering Tama and Pochi for stories.

"Okeeeey?"

"We fought a demon lord with Mr. Hero, sir!"

"Oh, wooow!"

"What about Lady Seina? Did you meet her?"

"Yeah, tell us about Lady Seina!"

Seina, the sneaky scout of the hero party, seemed to be popular with the ninja students.

"Seina likes *omurice* and curry, sir!"

“She likes yakitori, toooo?”

While that probably wasn't the kind of information the kids were after, they seemed equally interested in foreign food, given their simple diets here, and asked about the dishes in question. This topic got everyone excited, and they continued chatting until the old ninja came in and yelled at everyone to be quiet.

I put Tama and Pochi to sleep and waited for the other kids to fall asleep. Once I was sure they were all out, I went to visit Arisa and Mia and had them show me the old spellbooks and research scrolls they borrowed from the sage.

Arisa and Mia fell asleep pretty quickly, but the materials were so interesting that I accidentally stayed up all night reading. All these sleepless nights were starting to catch up with me.

I returned without waiting for Arisa and Mia to wake up, since ninja classes would resume early in the morning.



“Today I will teach you about concealment jutsu using cloaks and fabrics appropriate for various situations.”

The ninja classes for the day were much more mundane than the practical training. I had to wonder if the old ninja teacher had had enough of Tama's and Pochi's physical prowess.

“Reveeersible?”

“The back is forest-colored and the front is earth-colored, sir!”

“Precisely! Excellent observation! A true ninja must ever be light on their feet. The less you have to carry, the better!”

The old man seemed pleased that they understood.

I guess throwing stars and caltrops are probably pretty heavy. I'd never thought about it when I read all those ninja manga.

“Now, hide yourselves! I will count to a hundred, then come looking for you. If I find you, you must do three laps around the village. Hide like your life depends on it!”

At this bellow, the students all grabbed their cloths and started running.

It seemed to me that they were enjoying it a little, probably because it was basically hide-and-seek with a penalty game.

“Nin-niin?”

“Pochi is a hide-and-seek pro, sir!”

Tama slipped into the attic through an opening in the eaves, while Pochi swiftly hid herself under the porch.

The other kids hid themselves in chests, behind furniture, and so on.

*Ooh, not bad.*

A couple of the students hid themselves brilliantly, even though they didn’t have skills like “Concealment” or “Invisibility.”

Their levels were low, too... *Wait, whoa.* One kid developed the “Invisibility” skill even as I looked on. Judging by the fact that it was grayed out, he must have acquired it by leveling up from the experience gained playing hide-and-seek.

I see...that certainly did make him an Adept. What an impressive natural talent.

“Beruto, Radori, Dorato! And over there, Shibato and Zazari!”

The old ninja found the kids at a remarkable pace.

But even an expert ninja couldn’t see through my maxed-out “Invisibility” skill. He walked right past my hiding spot.

Maybe I should’ve toned it down a bit.

In the end, he never found Tama, Pochi, or me.

“You three are really good.”

“Uh-huh, no one’s ever made it all the way to the end without getting found before.”

“Nyee-hee-hee?”

“You’re making me blush, sir.”

Tama and Pochi turned bashful at the children's high praise.

"Hmph, they'll be exposed as frauds sooner or later."

"Yeah, you can't become an Adept that easily."

A few angry-looking students standing off to one side were grumbling about us.

Those were the kids who'd showed really impressive hiding abilities without any skills earlier. It probably rankled them to see newcomers getting all the attention.

"Meeew?"

"Ouchy, sir."

The purehearted Pochi and Tama looked dejected about the kids' harsh words.

"Don't worry about them."

"They've been kinda stuck-up since they came back from the other school."

The other students reassured the duo.

"Do a lot of kids come back?" I asked, a little curious.

"Uh-huh, sometimes kids who go to the next school come back, too."

"Some kids quit, but others get Adept right away and go to the advanced school."

"Yeah, sometimes new students have a hard time here."

"Mostly 'cause ninja food is gross."

The kids started talking about that instead.

Still, if there was an advanced school, maybe Tama and Pochi would get promoted to that one soon.

That afternoon, we practiced with throwing stars and learned how to use caltrops for making an escape. Then the old ninja went on at great length about his glory days, and eventually taught us about the "decoy jutsu" he'd used to escape in that fateful mission.

“You see, ‘decoy jutsu’ is about distraction.”

He untied the string that fastened the sleeves of his ninja outfit, picked up two thick branches from a basket at his feet, and tied them together in a cross shape.

“If you have smoke bombs, best to use those. Only after you have used up all your smoke bombs, caltrops, and throwing stars should you consider using this last resort.”

While he spoke, the old ninja removed his coat and put it on the cross-shaped branches.

“As you can see, such a small thing cannot fool an enemy’s eyes.”

The students nodded in agreement.

“Hide behind a tree, bushes, a boulder, anything you can find, and wait for your chance. Use heat haze, twilight, darkness when the clouds cover the moon. And as soon as your opponent cannot see you, set this as a decoy and make your escape.”

“Wait...so we run away?”

“Shouldn’t we attack when our enemy’s distracted...?”

The children looked surprised, turning to one another and whispering.

“Exactly. Run away. If it was an enemy you could defeat, then you would not be driven to your last resort in the first place. Our job is to bring back the information we gained in enemy territory. You must never forget this.”

The old ninja firmly reminded them that their duty was intelligence gathering, not combat.

Tama and Pochi, who were plunked down on the floor holding their knees, nodded vigorously, taking the lesson to heart.

Thus, the unexpectedly serious conversation about decoy jutsu brought our afternoon classes to an end.

After dinner, I did a routine check-in with the others.

*“You had kids like that, too, Master?”*



*“Why, did you see the same thing?”*

*“Mm. Confirmed.”*

I reported that I’d seen a kid gain the “Invisibility” skill by leveling up during training, and Arisa and Mia told me that someone had acquired a magic skill during their day’s classes, too.

*“I did see one student get the hang of things during training and suddenly get much better, although I don’t know whether they gained a skill or not.”*

*“Yes, Liza. There was a similar student in the shield group, I report.”*

The others had all seen a similar phenomenon.

However, unlike Arisa and me, they couldn’t see the students’ levels or skills and could only speak from what they saw while teaching.

*“How did things go on your end today, Lulu?”*

*“Me? Today we made some lovely dishes with fish paste! It was so delicious, I wished I could share it with all of you, too.”*

*“No, no, that’s not what I’m asking,”* Arisa insisted. *“I mean the students. Did any of them suddenly get really good?”*

*“Um... I don’t think so?”*

Things must be nice and peaceful in the cooking classroom.

*“I wonder if this sudden growth in ability is a trait of Adepts?”* Arisa remarked.

*“Yeah, maybe so. It’s partly because their levels are so low, but it did seem like they went up faster than other kids’ levels at around the same starting level.”*

Although since I was just keeping an eye on the one kid after he suddenly gained the “Invisibility” skill, I couldn’t say for sure if that was really the case.

*“I wonder how they find these kids, then?”*

*“Maybe it’s the sage’s experience, or he just has good instincts?”*

Or maybe there was some kind of artifact or treasure that told him which kids to pick.

In the end, we concluded that it didn’t really matter, since it wasn’t doing any

harm, and ended our check-in for the night.



The next day, the sage appeared at the ninja classroom.

“I shall train you and Tama today, Sir Pendragon.”

The pretty lady who worked as a ninja teacher was with him, possibly to be his aide.

“P-please don’t forget about Pochi, sir.”

“Ah, yes, sorry. You’re welcome to come, too.”

Although this seemed like a brush-off to me, Pochi joined us with a look of relief.

“I think you have experienced enough *normal* ninja training in the past few days.”

*Aah, is that why he put us in the old ninja’s class?*

“As I’m sure you’ve realized by now, your ninjutsu is very different from that of any ordinary ninja, young Tama.”

The sage looked at Tama.

She looked back with a confused “Meeew?” clearly unsure how to react.

“As far as I know, you are the originator of this magic-like ninjutsu using elemental stones. Perhaps there are some who have tried similar things, but none have mastered the technique so well.”

Finally figuring out that she was being paid a compliment, Tama giggled bashfully.

“Show me the lineup of ninjutsu you can use with elemental stones, if you would.”

“Aye.”

Tama demonstrated her ninjutsu using stone powder of the respective elements: fire jutsu fire dancing and fire blades; a water-escape technique using water stone powder; wind jutsu that included a strong gust of wind, a smoke

screen, and wind blades; earth jutsu like trench-digging, pit-making, and earth walls; lightning jutsu including lightning blades and electric shocks; ice jutsu that could freeze the surface of water; and light jutsu like light flashes, illumination, and weak flash bombs.

Seeing them one after another, I was impressed anew by the wide variety.

Since elemental stones were expensive, it would be difficult to popularize these techniques, but I had enough for Tama to use without a problem.

“What of shadow stones and dark stones?”

“No shadow yeeet?”

Tama showed an example of the shadow-splashing jutsu she could do with shadow stone powder.

The most she could manage was making small ripples or sinking in only to her ankles, a far cry from being able to capture enemies, like the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Whip.

“It seems you’ve a ways to go on perfecting this one.”

“Meeew, not enough stooones?”

“You’ve used up your shadow stones?”

“Aye.”

Tama nodded, and Pochi shiftily averted her gaze.

She probably felt guilty for using up a bunch of the shadow stone powder a while back.

“Then let me give you a few more.”

The sage produced some shadow stones from his Item Box and gave them to Tama.

“May I ask where one might acquire shadow stones?”

“In forests too deep for humans to tread. Where the sunlight is strong, yet it cannot reach the roots of the trees. Such a world of shadows is ideal for the stones. Especially a quiet forest where the shadows will not be disturbed.”

*Aah, I see.* I guess they wouldn't be in a place like Bolenan Forest that was thoroughly settled and maintained by the elves, then.

I'd have to go looking sometime. I might even know a few places that could qualify.

"You have no ninjutsu using dark stones yet?"

"Not yeeet?"

Even Tama hadn't gotten around to something that advanced.

"Could you not do something like this?"

The sage spoke a Dark Magic chant, and a black vortex appeared behind him.

"Whirlpool?"

"That's right. It absorbs magic and fire, among other things. Try using fire jutsu on me."

"Aye."

As soon as Tama created fire with some fire powder, it was sucked into the black vortex.

"Meeew!"

"It got sucked up, sir!"

Tama's and Pochi's eyes widened.

"Dark Magic excels at absorbing and neutralizing. I have no doubt that even dark stone powder could neutralize attacks from the likes of a Fire or Lightning Rod."

"Aye!" Tama nodded eagerly. "Pochi, help meee?"

"Yes, sir."

Tama made some dark stone powder, then tried scattering it into the air to block a Spellblade Shot from Pochi.

Even though Pochi seemed to be holding back the strength of her shot, the dark stone powder only dampened its velocity very slightly before it pierced right through.

“Ouchie!”

Too focused on the ninjutsu to dodge, Tama was struck square in the forehead by the slightly slowed-down Spellblade Shot.

“Tama, are you all right, sir?”

“Don’t worryyyy? One more tryyy?”

“Yes, sir. Pochi is good at controlling her strength, I promise, sir.”

“Wait a second, Pochi. Use this instead.”

Concerned about the danger, I had them practice with a low-capacity projection gun instead.

I watched anxiously as the pair practiced for a while.

“I did iiiit?”

“Tama’s amazing, sir.”

With her mastery of so many other ninjutsu, it took less than an hour for Tama to manage neutralizing a scattershot from the projection gun.

The sage giving her a few suggestions during the practice might have helped, too.

“Excellent. But you must not rest on your laurels.”

“Aye, Mr. Saaage.”

Tama nodded seriously.

Sometime during the course of their practice, Tama and Pochi had started calling the sage “Mr. Sage.”

“Be careful not to assume that darkness can only absorb. There are fairy tales of mages who used Dark Magic to soar through the skies. The only limit to your ninjutsu is your imagination, Tama. Keep your eyes and mind open and seek out new possibilities.”

“Aye, I’ll do my bestest.”

Tama struck a pose and saluted.

For some reason, Pochi stood next to her in the same pose. Very cute.

“That’s the spirit. Then allow me to demonstrate more Shadow Magic for your studies...” The sage paused to look at Pochi and me. “Sir Pendragon and young Pochi, you may practice with elemental stones as well if you wish, but perhaps it would be more beneficial to study special ninja techniques from the *chuunin*.”

“Special techniques?”

The sage nodded and gestured to the pretty ninja lady who’d been nervously watching Tama’s ninjutsu.

“Clone jutsu.”

With that, the woman demonstrated a realistic cloning technique, repeatedly using “Blink” and pausing between quick movements to create the illusion of afterimages. I would probably be able to reproduce something like that.

“Super speedy, sir!”

“Quick and respooonse?”

*That’s not quite right, Tama.*

“How was it? It looked like there were several of me, right?”

“Nyooo?”

“You were one person the whole time, sir.”

Unfortunately for the triumphant-looking lady ninja, Tama and Pochi had such excellent kinetic vision that they were able to track her movements just fine.

“That can’t be... Watch this, then.”

Narrowing her eyes, the ninja moved even faster than before, creating even more convincing afterimages.

She seemed to be using the feinting skill “Gap Defense,” too.

“W-well, how’s that?”

The pretty ninja panted for breath, wiping away a river of sweat.

“Meeeew?”

“You were very fast, sir...?”

Clearly the girls still weren’t able to see the afterimages.

“Looks like you could use more training yourself.”

“S-Sir Sage...!”

The ninja lady looked on the verge of tears.

“To me it looked like there were at least seven of you. The trick is to vary your speed, right?” I quickly tried to back her up. “What other techniques do you know?”

“We have disguise techniques for sneaking into enemy territory and techniques for escaping when you’ve been caught and tied up. Wall-running and glamour jutsu are convenient, too.”

The ninja counted on her fingers as she listed techniques.

“Woow!”

“Pochi is very curious about those, sir!”

Tama and Pochi looked at the lady ninja with their eyes sparkling.

“Tama, you’re training with me today. You can have Sir Pendragon teach you those techniques later.”

“...Aye.”

Tama looked a little disappointed.

Pochi and I moved a short distance away from Tama and the sage to watch the lady ninja demonstrate her *chuunin*, or intermediate, ninja techniques.

“The rope-escape trick isn’t too exciting, so we’ll start with wall-running.”

The woman pulled out a few black-bladed daggers and threw them into the wall, then used them as footholds to ascend the wall as if running on it.

When she reached the top, she stood on the narrow edge of the wall on one foot and threw us a wink.

Finally, she waved her arm, and the daggers she used as footholds flew back to her grasp. They must have been connected with some kind of wire.

“Amazingly amazing, sir! That was very, very cool, sir!”

The overexcited Pochi used “Skywalking” to run up next to the pretty ninja

lady and shower her with praise.

“...Thank you. I’m not quite sure how to feel about that, though.”

I considered running up the wall to join them but decided to refrain so as not to inflict any further shock on the woman.

Once she recovered, she brought us to a classroom.

“Glamour jutsu uses an illusion powder that’s prepared in advance. Thus, the direction of the wind is very important. You have to be careful—on windy days, you can only use it inside.”

The woman lit the powder aflame with a candlestick, filling the room with a sweet scent.

“Wow! Lots of meat, sir!”

Apparently, Pochi was already seeing an illusion.

“Meat! Sir!”

*Wuh-oh.*

Pochi dove into the pretty ninja lady’s chest.

“H-hey, stop that!”

*Wow, that’s some acrobatic jiggling right there.*

I grabbed Pochi and stopped her before she could bite down.

“H-hang on. I dispelled the illusion powder. Just take some deep breaths, all right?”

“...Hmm? The meat is gone, and now it’s just boobs, sir.”

Pochi retreated from the pretty lady’s chest in disappointment.

“Last but not least, the escape technique. Here, tie me up with this rope.”

The woman started to hold out the length of rope to Pochi, then swiveled toward me instead. She probably got the feeling that the former wouldn’t go well for her.

Tying up a woman feels like a seriously sinful pleasure, but if she’s asking me to do it, I have no choice. None at all. Just for the record.



“Pochi will do it, sir!”

“Ah, wait...”

“Have a fear, Pochi’s here, sir!”

Pochi snatched the rope before I could take it and wound it thoroughly around the ninja lady. She even tied it all the way up to her mouth, leaving her to wriggle and say “mmph!” helplessly.

Thanks to Pochi’s enthusiastic work, she seemed to be tied too tightly to move.

If I remembered right, the trick to a rope escape was stiffening up when one was tied, then loosening one’s limbs to create gaps to squirm out of. Even if she dislocated her joints to escape like a fictional ninja, I don’t think it would help much in this tight of a bind.

“Ah! Be careful, you could cut yourself, sir.”

Just as the lady ninja was about to pull out a scrap of metal hidden in her sleeve, Pochi plucked it away with only the purest of intentions. The pretty ninja looked like she might cry.

At this rate, she would lose what was left of her dignity as a teacher. I used my Magic Hand to help just a little by creating a small gap. She let out a sexy-sounding cry as I did so, though I covered my ears and pretended not to hear, like a proper gentleman.

“I—I finally got out...”

“You’re amazing, Miss Ninja, sir!”

Pochi clapped enthusiastically with nothing but pure innocence in her eyes.

“Th...thank you.”

The lady ninja screwed up her face as she responded.

I feel like I could get used to seeing a pretty lady in a bind, which is a scary thought. Better bury that one deep.

Managing to recover yet again, the ninja helped us practice our own rope escapes, clone jutsu, and so on.

“I escaped, sir!”

“Pochi, you’re not supposed to rip the ropes to shreds!”

Pochi’s brute-force escape technique didn’t go over well.

“Super clone jutsu, sir!”

“Eeeek! The wall!”

Attempting the clone illusion, Pochi used “Blink” but couldn’t quite stop in time; her momentum sent her crashing right through the wall of the classroom and tumbling out of the building. The wooden ninja house must have been made of cheaper stuff than I thought. Even though I knew there was no way Pochi would get hurt from the impact, I wished she would be a little more careful, if only for the sake of my nerves.

“Is it something like this?”

I tried imitating the lady ninja’s technique.

By using skills like “Gap Defense” and “Blink” all together, I was able to manage a decent reproduction.

### **> Skill Acquired: “Doppelgänger”**

*Oh, hey, it worked.*

I put skill points into my useful-sounding new acquisition and activated it.

“Master really can do anything, sir!”

“Impossible... He succeeded in just one try...?”

While Pochi praised me for what Arisa would call a “Master moment,” the pretty ninja applauded me with tears in her eyes. I felt a little guilty.

Incidentally, sexy *kunoichi* techniques were apparently reserved for higher classes. I didn’t think that would be good for Pochi’s upbringing anyway, but I would have liked to study it just a little, purely for research purposes.

By the time we finished our special training and headed back to Tama and the sage, they seemed to have finished their practice as well. The sage was giving her some kind of lecture.

“True power exists to aid and guide the powerless. Be careful not to let it go to your head.”

“Meeew?”

Noticing that Tama didn’t understand the sage’s words, I gave her an easier version. “It means you should help people who are in trouble, and not pick on anyone weaker than you.”

“Aye!” Tama responded enthusiastically.

“Have you finished your training, too, Sir Pendragon?”

“Yes, it was a very worthwhile endeavor.”

Whether it was practical or not, I’d had plenty of fun just doing ninja activities in a ninja house.

“I’m glad to hear—”

Before the sage finished speaking, the tinny ringing of a bell sounded out of nowhere.

He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a blue crystal bangle that must have been connected to the City Core. This seemed to be the source of the sound.

“...Holiness...”

My “Lip Reading” skill conveyed the sage’s soundless mutter to me.

“Apologies. Something urgent has come up. Learn more ninjutsu from this one until I return.”

With that, the sage sank into his own shadow and vanished.

*That must’ve been the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Portal.*

At the time, I was too distracted by the pretty ninja’s despairing cry of “Sir Sage, I can’t do iiiit!” to fully notice that the sage had used Shadow Magic without a chant.

“Maybe something happened in the holy city?”

My best guess from my “Lip Reading” skill was that something had happened to Pontiff Zarzaris in the holy city.

Just as I opened my map to gather information, I got a Tactical Talk call from Arisa.

*“Master, we’ve got trouble.”*

I felt my pulse quicken at Arisa’s urgent tone.

## Interlude: A Miscalculation

“Sir Sage, it’s the Holy Woman...”

The personal attendant who was caring for the Holy Woman noticed me and came running over.

We were underground beneath the city where I serve as viceroy. Here in the City Core room was the birdcage I’d created in one corner: the “Holy Woman’s Chamber.”

“Throwing another tantrum, is she...?” I muttered, looking around at the broken cup and toppled furnishings. “Do not use the emergency summons for such a trivial matter.”

“I’m terribly sorry. But the Holy Woman attempted to take her own life...”

The attendant shrank back nervously.

How foolish. Even if it was only an imitation, the Geist binding that woman would prevent her from doing any such thing.

“She’s just acting out for attention. If she goes wild again, just find a way to calm her down.”

I dismissed the attendant and strode over to the woman who had thrown herself face down on the bed.

Her straight violet hair was dark in a few places, and long enough to cover most of her Holy Woman’s attire. If she simply cut it all off, I imagine the weight off would ease her anguished state somewhat, yet she stubbornly refused to cut it. It did not seem worth forcing her to do so.

“...Shizuka. The next ‘Aptitude Transfer’ ceremony will be a big one.”

Since I’d come all this way, I informed the Holy Woman of our next order of business.

While my main target was the girl-child with purple hair like Shizuka's, the cat-eared girl's "aptitude" was far more impressive than I'd first thought. I must acquire it for my own and research it more closely.

"So once again, you're going to steal the skills and experience people worked so hard to earn..." Shizuka's voice was bleak.

"And what of it? We are only taking something the riffraff can hardly make good use of anyway and redistributing it to worthier owners. Besides, you cannot defy me while you are bound by that Geist. Just accept your fate...Holy Woman."

As I admonished her, Shizuka turned her face toward me without rising from the bed.

Her eyes glared at me bitterly from behind her violet bangs, one section of which had darkened to jet black. The face hidden beneath her long hair had beautiful features, yet her dark and depressing air put all of it to ruin.

"...‘Holy Woman’? I have no right to such a title. ‘Sinner’ would be more fitting."

"Then perhaps I should call you a demon lord?"

Shizuka buried her face in the bed again and let out a choked sob.

Her spirit had always been easily broken. Even when she became a demon lord, the Geist kept its hold on her, and she retained her rational mind. Convenient though that might have been, her miserable state made me feel depressed just being around her.

"My subordinate picked these out. Use it to relieve your boredom."

I piled some supplies in the corner of her room, along with clothes and accessories that I had a female student pick out.

Shizuka, who had no interest in quality materials, didn't even look up.

I shrugged and left the Holy Woman's Chamber, and the attendant entered in my place.

"Truly, women are such hopeless creatures."

As I let out a sigh, the shining blue crystal that was the main body of the City Core began flashing intermittently before my eyes.

At the same time, the terminal on my wrist let out a ringing sound.

“An emergency signal?”

I took out the City Core terminal and read the brief message displayed there.

“...This cannot be.”

My breath caught in my throat. Unlike the foolish attendant girl's summons, this was a serious crisis.

“There is no time to waste.”

I teleported to the holy city at once, in exchange for the majority of the magic that was left in the City Core.

“...Your Holiness!”

I ran into Pontiff Zarzaris's private quarters and found a mummified corpse in chamberlain's clothes, a terrified priestess in training, and a few Temple Knights, who had come running but clearly didn't know what to do.

Removing my cloak, I cast it over the corpse to hide it from view and scanned the room.

The most important person was...there.

I spotted the hem of the pontiff's robes beneath the partition screen next to the bed.

I hurried around the partition and over to the pontiff, who was cowering in the corner.

“Your Holiness! Are you all right?!”

“...Sorijeyro...”

He latched on to me, trembling.

I supported his weight while I looked him over quickly.

Black fog was leaking from all over his body. It was miasma, grown thick enough to be visible to the naked eye.

It was as Lord Green once said. God Fragments, which lend ordinary people the authority of a god, are too powerful for a human body to handle. If they are used too much, the soul vessel will break, and the human will become a demon lord.

In order to ascertain the truth of these words, I forced a sandfolk research subject to mass-produce Sandstorm Soldiers; sure enough, it transformed into the Sandstorm Lord. Shizuka became a demon lord as well when I overused her ability in the “Aptitude Transfer” ceremonies.

Now, the pontiff was undoubtedly only a step away from that same transformation.

“...I am afraid. I am afraid of my own power, Sorijeyro.”

The black fog seeping out of the pontiff’s body grew thicker.

Lord Green told me more. He said what pushed a person whose soul vessel was damaged from the realm of human to that of a demon lord was powerful emotional burdens, such as anxiety, terror, or unbridled rage.

Then, surely peace and stability would push them back to humanity.

“What happened, Your Holiness?”

“I let Somos die. No...I killed him.”

The pontiff confessed his sin, referring to the dead chamberlain.

“It began when Somos fell from a stepladder and broke his neck, and I used my ‘holy power’ to try to heal him. But the holy power did not work. Instead of being healed, Somos began to suffer, and dried up and shriveled right before my eyes. Tell me, has the goddess forsaken me?”

The Unique Skill Heal All must have backfired somehow.

Yet the pontiff seemed more afraid of losing the goddess’s favor than of having taken a life for the first time. The devout are a hopeless lot, too.

“Of course not. You are as blessed and beloved as ever, Your Holiness.”

Though I don’t know *which* god or goddess it is that blesses him.

“Sir Sage, is His Holiness back here...?”



“Black fog coming from the pontiff’s body?! Sir Sage, what in the world happened to—?”

I dropped the unfortunate Temple Knights into a Shadow Jail.

None who had seen the pontiff in this state could be allowed to go free.

“Sorijeyro, where did they go?”

“I simply quieted them for the time being.”

I soothed the pontiff, using the Psychic Magic spells Calm Wave and Weariness Field to forcibly settle his mind, followed by Sleep Wave.

As the pontiff’s breathing grew slow and steady, the black fog began to fade.

I must have dealt with it correctly, then.

“...Sori...jeyro...”

“Please rest, Your Holiness. By the time you awaken, this nightmare will be over.”

Once the pontiff fell asleep, I returned to the other side of the partition screen to dispose of the witnesses.

*...Where did she go?*

The priestess in training who’d been sitting there stunned was gone.

“Where is the girl who was here a moment ago?”

I strode over to the door, where several people were peering in through the crack.

As soon as I’d completely blocked their view of the corpse, I dropped it into the Shadow Jail after the unlucky knights.

“Do you mean Riija? Pastor Badoris had her carried to the infirmary.”

Pastor Badoris...one of Cardinal Dobbunaf’s lackeys.

“Mobilize all the Temple Knights to arrest priestess-in-training Riija at once. She attempted to poison the pontiff.”

“Riija did that?!”

“His Holiness! Is he all right?!”

“He’s fine, not to worry. But a chamberlain died trying to protect him. We must secure the culprit before she is silenced! Go! Hurry!”

My words finally urged the Temple Knights to get moving.

I told them I’d sent the corpse away for an autopsy, and that the room was off-limits to preserve the crime scene.

“...This has become quite a problem.”

Even with all the Temple Knights, securing the priestess would likely be impossible.

The fact that a girl who’d learned the pontiff’s secret had fallen into the hands of a cardinal who was after his position was troubling, to say the least.

But I couldn’t take forceful measures against the cardinal, either.

He was the one who did the dirty work of running Parion Province, not the idealistic pontiff. Perhaps I could take on those duties in his place, but if I took on such burdensome tasks, it would be a serious hindrance to my true duties. Thus, I could not dispose of him lightly.

Carefully controlling my annoyance at this precarious situation, I forced myself to think.

The ideal solution would be to control the cardinal with the “Geist” skill. However, such a cautious man was not likely to walk into a place that would meet all the conditions. Even if I managed to lure him in and force him under a Geist, he would hardly be the type to meekly follow orders. No doubt he would pretend to obey while secretly undermining me, or even find loopholes in his orders to rebel against me. The last thing I needed was the crafty cardinal maneuvering behind my back.

Of course, it would be simple if I could bring him over to our side, but I doubted that man would agree to releasing the seal on the Evil God’s Prison or to taking over the world using demon lords.

If only he were a simple fool like those demon lord worshippers...

Perhaps I should just allow the cardinal to come after the pontiff and trigger

his transformation into a demon lord... No, that wouldn't do. The preparations were not yet complete.

And if I used the pontiff's seat as bait to silence him, it would force me to make serious modifications to my carefully laid plans.

That would be putting the cart before the horse.

I had no choice, then. I would have to dispose of the cardinal.

Even if it meant the domestic affairs of Parion Province fell apart without their central pillar, the distress of the masses would only aid in our goal of increasing the miasma density in the area. If their faith in Parion faltered, so much the better. It would be more difficult to acquire funding for my research if the nation's power flagged, but that was a minor inconvenience.

Thus decided, I sent for some operatives I'd trained from an early age and ordered them to investigate the cardinal's current whereabouts.

"The cardinal is gone, you say?"

"Yes, he was last seen in the great cathedral with Pastor Badoris. There's been no trace of him since."

"What happened to the agents we had shadowing him?"

"They were eliminated."

The cardinal must have had some skilled agents of his own.

"Track him down. You can kill him on the spot if you manage to get him alone. Just make sure it looks like an accident."

"Yes, sir."

The agents scattered to search.

*Damn you, Dobbunaf...*

Did he figure out that the incident with the dead chamberlain and the purple light from using a Unique Skill were connected to the Sandstorm Lord's attack on the cathedral...? Or was he already doubtful of the pontiff's Unique Skill, and this confirmed his suspicions?

"...Sir Sage. Is everything all right?"

One of the pontiff's pastors peered in through the door.

It was only then that I realized it had grown dark. The sun must have set while I was lost deep in thought.

"His Holiness is still sleeping. I intend to let him rest until at least tomorrow morning."

"Perhaps a Temple Knight could take over keeping watch on him, Sir Sage? Surely you must be tired as well."

"No need to worry about me. I will protect the pontiff. Let the Temple Knights focus on finding the infidels who targeted his life."

At that, the pontiff left the room, still wearing a worried expression.

Then I heard stirring behind me. The conversation must have awoken the pontiff.

"...Sorijeyro."

I walked over to the bed, where the pontiff called for me in a brittle voice.

The miasma that was emitting from his body earlier had completely vanished. It should be safe to let other people into the room now, then.

"It wasn't a dream, was it? I killed Somos..."

"Your Holiness, you must relinquish your power."

Judging by the state he was in earlier, the pontiff would soon become a demon lord unless he gave up the God Fragment.

"You mean the power of healing?!"

"Indeed," I pressed. "We will bequeath it to a different clergyman in the next 'Aptitude Transfer' ceremony."

"I..." The pontiff looked at me in shock. "I need some time to think about it."

It was the only way to avoid his destruction, yet the pontiff still asked for more time, instead of agreeing right away.

I managed to keep my urge to shout at him in check, settling for a short "Understood."



“That utter fool!”

Creating a sound barrier with Wind Magic, I let out the rage I’d been suppressing.

After shouting curses and insults until my frustration cleared somewhat, I drank some wine to refresh my throat.

“Still, after we finally found a new purple-haired target, I can’t believe the pontiff became useless to us before we could turn her into a demon lord... At this rate, there’s no telling when we will finally release the seal on the Evil God’s Prison.”

I paced around the room, thinking hard.

“Mezzalt would be the best candidate for the God Fragment transfer. Surely he will accept it, given his admiration for the Holy Woman. Once he becomes a demon lord, he will no doubt use that power well to bring terror and destruction to Parion Province.”

A Holy Sword wielder was meant to destroy demon lords. To turn him into one instead would be a delicious irony.

“When the time comes, I ought to bring Shizuka to the holy city to carry out the next ‘Aptitude Transfer’ ceremony.”

It would be faster to bring the pontiff and company to her location, but if the pontiff and I both left the holy city, the cardinal might emerge from hiding to take advantage of the opportunity.

“Perhaps I shall bring the *girl-child* and company, too, and take her *Fragments* and skills away while I’m at it...”

Yes, that would be best.

“Then I will become even stronger.”

As a pleasant mood welled up within me, I threw back my head and laughed to my heart’s content.

## Unadepts

*Satou here. The phrase "lost child" makes me think of the announcements at places like amusement parks and department stores, but there are also situations that lead to search parties combing the mountains and so on. No matter what the case might be, I always hope they'll get found safe and sound right away.*

*"What's going on?"*

At the end of our training that day, Arisa sent me an urgent message in Tactical Talk.

*"Missing."*

Mia's voice chimed in quietly.

*So Mia's safe. Thank goodness.*

I pressed a hand to my chest in relief. When Arisa called and said, "We've got trouble," I was afraid something had happened to Mia, who was running the magic classes with her.

*"Who's gone missing?"*

*"Students."*

*"Two of the students we've been teaching disappeared."*

*"Did you tell the other teachers?"*

*"Yes, but..."*

*"Ignored."*

*"They ignored you?"*

*"It's the strangest thing! When we told our fellow teachers, they just said, 'This happens all the time' and that was it."*

Were disappearances really that common here?

*"Were these the same larvae who learned skills yesterday? I inquire."*

*"No," Arisa answered. "So I don't think it was an abduction or anything like that."*

*"Maybe they ran away because they weren't getting anywhere with their training?"*

*"That is possible. They might have fled the classroom on a whim and could very well be lost right now."*

Lulu and Liza might be onto something. They could be sitting scared in an alley right now.

*"Tama will find theeem?"*

*"Pochi will search, too, sir. Pochi is a pro at finding people, sir!"*

Tama and Pochi were ready to go.

That was probably fine, since all we had left to do today was sleep.

*"Do you know their names?"*

*"Yes, they're called Jimuza and Abul."*

I searched the map for the names Arisa gave me. To my surprise, they were nowhere to be found in the Village of Adept's or the surrounding area.

I checked the neighboring maps, too, and still came up with nothing.

*"Then does that mean they're already...?"*

*"No, there are several Den of Evil entrances around here. I'll check if they wandered into one of those by mistake."*

There were a lot of small Dens of Evil in this area, like the ones we found during our long-distance run to the tower.

I explained this to Arisa and left the room, where I found Tama and Pochi waiting for me in a saluting pose, already changed from their pajamas into their ninja outfits.

*"We'll go look for them, too."*

*"Mm. Worried."*

*"Master, I wish to join the search as well, I request."*

*"I don't know if I'll be any help, but I'll join, too."*

Arisa, Mia, Nana, and Lulu all signed up for the search.

Liza was already on her way to the ninja classroom.

*"All right. We'll all go together."*

I gave everyone a meeting place and left the ninja house with Tama and Pochi.

*"Jimuzaaaa! Abuuul!"*

Once we all met up, we went to search near the Dens of Evil.

I was able to tell where most of them were by checking the blank areas on my map. It was harder to tell exactly where the entrances were, though, so I had everyone split up and look for them.

*"Got ooone?"*

Tama pushed her way through the underbrush, her face and hair getting covered in leaves as she tracked down an entrance.

*"Pochi's nose doesn't lie, sir! There's definitely an entrance under here, sir!"*

Pochi dug up another one with her natural instincts alone.

*"Arisa, over there! A strange breeze is blowing through the gap between those two boulders."*

*"Okey-dokey! I'll go look!"*

Expert sniper Lulu found a cave by reading the flow of the wind, and Arisa teleported over to search.

*"Search, mini-sylphs."*

FWOOSH!

Mia used Spirit Magic to summon a sylph and split it into countless mini-sylphs, sending them to search the area with strength in numbers.



Liza and Nana, who had less natural searching ability, supported the others instead.

“Liza, monster spotted, I report.”

“It must have been hiding out in the Den of Evil.”

Once in a great while, a monster or creature like a bat would come flying out of a Den of Evil, only to be quickly destroyed by Nana’s Foundation abilities and Liza’s Magic Spear.

Each time one of the girls found an entrance, I hurried over and used the “Search Entire Map” skill to check inside for the missing children.

“They’re not turning up, are they?”

“Well, there are a lot of dens.”

We’d already checked more than thirty spots without any results.

I was even starting to wonder if they’d left the area of my map entirely. There was no way ordinary kids would be able to do that so quickly, though.

“Maybe they really have been kidnapped...”

“Kidnapped?”

Mia caught wind of Arisa’s muttered worry.

“Like by survivors of the Light of Freedom cult or something!”

“It certainly wouldn’t be out of character for such an evil group to plot to revive a demon lord by sacrificing children,” Liza mused.

“Sacrificing larvae is forbidden, I declare.”

“Master...”

Lulu looked at me worriedly.

“We don’t know for sure yet that they’ve been kidnapped.”

While that did sound plausible, I hadn’t seen any members of the demon lord—worshipping cult Light of Freedom since the defeat of the Sandstorm Lord.

Still, this nation had so many Dens of Evil—the ruins of the labyrinth called the “Evil God’s Prison”—that there was still a real possibility that they were

hiding out somewhere. I think these countless caves were one of the reasons that the Light of Freedom members were able to have such a large presence here in the religious Parion Province.

“Mew!”

Peering into a chasm on a rocky slope nearby, Tama suddenly raised her head and looked around.

There was a point of light at the edge of my radar. It was the pretty lady from the ninja house. I waited until she emerged from beyond the rocky area.

“May I ask why you left the classroom late at night and came all the way out here?”

I couldn’t see her expression very well since she’d appeared with the help of several flash bombs, but she didn’t seem to be out of breath, as befitting a ninja teacher.

“We’re searching for two children who disappeared from the magic classroom,” I answered honestly.

“I see...,” she murmured, then chided that it was dangerous to go so close to the Dens of Evil, especially at night.

“As for the children, no need to worry,” she went on. “We already have them in our protection.”

She explained that there was a hidden village especially for kids who dropped out. That was reassuring, at least.

“I wonder why our fellow teachers didn’t mention that?”

“Well, we keep the hidden village a secret from the students,” the pretty ninja told Arisa.

“Why is it a secret?”

“Because if they knew about the village, some children might give up instead of giving one last push to try harder.”

She explained that it was better if the students didn’t know there was a place for them to run away to.

“Even so...” Arisa didn’t seem convinced. “Let me see Jimuza and Abul, then. I want to know for sure that they’re safe.”

“You can’t. The location of the hidden village is a secret.”

“But why?! I’m a teacher, not a student, you know.”

“Only a temporary one.”

Arisa and the ninja stared at each other.

Eventually, it was the older woman who relented first.

“...Oh, all right.”

“Then let’s go—”

“No, I’m not taking you to the hidden village. I can’t disobey the sage’s orders.”

After briefly lighting up, Arisa’s face darkened again.

“I’ll have the kids send you a letter. That should do, right?” The ninja looked at Arisa. “If that still isn’t enough for you, then take it to Sir Sage directly.”

“All right. I will.”

Arisa glared at the pretty ninja, who shrugged.

I decided to let her know when the sage returned from the holy city.



“Missing kids?”

“Yeah, that happens, especially with returned kids who come back from the advanced school.”

The next morning, I asked the ninja school students and learned that kids sometimes went missing from here, too.

“Sometimes they were really great before but come back totally average.”

“Master said they had a ‘hubris.’”

The students gave me more rapid-fire answers.

“If you’re done eating breakfast, then get your butts to the training area!”

Before they could tell me any more, the old ninja's bellow sent the kids racing and tumbling out of the room, and that was that.

Since the sage hadn't returned yet, the lady ninja was in charge of class again.

"Today we'll be working with compounds."

She taught us how to make the blinding powder for the wind-escape jutsu, the bewitching powder for charm jutsu, and so on. We didn't get into illusion powder, probably because she didn't want Pochi grabbing her chest again.

Since I already knew all these alchemic techniques, I pretended to follow along as I exchanged information with the others via Tactical Talk.

*"There are missing kids from all your classes, too?"*

*"Yes, Master. I didn't notice because they'd been gone since before I arrived."*

*"Master, there was one dropout from the shield group, too, I report."*

*"What about yours, Lulu?"*

*"No, no dropouts here—oh, although I'm told a few kids have left, saying they were going to start their own food carts."*

I wasn't sure whether Lulu's students counted as going missing, but either way, there were kids who had run away from every class in one way or another.

*"Oh yeah, Raito said one of his friends disappeared, too."*

*"Raito? Why did he come to you about that, Arisa?"*

*"He didn't, really. I just happened to see him wandering around during a break period, calling out his friend's name."*

That kid seemed to have a surprising knack for getting into trouble. I hoped he wouldn't get mixed up in this situation, too.

Although since evidently the missing kids were being cared for in the "hidden village," hopefully there was no actual danger in this case.

The letter from the kids to Arisa didn't arrive that day, and the sage still hadn't returned even when evening came, so we weren't able to speak to him directly about it.

“...Gah!”

In the middle of the night, I checked my map in hopes of secretly searching for the hidden village, only to find out that the lady ninja was hiding on the roof of the ninja house.

Given what had happened the night before, she was probably worried that we were going to sneak out to the Dens of Evil again.

I was about to use Return to teleport to the seal slate I’d placed by the tower while we were on our excursion there, when suddenly a marker appeared in the range of my radar.

It was the former Phantom Thief Pippin.

He must have come in using his signature short-range teleportation.

“Hey there, young master.”

“Good evening, Pippin.”

“Ah, so you knew...” Pippin seemed disappointed when I responded calmly to his sudden appearance. He was obviously hoping to catch me off guard.

Tama must have noticed Pippin’s approach, too. Her ears perked up in our direction, although her face was still buried sleepily in the pillow. Pochi was snoozing away in dreamland.

“So, what’s going on? It must be something important if you followed me all the way out here, right?”

“Now, now, what’s the rush?” Pippin said cheerfully. “First, I wanna thank you. Thanks to the funds you provided, I was able to secure some pretty choice locations for the branch stores and warehouses.”

*Ooh, that’s good to hear. I’ll have to praise him as Kuro sometime soon.*

“I left the company girls in charge of opening the branches.” Pippin lowered his voice to a whisper. “But while I was tying up some loose ends, I overheard a disturbing rumor.”

“A rumor?”

“Yeah, about the Village of Adept’s.”

“You mean...here?”

“That’s right.” Pippin nodded seriously. “I saw a guy on the verge of death in a back alley. He said they took away his ‘aptitude’ in an ‘Aptitude Transfer,’ then sent him to work until he died in a mine, so he ran away.”

“What exactly does ‘taking away his aptitude’ mean?”

“Not sure. Some shady figures in black hoods killed him before I could ask him any more questions. Pretty sure they were intelligence agents for this nation. They had some damn good recognition-inhibiting gear, I’ll tell ya.”

Pippin looked frustrated.

“How is that related to the Village of Adepts, though?”

“He was muttering to himself when I first found him. ‘I don’t wanna go back to the village,’ ‘Please forgive me, Holy Woman,’ ‘I can’t face the Holy Woman now that I’m not an Adept’...stuff like that, over and over.”

Pippin must have homed in on key words like *village* and *adept* and made the connection to this place.

“So you came all the way here to let me know?”

I thanked Pippin for sharing the information.

He was great at intelligence gathering—how did he even know I was in the ninja house? Pippin might be an even more valuable resource than I realized.

“Well, that’s not all. Don’t you have any suspicions of your own?”

“Hmm? What, you’re gonna stick your nose in even further?”

“I am a gentleman thief, you know. Well, now I’m just Lord Kuro’s lackey, but I still can’t turn a blind eye to people who’re preying on the weak. Not that I can take them all down,” he added, then went on jokingly. “If it’s an ancient treasure that’s moving these ‘aptitudes’ around, I’m sure Lord Kuro would use it to help people. And if it’s the work of a demon, I’ll just take my leave and let you lot handle it.”

“I see... Well, as far as my suspicions, there is one thing I’m a bit concerned about.”

With that, I told Pippin about the “returned” children who went missing and the “hidden village” where they were allegedly being kept safe.

“I didn’t see any kinda settlements around here. If anything, it’d probably be...”

“I know. In a Den of Evil, right?” I interjected.

“Yeah, I knew something was up...”

“What, do you have some idea where it is?”

Pippin nodded. “I heard some folks have been heavily guarding carriages and supply carts going into a part of the wasteland where there’s no towns or villages. On top of that, they said it’s only on nights when there’s no moon.”

“Well, that’s suspicious.”

It’s like they’re advertising that something strange is going on.

“Any idea where they were headed?”

I spread out a map on my bed.

Pippin pointed out the place where the sightings were reported and traced a general idea of the direction where they were headed.

I cross-checked that information against the empty areas on my map. There were three places that could be a match.

“There are Dens of Evil here, here, and here.”

“How the hell do you know that...?”

“When we were helping the hero hunt down the demon lord, I saw a map of all the Dens of Evil locations.”

“And you remember it right down to the little ones in the middle of nowhere?”

Pippin raised his eyebrows and muttered so quietly that I wouldn’t have caught it without my “Keen Hearing” skill: “No wonder even Lord Kuro is impressed with this guy.”

“Thanks,” he went on. “Now I can go investigate.”

“I’ll come with you, then.” When Pippin hesitated, I said, “You’ll need someone to create a diversion, right?” and he reluctantly agreed to go in together.

“All right, here goes. Hang on tight.”

Pippin used his short-range teleportation to move us to the roof of a building nearby.

The lady ninja shouldn’t be able to see us here from the roof of the ninja house.

“Did you mean to bring those kids, too, young master?”

At Pippin’s comment, I looked down to find Tama clinging to my leg, looking up at me and doing a simplified version of her salute pose. Pochi was next to her, still looking half asleep. Tama must have noticed the teleportation and brought Pochi along to follow me.

“Don’t worry. These two can handle themselves.”

Pippin just shrugged and didn’t protest any further. “Well, I can’t teleport us out of the village with this many people. We’ll have to move along the rooftops.”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

Tama followed close behind Pippin; since Pochi was still rubbing her eyes, I carried her under one arm and trailed behind them.

As we moved, I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to tell Arisa about Pippin’s information, and that we were on our way to investigate a suspicious area.

*“Mia and I will come, too, then!”*

*“We’re just scouting it out for now.”*

If we found the kids Arisa mentioned, maybe it would be good to at least rescue them in advance.

*“But...”*

*“If it does turn out that we need to rescue people who’ve been captured, we’ll*



*need you, and Mia's magic. Can you and the others come if and when that happens?"*

*"...All right. I'll give Liza, Nana, and Lulu a heads-up."*

Once I finished my call with Arisa, I saw Pippin hiding in the shadows on a roof.

We crowded in behind him.

"There's a surveillance network past this point," Pippin whispered.

"Surveillance...?"

"Yeah, and not just to keep intruders out. Looks like they're keeping watch for escapees, too."

I did notice that there were a lot of guards on duty at night, but I assumed it was just because there were Dens of Evil nearby.

Pippin used his short-range teleportation to take us across the wall, landing in a dip in the ground on the other side.

"Master, where are we going, sir?"

"Top secret missiooon?"

"Top secret! Sir!"

Tama's words wiped the sleepiness from Pochi's face instantly.

Clearly, the words "top secret mission" had caught her attention. The pair saluted each other, showing their enthusiasm with a series of poses.

"We're gonna run for a while from here."

Pippin ran at full tilt, periodically teleporting a short distance ahead, and the three of us easily followed behind him.

Pochi had decent night vision, and Tama's was excellent, so we didn't need any light sources. Once your eyes get used to it, you can see decently by the starlight even when there's a new moon like this one.

"It should be around here..."

Pippin stopped partway up a mountainside that was lush with breezebranch

trees and looked around.

According to my map information, there should be an entrance nearby.

“Let’s split up and search.”

Perfect timing. I pretended to look for the entrance as I stashed a Return seal slate in the shadow of a large rock.

“Over there, sir.”

Pochi sniffed the air and pointed at the base of a red boulder.

The entrance was ingeniously disguised, impossible to spot just by looking. Only Pochi’s advanced sense of smell could have located the hidden entrance.

“Great work. You dog-eared folks have noses every bit as good as dogfolk.”

“Tee-hee, sir.”

Pochi puffed up her chest proudly at Pippin’s praise.

Then she started to run toward the entrance, only for Pippin to stop her.

“Not so fast. There’s a trap there.”

“I’ve got thiiiis?”

Tama crept over carefully and disarmed the trap.

I already knew from my map that there was no one watching the entrance.

“Damn, the other little one’s got serious skills, too.”

“Nyee-hee-hee.”

Tama beamed shyly.

Pippin and I raised the cover hiding the entrance and let Tama and Pochi go in ahead, following close behind them.

As soon as I stepped inside, I used “Search Entire Map.”

*...They’re here.*

There were many people inside, including the two children Arisa had mentioned.

Most of them were connected to the Village of Adepts, though there were

plenty of Parion Province Temple Knights and priests as well.

Luckily, there were no members of the demon lord–worshipping cult Light of Freedom. Since I hadn’t seen them since the recent defeat of the demon lord, I was worried that there might be remnants hiding out around here, but I guess that concern was misplaced.

There were plenty of monsters, too. The place was crawling with demi-goblins, which I’d never seen in Dens of Evil before, and in an area farther off there were lesser undead like zombies and skeletons made from the bodies of demi-goblins.

The latter had evidently been created by a necromancer with connections to the village.

Well, that was probably enough preliminary investigation.

We’d achieved our main goal. I contacted Arisa with Telephone.

*“We found the missing kids. This must be the hidden village.”*

*“Really? What’s the situation?”*

*“Looks like they’re with some other kids, doing drills attacking targets with wooden practice spears.”*

I told her what I’d seen with Clairvoyance.

*“Spears? Those scrawny kids seemed like they’d never lifted something heavier than a book in their lives...”*

*“It kinda seems like they’re doing it against their will. Maybe the ‘hidden village’ people are forcing them to train.”*

*“I thought they were being protected there. That is what the Kunoichi said, isn’t it?”*

I nodded.

*“Maybe they’re just trying to test if they have other talents...? I don’t know...”*

*“It’s hard to tell what’s going on exactly. I’ll go talk to them in person.”*

*“Okay, thanks.”*

It was still possible that the kids had requested the training themselves, after all.

*“Mew-mew-mew.”*

Tama, who was in the lead as our scout, flashed me a few hand signals.

That sequence meant that an unknown person was approaching.

I ended my call with Arisa and turned my attention to overcoming the situation at hand.

I flashed the signal for “hide,” and Tama jumped up to cling to the ceiling. This was a technique we’d just learned from the lady ninja earlier today—she was already putting it to good use.

Pochi tried to follow suit and nearly crashed into the ceiling, so I used my always-active Magic Hand to catch her and hold her in place.

Pippin and I hid in the shadows on either side. At our size, we’d probably be spotted if we clung to the ceiling.

Two Temple Knights with lanterns came into view.

“Looks like the factory is going smoothly.”

“Factory?”

“You know, those things. It’s like a factory for raising levels, right?”

*A level-raising factory? Like an experience point factory or something?*

Curious about the knights’ conversation, I listened in more closely.

“It’s all thanks to the goblin cultivation project. You gotta take your hat off to the sage’s wisdom and foresight.”

“No kidding. When he first came back with that nasty nilbok vegetable, I thought it was just to make the poor even more miserable. Who knew the goblins would multiply way faster when they eat nilbok?”

We’d seen nilbok before in a Parion Province village.

It apparently boosted demi-goblin reproduction, just like the gabo fruit in Shiga Kingdom.

“And after those goblins get killed, they can even bring ’em back as zombies or skeletons over and over.”

They must be using these demi-goblins and undead for power leveling, then.

Maybe the kids were practicing with spears so they could undergo power leveling safely?

“No wonder necromancers are so widely hated, though. Those monsters don’t even get to rest in peace after they die.”

“...I hear they use the bodies of people who died in accidents or killed themselves, too.”

“That’s just a rumor. You know the Holy Woman and the sage would never do something so inhuman.”

“Yeah... I guess you’re right.”

“Course I am.”

The Temple Knight who denied the rumors smiled reassuringly, and the one who brought them up put on a smile as well.

Like the people in the village, everyone here seemed to admire the Holy Woman and the sage.

“Now, we better hurry up, or we’re not gonna make it in time. They’re counting on us to get the priests and officers taking part in the ‘Aptitude Transfer’ ceremony, you know.”

That was an important-sounding new key word.

No, I guess Pippin did mention something about it, actually.

“They took away his aptitude in an ‘Aptitude Transfer,’ or something like that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“There’s nothing to worry about. They’re working hard to make an offering to the chosen ones—officers like us who protect the province, or priests and priestesses who guide the masses.”

After that, I couldn’t hear the Temple Knights anymore.

This “aptitude” was probably referring to skills. If what they said was true, it meant these people had some method of making people “offer” their skills up to them.

Once the Temple Knights were some distance away, Pippin whispered in my ear.

“What d’you think, young master?”

“I’m not sure I buy that last part about ‘offerings to the chosen ones,’ but either way, it definitely seems like people who run away from the village are being forced into labor here.”

We proceeded in the direction the Temple Knights had come from. At each crossroads, I used Magic Hand to make sounds, or the “Ventriloquism” skill to fabricate conversations, guiding our leader Pippin toward the right destination.

“This is the experience factory?”

I peered down through an opening in the rocks at the cavern below.

“It just looks like they’re fighting monsters to me,” Pippin commented.

From our vantage point, we could see people standing at a safe distance and using spears to jab at demi-goblins trapped in cages.

“Power leveiiiiing?”

Tama tilted her head.

That was indeed what it looked like to me.

“Most of them are obviously being forced, but a few of ’em look like they’re enjoying it.”

I focused on my “Keen Hearing” skill and picked up on comments from a few men and women who were gleefully impaling demi-goblins: “Let’s cultivate those skills!” “I’m gonna make an offering to the Holy Woman!” “I’ll never disappoint the sage again!”

However, the vast majority were just mechanically thrusting their spears with lifeless looks in their eyes.

I learned later that “cultivating skills” referred to the belief that skills that

were returned to the earth, so to speak, would grow back again.

“I smell something strange, sir.” Pochi sniffed the air.

“Demi-gobliins?”

“Not demi-goblins, sir. It smells like a strange chemical, sir.”

Pochi pointed.

I looked and saw a desk with several vials on it. My AR display revealed the true nature of the drug that remained inside them.

Demonic potion.

It granted the user temporary strength enhancement and the ability to level up more easily, though the side effects were so dangerous that it was strictly forbidden in the Shiga Kingdom. If one used it too much, it could transform part or all of the human body into a monster.

If my AR display’s information was true, these particular demonic potions were made in Shiga Kingdom. In fact, the potion’s creator was an alchemist who worked for the corrupt noble Sorkell, who was formerly an acting viceroy in Labyrinth City Celivera. This must be where the contraband potions wound up after being smuggled into the trade city Tartumina.

“Yikes...!”

Pippin used his short-distance teleportation to land next to the desk, grabbed a vial, and popped back.

He aimed for the precise moment when the guards were distracted, of course, but that kind of stress was still bad for my heart.

“Young master, this stuff’s demonic potion, all right,” Pippin told me quietly after analyzing the dregs in the bottle. “I’ve gotta tell Lord Kuro...”

“Do you have a means of contacting him?”

I’d left a simple Space Magic–based communication device at the Echigoya Company headquarters.

“Not on me. But I think the gal who came to set up the branch shop has something.”

“Would you go and let him know, then? I’m sure Lord Kuro would come rescue all the people being forced into labor, don’t you think?”

Roundabout though it might be, I couldn’t very well let Pippin see “Satou” using superhuman powers.

“All right. Let’s head back to the surface for now, then. You lot should return to the village.”

“No, we’re going to look for some friends of ours who’ve been captured first.”

At first, I thought there was no hurry to rescue them if they weren’t being mistreated. Now that I knew this group was using stuff like demonic potions, though, I couldn’t just leave Arisa and Mia’s students in their hands.

“I’ll go with ya, then.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep, trust me. My expert thieving techniques can rescue these friends of yours with a lot less commotion than you breaking them out with brute force,” Pippin replied bluntly.

“Thanks, that would be a big help.”

We followed Pippin’s lead and began searching for the place where the kids were being held captive.

Of course, it goes without saying that I guided him toward the spear practice area with the same methods I used to get us to the experience factory.

“I smell water, sir.”

Pochi sniffed the air again as we crept along.

There must be a water source in the large cavern up ahead.

“Pooond?”

“I’d say it’s big enough to be called an underground lake.”

There were people drawing water from the edge of the lake.

I was surprised to see such a plentiful source of water in Parion Province, which was largely made up of deserts and wasteland.



They could probably resolve the water shortages if they dug some deep wells, but that might create a new problem with the heavy manual labor of drawing water.

“Let’s go, young master.”

At Pippin’s prompting, we continued along the path at the edge of the lake and reached the spear practice area.



Since we took a bit of a detour, the spear practice was wrapping up right as we reached the area.

“...That’s it for today’s training! Back to your quarters!”

A bearded man who was presumably the instructor bellowed, prompting cheers from the students.

We followed the students as they headed back to their quarters. Arisa and Mia’s students, our top priority for rescue, were at the front of the pack, making it hard to make contact while they were on the move.

The students’ “quarters” consisted of a large mixed-residence room.

There was a large pot in the center of the room; some kind of soup was scooped into the bowls that the students brought to the pot, and they began eating. Judging by the smell, it must be nilbok soup.

“Change into this, young master.”

Pippin had somehow procured me a set of raggedy clothes like the ones the students were wearing.

It smelled like they hadn’t been washed in a long time.

“What about Tamaaa?”

“None for Pochi, sir?”

“Only for the young master. You guys would stand out too much.”

Pippin hadn’t grabbed any for himself, either.

“If you wear this, you’ll be able to blend into the group, right?” Pippin winked

at me.

Well, I didn't have much choice. Pinching my nose, I changed into the clothes and slipped in among the students.

Before long, I found Jimuza and Abul.

"Gross...!"

"Just eat it, Abul. Otherwise, you won't have enough strength when the time comes to run for it."

"You think we can get away?"

I drew closer as they spoke. "You certainly can."

"Who're you?"

"I've never seen you before."

My sudden interjection must have made them suspicious.

"Don't worry, I'm on your side. Your teachers sent me."

"Teachers?"

"Mr. Beardy? Or Crazy Old Lady?"

Were those their nicknames for their teachers?

I seriously doubted that either of those referred to Arisa or Mia.

"No, neither."

"Then that pushy Arisa? Or Ms. Elf?"

That sounded more like it. I nodded.

"Why would they be looking out for us?"

"We weren't very good students..."

"You were very precious pupils to them, you know."

"Really...?"

The two boys looked touched, their lips wobbling.

Just as I was about to take them away, there was a commotion at the

entrance.

“It’s time for the ceremony! Anyone selected by the priests must participate.”

Several priests and a large number of soldiers pushed into the room.

The priests, who had the “Analyze Character” skill, looked at each student and sorted through them. They were choosing any kids who had more than one skill.

Since my rescue targets Jimuza and Abul also had skills, I changed my displayed information like my levels and skills to match those of the kids around me so that I could go with them.

I was far enough away from Pippin that he hopefully wouldn’t notice my skills and levels suddenly changing.

“You, you...and you.”

Jimuza, Abul, and I were all taken out of the room.

“Wh-what’s going on?”

“You’re participating in the ceremony, that’s what.”

Without further explanation, the priest stomped away to the head of the group.

“Does that mean our aptitude came back?”

“Even though it didn’t come back after all the training we did before?”

“That spear practice musta worked!”

“Huh, I guess they weren’t just picking on us.”

“We were wrong to doubt the sage and the Holy Woman, I’m sure of it.”

The pair whispered to each other urgently as they followed the crowd.

For some reason, they almost seemed excited.

“Do you know what kind of ceremony this is?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s our second time.”

“We’re going to the ‘Aptitude Transfer’ ceremony.”

Abul and Jimuza nodded.

So the “Aptitude Transfer” ceremony was about to take place, then.

*I guess that saves me some time investigating?*

“You seem awfully happy. You don’t want to run away anymore?”

“I mean, why would we, when our ‘aptitude’ came back?”

“Yeah, the whole reason we ran away from class in the first place is that our ‘aptitude’ wasn’t coming back, no matter how much we trained. We thought the sage and Holy Woman mighta tricked us.”

“Our training here was scary, but it looks like there was a good reason for it.”

They both seemed satisfied.

The pair of them currently had skills related to spears and evasion, not to magic, but it would be difficult for me to explain that without revealing my “Analyze” skill.

I decided to go to the ceremony with them and find a good opportunity to either explain things or get them to run away with me.

## [Aptitude Transfer](#)

*Satou here. I once heard a friend of mine mutter, "I wish I had that guy's raw talent" while we were watching a professional sports match. Maybe his envy got the better of him even though he knew there was more to it than just natural raw talent.*

"Silence! Silence, I say!"

We were taken to a large room that was full of a jostling crowd.

There were raised areas around the edges of the room, almost like spectator seating, lined with priests and priestesses in gaudy ceremonial clothing and Temple Knights in formal armor.

Right up front, the giant bronze statue of a woman in priestess clothing was labeled **Holy Woman Statue** in my AR display.

Tama, Pochi, and the former Phantom Thief Pippin were peering down through an air vent above the statue. Tama and Pochi waved at me excitedly, so I flashed them the hand signal for "hide."

"The 'Aptitude Transfer' ceremony shall commence shortly."

A man in an outfit similar to the sage's stood at the podium.

The sage himself didn't seem to be here.

"While we await the sage's arrival, I shall explain the proceedings of the ceremony."

I was surprised there was going to be an explanation in advance. I'd assumed they were just going to jump right in.

"Each of your 'aptitudes' shall be offered up to the divine by way of the Holy Woman."

So they really did have a means of transferring skills.

The people who were undergoing the ceremony for the first time began to murmur among themselves. I could hear nearby people who had done it before reassuring them.

“Once you offer up your aptitude, your skills will temporarily disappear, but fear not. If you devote yourself to practice, those skills will return to you in due time.”

Well, yeah. Even if your skills got erased, you could relearn them by building up experience.

“I am sure some of you who have never participated in the ceremony before will be wondering what the point of all of this might be.”

There was a scattering of nods.

I’m guessing the kids who put on superior grins when they saw this must be the ones who’d done it before.

“There are some things that you can only grasp when you have lost your aptitude—your skills.”

There was a loud bang, and everyone’s attention turned back to the front. The speaker must have stomped his foot.

This was a pretty elaborate performance. No wonder he had skills like “Public Speaking,” “Synchronize,” and “Acting.”

“When you regain your ‘aptitude,’ you will surely unlock the ability to find even more impressive talents within yourself than before.”

Epic music began to play in the background, nearly drawing me into the speech.

There must have been an orchestra waiting behind the curtain.

*Now, then.*

That was a bit of a long speech, but if they really did have the ability to take skills from other people, then I guess maybe he wasn’t lying.

You can obviously learn skills by training, and attempting something that you previously had a skill for would probably lead you to gain a deeper

understanding of how to do it on your own until you earned the skill back. Maybe I could test this out by deactivating a skill sometime.

*Whoops, wait a minute.*

That wasn't the important part. The problem was where these "offerings" were going.

It would be one thing if they were just deactivating the skills like I could do, but if they were stealing those skills instead...

*They all had a fair amount of skills, and not a wasted one among them. They must have trained under very strict guidelines.*

A memory arose in the back of my mind.

That was something I noticed when we met some Temple Knights on our way to the holy city.

Both back then and when I searched again in the present, I still didn't find a single Temple Knight with any wasted skills—nothing that would be unnecessary to their job as a knight.

Thinking about it now, it was definitely odd.

Unless they were very low level, almost all the Temple Knights in Shiga Kingdom had incidental, unnecessary skills of some kind.

Now I suspected that these knights were sacrificing unnecessary skills to the Holy Woman and receiving useful skills in exchange.

My thoughts were interrupted by sudden clamors and cries.

"It's the Holy Woman!"

"The Holy Woman is here!"

Apparently, the moment had arrived.

"It's time. Begin the chant."

"Got it. I'll take that damned witch down."

My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on some ominous-sounding whispers.

"Guards! Over there! They're trying to use magic!"

One of the knights in the spectator seats pointed at the people I'd heard whispering.

He must have used the "Magic Perception" skill to notice the surge of power when the mage began the chant.

"Kill the witch!"

A group of armed men broke into a run, and the mage continued the chant. It sounded like the wide-range attack magic spell Fire Storm.

*Well, I can't just let that happen.* I reached for the mage with my Magic Hand.

"Protect the Holy Woman!"

The rest of the crowd swarmed around the mage and dragged him down. They even managed to grab and stop the men with weapons through sheer force of numbers, despite a few bloody injuries.

It was as if they didn't care about their own safety when it came to protecting the goddess.

It occurred to me that the "Magic Perception" user in the audience didn't notice me even though I was manipulating my Magic Hand. Maybe it was because I didn't give off excessive magic power in the process?

Once the would-be interlopers were dragged away and the injured were healed with Holy Magic, the ceremony resumed.

"Holy Womaaan!"

The figure who emerged gracefully from behind the curtain was a young woman, not the old lady I'd met at the Holy Woman's shrine in the Holy City of Parion.

"So that's the Holy Woman...?"

Her name was shown in my AR display as **Shizuka**. While that was clearly a Japanese name, she didn't have the usual skills or Unique Skills that a reincarnation would have. Her hair was long and glossy black.

She wore a veil dotted with flowers, and blue Holy Woman's robes over a gorgeous layer of white. I couldn't see her face beneath the veil. She was about



as tall as Nana, an average weight that was neither chubby nor overly skinny.

She was level 50, yet her only skill was “Holy Magic: Parion Faith.” That was far too few skills for such a relatively high level.

Had she “offered” her unnecessary skills to other people through the “Aptitude Transfer” ceremony as well?

*Hmm?*

A faint reaction from my “Sense Danger” skill prompted me to catch something that was flying my way.

I looked down to find a piece of paper wrapped around a rock in my hand. Judging by the direction it had come from, it must have been from Pippin.

I wish he’d folded it into a paper throwing star or something instead.

Since it seemed to be a letter, I unwrapped it and read the message.

*Kitty-kid started freaking out when she saw the Holy Woman,* it said.

I looked up and saw Tama flailing frantically, her hand signals forgotten.

I glanced at the Holy Woman again but didn’t see anything strange about her. Still, I couldn’t discount Tama’s sharp instincts. Since my “Sense Danger” skill wasn’t reacting, either, maybe that meant something was going to happen soon?

I would’ve liked to talk to her directly with the Space Magic spell Telephone, but then the “Magic Perception” user might notice.

As a backup plan, I spread my already activated Magic Hand all over the hall in case of trouble. I also readied some smoke bombs and tear gas bombs in a temporary folder in Storage.

I should probably prepare a few pieces of paper in case I needed to signal Pippin, too.

“You who would offer up your aptitude, line up in front of the Holy Woman one at a time.”

The people clamoring to get to the front of the line were scolded by the priests and guards.

Did they really understand that by “offering up their aptitude,” they were actually transferring their skills to her?

The man at the front of the line knelt in front of the Holy Woman.

As he did so, magic circles appeared on top of the stage and glowed brightly.

“Such wonderful aptitude. You’ve worked so hard. I am proud of you for your training.”

The soft-spoken Holy Woman placed her hand on the man’s head.

I watched as his skills vanished.

They weren’t transferred to the Holy Woman, though.

I looked around. The skills had transferred to a priest standing behind the Holy Woman.

Now there was no doubt that this “Aptitude Transfer” ceremony transferred skills to other people.

The problem was *how* they were doing it. The Holy Woman’s only skill was “Holy Magic,” and it didn’t look like she was chanting a spell or using one that she’d already stored up.

Although I couldn’t see it very well from here, there was a good chance that the magic circles in the ceremony hall were making the transfer.

Another stone came flying from Pippin.

The message read, *Shouldn’t we stop the ceremony?*

That was originally the plan. However, from what I could see, the people around me were willingly giving up their skills, not having them forcefully taken away.

They seemed a little overzealous, but there were no signs that they were being controlled.

My map search didn’t turn up any Psychic Magic users in the province. The only one when we arrived was a member of the Light of Freedom cult who had since been executed.

Considering that the sage who was either supporting or even organizing this

ceremony was a staunch enemy of the Light of Freedom cult, it was highly unlikely that anyone here was being brainwashed with Psychic Magic.

After quickly thinking all this through, I pretended to throw a rock back at Pippin and instead dropped it next to him with a letter attached using my Magic Hand. I had written *Let's watch and wait for now*. While Pippin looked less than pleased, it didn't seem like he was going to leave Pochi and Tama to act on his own, or anything like that.

"You lot line up, too."

The priest who was in charge of the line prompted us to stand at the back.

I stood in front of Jimuza and Abul in case of an emergency.

"Huh? Mr. Noble?"

"...Raito?"

For some reason, young Raito was in front of me in line, not back in the Village of Adepts, like I thought.

"What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Sage sent for me."

"And did you see the s—...? Mr. Sage?"

"Nah, not yet. I'mma join in the ceremony 'cause a bigwig told me to, but I still don't really get what's goin' on with all this."

I traded places with Raito as we spoke.

His rare "Intuition" skill probably couldn't be regained with practice. I wasn't going to let it get taken away from him against his will if he didn't understand what was happening.

*"Master, we've got a problem!"* Arisa contacted me with Telephone. *"I just checked and saw that Raito is missing. And one of the students told me that someone sent for us—Liza and Lulu and the others, too, not just Mia and me. Apparently, the sage is the one who sent for us. Something might be going on there, too."*

...Whoops.

I forgot to tell her about the “Aptitude Transfer” ceremony.

I looked around quickly. Luckily, the “Magic Perception” user didn’t seem to have noticed, so it was probably safe to reply.

Still keeping an eye out, I told Arisa about the ceremony and that I’d found Raito.

*“Come on! You should’ve reported in right away!”*

*“I know, sorry. I’ll let you know if anything happens at the ceremony.”*

*“An undercover investigation is way too dangerous—”*

*“You’re next.”*

My turn came up while I was still on the call. I told Arisa as much and stepped up to the stage.

Now I could see the magic circles that were out of view before. They were complex and multilayered, using carved stone slabs that were arranged around the podium as well as shapes made out of Light Magic.

I tried to decipher them as I approached the Holy Woman.

It seemed to be some kind of summoning circle, though I couldn’t tell for what. How could these magic circles be stealing skills from people?

“You who would offer up your aptitude, come forth,” the Holy Woman said evenly.

Up close, I could see her face through the veil. She had pretty and understated features, if not an overwhelming beauty. It was impossible to see her eye color through the veil when she was looking downward.

*“This is your first time, isn’t it?”*

It seemed like she was confirming what she already knew, not asking.

Did she remember every single person who’d offered up their skills?

*“Level three. That’s not quite high enough to offer up your experience yet.”*

*“Then I’ll just offer my ‘aptitude.’”*

A priest with the “Analyze” skill whispered something in her ear.

“Do you consent to serve me as my ‘familiar’? If so, please answer ‘yes.’”

As she finished speaking, an AR window popped up in front of me.

**> Become familiar of Demon Lord “Shizuka”? [yes/no]**

*Demon Lord?!*

She didn’t have the demon lord title.

And she wasn’t wearing a Brace of Stolen Divinity that could fool my analysis.

When I checked her equipment and possessions in my map details, I found a suspicious item called an “Evil God’s Imprint.” I would have to add that to my search list along with the brace.

“Whatever is the matter?”

The Holy Woman looked puzzled.

It was hard to believe she was a demon lord when looking into those violet eyes.

But unfortunately, I couldn’t afford to question it.

I went into action.

*“Arisa, I ran into a demon lord. I’ll have Pippin collect the kids while I take care of it.”*

I sent Pippin a rock-letter telling him to escape with Raito, Jimuza, and Abul.

Then I sent Tama instructions as well, and she and Pochi began pulling out smoke bombs and tossing them.

In the moment that their smoke bombs exploded, I produced some more that I had in Storage and set them off with my Magic Hand in all parts of the room.

The stage, and the entire ceremony hall, was full of smoke in an instant.

“What’s going on here?!”

“Get the Holy Woman to safety!”

Before the guards could come running, I took the Holy Woman—no, demon lord—by the arm and used Return to teleport away.



“...Where are we?”

Demon Lord Shizuka looked around calmly.

We were in an empty rocky area some distance away from the Den of Evil where the ceremony hall was located.

“I take it you’ve abducted me, masked man?”

I had transformed into my Nanashi the Hero disguise.

Unlike the Sandstorm Lord we’d recently defeated, Shizuka seemed as sane and rational as the Ancient Dogheaded King. Maybe we could settle things without trying to kill each other.

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“And you are?”

“I’m Nanashi.”

“Nanashi, as in ‘nameless’? Like Captain Nemo?”

As the demon lord addressed me, I used my Magic Hand to remove the Evil God’s Imprint from her person.

Immediately, I could see her real stats.

This item must have been disguising them, just as I thought.

“What...?”

The demon lord raised the hem of her skirt and looked at her ankle.

She must have noticed that the Evil God’s Imprint had disappeared.

“But I thought it could *never* be removed...”

I ignored her surprise and focused on gathering information.

Her gender was indeed female, and her original race was “long-eared tribe.” She was only twenty-four years old.

She was still level 50, with five titles: “Holy Woman,” “Demon Lord,” “False Holy Woman,” “Devoted,” and “Shut-In.”

Her only normal skill was “Holy Magic.” She had no gifts. Her Unique Skills

were Adopt Familiar and Transfer Element.

These Unique Skills must be how she performed the “Aptitude Transfer.”

She had no battle-related skills at all, and while her Unique Skills might be well-suited to making soldiers, they weren’t meant for direct combat at all.

To be honest, she was probably the weakest demon lord I’d met thus far.

I was a little concerned about her status conditions “Illness: Depression” and “Illness: Stomach Ulcer,” but now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

“Demon Lord Shizuka.”

“How did you...? Ah, yes. You must be a hero.”

The demon lord sensed the reason partway through her question and lowered her gaze.

She hesitated for a moment, looking down and biting her lip. Then she removed her veil and wig and stood up slowly.







Her long violet hair fluttered in the night wind.

“...All right. I’m ready.”

Demon Lord Shizuka spread her arms wide.

“You’re here to finally kill me, right?”

She smiled bleakly and slowly closed her eyes.

“So kill me... If possible, I’d appreciate it if you made it relatively painless, please.”

*Hang on, does she have a death wish?*

“I don’t want to kill you.”

“Aren’t you a hero?”

“That doesn’t mean I have to go around killing demon lords.”

“I see...,” Shizuka murmured, then paused for a moment. “But it’d be for the best if I died.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m an evil demon lord who steals skills and experience points from my followers. I can never atone for that sin, even if it is because I’m being ordered to do it and can’t refuse.”

“You’re being commanded? By who?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t tell you.”

“You must care for them a lot, then.”

Shizuka’s reaction to that was immediate and intense. “No! I don’t care for him at all!”

Her eyes went bloodshot, and her breathing was heavy.

It was a stark contrast to her fragile state from just a moment ago.

“He pretended to be kind to get close to me, then bound me with a *Geist*!”

She said the “Geist” part in English.

“As in the ‘Geist’ skill that forces you to do things?”

“Yes, that must be it. I heard him use the word once when he was talking to someone else.”

Trying to calm her down, I produced a table set from Storage via the Item Box, offering her some blue-green tea and baked goods.

“That was almost like a magic trick,” Demon Lord Shizuka murmured, sounding slightly amused. “...This is delicious. It’s been so long since anything tasted good to me.”

Don’t make comments that sound like something I would say after a death march. You’ll just make me feel more sympathetic toward you, darn it.

*“Master, are you fighting the demon lord already?”*

Arisa contacted me via Tactical Talk.

*“No, I think we should be able to resolve things by talking it out peacefully.”*

*“Ooh, okay then. Glad to hear it, although I guess that means there was no need for us to all come running from the village.”*

Since Tactical Talk didn’t have as far a range as Telephone, that must mean Arisa and the others were relatively close by.

*“Emergencyyy?”*

*“Lots of people chasing us, sir.”*

Tama and Pochi called for assistance on their mission to evacuate the three kids from the ceremony hall.

*“That doesn’t sound good. Master, we’ll go help Tama and Pochi for now.”*

*“Be careful. Pippin’s with them, too.”*

*“Okey-dokey, I gotchu!”*

Arisa ended the call.

“This reminds me of my past life, when I would stay up late working on my hobbies with coffee and cookies for company.”

The demon lord Shizuka sipped from her mug and spoke quietly.

“Well, if coffee from the Saga Empire would do...”

“There’s coffee in this world?”

Her eyes widened in surprise as she accepted it.

“It tastes like the instant coffee I used to drink a long time ago. How relaxing.”

The scent and taste of coffee must have opened her heart. She started telling me about herself in bits and pieces.

As she’d mentioned earlier, she was being controlled by a mastermind with the “Geist” skill, forced to use her Unique Skill Adopt Familiar to make people gathered from the Village of Adepts into her familiars, then collect their experience points and skills and distribute them to the mastermind and his lackeys with her other Unique Skill Transfer Element.

“It really was awful. Stealing skills and experience from innocent people who look at me with such trust and handing those over to idiots with nothing going for them but their bloodline or family name... Really, what I’ve been doing is helping him exploit people.”

She chewed her lip so hard that it bled. I pressed a handkerchief to the wound and healed it with magic.

“The worst part was stealing Unique Skills from my fellow reincarnations. The ones who received their skills seemed fine, but the people who lost their Unique Skills were weakened to the verge of death. Little Daigo and Chinatsu even became so unbalanced that they’re recuperating in a monastery...”

She clenched her fist until her nails pierced the skin, staining her pale hand with blood. Demon Lord Shizuka seemed to have a slight habit of self-injury.

“Because of all the stress, between stomach pain and becoming a demon lord, I’ve wanted to die countless times. If my Geist didn’t forbid me from committing suicide, I probably would have hung myself by now.”

Why would you list “stomach pain” and “becoming a demon lord” in the same breath...?

But from what she told me, I suspected that the immediate cause of her demon lord transformation was overuse of her Unique Skill damaging her soul vessel, not the stress. It would make sense if she was made to use her Unique

Skills on that many people every time. Although I guess the stress could be what pushed her over the edge.

*Whoops, I got so caught up in Shizuka's situation that I forgot to confirm some details.*

"I'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that all right?"

"Yes, anything. If I'm able to answer, I will."

Demon Lord Shizuka took a sip of her now lukewarm coffee.

"What kind of Geist are you under?"

"There are a lot of rules, because he bound me with several different Geists."

She went on to tell me about all the Geists she could remember. "I cannot reveal his identity, I must obey any orders he gives me, I cannot leave the Holy Woman's Chamber without permission, I cannot leave the province, and a few others related to my Unique Skills and the 'Aptitude Transfer.'"

"That certainly is a lot."

"He's very thorough, the bastard."

Shizuka scowled. She clearly despised the mastermind from the bottom of her heart.

I waited for her to calm down, then moved on to the next question. "You said you can transfer Unique Skills? Who did you transfer them from, and to whom?"

"From reincarnations that he found. Yuusaku, Daigo, and Chinatsu. I can't say who I transferred their Unique Skills to—it's forbidden by my Geist."

I searched the map and learned that Mr. Yuusaku was in the Den of Evil where the ceremony took place, though Daigo and Chinatsu were nowhere to be found. Since she said they were recuperating in a monastery, they were probably in some city of Parion Province that I hadn't checked yet.

An elixir could probably cure those two kids. Once this was all over, I figured I'd track them down and heal them, as a favor to my fellow Japanese natives.

"Can you tell me about the Unique Skills they had? If you can't get into the

details, even just the number would be fine.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t say how many Unique Skills they had.”

“Are you the one who gave Pontiff Zarzaris his Unique Skill, too?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t say who I’ve transferred Unique Skills to.”

I was afraid of that...

Since there were three reincarnations, that meant there were at least three Unique Skills in play. Even if Pontiff Zarzaris and Cardinal Hozzunas got their skills from those reincarnations, there would still be one more left.

Maybe I should change my questioning approach.

“Did you ever make the Sandstorm Lord into your familiar, or use Transfer Element on him?”

“No, neither. He did tell me once to make the Sandstorm Lord my familiar, but it was rejected, so it didn’t succeed.”

That meant she didn’t transfer a Unique Skill to the Sandstorm Lord, then.

In other words, someone in Parion Province secretly had a Unique Skill.

I put my brain cells into overdrive, searching for the questions that would give me the answer I needed.

“Can you tell me what you know about Sorijeyro the Sage?”

Demon Lord Shizuka raised her head sharply and stared at me.

She must have caught on to my intentions.

Shizuka looked into my eyes and answered intently. “I’m sorry, I can’t answer that.”

“Thank you. That was a big help.”

Sorijeyro the Sage was the mastermind behind it all.

## **The Fallen Saint**

***Though men of the cloth are called “holy,” deep down they are either greed-driven sinners or oblivious dreamers. But of course, I have no complaints either way. They are all soon to serve our great ambition, no matter which kind they might be.***

“Sir Sage! Terrible news!”

As soon as I emerged from the shadow, one of my subordinates came rushing over in a noisy panic.

When he told me why, I ended up shouting as well.

“The Holy Woman has been kidnapped?!”

Because I was delayed dealing with the pontiff, I received some unexpected and deeply unpleasant news when I finally arrived at the ceremony hall in the Den of Evil.

“Yes, some thieves who were lurking near the ceiling threw smoke bombs into the room, and the Holy Woman was abducted in the ensuing chaos.”

“What in the world were her bodyguards doing?!”

“I’m terribly sorry. They came running as soon as the smoke bombs went off, but the Holy Woman disappeared from the room without a trace within a matter of seconds.”

The Holy Woman—Demon Lord Shizuka—is an indispensable tool for my path toward total domination.

When I let her out of the thoroughly protected City Core Chamber, it is always with a nearly excessive number of skilled bodyguards and mages keeping close watch on her.

How could someone have outmaneuvered them all so easily...?

“Who was present in the room?”

“The Adepts were returned to their cages after being physically searched and examined. Those who were there to receive ‘aptitudes’ have been gathered in one place to await your orders.”

“And the search for the Holy Woman?”

“The vast majority of our guards, including her elite bodyguards, have been sent out to find her.”

“You’re saying you sent people besides the bodyguards out on the search?”

This absolute moron...

“Y-yes, sir. I thought it best to have as many eyes as possible...”

“Whoever kidnapped the Holy Woman may have escaped with these guards. Bring them all back and take a roll call at once.”

“R-right away, sir!”

The bodyguards’ leader ran out of the room.

“Sir Sage, is it possible that the thieves had access to teleportation methods, like Space Magic or Shadow Magic?”

“Perhaps, but it is no easy feat to teleport a long distance with another person in tow.”

Even in all of Parion Province, the only mage skilled enough to secure the Holy Woman and teleport away in only a few seconds is probably myself.

No, there may be one other...

The face of the girl-child who traveled here with Sir Pendragon flashed across my mind.

While she was using a highly advanced Recognition-Inhibiting item to protect her stats and skills, the “Status Check” skill I stole from Shizuka revealed to me that she had the “Space Magic” skill.

A mage over level 50 like her might well be able to master other magic besides her standard Fire Magic.

“Go to the Village of Adepts and—”

I started to send a group of bodyguards out, then stopped abruptly.

Sir Pendragon, the girl-child’s guardian, was not to be underestimated. While he might look like a friendly, ordinary youngster leading a band of mere children, he and his group were actually masterful fighters who battled the demon lord alongside the likes of the hero’s party and Mezzalt.

The elite bodyguards, whose strength came from stolen skills and experience points given to them by the Holy Woman, would probably be no match for such seasoned fighters.

“...No, I will go there myself. The rest of you check whether the Holy Woman’s kidnapper is among the search party, and look for any suspicious figures fleeing toward town.”

The bodyguard captain gave a short salute and ran off to carry out his orders.

I took a magic potion out from my Item Box and drank it down, then teleported to the Village of Adepts using the Shadow Portal spell.

“Urgh...”

When I returned to this world from the shadows, exhaustion weighed me down, making my limbs feel heavier.

“...I would prefer not to keep teleporting such long distances this often.”

My magic was drained to nearly nothing, so I drank another magic recovery potion.

I had to be careful. If I drank too many in a row, it could lead to poison-like symptoms.

I ran out of the private room that I used as a teleport point in the village office, leaping across rooftops toward the ninja house.

With the overly complicated makeup of the village, it was faster to travel this way than by riding a horse.

As I ran, I spotted the female ninja hiding on the roof of the ninja house in the distance.



“Since she is still keeping watch, does that mean Sir Pendragon and his brood haven’t gone anywhere?”

I’d assigned that woman to monitor Sir Pendragon and the rest of his little group.

“Anything to report?”

“S-Sir Sage!”

The Kunoichi looked flustered that I’d managed to sneak up without her noticing. What a sorry excuse for a ninja, losing her cool in such a way.

“Where is Sir Pendragon?”

“It seems like he’s just staying inside this time,” she responded confidently.

“...This time? Did something happen yesterday?”

“Erm, yes. He managed to slip out right under my nose and went looking in the Dens of Evil near the tower for a few kids who were sent to the ‘Aptitude Transfer’ mines.”

“So he’s caught on already...”

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that a mithril adventurer would notice something amiss in just a few short days.

“Not to worry. He seemed to believe the excuses I made up on the spot. He’s been sleeping in his bed all evening.”

“I see...”

Sure enough, I could see through the open window that Sir Pendragon and his little friends were lying perfectly still in a deep sleep, not stirring in the slightest.

...Perfectly still?

“S-Sir Sage?”

I ignored the ninja’s confused voice behind me as I stole through the dark night, leaping into the room where Sir Pendragon and company were supposedly sleeping.

Landing without a sound, I lifted the blanket and looked at Sir Pendragon’s

face.

“Damn it all. A doll?”

Sir Pendragon, as well as his two girl-child henchmen, had been replaced with dolls.

And they were surprisingly detailed dolls, at that. It was small wonder that the ninja woman didn’t notice such a convincing doll in the darkness.

“Sir Sage, I am so sorry. I swear—”

“Save the apologies for later. I’m going to the magic classroom where two of his minions were teaching. You check on the rest of their little gang.”

I interrupted the irrational woman’s apologies and gave her a top-priority mission.

Then, without waiting for an answer, I sprang out the window and headed for the magic classroom.

“Gone. Just as I thought...”

As I’d suspected, the reincarnated girl-child and the elf were nowhere to be found.

“So it was Sir Pendragon and company who kidnapped the Holy Woman, then...”

...But for what purpose?

The answer was obvious. He clearly intended to use Demon Lord Shizuka’s Unique Skills to create the ultimate army for the Shiga Kingdom.

No—perhaps he would make an army of his own to take over the kingdom instead.

*“It seems you have your hands full, indeed.”*

Just as I was about to get lost deep in my thoughts, I heard a voice with an unnatural echo.

“Lord Green!”

A green-tinged shadow swirled in a nearby corner, then took the grotesque

shape of my sworn ally.

I created a wall with Barrier Magic before speaking to the green greater demon with whom I had a pact.

“The Holy Woman—Demon Lord Shizuka has been kidnapped. I must recover her at any cost for the sake of the plan. I would appreciate your aid as well, Lord Green.”

Perhaps the phantomlike Lord Green could locate Sir Pendragon?

But my faint hopes were dashed by the demon’s response.

“It is no use, indeed.”

“No use? Do you know something I do not, Lord Green?”

“I came because I could no longer sense the Imprint, indeed.”

“The Imprint? Surely you do not mean that Demon Lord Shizuka’s Evil God’s Imprint was removed?”

“It was, indeed.”

The demon nodded.

The Evil God’s Imprint is an item I found deep in the ruins of the Evil God’s Prison. Just like the Brace of Stolen Divinity, it is capable of fooling even a hero’s “Analysis” skill.

One who has equipped this item is bound by a fatal curse that can never be removed, according to Lord Green. If it was torn off by force, the wearer’s very soul would be torn apart, and the Imprint itself would turn into black fog and disappear.

“Does that mean Demon Lord Shizuka is dead?”

...This cannot be.

My vision began to darken with the shock.

That woman was an absolutely vital piece of my plan to rule the world.

Even if I succeeded in filling the Evil God’s Prison with miasma and breaking the seal, and used the revived calamitous army to eradicate the current system

of rule, I would need capable personnel to get rid of the calamity when it was no longer needed and bring the world under my reign.

It was only with Demon Lord Shizuka's Unique Skill that my long-oppressed clan could finally become rulers.

"Such sweet regret, indeed."

"You seem to be enjoying this."

I couldn't help complaining about Lord Green's unpleasant comment, even though I knew it was pointless.

"But of course, indeed. The sorrow of others is nectar to me, indeed."

I looked away from the unrepentant demon and steadied myself despite my bitterness at this impossible new reality.

"Have you calmed down already, indeed? You could at least vow to have your revenge, indeed."

Revenge...?

Of course. Demon Lord Shizuka could not have killed herself.

After all, I forbade her from taking her own life with my "Geist" skill. Though it was an inferior version of "Geist" copied with the Copy Plagiarism Unique Skill, I reinforced it enough with Psychic Magic to be sure that she couldn't commit suicide, no matter what.

"Do you know who killed her?"

"What's this, are you testing me, indeed?"

Lord Green answered my question with a question.

Indeed, the culprit who killed Shizuka was already known to me...

"So Sir Pendragon removed the Evil God's Imprint from Demon Lord Shizuka...?"

"It is the only explanation, indeed. He took on a greater demon in Labyrinth City. It would be no surprise if the boy held a strong grudge against demons and demon lords, indeed."

I found it hard to believe at first that the kindly Sir Pendragon would harm the pitiful-looking Shizuka, but Lord Green's information forced me to rethink.

Grudges and hatred can change a person. If he had a deep-seated grudge against demons and demon lords, then he might destroy her without being swayed by her appearance.

Sir Pendragon and his minions certainly have enough strength to do so...

"It seems I foolishly brought a snake into this village."

With just a few words of regret, I looked back at Lord Green, who was watching me eagerly.

"How am I to enjoy this if you do not suffer more about it, indeed?"

This demon truly was perverse.

"What will you do now, indeed? Take revenge for the slain Holy Woman, indeed?"

Lord Green smirked, his lips like a crescent moon.

I could tell from his expression that he was deliberately trying to fan the flames of hatred in my heart. I suppose that means that Lord Green is still a demon who cannot coexist with humans.

"Revenge will have to wait."

I did need to retaliate, but getting caught up in an emotional act of vengeance would be inefficient.

"First, I must decide our new course of action."

I looked away from the demon, thinking hard.

My original plan was to steal the reincarnated girl-child's Unique Skills and craft her into a new demon lord to take the place of the Sandstorm Lord.

But now that we'd lost Demon Lord Shizuka, I was forced to postpone that plan indefinitely.

While it might still be possible to turn the girl into a demon lord, it would be both difficult and unreliable to try to abduct her from the Pendragon brat's protection and bring her to the point of transformation.

No, more importantly, I only needed a demon lord to undo the seal on the Evil God's Prison. There would be no point in reviving the calamitous army unless I could prepare enough manpower to destroy them once they were no longer needed. I would then use that manpower to bring the world under my control.

"I may have to put undoing the seal on the Evil God's Prison on hold for a time..."

"That simply won't do, indeed."

"...Lord Green?"

The demon drew closer.

"There is something else I needed to tell you, indeed." His crescent moon smile deepened. "The holy city is in a very entertaining state right now, indeed..."

"Entertaining...?"

I stared at Lord Green with a sinking feeling.

I knew full well that anything he was enjoying talking about could only be bad news.

"Let me show you, indeed."

Lord Green pressed a hand to my forehead...



"Aaaargh!"

A massive number of images flowed into my mind, nearly drowning me in the torrent of information.

"First, there's this, indeed."

Lord Green's voice anchored my floundering consciousness and focused my attention on one of the images.

"The pontiff is a fake...?"

"Rumor has it, he's been replaced by a demon."

Some working-class men were amusing themselves with a ridiculous rumor on

a street corner somewhere.

“Stupid! That can’t be true!”

“Yeah, come on! The pontiff is in the cathedral, protected by Parion’s holy barrier!”

“Exactly! A demon could never get in there!”

Even these low-class men were not fools.

They knew more than anyone in the church expected of them.

“Have you morons forgotten?”

“What?”

“A demon lord broke the barrier and attacked the cathedral!”

The other men’s protests fell silent at that.

“I bet that’s when they made the switch, right?”

“B-but His Holiness has still been doing the healing ceremonies since then...”

“Has he, though? Think long and hard.”

The men furrowed their brows.

“Come to think of it, the ceremony was cut short last time!”

“Wasn’t that just because he wasn’t feeling well?”

“No, there’s more! There were some people who started feeling sicker, instead of getting healed this time.”

Ah, the day that the pontiff’s Unique Skill went out of control...

While it was a ridiculous rumor, including a piece of the truth made it seem far more plausible. I would have to spread other rumors to negate this one, and quickly.

*“This part is fun, too, indeed.”*

Lord Green’s voice drew me to a different view.

“I saw it, ya know. When the pontiff was doing the healing ceremony, he made purple light, not blue light, like a hero.”

“What are you talking about? The healing thing always makes pure blue light.”

“It’s true, I tell ya! I was watching from the front row last time. There was a breeze right when the ceremony started, and behind the curtain, the pontiff’s body was glowing with purple light!”

An eyewitness...that wasn’t good. I had better silence him quickly, just to be safe.

“There *was* something off about the healing that day, now that you mention it.”

“Oh yeah, you got a point. My grandma’s been laid up in bed ever since.”

“Do you think that rumor could be true...?”

“What rumor?”

“You haven’t heard? People are saying the pontiff’s been replaced by a demon.”

This rumor again?

It was spreading almost unnaturally quickly.

“There must be someone behind this...”

*“Correct, indeed.”*

My view changed again, and I saw one of the men who was spreading the rumor about the pontiff speaking with a hooded figure.

“I spread that rumor for ya.”

“Well done. Next, I need you to agitate the people and get them to riot at the cathedral.”

“Come on, gimme a break. I don’t wanna get arrested by guards or executed by the Holy Knights.”

“Let us take care of that. Just get people worked up as much as you can, then make your escape when the time seems right.”

The man accepted money from the person in the hood, then gathered his



friends and started inciting a riot.

Things just kept getting worse...

I tried to stir, only to realize that I couldn't feel my body.

"Lord Green, please end the spell. I must return to the holy city."

I couldn't move my limbs or use chantless magic.

Which also meant that I wouldn't be able to forcibly free myself from Lord Green's spell.

*"No need to worry, indeed. These recordings are from the past. Only a moment will pass in the real world, no matter how long you watch here, indeed."*

With that, he showed me the next scene.

"SAVE THE PONTIIIIFF!"

"DESTROY THE DEMOOOON!"

The masses who'd believed the rumor were mobbing around the cathedral.

"DEFEAT THE DEMON PRETENDING TO BE THE PONTIFF!"

"THE DEMON MUST DIIIIIE!"

"KILL THE MURDERER!"

The people glared at the cathedral with bloodshot eyes, shouting with anger and hatred.

There were even children and the elderly among them.

"Isn't that...?"

*"I'm gonna be a priest when I grow up so I can be useful to you, Pontiff."*

The boy who'd innocently declared his loyalty to the pontiff after he'd healed his father was among the angry mob.

I recognized many others who had thanked the pontiff countless times at the healing ceremony, too.

...Those fools.

I glared contemptuously at the masses who had turned on the pontiff so easily.

“TAKE DOWN THE DEMON DISGUISED AS THE PONTIFF!!”

As I watched, the crowd grew larger and angrier by the minute.

“...What’s going on here?”

This momentum made no sense, even if there were agitators.

*“Psychic Magic is a must for inciting a crowd, indeed.”*

As Lord Green spoke, my vision moved to the hooded man who was stirring up the crowd.

“Is that...me?”

On closer inspection, the agitator who imitated my appearance wore green lipstick, with green painted on his nails and eyelids.

I’ve seen this before. It’s one of Lord Green’s Avatars.

“So you’ve betrayed me?!”

As soon as I shouted with rage, the visions faded away.

I closed in on Lord Green, who stood before me.

“Surely not. My goal has always been to remove the seal on the Evil God’s Prison, indeed. I simply did what was most effective to that end, indeed.”

“Damn you...!”

Overcome with fury, I used the advanced Light Magic attack spell Anti-Evil Ray Sword to attack Lord Green.

The blade of blinding light slashed his body clean in two.

...With no resistance.

“I failed?!”

*“My, how frightening. Good thing I used an Avatar to narrowly escape death, indeed.”*

“Damned trickster...!”

Lord Green's presence faded away.

He must have escaped me.

"You'll pay for this, I promise you that."

With a muttered word into the darkness, I traveled through a Shadow Portal to the cathedral.



"DESTROY THE DEMON DISGUISED AS THE PONTIIIFF!"

The increasingly violent mob in front of the cathedral was pushing forward with enough force to overwhelm the temple soldiers and guards.

Some of the guards were even siding with the crowd instead.

"Even some of the priests and pastors..."

Even if they were being agitated with Psychic Magic, these people were supposed to lead the people of a country that was named for a goddess...

My mouth hung open at the sheer disgrace of it all.

"...Sir Sage?! I thought you were giving orders from the rear?"

One of my subordinates saw me and came running over.

He must have been tricked by Lord Green's Avatar, like so many others.

"That sage is a fake. Disregard all of its orders."

"Wh-what?! ...Oh no! Some of our number are already on their way to kill the so-called false pontiff!"

"I will protect His Holiness. You tell the others what I've said and eliminate the agitators in the crowd."

"Yes, sir."

I watched my subordinate run toward the mob, then summoned three Shadow Beasts with Shadow Magic.

"Find the fake me hiding at the rear of the mob and destroy it."

The beasts howled and set off through the mob, traveling from shadow to

shadow.

Without waiting to see them reach their target, I used Shadow Portal to hurry to the pontiff's side.

"Here, too...?"

There was a throng of pastors and priests around the pontiff's room.

The room was protected by a Holy Magic barrier, leaving me no choice but to go there from my own room.

"Aaaaaah!"

"Eeeeeek!"

I heard screams from inside the room, and the door was flung open, letting purple light spill into the hall.

"Help! They're being sucked dry!"

"He really is a demon! The rumor was true!"

"Someone get Sir Mezzalt! We need a Holy Sword wielder!"

The pastors who came tumbling out of the room sent the crowd into a panic.

I launched off the floor and ran along the wall to leap into the pontiff's room.

"What in the world happened here?"

Several pastors and bishops were lying shriveled to death on the floor. Beyond them, Temple Knights were surrounding the pontiff with their hands on the hilts of their swords.

The pontiff himself was clutching his head and covering his ears, trembling in a corner.

In his emotionally unstable state, being cornered by people he trusted must have caused his Unique Skill Heal All to backfire spectacularly.

"Stop! His Holiness is no demon!"

I slowly walked closer, trying not to set off the Temple Knights.

Although I tried to calm the pontiff with Psychic Magic, the Holy Magic barrier around the room nullified it. I couldn't simply destroy the barrier with Break

Magic, either—doing something like that might end up pushing the Temple Knights over the edge.

“You’re the one who needs to stop.”

“...Sir Mezzalt!”

The worst possible person arrived at the worst possible time.

The Temple Knight Mezzalt’s Holy Sword Blutgang was far too dangerous to the pontiff in his current condition.

“I will calm His Holiness down.”

“I won’t let you approach the demon. You are under suspicion of colluding with a demon lord, abducting the pontiff, and replacing him with a demon in disguise.”

I ignored Mezzalt and tried to run to the pontiff’s side.

“I told you to stop!”

As I heard Mezzalt shout, I felt sudden, intense heat on my back.

I turned around and backed away, seeing the Holy Sword dripping with blood.

Mezzalt must have cut me from behind. To think he was able to slice through my robe, lined as it is with a molted lesser dragon’s hide... Truly, Holy Swords are not to be underestimated.

“...S-Sorijeyro.”

The pontiff rose unsteadily to his feet, staggering toward me with faltering steps.

“D-don’t move!”

“If you try to turn on us, we’ll show you no mercy!”

One of the Temple Knights drew his sword out of fear and slashed at the pontiff.

The cut appeared to be shallow, but the pontiff looked deeply shocked, tears streaming down his face.

*...Not good.*

Black miasma began billowing from the pontiff's body.

"Mezzalt! Out of the way!"

"Stay there and watch as the demon reveals itself."

I tried to heal the Holy Sword wound with Healing Magic and "Blink" away from Mezzalt, but with his years of bloody battlefield experience, he wouldn't let me do that so easily.

"Now we see its true colors."

"Damned demon! Servant of a demon lord!"

"I am not... I aM... I—I... IIIIIIAAAAAHHHM!"

...Tch.

Miasma overflowed from the pontiff and began to transfigure his body.

"...Too late."

It was inevitable now.

I tossed a smoke bomb. By the time Mezzalt cut through it and lunged at me through the fog, I had sunk into a shadow.

Even a Holy Sword user wouldn't be able to follow me into the shadows.

I watched the pontiff's transformation from the other side.

"SO...SoRi...JeYROOOOOOO!"

His body began collapsing like viscous liquid, the lines between his flesh and clothes blurring. Strange bumps and creases emerged on what was left of the pontiff as his volume expanded outward.

Black smog spewed from inside the warped body, and there were flashes of purple underneath its bubbling surface, like lightning in a storm cloud.

The only remaining indicator of the pontiff was a faint impression of his face near the head area.

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

Demon Lord Zarzaris let out a scream as he was born.

Purple light swathed around the demon lord's body like a vestment, spreading out across the room in rings.

"What a mess..."

Everyone the ripples of light touched let out screams of agony, drying up and dying one by one.

This must be the effect of the inverted Unique Skill.

*"Damn you, demon...!"*

Safe in the shadows, I heard Mezzalt roar.

The highest-level Temple Knights were still immobilized with their life force drained. Even Mezzalt, who escaped the worst of it with the Holy Sword Blutgang's protection, dropped to his knees in a daze.

"You even managed to incapacitate a Holy Sword wielder. Not half bad for a newly born demon lord."

This was far from what I had planned, but now that he had transformed into a demon lord, there was no point in lamenting the situation.

All I could do was use the pontiff-turned-demon lord as effectively as possible.

"I suppose it would be most optimal to undo the seal on the Evil God's prison so this demon lord does not go to waste... As much as it pains me to aid in Lord Green's goals after he betrayed me, Sir Pendragon or the Shiga Kingdom hero are bound to show up if I simply stand around wringing my hands."

Outside the shadows, the demon lord grew until he broke through the ceiling of the cathedral.

"If I eliminate the three of Sir Pendragon's minions who can attack from a distance, the demon lord will surely take care of the rest, as he did with Mezzalt. The problem is that pesky Shiga Kingdom hero. No doubt the tales that he has defeated the great Golden Boar Lord and the Ancient Dogheaded King are exaggerated, but he must be powerful enough to warrant such rumors."

At the very least, someone in the Shiga Kingdom was able to defeat Cardinal Hozzunas, who had been strengthened to perfection by Demon Lord Shizuka.

I looked around and saw that Demon Lord Zarzaris was still rampaging in the Heavenly Room like a child throwing a tantrum. It was all the more repulsive because he still retained faint traces of the pontiff's countenance.

"What an uncooperative pawn."

I used Shadow Portal to teleport next to the demon lord's shoulder, stepped out of the shadow, and whispered into his ear.

Fortunately, the resistance skills I'd collected using Shizuka seemed to be doing their job. I wasn't assailed by as much lethargy as I expected.

"Your Holiness. Can you hear my voice?"

"SO...ri...JeYROOOOOOOOOO..."

He still remembered me?

"WHAT sHOULD I DO..."

And he still *trusted* me?

...What a fool.

But that foolishness was a boon to me.

"Now, Your Holiness. Go forth and preach god's love to the ignorant masses."

I used my terminal to connect to the City Core and prepared a space to use "Geist."

Countless magic circles made of light appeared at the demon lord's feet, while a many-layered circle appeared in midair and enveloped the demon lord like a pillar.

"Your Holiness. You must go forth. Granting death to the mindless infidels who dared turn against you is the only way to show them god's love."

I used a combination of the "Geist" skill and Psychic Magic to plant an order that the demon lord would have no choice but to obey.

"SO...sori...jErOOOOOOOO!"

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

The demon lord burst through the wall of the cathedral and stumbled into the



square.

“The demon! It showed itself!”

“I-it’s a monsteeeeer!”

“Run awaaaaay!”

The people who had been packed into the square ran around in a panic when the demon lord crashed into view. The reckless ones who tried to stand their ground and face it soon dropped their swords and fled in the face of the demon lord’s sheer size.

“Your Holiness, you must grant death to the infidels who betrayed you. That is how a god shows love to such fools.”

“GOD...gODS...GOD’S looOOOOOOOOOVE!”

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

At my prompting, the demon lord glowed with purple light.

Anyone who was touched by the ripples of that light fell and dried up at once.

“Bringing instant death to the people simply by existing...quite the demon lord, indeed...”

Killing one person doesn’t grant a great deal of experience points. But if he wiped out the entire population of this crowded city, this demon lord might just become powerful enough that even a hero couldn’t defeat it.

“Interesting...”

The people who shriveled up from the demon lord’s light waves began turning dark purple and transforming into the twisted shapes of undead or chimeras.

These grotesque spawn—the Violet Zealots—began following after the fledgling demon lord. Most of them lost their human shapes and took on the appearances of demons or monsters.

“What convenient soldiers. I ought to wind them up with Psychic Magic, too.”

Once I incited the Violet Zealots, I headed to the City Core room.

My intention was to invoke a layered lockdown barrier around the city so that

no one could escape. Finally, the position of vice-lord that I wrested from the pontiff by surreptitiously manipulating his will would come in handy.

It cost a great deal of the city's magic, but the result was a perfect hunting ground for the demon lord from which no one could escape.

With all my preparations complete, I stepped outside the cathedral.

"GOD's loOOOOOOOVE!"

The demon lord was only screaming in the cathedral square, with the Violet Zealots wandering around aimlessly nearby.

The guards and Temple Knights were beginning to surround the outskirts of the plaza. There were curious onlookers gathered on the roofs of nearby buildings, too. These ridiculous fools truly had no sense of self-preservation.

"To think you cannot even carry out a simple slaughter without my orders..."

I used Wind Magic to send my voice to the demon lord's ears.

"Your Holiness, grant death to the foolish infidels at once. You must show them god's love."

"LOOooOOve...God'S LOoOOOOOOVE!"

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

Sending off a wave of purple light, the demon lord began shambling downtown.

The sudden wave soon reached the buildings at the edge of the square, and people fell to the ground as dried husks. People nearby gathered to try to save the fallen, only for them to transform into Violet Zealots and slaughter the survivors, creating even more Violet Zealots.

"This is quite an efficient form of spawn."

The growing numbers of Violet Zealots chased after the civilians, destroying buildings and turning the city into a hellscape.

"Yes...more, more, *more*. Let this holy city that names itself for a foolish goddess be filled with fear, despair, and death, and let the miasma grow and sink into the earth."

No doubt the Malice Urns and Chaos Jars I'd set up throughout the city would soon be full.

I created a portal between shadows and landed on the demon lord's shoulder.

Suddenly, a white-clad figure stood in our way...

"...So you've arrived, Hero of the Shiga Kingdom."

## The True Saint

***Satou here. I've heard that a person's true nature only shows itself in extreme situations. I don't know what I would do at a time like that, but I'd like to be the kind of person who makes my family proud.***

"I see the holy city!"

We were using Return repeatedly to teleport to the holy city and confront the evil mastermind, Sorijeyro the Sage.

I evacuated Raito and the magic school kids to a safe place. With Demon Lord Shizuka's consent, I used the composite spell Desert Mirage to create a city to leave her in, for safety. Just in case that would violate her Geist that forbade her from leaving the province, I used the last Geist remaining in the Xanthic Staff to cancel that out.

Before we left, Pippin told me, "I got new orders from Lord Kuro. I'm gonna have to go ahead and take care of things on my own now." Of course, I was the one who gave him those orders. I was sending him to collect proof about the true nature of the "Aptitude Transfer" and the man behind the curtain.

"We're here...geh! The cathedral!"

In the distance, the great cathedral had taken serious damage, to the point of near destruction.

"Master, there is an enclosing wall around the city, I report."

"Looks like it's a barrier made with the City Core," I answered, looking around.

"There's something huge near the cathedral, Master!"

Lulu pointed toward a massive monster that had appeared in the square outside the cathedral.

"LOOooOOve...God'S LOoOOOOOVE!"

The creature howled toward the heavens in a strangled cry, and slowly began shuffling away from the cathedral.

I got a huge shock when I examined it.

“It’s...a demon lord?”

Detailed information appeared next to the demon lord in my AR display.

“Master, is that really...?”

“Yeah. Pontiff Zarzaris turned into a demon lord.”

At first, I couldn’t believe the words in my AR display.

According to my map information, there were monsters called “Violet Zealots” that were the demon lord’s spawn being mass-produced in the cathedral square, and the city was already in a chaotic state of battle.

I can’t believe things went so horribly wrong in such a short time.

“I’m going to go deal with the demon lord. You guys take care of its spawn.”

I quickly conveyed the situation to my companions, then transformed into Nanashi the Hero and used “Flashrunning” to launch into the air above the demon lord, descending with “Skylrunning” to stand directly in front of its eyes.



“...So you’ve arrived, Hero of Shiga Kingdom.”

Next to the demon lord’s ear was a man in white clothing—the sage.

It took me a moment to recognize him. He’d changed from his usual black robes into a pastor’s white garb. I put a marker on him just in case, since there was no telling what he might do.

“Who are you? And why are you with a demon lord?”

“Masked hero...you are of similar height, but your voice is not Pendragon’s.”

Yikes, he suspected it was me?

*“Master, we’ve all changed into our armor.”*

*“All right. It looks like people who get killed turn into more spawn. Be careful of dead bodies.”*

Arisa connected all of us with Tactical Talk, so I relayed some key information. I also used Clairvoyance and Clairaudience so that I could keep an eye on them.

“The spawn... I recognize that white armor. So Pendragon is over there, then.”

“Pen-Pen and friends are here, too? Man, trouble follows those guys everywhere.”

I pretended to be someone else with help from my “Fabrication” skill.

If he watched carefully, he would probably realize they were one person short, but I doubted he’d be able to figure it out in the middle of battle. Especially with the vanguard flying all over the place and Arisa teleporting herself and Mia from one spot to the next.

*DANGER.*

“Anti-Evil Ray Sword!”

The sage suddenly used Light Magic without a chant. I barely dodged it with “Flashrunning.”

I was expecting his usual Shadow Magic, not Light Magic, of all things. If it weren’t for my “Sense Danger” skill, I might’ve gotten hurt.

“Then can you dodge this...? Your Holiness, divine judgment for the fool!”

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

The demon lord let out a howl.

Purple light flowed through the demon lord’s body, unleashing a purple wave in all directions.

*“Everyone! Don’t let that touch you!”*

I warned my comrades right as my “Sense Danger” reacted, and used “Flashrunning” to move to a safe zone.

The flowers and trees in full bloom around the cathedral square wilted and withered as soon as the purple wave touched them.

The range of effect was smaller than I thought—it dissipated long before reaching my friends.

The sage wasn't affected by the wave at all, even though he was right next to the demon lord. It seemed like the demon lord himself was taking care to avoid hurting the sage.

"You dodged it again?! Your Unique Skill must be some combination of evasion and movement. It does not appear to be instant teleportation. Perhaps it's an airborne variation of 'Warp'? No, it is more likely to..."

The sage started thinking aloud in the middle of battle.

This guy really was a researcher by nature.

"Hero! Show me that move again!"

"Whaaat? No way."

"If you refuse, then I will simply force your hand!"

The sage threw his cloak aside and readied his staff.

It looked similar to the one with a shadow stone that I saw him use before, but this one contained stones of multiple properties, indicating that it could probably use all kinds of magic.

"Your Holiness, destroy him with a Holy Wave!"

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

The demon lord appeared to be completely under the sage's control. He unleashed another purple wave.

I dodged it the same way as before.

"I saw that! I saw it all, Hero!"

The sage, having apparently watched my "Flashrunning" closely, sounded like he might jump for joy.

More concerningly, there was a glimmer of faint purple light in his eyes.

"Good for you."

"Yes, very good. I saw more than enough."

He was really driving home the fact that he saw my skill.

I'm not sure why, though. Just because he saw it doesn't mean he's suddenly

going to be able to use it.

“Show me your next power, Hero! Let me see your other Unique Skills!”

“Um, no thanks.”

“Flashrunning” wasn’t even a Unique Skill in the first place.

“Your Holiness, another wave!”

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

The demon lord obeyed, sending another purple wave rippling around its body.

“That’s not going to hit me, no matter how many times you—!”

“Mana Chain Hold!”

Just as I finished dodging with “Flashrunning” and paused in the air, something wrapped around my body.

The sage had used some kind of Practical Magic binding spell. As with the Light Magic, he was either using it chantless or with some kind of chant-canceling.

“Your Holiness! Home in on him, now!”

The sage had abandoned any politeness in his orders. The demon lord’s wave narrowed and stretched toward me, the tip of it closing in like a spear.

In the meantime, he wrapped another Mana Chain Hold around me for good measure.

“Show me your power if you want to live, Hero!”

“...Nope.”

I destroyed the Mana Chain Holds with a flick of my hand and used “Flashrunning” to avoid the narrowed beam.

This time, I moved forward instead of away.

“Shadow Bind!”

Startled by my sudden appearance in front of him, the sage wasted no time on exclaiming, instead casting shadows at me like a net.



“Whoops, careful with that.”

I took the Holy Sword Durandal out of Storage and slashed the shadows away.

...The sage was gone.

He’d disappeared in the moment that my vision was blocked by the shadows.

According to the information on my map’s marker list, his current location was an area with no map available, so he must be hiding inside a shadow.

“If he thinks he can get away that easily...”

“SO...sori...jeYROOOOOOOOO!!”

Before I could look for his trail to follow him into shadow space, a truck-size fist came barging toward me, so I dodged with “Flashrunning.”

I tried searching for the trail again afterward, but the miasma and shock waves the demon lord sent off had scattered them too much to follow.

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

Apparently realizing that he couldn’t hit me just by swinging around blindly, this time the demon lord sent his waves out spiking in all directions, like a puffer fish.

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

The demon lord sent out wave after wave of spikes.

He was even changing their positions and direction each time.

“Well, that’s still not going to hit me— Wuh-oh.”

As I paused in midair, an invisible slash flew toward me.

The sage.

I used my “Sense Danger” skill to help me dodge, parrying the ones I couldn’t avoid with the Holy Sword Durandal.

That wasn’t the sage’s only attack. He sent out dozens of the Practical Magic

spell Remote Arrow from nearby shadows below, and while I was dealing with those, the Wind Magic spell Blade Storm and the Lightning Magic spell Thunder Storm flew toward me from a different building's shadow.

"Like I said, you can't hit me."

I dodged with "Flashrunning," sensed a presence behind me, and turned around.

"Dark Absorb."

Blackness filled my vision, and my invisible foothold vanished.

His Dark Magic spell must have canceled out the footholds I created in midair.

"Mana Chain Hold."

He tried to capture me with Practical Magic, but I was already gone.

Just as he looked up, sensing my position with some kind of skill, I used "Flashrunning" to jump in close to him and strike with the heel of my palm.

The sage disappeared before my eyes.

No—he used "*Flashrunning*."

Eight orbs of purple light floated around the sage's head, one of them glowing brightly.

It looked like a demon lord's Unique Skill, but he didn't have any such thing.

And I knew for a fact that he didn't have a Brace of Stolen Divinity or any other status-disguising items.

"Did you steal that from me?"

"I didn't steal it. I only *copied* it."

"Copied it? What do you mean?"

Was he hiding some item that could copy skills, like the Xanthic Staff I'd acquired in the Yowork Kingdom labyrinth ruins?

"Exactly what I said. Now, show me your powers, Hero."



“This again? Really?”

He clearly wanted to learn some of my other skills, too.

“Your Holiness! No need for mercy or holding back. Render judgment on this false hero!”

“SO...sori...jeYROOOOOOOOO!!”

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

A far more intense blast than the ones I’d seen before flew toward me from the demon lord.

As it approached, the sage fired Dark Absorb and Mana Chain Hold at me again.

It’d be easy to avoid all that with visual “Unit Deployment,” but it would be bad news if he learned that skill. I couldn’t risk creating a terrorist who could teleport anywhere in the world at will.

“Let there be light.”

Since we were in a holy province, I figured I’d try a religious-sounding phrase.

I used a Flash spell to blind him, then canceled the sage’s spells with the Practical Magic spell Break Magic.

My plan to avoid the demon lord’s attack with “Flashrunning” didn’t end up being necessary. The flash caused the demon lord to fall back, covering his eyes, so his attack never reached me.

“Gaaaaah!”

The sage dried up with a shriek and sank into a shadow.

From the look of things, the demon lord failed to avoid hitting the sage, causing him to take the effects of the purple wave head-on. According to my map information, his condition was “Weakened (Severe).” Talk about getting your just deserts.

While I had a moment to spare, I checked in on the others.

*“Do not lay a hand on civilians, I declare!”*

*“It’s bad to bully the weak, sir!”*

Nana and Pochi were protecting people from the demon lord’s spawn, the Violet Zealots.

*“These opponents are far too weak to be a challenge.”*

*“Aim...and fire!”*

Liza and Lulu were focused on eliminating Violet Zealots.

*“Liza, take a left at the next corner. Lulu, once you’re done there, take out the spawn that will come from the shadow of the red building at your three o’clock. Mia, where are the mini-sylphs?”*

*“Supporting.”*

Arisa was using Space Magic to help everyone navigate, while Mia sent the mini-sylphs she summoned with Spirit Magic to do her bidding, protecting frontline fighters like Nana and Pochi while helping to evacuate people.

Their efforts seemed to give the Parion Province citizens courage; the initial pandemonium had calmed down, replaced with an organized effort to resist the Violet Zealots.

Given how well they were doing, I could probably leave the rest in the girls’ capable hands.



*“Your Holiness!”*

I heard a familiar voice from the ground below.

Looking down, I saw the elderly Holy Woman in a palanquin in front of the demon lord. There were priestesses and shrine maidens surrounding her palanquin.

All but the Holy Woman herself were pale and trembling, cold sweat running down their faces.

I couldn’t blame them for reacting that way to the giant demon lord’s intimidating appearance and the withered state of the trees and garden. If anything, the Holy Woman was the strange one for staying so calm.

“Scatter the dragon scale powder!”

“Yes, Madam!”

The shrine maidens tossed dragon scale powder that was loaded with magic, and a bespectacled priestess used Wind Magic to blow it in the demon lord’s direction.

The powder sparkled with blue light as it flowed toward the prone demon lord, swirling in the air around his face.

As she watched this, the old Holy Woman held up a Holy Staff with a blue gemstone.

“Sacred Purification!”

Finishing her chant, the Holy Woman spoke the invocation word to unleash the Holy Magic spell. A wave of pure blue light burst from her staff, reacting with the dragon scale powder floating around the demon lord’s face to surround it with a fearsome holy light.

“GOD’s looOOOOOOOOOVE!”

The demon lord shrieked as he was bathed in holy light; black fumes rose from his body and were blown away.

Even as the demon lord screamed, his face became more peaceful. The Holy Woman’s magic must have been an advanced spell to cleanse the miasma from the demon lord.

“Your Holiness!”

“...LEANN?”

“Pontiff! Gramps! You recognize me!”

The old Holy Woman cried out to him in tears.

Wow. The demon lord seemed to have recovered a trace of his lost sanity. It even looked like his size might be shrinking a little.

“LE...ANN...”

The demon lord repeated the same word.

Leann was probably the old Holy Woman's name before she was christened as Yu Parion.

"Start the chant again! I'll change you back, Gramps, I promise! ■■■..."

"...aah... LE...ANN."

The gentler-looking demon lord closed his eyes.

At this rate, maybe the demon lord transformation could be undone—or so I thought.

*"Your Holiness! Destroy those fools in front of you!"*

The sage's cruel words echoed seemingly from nowhere, shattering that hope.

"SO...SORIjeyROOOOOOOOOO!"

**HZOOOBBBLZY.**

Against the demon lord's will, a dark purple light coursed through his body, and the deadly wave began to surge toward the Holy Woman and her entourage.

*Not a chance.*

I used "Flashrunning" to jump between the demon lord and the priestesses, and activated the emergency defense system Fortress.

"Nnnngh...!"

It was tougher than I expected.

I'd thought Fortress could nullify almost any attack, but the demon lord's wave permeated through the barrier and drained life force and energy out of my body.

"LE...le...IEAAAAAANN!"

Turning around, I saw the old Holy Woman on her hands and knees on top of the palanquin.

While I'd managed to block most of it, some traces of the wave must have still made it past me.

“Madam!”

“I-I’m fine. The ch-chant...start the chant again!”

Even as she held herself up in a cold sweat, the elderly Holy Woman resumed the chant that had been interrupted.

*“Your Holiness! Kill theeeeeem!”*

“SO...sORi...jeRoooOOOOOOOOO!”

**HZBBBBBBBBBZ.**

The demon lord shook his head, resisting the sage’s shouted orders.

The purple light stopped flowing across his body, flickered like a fluorescent lamp, and went out.

Dark purple liquid leaked from the demon lord’s eyes and ears, possibly because he had defied the sage’s order.

The demon lord’s status condition read “Geist/Violation.” I guess the sage had him under a Geist, then.

“Damn you... You dare defy my orders?”

The sage’s voice echoed around the square, dripping with rage.

This couldn’t be good. I had to pinpoint the sage’s location and get him away from the demon lord before it was too late.

I focused all my attention on my hearing.

*“Demon Lord Zarzaris!”*

All other sounds fell away, and the sage’s voice rang clearly in my ears.

*“This is an order from your master!”*

The map opened on its own, and a target mark appeared over a 3D display of the area, narrowing down rapidly.

*“Use your inverted—”*

The target marker locked into place.

*Got you.*



I closed in with “Flashrunning” and used a dragon’s-claw short sword, complete with a dragon fang coating that gave it the power to pierce anything, to slice the crack between dimensions wide open.

“I-impossible—”

The still-weakened sage tried to use Shadow Whip, but before it could produce enough power, my Remote Stun barrage rained down on him and pummeled him unconscious, sending him flying farther into the shadows.

“Whoops. I overdid it.”

The sage dropped deep into the darkness and out of sight.

Oh, well. He had the Shadow Magic spell Shadow Portal, so he’d probably make his way back once he woke up. Right now, the demon lord was more important than the sage.

I dropped back down to land between the old Holy Woman and the demon lord.

“Who do you think you are?!”

“You may have been fighting the demon lord, but we cannot allow you to come any closer to the Holy Woman.”

The priestesses belatedly demanded to know my identity.

I guess they didn’t see the part where I used a Holy Sword.

And when I protected them with Fortress, they were probably too scared to realize what had happened.

“It’s all right.” As her entourage clamored around her, the old woman calmly stopped them. “He’s a hero. Right, mister?”

“A hero?”

“So this is the Hero from Shiga Kingdom?!”

The priestesses and shrine maidens took the Holy Woman’s word and accepted me as a hero.

“I’ll hold him down. You purify him.”

“Okay, got it.”

The elderly Holy Woman nodded childishly and began the chant.

The demon lord kept squirming and trying to fight back, possibly due to the vestiges of the sage’s Geist, but I kept him pinned down through sheer brute force.

“...■ ***Divine Purification Youjin Seikou!***”

The Holy Woman finished the chant and unleashed the Holy Magic.

The black smoke pouring out of the demon lord was blown away by the flood of blue light, only to immediately start leaking out again.

Still, it did seem to have some effect. The demon lord’s body shrank another size.

“Again!”

“Madam, we have no more dragon scale powder.”

“We’ll do it anyway!”

Despite the priestess’s protests, the old Holy Woman stamped her feet like a stubborn child.

“Here, use this.”

“Dragon scale powder?”

“I’ve never seen powder filled with such magic before.”

“This will definitely work!”

When I gave them some of the huge stock of dragon scale powder from my Storage, the priestesses got weirdly excited about it.

“Thank you, Mr. Hero.”

I nodded back at the elderly Holy Woman and watched as she began the chant again.

“...■ ***Divine Purification Youjin Seikou!***”

Her Holy Magic blew away more of the demon lord’s miasma.

“...LE...ANN.”

The demon lord regained his senses a little more.

If we kept repeating this, his mind might be able to fully recover.

I unleashed the spirit light I normally kept suppressed, helping the Holy Woman purify more miasma.

“...H-he...ro.”

It sounded like the demon lord was calling for me. I moved to stand in front of his face with “Skylarking.”

His eyes wavered between sanity and madness as they gazed at me.

“What is it, Pontiff?”

“...K...ki...ll...mmm...e...”

Did he say...*kill me*?

“...wh...iile...l...stllll...ssssane.”

*While I am still sane?*

No wonder he was the head of a province that named itself for the goddess Parion. Even now that he was turned into a demon lord, he was trying to sacrifice himself to save his people from disaster.

If you ask me, the pontiff’s personality is far worthier of the “Saint” title than mine is, even though I technically have it.

“...Pl... ease...”

The demon lord—no, the pontiff—pleaded with me.

They say there are times when killing someone can be a mercy, but if we exorcised the miasma with the Holy Woman’s magic and then used an elixir on him, there would hopefully be no need to kill him.

“...not...mmh...time...”

*Not much time, maybe?*

“Not much time before what?”

Even as I started asking, the answer became clear.

The pontiff's body was beginning to break down. Worse, the parts that were breaking down were tinged with that purple light.

"...ex... plode..."

Wait. *Explode?!*

At this rate, the pontiff's soul vessel was going to break before we could eliminate all the miasma from his body.

"I won't let that happen."

I took out a lesser elixir from Storage and sprinkled it over him.

But the pontiff's body didn't stop disintegrating. The miasma around him thinned, and his body shrank a little, but that was all.

"So we have to get rid of the miasma first?!"

*Damn it.*

When I realized the truth, I cursed inwardly.

The Holy Woman was continuing the purification even as she ran low on magic power, trying desperately to save him.

The effects were getting weaker, though. The pontiff had fainted now, and his transformed body hadn't shrunk much since it had reached ten feet in length.

"I'm not done yet! We gotta save His Holiness no matter what...!"

The Holy Woman refused to give up. I transferred some of my magic to her and reminded myself not to give up, either.

There had to be some way to solve this besides destroying him as a demon lord.

"We have to trust the Holy Woman!"

"Keep supporting her!"

The priestesses cheered each other on.

Their words gave me an idea.

The Holy Woman—Demon Lord Shizuka.

She might be able to get us out of this situation somehow.

*“Shizuka...”*

I contacted Shizuka, who was safe in the mirage city.

*“What is this? Where is your voice coming from?”*

*“It’s the Space Magic spell Telephone. In fact, just think of it like a cell phone.”*

*“Aah, it’s you. I was wondering who was speaking to me out of nowhere. Do you need something?”*

Shizuka spoke briskly and clearly.

She must be one of those people whose personality changes when they’re on the phone.

*“Pontiff Zarzaris turned into a demon lord.”*

*“That old fellow with the white beard?”*

*“Yeah. I want to remove his Unique Skill. Do you think you can make him your familiar?”*

If we eliminated the cause that was damaging his soul vessel, maybe elixirs would start working on him.

We couldn’t save the Sandstorm Lord, but I was determined to save this one.

*“I think so. When I’ve made someone my familiar once, it’s easier to do so again.”*

Luckily, based on her reaction, telling me that didn’t seem to violate the sage’s Geist.

*“I’ll bring him to you soon, then. Be ready.”*

*“All right. But who am I going to transfer the Unique Skill to? I’m at my limit, so I need someone else to transfer the skill to.”*

Basically, it didn’t matter who the skill was transferred to. As useful as Heal All seemed, if it could turn someone as pious as the pontiff into a demon lord, I thought it would be too risky to give it to anyone else.

There was no guarantee that I'd be around if something went wrong, and I didn't want to make anyone carry something so dangerous.

People who could manage their Unique Skills like Arisa or the labyrinth-dwelling reincarnations were pretty rare, after all.

*"I'll just catch a bug or something. That would work just as well, right?"*

*"...W-well, yes, but are you sure about that?"*

*"Yeah, it's no problem."*

As much as I hate to let anything go to waste, I thought it best to be brave and decisive in this situation.

*"...■ **Divine Purification** Youjin Seikou!"*

The Holy Woman barely managed to cast the Holy Magic spell again before collapsing on the palanquin.

"Madam!"

She must have pushed herself too hard.

"I'll take care of things from here," I murmured to her.

Then I picked up the pontiff and used Return to teleport to the mirage city where Demon Lord Shizuka was waiting.

"Shizuka, we're here!"

"I've made the preparations."

There was a magic circle of some kind drawn on the floor.

I was grateful that she'd managed to get it ready before we arrived.

"It won't work if he's not conscious, though. Can you wake him?"

"It might be a little violent, but..."

Lightning Magic might actually kill him, so I used a weak Lightning Rod to wake him with an electric shock.

"NGAAAAAAAH!"

I held the struggling pontiff down easily, thanks to our overwhelming

difference in levels.

“Look at me, please.”

“...Holy...Woman...”

“I thought so. You don’t remember my name.”

The pontiff held out a trembling hand toward Shizuka. Worried that he would injure her by accident, I used Magic Hand to keep him in place.

“It’s Shizuka. Now, please become my familiar...”

Shizuka walked forward herself and took the pontiff’s overgrown hand of her own accord.

*“Adopt Familiar.”*

A flash of purple light ran through their hands and into the pontiff.

“AHHHHhhhhHHHhh...”

The pontiff’s face slackened with relief, and he suddenly started coughing violently.

He was hacking up miasma, dense enough that it was visible with the naked eye, all of it billowing around Shizuka like smoke.

“...Nngh!”

Doused in miasma, Shizuka began to transform.

Her canines grew out into long fangs, and her neatly trimmed fingernails grew several inches and glinted dangerously.

I guess miasma must hasten a demon lord’s transformation.

The last thing I needed was for Shizuka to lose her mind, too. In addition to my still-unleashed spirit light, I surrounded the area with several Holy Stones and scattered magic-infused dragon scale powder like the priestesses had before to neutralize the miasma.

“Thank you. That burns my body, too, but it’s better than being exposed to all that miasma.” Shizuka was sweating as she spoke. “I was able to make him my familiar. But he’s in worse condition than I thought. Even if I get rid of his

Unique Skill, he might die right away.”

“Don’t worry. Once the God Fragment is gone, I can heal him with an elixir.”

“Elixir? But *he* told me that they’re extremely scarce in the outside world...”

“I have my own unique ways.”

I gave the exhausted-looking Shizuka a nutritional supplement from Storage.

She drank it without hesitation, then coughed a few times.

“Wow, this works great. I wish I had some of these when I was scrambling to finish a *doujinshi* before ComiPa.”

There was no time to focus on the fact that Shizuka had just outed herself as a huge nerd. I waited for her to catch her breath.

“All right, I’m ready. You’re sure you want me to transfer it to a bug?”

“Yes, very sure.”

I held out a scarab beetle that I’d caught before teleporting here.

“I don’t really want to handle it, so if you could just hold it there... No, then I’d run the risk of transferring the Unique Skill to you by myself. Can you just fix it in place somehow?”

I stuck a branch into the ground and tied the beetle to it with cotton thread to oblige the delicate demon lord.

“Here goes...”

Shizuka took a deep breath to steady her focus, then pressed a finger to the pontiff and another to the beetle.

“...Transfer Element.”

Purple-black light flowed through Shizuka’s body and through her hands to surround the pontiff and the beetle.

“Nnngh!”

“AAAaaaAAAAAH!”

Shizuka broke into a cold sweat, and the pontiff thrashed in apparent agony. I didn’t want to risk affecting the transfer by touching him directly, so I held him



down with my Magic Hand. The beetle was making loud chittering noises, too.

A dense purple mass that was nearly black spilled out of the pontiff's body and flowed into Shizuka through her hands.

Her stamina began depleting at an alarming rate, and her MP gauge drained as well.

"Nnnngh...owwwwwww...!"

Transferring a Unique Skill must be a painful process. It looked like she was seriously suffering.

Unable to do anything to help, I could only hold my breath and watch.

"Uuuurgh...almost...there...!"

Shizuka clenched her teeth and strained harder.

"Gooooooo...!"

She forced the mass into the scarab beetle.

The increasingly loud insect began growing in size with crackling sounds.

As it grew, its level jumped from one all the way to fifty.

The scarab beetle's title changed to "Demon Lord," and its previously blank name was overwritten to "Demon Beetle." That seemed a bit lazy, though it was probably just done automatically by the system.

Black smoke began to gush from the beetle's abdomen.

At this rate, it might have a negative effect on Shizuka or the pontiff.

I decided to create an exit from the mirage city behind the Demon Beetle and chase it outside.

"Take care of the pontiff, please."

With that, I handed Shizuka an elixir, chose "Short Stun" from my magic menu, and struck the Demon Beetle with it.

Demon lords are supposed to be immune to lesser magic, but it apparently couldn't cancel out the physical shock wave. Unable to hold its ground, the giant beetle was thrown outside.

The Demon Beetle spread its wings and took to the sky.

“Sorry to sacrifice you like this, but...”

With a silent apology to the scarab beetle, I unleashed a volley of the Explosion Magic spell Explode to destroy its magic barrier.

**SZCABBBBRZABE.**

The demon lord howled and began unleashing a dark purple wave around it.

I drew a magic bow from Storage, notched a Holy Arrow that was overcharged with magic, and used Acceleration Gate to produce a hundred and twenty speed-enhancing circles in the arrow’s path to ensure the insect wouldn’t suffer.

“...Rest in peace.”

With a murmured prayer, I shot the accelerated Holy Arrow straight through the Demon Beetle.

A blue laser beam-like light shot into the sky toward the distant crescent moon, and the Demon Beetle, still reared up in an intimidation pose, was vaporized without leaving a trace.

The booming sound echoed in the sky, until silence finally fell.

*“Damn yooou! Handing it off, no faaair!”*

I spotted the small purple light floating in the air grumbling, and destroyed it with a slash of my Divine Blade.

**> Defeated Demon Beetle**

**> Title Acquired: Piercer of Skies**

**> Title Acquired: Demon Lord Slayer: Demon Beetle**

**> Defeated God Fragments**

The log in the corner of my AR display confirmed that I’d destroyed it.

I said another silent prayer for the Demon Beetle and returned to the mirage city.



“I’m back.”

“Eek!”

Shizuka stared at me as I returned. When I raised a hand to wave, she actually drew back, trembling.

“Was it that scary?”

“Y-yes. That *was* a demon lord, even if only a temporary one... I didn’t think you’d be able to defeat it that easily.”

Though her voice was shaky, Shizuka at least spoke to me normally. Maybe it was the joking tone I used that reassured her, or maybe it was help from my skills like “Negotiation” and “Making Excuses.”

“Are you really a hero...?”

“What do you mean?”

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that in a bad way, I swear!”

Although I asked it very lightly, she still seemed a little frightened.

“Before I was taken captive, I read many stories about heroes and demon lords that were based on historical fact.” Shizuka chose her words carefully as she explained herself. “But there was no record of any hero defeating a demon lord so easily.”

“Well, what do you think I really am, then?”

“Perhaps a god’s apostle, or even a god yourself...ah, or maybe a dragon disguised in human form?”

Those were some pretty imaginative answers.

“Nope. I’m just an ordinary person.”

“...*Ordinary?*”

It was the honest truth, yet Shizuka didn’t sound convinced.

More importantly, though...

“Looks like Pontiff Zarzaris is all right?”

“Yes, the elixir you gave me appears to have worked.”

The pontiff was still comatose, but he seemed to have made it out of the worst of the danger.

“You should probably drink one, too.”

I took out a lesser elixir from Storage and gave it to her.

Although the Holy Stones had stopped her transformation from progressing, those fangs and nails would probably get in the way of everyday life.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s just a lesser elixir, unlike the pontiff’s.”

Shizuka continued to demur at first, until I finally pointed out, “Won’t those fangs and long claws bother you?” After a little more hesitation, she finally thanked me and drank it.

Her fangs popped out and were replaced with new teeth, and the purple nails dropped off and new nails grew in their place.

“Want them?”

Shizuka gathered the nails and fangs and held them out to me.

“...What would I use them for?”

“You don’t need them? He was always eager to take them, saying they were good materials.”

*The sage collected these...?*

I didn’t want to leave them lying around for some weirdo to misuse, so I accepted them and tucked them away in Storage.

My Storage was getting increasingly full of dangerous items...

*“Master, how’s it going over there?”*

*“We managed to turn the pontiff back into a human.”*

He was still a little bigger than his original size, but that was going to have to be good enough.

*“Oh, good. That must be why the spawn stopped moving here.”*

I was glad to hear the chaos in the holy city was over.

But when Arisa went on, I realized it wasn't quite done yet.

*"That's all well and good, except it seems like a riot's about to break out in the cathedral."*

The sage had holed up in the Heavenly Room in the cathedral, and the Holy Sword wielder Mezzalt had gathered a group of Temple Knights to go confront him.

*"We should go help Sir Mezzalt, then. I'll be back in the holy city soon."*

With that, I ended the call.

"Sorry, do you mind taking care of the pontiff for a bit?"

"That's fine with me. But are you sure you want to leave him with me?" Shizuka pointed at herself. "Demon lord. Remember?"

"I think I can trust you."

She didn't seem like the type to be plotting something in secret. Besides, I doubted anyone who'd get depression and stomach pain from being forced to do unjust things would hurt someone who was in a coma.

"Uh-huh. Fine, then. I'll have to make sure you won't regret it."

Shizuka mumbled shortly and turned away.

I could see in profile that her face was red. She must be embarrassed.

"All right, thanks."

I closed the entrance of the mirage city and used Return to teleport back to the holy city.

It was time to settle things with the evil mastermind: the sage.

## The Sage and the Fool

***The world is made up of a vast majority of fools and a tiny minority of intellectuals. Those fools who recognize their own foolishness can yet have the opportunity to learn and gain intelligence. But none are more difficult to deal with than fools who think themselves intellectuals.***  
***(Sorijeyro the Sage)***

“...I made it.”

From a shadow that fell in the Heavenly Room of the cathedral emerged a heavily wounded Sorijeyro the Sage.

“I cannot say I am unharmed, but at least I did not get lost deep in the shadows.”

The sage dragged himself across the floor and up to the pontiff’s chair.

“Nothing ever seems to go to plan...”

Slumping into the chair, the sage sank into thought.

(We were prevented from using the demon lord to open the seal on the Evil God’s Prison by the Saga Empire hero. Lord Green’s betrayal caused our puppet pontiff to turn into a demon lord and be defeated by the Shiga Kingdom hero.) On top of his physical injuries, deep mental exhaustion was turning his limbs to lead.

(Worst of all, the linchpin of my plan—Demon Lord Shizuka—had been eliminated.) The sage heaved a deep sigh of regret.

“Even so, I suppose it’s still better than when I was in the burnt remains of a village surrounded by corpses...”

The sage looked up to the night sky and muttered to himself.

(I still have sympathizers in this province. If I bring them all together, surely I can take control of this land and create a first step toward world domination.)

Twin flames of ambition reignited in the sage's eyes.

Just then, the sound of footsteps charging through the hallway reached his ears.

“So the fools have caught wind of my presence already...”

He turned his gaze toward the entrance to the Heavenly Room.

“We have you now, Sorijeyro!”

The door flew open, and in barged Cardinal Dobbunaf, Parion Province's second-in-command to Pontiff Zarzaris.

“How dare you sit in the place of honor reserved for His Holiness!”

Right behind the cardinal came Mezzalt, the Holy Sword-wielding Temple Knight.

Despite being weakened by the effects of Demon Lord Zarzaris's inverted Unique Skill, he'd managed to recover enough to move, thanks to the bishops' Holy Magic and potions.

However, his weight was being supported by a subordinate, so he must still be far from his usual strength.

“Men! Surround him!”

The Temple Knights and battle-experienced priests who crowded into the room behind them quickly encircled Sorijeyro the Sage as he sat in the pontiff's seat.

But they couldn't hide their anxiety in the face of someone who was powerful enough to fight alongside the former hero and Mezzalt against the Sandstorm Lord.

“You're too late, Cardinal. You've always been a bit too slow.”

The sage toyed with an eerie jar on his lap as he spoke.

It was a Chaos Jar. He had collected much of the miasma produced by the pontiff, and the pain of the people in the holy city.

“Sorijeyro! Where is the real pontiff?!”

“The ‘real’ pontiff? Have you no eyes? That *was* him. It is what happened to him as a result of wearing down his soul for the sake of responding to the endless pleas of the greedy and ignorant masses.”

The sage sounded somewhat forlorn.

“Th-then His Holiness really did turn into a demon lord?”

At this murmur from the cardinal, shock spread through the rest of the group.

“Harrumph. I do not believe your lies. Now, where is the demon lord?! There is no hero around this time. I, Mezzalt, chosen wielder of the Holy Sword Blutgang, shall defeat it forthwith!”

Mezzalt drew his Holy Sword, showing off the blue light to his allies as he pointed it at the sage.

“Impossible.”

“How dare you! As if anything is impossible to the great Mezzalt!”

“I told you, it is impossible. Demon Lord Zarzaris is no longer with us.”

“What? Has he already run loose outside the holy city?!”

The sage heaved a sigh, looking down at the uncomprehending Mezzalt.

“He is no longer of this world. Nanashi the Hero of Shiga Kingdom defeated him.”

The sage didn’t witness this moment firsthand, but he knew from a brief chance encounter that the hero was no slouch. At the very least, a suddenly newborn demon lord would be no match for such an opponent.

“Hero!” Mezzalt bellowed. “Damn you! You’ve stolen the achievement of defeating a demon lord away from me yet again?!”

The sage leveled a cold glare at the indignant knight. “How foolish...as if you could hope to rival a hero.”

The sage put the Chaos Jar away in his Item Box and stood.

“What?! You, a traitor who turned the pontiff into a demon lord, dare to mock me?!”



Ignoring the furious Mezzalt, the sage turned to the cardinal. “Join me, Dobbunaf. I will grant you fame and utility alike. With you as my cover, I will...”

“...unlock the seal of the Evil God’s Prison, perhaps?”

The sage blinked in surprise that the cardinal had seen through his plot.

“Did you truly think I was unaware? Since you style yourself as a sage, I suppose you assume that everyone else is an utter buffoon.”

“What would you know about me?!”

“More than you think, I suspect. After you release the seal on the Evil God’s Prison and wreak havoc on the world, you intend to force the reincarnation you call the ‘Holy Woman’ to use her cursed Unique Skill to create an all-powerful army and bring the world under your control, or something absurd like that, don’t you?”

The sage’s face flushed red with fury, a vein throbbing, at the implied insult.

“Your acting could use some work. I suppose you keep your hood over your face not to hide your monkeyfolk identity, but to keep your thoughts from showing on your face, hmm?”

The sage growled. “I will ask you one more time. Serve me, Dobbunaf. If you agree—”

“I will not. Besides, you’ve given me all the time I needed.”

“Time...? No, surely—”

As the sage’s eyes widened, pure blue light flooded up beneath his feet, and a multitude of multilayered magic circles appeared around him, forming a powerful barrier.

“Ritual Magic! You gathered priests on the floor below this one?!”

“You only just noticed? How disappointing. And here Mezzalt and I came storming in with some troops just to distract you.”

“This barrier cannot hold me!”

The sage used Practical Magic, Dark Magic, and other kinds of spells to break the barrier, all of which were canceled out immediately.

“It’s no use,” the cardinal said coolly. “This is a ritual originally gifted to us by the Goddess Parion to seal demon lords. A mere monkeyfolk like yourself could never destroy a barrier built by a thousand priests and priestesses.”

The magic circles moved like gears, folding the barrier smaller and smaller.

“Damn yooooou!”

The sage gritted his teeth in fury.

He knew for a fact that if he stopped resisting now, the barrier around him would be banished into the space between dimensions, subjecting him to eternal torment.

“If magic will not work...”

The sage produced the City Core terminal from his breast pocket.

“■ **City Portal Toshinai Teni.**”

He raised the terminal and spoke the words, but his body remained firmly stuck in place.

“You have authority here no longer. I reported you as a traitor. The only person who can overturn that is a person of higher rank than me—in other words, only the missing pontiff.”

The cardinal, who evidently refused to accept the pontiff’s death, explained why the sage couldn’t use the City Core.

“Higher rank? Then look no further! ■ **Acquittal Menzai!**”

The sage raised the terminal again and spoke the City Core command to remove the crime that had been carved into his status. However, the terminal simply flickered and caused no changes.

“Impossible! But why?! As vice-lord, I should rank higher than a cardinal!”

“You think too little of His Holiness. After he appointed you vice-lord, he registered me as a vice-lord as well.”

The cardinal suspected that the pontiff had only done this out of a kindly wish for the sage and the cardinal to be the same rank, not in case of an unlikely betrayal, but he didn’t mention this part to the sage.

“You failed to see the depth of His Excellency’s wisdom, and your students have betrayed you. Any favorable reputation you had was only a house built on sand, forged with heretical methods.”

“Betrayed by my students? What an absurd notion.”

“I do not know if you used Psychic Magic or a Charm skill to win over your pupils. Either way, you underestimated the prejudice and hatred held by bigots. Even under your psychic influence, this student still looked down on you as a monkeyfolk. It was the same student who reported all of your plans to us.”

“Those damned traitors...!”

The sage snarled in rage.

“Hmph. Curse your own depravity instead... ■ ***Punish Chuubatsu.***”

The cardinal produced a City Core terminal and used it to attack the sage inside the barrier with a lightning strike.

“So one can attack from outside the barrier...” The sage trailed off, realizing something. “...I can see outside, and the inside is visible from without. In other words, light can travel through the barrier freely.”

“Light Magic will not work, you know. That barrier blocks all magic.”

The cardinal mercilessly rejected the sage’s attempt to plot a breakthrough.

“I do not need *you* to tell me that. I am well aware that magic cannot pass through. But if light can, then that means the boundary is not absolute!”

“And so what if it isn’t?! ■ ***Punish Chuubatsu!***”

The cardinal attacked the confident sage with another lightning bolt.

The sage blocked it with Dark Magic and went on muttering to himself.

“If the barrier is made with the borrowed power of a god, I need only use the power of a god to break it.”

Purple light tinged the sage’s body, and eight purple orbs appeared around his head.

“Allow me to show you the true worth of my Unique Skill Copy Plagiarism.”

The sage took a karate-like stance.

“Consume slot six. Imbue my fist with Unstoppable Strike.”

One of the orbs burst open, and the sage’s fist glowed with blue light.

“Th-that’s Hayato the Hero’s special skill!”

Paying no attention to the surprised cardinal, the sage thrust his fist forward.

It crashed into the barrier, producing shock waves of blue and purple light.

“Barrier, break before me!”

With the sage’s dogged shout, the balance broke, and the enormous amount of magic that made up the barrier reversed direction and exploded into the Heavenly Room.

The ceiling crumbled, and the stained glass depictions of mythology that were akin to a national treasure shattered into pieces. The floor buckled, and a storm of magic power was blown down below, overwhelming the priests who created the barrier.

“Mezzalt, take him down! ■ **Crusade Seisen**, ■ **King’s Armor Okai**, ■ **King’s Blade Oken!**”

“Nnngah! Such power!”

The City Core’s power flowed into Mezzalt’s body, changing his physique from that of one recently recovered to that of a dauntless warrior.

“With this, I can make short work of a curse user or two...”

The Holy Sword Blutgang traced an arc of blue light in the air as Mezzalt closed in on the sage using “Blink.”

“‘Arc Blazer’!”

The knight unleashed his special attack faster than the eye could follow, slashing into the sage’s neck.

Everyone present was certain they were seeing the sage’s head fly through the air.

But then...

“Too slow.”

The sage was above Mezzalt in the air, his head still squarely on his shoulders.

Purple light ran through his body, and seven glowing purple orbs floated above him, one of which was glowing brightly.

“ **Punish** Chuubatsu!”

The cardinal fired a lightning attack at the sage.

“It’s no use.”

The sage was gone before the lightning reached him, appearing next to the cardinal with a flash of purple light and snatching away the man’s City Core terminal.

Then another flash, and he reappeared elsewhere.

“Hrm. The ‘Pickpocket’ skill does come in handy from time to time.”

The sage used the Earth Magic spell Toss Beryl to destroy the terminal, then struck the cardinal with the Lightning Magic spell Piercing Bolt as if in revenge for the earlier strikes.

“How dare you harm the cardinal!”

Even when Mezzalt used an “Arc Blazer” sneak attack, the sage dodged it so quickly, it was as if he’d instantly disappeared.

“So this is the power of that elusive Shiga Kingdom hero. Perhaps it was this ‘Flashrunning’ that allowed him to defeat Doghead and the Boar Lord.”

The sage murmured to himself, continuing to dodge Mezzalt’s fierce flurry of attacks like an afterthought.

“You are no match for me, it would seem.”

He used Toss Beryl to limit Mezzalt’s movements, then combined Dark Magic and Shadow Magic on the knight’s predicted path to steal his magic and life force.

“Save Sir Mezzalt!”

“Yes, sir!”

The Temple Knights rushed in between Mezzalt and the sage.

“How bothersome. I shall reduce you all to ash, the cardinal included.”

The sage floated into the air and readied a staff from his Item Box.

Sensing what he was about to do, the cardinal piled on Defense Magic from the City Core and made a break for the exit.

“As if I would let you get away now...”

The Firelight Pearl in the sage’s staff glowed bright red, and crimson flames whirled through the room.

Then the flames grew even bigger, as if to plunge the knights deeper into despair.

It was a scene of utter ruination, enough to seal the fates of everyone in the room.

“...Inferno.”

The sage spoke the invocation and pointed his staff forward, and a blaze of hellfire raged toward the knights, as if from the gates of hell itself.

But just as the flames were licking at their fleeing backs...



“I will protect you, I declare.”

A figure in dazzling silver armor stepped in and shouted the word “Fortress.”

Instantly, a many-layered magic barrier formed, blocking the Inferno.

The massive amount of heat clashed against the Fortress, and waves of radiant heat singed the silver knight—Nana.

“I am having slight difficulties, I report.”

Several other girls in silver armor arrived to back her up.

“Deracinator!”

“Falliinks?”

“Sir!”

A Space Magic barrier cut off the radiant heat, and three uses of the beastfolk girls' disposable defense system, Phalanx, pushed back the Inferno.

"Aim...and fire!"

A sniper rifle shot a bullet at the sage, who was still floating in the air.

"Urgh!"

The sage's defense barrier just barely made it in time to block the bullet.

But it couldn't cancel out the shock waves, which knocked into the sage's shoulder and sent him spinning out in midair.

"Splash Needle."

Water Magic burst up beneath the sage and was immediately vaporized by the heat from the Inferno—creating a phreatic eruption that sent the sage flying into the sky.

Mia gaped at the unexpected results of her spell, her stunned expression like a character's from a gag manga.

"Cardinal, are you all right?"

A man in silver armor called out to the cardinal, who was struggling to keep up with the sudden turn of events. It was Satou.

"My injuries are minor. But I thought you were staying in Sorijeyro's village, Sir Pendragon?"

"Yes, we learned of the sage's plot there and came running to stop him."

Satou reassured the cardinal that his suspicions that they were on the sage's side were unfounded.

"So you've come as I suspected, Pendragon!"

The sage floated back down, reinforced with layers of Defense and Support Magic.

The surprisingly effective steam explosion had left his vestment in tatters.

"I see they do not call you 'Untouchable' for nothing... I did not think anyone could emerge from my Inferno unharmed." The sage drank an advanced magic

recovery potion as he muttered. “But how long can you keep that up, I wonder? You may have defenses that rival the legendary Heavenslight Protection of the kingdom of sorcery Lalagi, but surely that must come at a high cost. Even if you had Philosophium, you could not use it many times.”

Despite the sage’s attempts to goad him, the young Satou’s expression didn’t waver in the slightest.

“Or *can* you...? No, surely not. Unless you were foolish enough to burn Philosophium as fuel, you could only produce that defense once or twice. Which means victory is as good as mine.”

Satou kept his face blank, though he winced inwardly at the insult to his Holytree Stone Furnace.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to surrender?” Satou asked. “I don’t want to kill someone who I studied under, even if it was only for a short time.”

“Hmph, what a pitiful bluff. More importantly, what happened to the Holy Woman you kidnapped from the ceremony hall? Have you killed her already?”

“Holy Woman? I only rescued a few kids that we knew. One of Lord Kuro’s subordinates was at the ceremony, so maybe he’s the one who rescued the Holy Woman?”

“...Kuro?”

“A servant of Sir Nanashi the Hero.”

“That damned Shiga Kingdom hero again?!”

Satou’s “Fabrication” skill managed to surpass the sage’s sharp perception.

“...The Holy Woman? You didn’t hurt her, did you?”

The cardinal grabbed Satou by the shoulders and shook him.

Before Satou could open his mouth to clear up the misunderstanding, another element of chaos appeared in the Heavenly Room.

“I’m fine, Dobbs.”

It was the elderly Holy Woman on her palanquin. She had fainted earlier from overextending herself trying to turn Pontiff Zarzaris from a demon lord back



into a human, but she had evidently been fully healed by her entourage and hurried to the scene.

Dobbs must be her nickname for Cardinal Dobbunaf.

“Madam!”

The cardinal exclaimed with joy to see that the Holy Woman was safe, but his joy quickly turned into horror.

The sage, who was floating in the air just moments ago, appeared behind the old Holy Woman in an instant and knocked her entourage away.

“Eek!”

“Don’t move, Pendragon!”

Glowing with purple light, the sage held a dagger to the Holy Woman’s throat. As he did so, he drew her inside his defense barrier.

Now, no matter how nimble Satou might be, it was doubtful that he could break the barrier and steal the dagger before the sage could slash the Holy Woman’s throat.

“This is an infamous dagger called the ‘Unlife Curse Blade’ that was found in the Bloodsucker Labyrinth of the Saga Empire. Anyone it cuts is inflicted with a fatal curse and a neurotoxin that surpasses even hydra venom in potency. No magic potion can save the victim. It is the worst imaginable means of murder.”

The sage didn’t mention that an elixir would be able to save the victim.

He suspected there was a small chance that a labyrinth explorer like Satou might actually have one. And as it happened, he was correct.

“It seems the tables have turned. Now you are the ones who must surrender.”

The sage opened his Item Box and tossed ten collars toward his opponents.

“You wouldn’t dare...”

“Indeed, I would.” The sage looked triumphant. “These are enslavement collars. If you wish to save the Holy Woman’s life, put them on of your own free will.”

“Have you fallen that far into heresy, Sorijeyro? Free the Holy Woman at once!”

“I have already stated my demands. You can have her life in exchange for your freedom!”

“H-help me, Dobbs...”

The Holy Woman pleaded for the cardinal’s help.

“Madam! Grrr, is there no other way...?”

The Temple Knights who had snuck up behind the sage touched his blade barrier and sank into a puddle of blood.

The cardinal looked back and forth between the enslavement collars and the Holy Woman, grimacing.

As he did so, Satou’s Magic Hand crept toward the sage but was unable to interfere through his barrier. Though he didn’t show it on his face, Satou was evidently searching for a way to salvage the situation, too.

Whether she knew this or not, Tama stepped forward, approaching the sage.

“...Tama?”

Satou noticed her movement.

Tama stopped in front of the enslavement collars.

“Clever girl. Come to put on your collar, have you?”

Tama picked up the collar and looked up at the sage.

“Mr. Sage, it’s wrong to pick on the weeeak?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You said to help people in trouble and not pick on people weaker than you, remembearer?”

It was then that the sage remembered that this was Satou’s simplified translation of what the sage himself told Tama: *“True power exists to aid and guide the powerless. Be careful not to let it go to your head.”*

“Ah, yes. I did say that.”

Tama and the sage gazed at each other.

The girl's eyes filled with tears under the pressure.

"Pochi thinks it's bad to bully the weak, too, sir! You shouldn't be unfair, sir!"

Pochi rushed to Tama's side to back her up.

"Unfair? Then would you say it is fair for many people to attack a single opponent?"

"Uh-oh, sir!"

Pochi was flustered by this counterargument.

"Let's see you fight one-on-one, then!"

"Mmm. Representative match."

Arisa and Mia stepped up next to Pochi and Tama.

"A representative, you say? You think you can defeat me just because you can also use chantless magic, girl-child?"

"No, I'm not the one who'll be fighting you." Arisa shook her head.

"The spear user who was invited to the Shiga Eight, then!"

"No, there is someone much stronger than the likes of me."

When Liza denied him, the sage turned his gaze to Lulu, who flapped her hands frantically.

"N-not me, either!"

"Of course, it is not me, either, I declare. It is Master's turn to shine, I announce."

Nana moved in front of the cardinal, freeing up Satou from his protective position.

"You, eh? As if a fighter who is only light on his feet can oppose me with magic tools alone."

"Oh, I'm not just going to oppose you. I'm going to defeat you once and for all."

At this uncharacteristically self-assured statement from Satou, Arisa and the rest of his companions broke into smiles.

“Such foolishness!”

The sage’s body was bathed in purple light, and seven purple spheres appeared above his head.

One of them went out, and the sage shouted down at Arisa.

“Reincarnated girl-child! Behold my level!”

“Level? What about it—level ninety-nine?!”

Arisa’s face twisted with surprise.

The others all wore similar expressions of shock.

No, not quite. Satou briefly looked like he wanted to say “Uh-huh...” before he pasted on a surprised expression as well. Fortunately, no one else noticed this.

“That’s right. Now that I have cast off my false guise, there is no one within the limits of human ability who could hope to defeat me.”

“How—?! I know you didn’t have a Brace of Stolen Divinity! Was that purple light the secret?!”

“Quite a curious mind you have.” The sage smirked with amusement at Satou’s unusual outburst. “The answer is this: As you suspected, I used my Unique Skill Copy Plagiarism to reproduce and maintain the effects of a Brace of Stolen Divinity.”

“What an unfair skill...!”

Arisa bit her lip furiously.

“Once I have canceled a skill once, I must copy it again. However, I can simply retrieve the Brace of Stolen Divinity from the cathedral’s treasure room again. That piece of equipment turned out to be the most useful object I found in the ruins of the Evil God’s Prison.”

After he muttered this, the sage looked one by one at team Pendragon, the Temple Knights, and finally the cardinal.

“Then allow me to ensure that we have no boorish interlopers.”

“Th-the shadows!”

“Uh-oooh?”

“Waaah, sir!”

“Mrrr.”

Shadows swelled up from beneath their feet and ensnared them within seconds.

The nimble Tama and Liza managed to evade the shadows, but everyone else was bound by shadows and could no longer move. Pochi was a bit of an exception, as she initially escaped with her natural instincts, only to trip and get caught anyway.



“Mew!”

“...Damn it.”

The two who escaped at first were eventually captured when more and more tendrils emerged from the shadows.

“Now then, let our battle begin.”

The sage released the old Holy Woman, holding the Unlife Curse Dagger in one hand and producing his favored multi-attribute-stone staff in the other.

“You’re not taking a hostage this time?”

“Hmph. I have no need for such tricks against a boy of only level fifty-four who just happens to be light on his feet. I am only wary of the girl-child there.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get involved.”

Arisa shrugged, not bothering to free herself with Space Magic.

Off to one side, Tama was wiggling around and trying to get rid of the shadows holding her by using shadow powder ninjutsu. Unfortunately for her plan, the sage’s magic seemed to have stronger control over the shadows.

“Come at me, Pendragon.”

“All right, then—”

Instead of drawing the fairy sword at his waist, Satou picked up a nearby spear and rock.

“—Here I go.”

Deliberately announcing his intentions, Satou threw the rock at the sage with all the speed and force of a fastball.

The sage vanished.

He reappeared in a wash of purple light at Satou’s side—only to lose his balance and go tumbling dramatically across the floor.

In the dust cloud the sage left as he rolled, a broken spear became visible tumbling close behind him. It was the one Satou had been holding moments ago.

“Wh-what just...?”

The sage looked around, trying to comprehend what had happened to him; seeing the broken spear and the empty-handed Satou, he realized he must have been tripped by Satou’s spear.

“...Did you predict my trajectory?” The sage looked shocked, then quickly realized this was impossible. “No, surely not. The skill I copied from Nanashi the Hero works similarly to ‘Warp.’ The user moves instantly, too fast to see and react. You could not have intentionally tripped me.”

Satou made no comment on the sage’s muttering, as if he couldn’t hear him. Instead, he picked up a different spear and swung it around experimentally.

Noticing that the sage was staring at him doubtfully, Satou beckoned him as if to say, *You can try coming at me this time.*

“Damn you! You think yourself strong?!”

The sage flew into a rage at being treated like a lesser opponent.

He put his staff away in the Item Box and held the dagger in his other hand.

It appeared that he intended to slash Satou with the dagger on his way past and kill him in one go.

“Prepare to pay the price for that arrogance!”

The sage vanished, reappeared far to Satou’s side, then vanished again.

He repeated this several times, until no one could keep track of his location. Then there was an explosive sound behind Satou.

“Mew!”

“Ouchie, sir!”

The butt end of the spear struck the sage’s solar plexus, and he doubled over, eyes rolling back in pain.

The spear’s tip was stuck into the marble floor; the handle quickly reached its limit and snapped, flying along with the sage past Satou and crashing into a nearby pillar.

The plaster veneer of the column crumbled, and a cloud of dust went up from



where it connected to the ground, demonstrating the force of the impact for all to see.

“Maybe you should watch where you’re going?”

Satou watched the sage politely.

“What just happened?”

“I thought I saw Sir Pendragon thrust the spear into the floor, and then somehow Sorijeyro crashed into it?”

It seemed that ordinary people couldn’t tell what had happened.

“That’s our Master for you.”

“So Master was able to see the sage’s movements.”

Those who were able to follow the action, like Liza and Lulu, applauded Satou.

Tama and Pochi were scrunching up their faces in sympathy at the painful-looking crash.

“What an amazing special move.”

“He must have predicted Sorijeyro’s position...”

Mezzalt murmured in admiration of Satou’s technique, while the cardinal wondered aloud.

“Sir Sage is so logic-driven that he’s very easy to read,” Satou said casually.

If the sage were awake to hear this comment, he probably would have been furious with the humiliation.

“Uuurgh...”

A faint groan came from near the wall.

“Satou.”

“Master, the enemy is still afoot, I report.”

“That was like a top-speed highway collision. I’m surprised he’s even alive.”

Mia and Nana were alert, while Arisa commented with a phrase that only Satou would understand.

He'd crashed into the pillar faster than the speed of sound. If it weren't for the multiple layers of barriers, it would have undoubtedly pierced his stomach through, even if it was only the butt end of the spear.

Satou ran over at a speed rivaling that of the "Blink" skill, pointing his fairy sword at the sage's neck as the latter regained consciousness.

"Is it safe to say that I've won the match?"

Satou held out a potion with a smile. The sage rejected it, producing one from his Item Box instead and drinking it down.

"...It couldn't be coincidence that it happened twice. You must be an expert in countering. So striking back after an attack is your forte..."

The sage coughed, then muttered in a hoarse voice.

The attack to his solar plexus must not have healed completely even after the magic potion.

After a moment of silent thought, the sage threw the empty vial aside and spoke again.

"...The match is yours, Pendragon."

"Hooraaay!"

"Master won, sir!"

"Good gaaame?"

The girls cheered when the sage admitted defeat.

The empty vial flew through the air and began to fall. Tama followed it instinctively with her eyes, a habit of cat-eared folk.

When it hit the ground and shattered, there was suddenly a billow of white smoke.

"Mew!"

Before Tama could call out a warning, a man behind the pillar in priest's robes snuck up behind Satou and stabbed him in the back with the dagger the sage had dropped.

“Master...!”

Arisa’s chantless Space Magic blew the smoke away instantly.

When it cleared, it revealed the sage sending shadow spears toward Satou—who had been stabbed in the back by a dagger.

“It’s not fair to stab from behind, sir!”

“Masteeeeer!”

Pochi shouted, and Tama freed herself from the shadows using ninjutsu and ran to his side.

“We can’t waste time on these things.”

Arisa used Space Magic to escape the shadow tendrils, while Nana used the Foundation version of Break Magic to destroy hers.

Liza and Pochi forced their way free, and Lulu managed to point her gun at her shadow tendrils with flexibility that would make the Kunoichi go pale, shooting her way free.

“Mrrr.”

Mia was the only one who couldn’t escape on her own. Nana freed her, and they all ran to Satou.

This all transpired in a matter of seconds after they saw that Satou was in trouble.

On the other hand, the assassin who’d struck Satou...

“Impossible!”

...couldn’t hide his shock that Satou had caught the tip of the dagger between his fingers.

It must have taken unbelievable skill to expertly prevent the attack from behind in the midst of a smoke screen, without even turning around.

“But you were too focused on your back.”

The sage’s shadow spears had pierced Satou’s forehead, heart, and a dozen other vital points.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

The sage’s mouth dropped open when Satou replied calmly.

Then, noticing that there wasn’t a single drop of blood coming from any of the points where his shadow spears had supposedly pierced, he realized he had failed.

“You can use Shadow Magic, too...?!”

“No, this is thanks to the ninjutsu Tama taught me and the shadow stones you gave me.”

Satou revealed the shadow stone powder in the palm of his hand.

The assassin behind him drew back the dagger and prepared to throw another one, but Satou didn’t even turn around, because...

“Nin-niin!”

“Hi-ya, sir!”

Tama’s ninjutsu created a gust that blew the would-be assailant backward, and Pochi jumped into the wind and body-slammed the man, knocking him out cold.

Liza scooped up Pochi as she rolled across the floor, and used her Magic Spear to pin the man to the ground.

Behind them, Mia began a chant, Lulu readied her sniper rifle, and Nana protected the cardinal and company with her shield.

“You have excellent subordinates.”

“They’re my friends, and I’m very proud of them. So, are you willing to surrender now?”

Satou didn’t move the sword from the sage’s throat as he inquired.

“I am not intimidated by threats from someone who cannot kill me. If you are going to point your sword at me, you had better be willing to use it.”

Satou scratched his cheek under his helmet, looking flummoxed. The sage had him there.

“Mr. Sage, please give uuup?”

Tama appeared in front of the sage and pleaded with him earnestly.

“That’s right, sir! We already won, sir!”

Pochi cheered on Tama from a distance, while Satou and the others watched the exchange.

“You would ask me to cast aside everything and surrender?”

“Aye.” Tama nodded.

“How foolish...”

“Meeew!”

The sage grabbed the defenseless Tama by the collar of her armor and lifted her into the air.

“Those garbage lines I fed you were only to serve my own interests,” he declared. “All lies, told for the purpose of controlling fools like you. The weak are devoured, those who cannot resist are trampled underfoot. That is the way of the world. It is a cruel reality where only the strong can gain anything.”

Tama’s eyes filled with tears at the sage’s cold words.

“Tears and pity are the hallmark of the weak,” he said, and threw Tama aside.

“The whole world doesn’t work like that.”

Satou caught Tama in midair and wiped her tears away.

“Master is right! We don’t need to listen to a villain’s flimsy excuses for being evil!”

“Mm. Hasty.”

“Yes, Mia. The true foolishness is giving up, I declare.”

Arisa scolded the sage, and Mia and Nana agreed.

The other girls nodded along with their words.

“Hmph. I have no time to waste on the sugary delusions of little girls.”

The sage’s body glowed with purple light. He saw at the end of his

outstretched hand that his fingernails were hardening and turning purple, and he hid them in the sleeve of his robe.

Whether it was because he had overused his Unique Skill or reproduced that of the hero, the sage was clearly paying the price for using power beyond his means, his body slowly but surely transforming.

“So you intend to keep resisting?”

“Of course. Besides...”

One of the six purple spheres above his head burst, and Reflective Scales made of purple light appeared behind Satou.

“...there is no point surrendering to one who is about to die!”

The Reflective Scales closed in to cut through Satou’s neck. Without turning around, Satou bent backward to avoid them.

His momentum carried him into a backward somersault, and he kicked the Reflective Scales on his way by, then removed his cloak to catch the lightning strike that the sage threw after him.

“That was the Sandstorm Lord’s Unique Skill, right? That leaves five more. What other abilities are you hiding?”

Despite the fact that an enemy far stronger than he was using the powers of demon lords and heroes, there was no fear in Satou’s face.

If anything, he even had the calm confidence of one with absolute strength.

“Untouchable! What are you really?!”

The sage jumped back from Satou as he bellowed.

“How do you evade all of my attacks like nothing?!”

There was undeniable fear in his voice.

“You... I must dispose of you here and now at any cost...”

The sage glared at Satou as he spoke.

“...Nanashi the Hero.”

## The Fool's Fate

***Satou here. When a villain meets their end, it will be said that they were evil to the last. Perhaps this allows their demise to bring a form of catharsis.***

“...Nanashi the Hero.”

I couldn't hide my surprise when the sage saw through to my secret identity, but luckily my maxed-out “Poker Face” skill covered for my failure perfectly.

At least, I'm fairly sure I managed to maintain a blank expression.

I have to admit, I may have gone overboard. I was enjoying getting the sage to fall for my traps because of his inexperience with the “Flashrunning” he copied from me using his Unique Skill a little too much.

The assassin showed up on my radar, and I saw him from the bird's-eye view of my Clairvoyance spell anyway, so it was easy to deal with him. And since I figured the sage would use his preferred Shadow Magic to try to attack me at the same time, I was barely able to deal with that, too. The fact that my back was soaked with a cold sweat is a secret.

“Nanashi the Hero? Of the Shiga Kingdom?!”

“That masked hero is really Sir Pendragon?!”

The key figures from Parion Province murmured in surprise, and in the other view from my Clairvoyance, I saw my companions turn pale and exchange nervous glances.

“Wh-what should we do, Master?”

Arisa's voice sounded worried over Tactical Talk. I told her it would be fine.

Then I put on my best *What do you mean?* face for the sage.

“You think *I'm* Nanashi the Hero?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!” the sage shouted, looking confident. “My powers are at the peak of humanity’s limits. If not a hero, only a god or a god’s apostle could trifle with me so easily!”

He had his Reflective Scales positioned between us, as if he was wary of me.

Each time the sage yelled, I thought I saw jet-black smog leaking from his lips.

Hopefully, it wasn’t a sign that he was going to turn into a demon lord from using his Unique Skill so much...

“You overestimate me. Besides, Sir Nanashi the Hero is right over...”

I quickly dressed a substitute dummy in Nanashi’s outfit within Storage, then took it out on the other side of the collapsed ceiling of the Heavenly Room, along with a magic-charged mass-produced Holy Sword.

Normally, these dummies were for testing equipment. I probably hadn’t used one as a standin since Labyrinth City Celivera.

“<Dance,> Claidheamh Soluis!”

I used my “Ventriloquism” skill to make the dummy shout, then took out thirteen Holy Swords and waved them around the dummy with Magic Hand.

It was clearly not Claidheamh Soluis, but someone who had never seen the real thing wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

After all, those thirteen Holy Swords were real, even if I did make them myself.

“What the...?! ”

The sage’s eyes widened at the Nanashi doll floating in the sky. Then he suddenly took out two ampoules, one red and one purple, and bit them open.

Those were the lethal drug samples I’d seen at the cardinal’s mansion: archdemonic potion, a concentrated form of demonic potion, and the mysterious high-concentration magic stimulator.

“Stop, sage! Do you want to die?! ”

I reached out with my Magic Hand to stop him, but the Dark Magic barrier around him canceled them out.



“Mew!”

Tama’s throwing star shattered one of the ampoules.

“Aim...and fire!”

Lulu’s bullet followed and broke the other one.

Good work, you two.

“How dare you use those against me...!”

Clicking his tongue, the sage tossed the shattered vials aside and fired a dozen or so javelins at them in retaliation.

Tama dodged them nimbly, while Arisa’s Space Magic spell Deracinator protected Lulu.

I had to get the sage’s attention back on me.

*“I got rid of the demon lord and rescued Pontiff Zarzaris, so don’t worry. He’s in a safe place now.”*

I spoke from the Nanashi doll with “Ventriloquism.”

It was difficult to keep maneuvering the doll while keeping my eyes on the sage as Satou.

I don’t want to use that as an excuse, but it took me an extra moment to notice a man in priest’s robes approaching the sage.

“Sir Sage, it is time for the last resort, indeed.”

“L-Lord Green!”

*Green...* The man in the priest outfit had green fingernails and lips, and his sash and shoes were green as well.

He looked just like the former Count Poputema from Celivera, who I used to call the “green noble,” when he was being controlled by a greater green demon.

“You must use Call Immortal, indeed!” the green priest cried.

*Call Immortal?*

That was the Unique Skill that Cardinal Hozzunas had used to summon the Evil God’s Spawn in the royal capital of Shiga Kingdom at the end of the year.

The sage had copied that Unique Skill, too?

*This is bad. Really bad.*

We'd only managed last time with help from my Divine Blade and support from Hikaru and the sky dragon.

If the sage used Call Immortal while those two weren't around, there would be serious casualties in Parion Province.

"I'm afraid I cannot, Lord Green. I have used my Unique Skill too many times already. If I use that now, I will most likely lose to the power of the gods and be turned into a mindless demon lord."

"Not to worry, indeed. I have a plan, indeed."

*Ugh, you've got to be kidding me.*

"Impressive, Lord Green!"

"Take this..."

I saw the green priest reach into his breast pocket.

"Pen-Pen!"

Giving an order from the Nanashi doll, I used "Blink" to get close enough to stop the green priest.

"Stay out of this!"

The Reflective Scales knocked my hand back.

I tried throwing one of the Holy Swords floating next to the Nanashi doll, but a simple toss from my Magic Hand wasn't enough to break through the Reflective Scales, only to crack them slightly.

"'Draco Buster'!"

Liza jumped in faster than the wind and broke through the Reflective Scales, pinning the sage to the pillar.

The new upgrades to her Cricket Spear were clearly worth the effort.

Thankful for Liza's interference, I used a palm strike to knock the green priest away.

“Lord Green!”

“The die is cast, indeed.”

Something black pierced the sage’s back.

It turned into smoke before I could reach out and grab it, absorbing into the sage’s body.

“Uuuurgh...! Lord Green! Y-you...!”

“It was sitting around in your base, so I brought it with me, indeed. Now, be of use to me...”

The priest bounded onto the floor and twisted his neck to look at the sage.

“...and become a proper demon lord, indeed.”

As soon as he spoke those words, black fog blew out of the sage’s body, and his skin began to turn dark purple.

“Damned evil demon! You deceived me!”

The sage’s body began growing larger, producing spikes and bumps all over.

The top of his head turned into something like a diadem, and the purple orbs that were floating above his head slotted into it, like jewels in a crown.

“I did not betray you, indeed. You were too afraid of becoming a demon lord to use Call Immortal, so I simply gave you a helpful push so that you could use it without worry, indeed.”

The green priest looked unapologetic.

In my AR display, I saw the sage’s race change from **monkeyfolk** to **demon lord**.

The black object must have been an item to hasten a demon lord transformation.

“Arisa! Retreat to safety now!” I shouted in a growing panic.

If that black object could turn someone with a God Fragment into a demon lord...I shuddered to think what might happen if such a dangerous thing was anywhere near Arisa.

I had to make sure it wasn't used on her, no matter what.

"Pen-Pen, evacuate everyone and leave this to me."

"Got it!"

Acting out a conversation with the Nanashi doll, I turned my attention to the emergency evacuation, to make sure Arisa was safe, as quickly as possible.

"Ah yes, the Evil God's Protection works quite well on those whose vessels have broken, indeed. Normally, they would simply betray us and perish, indeed."

I heard the green priest snickering.

*The Evil God's Protection works quite well on those whose vessels have broken, indeed.*

So that's the condition that triggers a demon lord transformation?

"Lord GreeEEEEEEEEEEEN!"

Before I could be sure, the green priest was crushed by the gigantified sage.

His shadow loomed over me, too, as I stood frozen in place, so I picked up a few people who had fallen onto the floor and escaped from the Heavenly Room.

"LORD GREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEN!"

The demon lord bellowed to the heavens.

*"I won't deny being evil, but I still don't believe I betrayed you, indeed. We established that the plan was to unlock the seal on the Evil God's Prison using a demon lord, indeed."*

The "indeed" demon's voice echoed from nowhere.

*"Now, destroy the holy city, indeed. Plunging people who are living happily into the depths of despair is the best way to create dense miasma, indeed."*

"LORD GREEEEEEEEEEEEeEEN!"

The sage's voice became more and more garbled with his transformation.

The sage—or rather, Demon Lord Sorijeyro—destroyed the Heavenly Room in

a fit of fury and began walking out of the cathedral.

*“Master! Hurry!”*

*“The exit is getting blocked!”*

Arisa and Lulu contacted me urgently.

*“Tama will heelp?”*

*“Pochi will carry people, too, sir!”*

*“Stay put, you two!”*

Luckily, Liza stopped Tama and Pochi from coming to help.

*“Hurry!”*

*“Master, move quickly, I declare.”*

Mia and Nana urged me on as the ceiling began to collapse.

The exit was being buried before my eyes.

*“Catch them!”*

With that, I used Magic Hand to help toss the people I was carrying through the exit.

I also kept the rubble from falling on them using Magic Hand.

*“Master, you have to get out, too!”*

*“I’m going to use Return. You girls start evacuating people from the holy city, please.”*

Then I escaped from the crumbling cathedral.

This way, I could swap into the Nanashi doll’s place.



*“Now, then.”*

I took Nanashi the Hero’s outfit off the substitute dummy and put it on, then flew up high.

*“The high-ranking priests’ mansions near the cathedral have all been destroyed...”*

It didn't seem like there were many casualties yet.

The sage—Demon Lord Sorijeyro—was burning the capital with Fire Magic, then creating tendrils from the dark shadows cast by the raging flames to mow down buildings.

In the distance, a wall of wind was whirling up black smoke and flames, blocking my view past that point.

*“How is the evacuation going?”*

*“Master, we are being blocked at the gate, I report.”*

*“The other gates look to be the same way.”*

Nana, who was guarding the key figures, and Lulu, who was stationed at a high vantage point, reported in.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

*“HeeeEEEEeerooOOOOOOO!”*

Once the demon lord finished destroying the district of high-ranking mansions, he began moving toward the regular residential district with a roar.

*“Master, don't let the demon lord leave the area of the cathedral until we're done evacuating! My Endless Deracinator and Mia's Garuda's wind barrier can't stop his magic!”*

*“All right. I'll take care of it.”*

*“The demon lord is level one hundred ten now. Be careful!”*

I didn't notice until Arisa pointed it out that the sage had gone from level 99 to level 110 as a demon lord.

I remembered the Sandstorm Lord that Hayato the Hero defeated in the Den of Evil.

That one suddenly went up by ten levels partway through the battle, too. Although this one had gone up by eleven, that was a minor difference.

*“HeeeEEEEeerooOOOOOOO!”*

The demon lord roared as if it was losing its mind.

I found out in my interactions with Demon Lord Shizuka that miasma hastened a demon lord transformation, so I turned my spirit light on full blast to erase the surrounding miasma.

“Over here, demon lord!”

I used Ice Storm on the demon lord’s back.

Since the flames were making this area intensely hot, I figured it might cool things down while also grabbing the demon lord’s attention, but apparently I overdid it.

The high-ranking priests’ district, which had already been evacuated, was covered in ice and snow, and the waterways went from boiling to freezing over.

It was probably dangerous to use wide-range attack magic like that inside a city.

“HeeeEEEEEROOooooOOOOooo!”

Huffing out white breath, the demon lord shot Lightning Magic at me, which I dodged with “Flashrunning.”

Last time I looked, he only had the four basic elements and Shadow Magic. Now, however, he had almost all the magic skills covered.

“...That’s intense.”

The demon lord’s attack magic was much more powerful than before.

If I stopped at just keeping his attention, someone might get killed by a stray spell.

“Then we’ll have to take this outside the city!”

I closed in on the demon lord with “Flashrunning” to grab him and use Return—then stopped in my tracks.

*“Master, what’s wrong?”*

*“It’s a trap.”*

He had set up a trap for me to run into with “Flashrunning,” just like I had done to the sage earlier. A web of shadow blades too thin to see with the naked eye surrounded the demon lord in a dome.

If it weren't for my "Sense Danger" and "Trap Detection" skills, I might've run right into it.

I used Break Magic to destroy the shadow blades, then "Flashrunning"—

Before I could dive in, a Reflective Scale flew toward me. It multiplied from one to many before my eyes, swirling around the demon lord.

Each time the demon lord flashed with dark purple light, the five lights in his diadem increased. When there were eight of them, they would produce more Reflective Scales, then go out one by one, repeating the cycle.

He seemed to be using Copy Plagiarism to reproduce his own Reflective Scales. As he did so, the purple light surrounding the demon lord's body grew blacker.

My spirit light was barely having any effect at all.

"Stop it, sage! If you keep using your Unique Skill, you won't be able to turn back, ya know."

Nanashi's tone isn't ideal for being convincing...

"Bwah-ha, bwah-ha, HA-HA-HA-ha-ha-HA..." The demon lord laughed toward the night sky. "...It's alrEADY too LATE for THAt."

The Reflective Scales surged toward me at the demon lord's will, and I deflected them with dual-wielded Holy Swords.

They were coming so fast that I couldn't move, at which point other attack spells came flying at me, making it difficult to make my next move.

I wanted to tell him that it wasn't too late, but if I devoted my breath and attention to that, I might not be able to block all the Reflective Scales.

*"Aim...and fire!"*

A blue light bullet pierced the deluge of Reflective Scales and struck the side of the demon lord's head.

Although the disposable acceleration gun evidently wasn't strong enough to pierce the demon lord's skull, it still gave me enough of a chance to recover my balance.



I used “Flashrunning” to climb high into the air.

*“Thanks, Lulu. You’re a big help.”*

*“N-not at all! I still have a long way to go.”*

Lulu’s flustered reaction to being complimented made me smile.

“HeeEEEEeeerooOOOOoooOOO!”

The demon lord caught up to me in seconds—maybe he was using “Flashrunning,” too. Maybe now I could lead him away from the holy city.

I used “Flashrunning” to keep moving, bringing the demon lord in tow. His “Flashrunning” couldn’t cover as much of a distance as mine, so I limited my own speed so that he wouldn’t lose sight of me as our chase unfolded in the night sky.

“STOOOoooOOOOP!”

When I paused for a moment, the demon lord fired an attack spell at me.

Fireballs exploded around the area I was heading toward, an Ice Storm blocked my escape, and a barrage of Remote Arrows and Thunder Bolts chased after me like a bullet hell game.

Even when I dodged them all by “Flashrunning” in random directions, the demon lord refused to give up, firing more volleys of magic.

In between the spells, he tried to use a feint and cut my head off with Reflective Scales, but I kept avoiding all of them with “Flashrunning” and baited the Reflective Scales into crashing into the ground. A breezebranch tree got cut down in the crossfire, water bursting out of its trunk like a geyser.

“HeeEEEEeeerooOOOOoooOOO!”

I dodged the demon lord’s advanced Fire Magic spell Inferno with “Flashrunning.”

This was a big one, maybe because I paused for longer than usual. Although I was getting fed up with the persistent attacks, it probably looked like a beautiful light show from the ground. The fact that he was using all these spells in a row without running out of magic must mean that his MP got a serious

boost from becoming a demon lord.

Still, this game of “Flashrunning” tag was getting mentally exhausting, since it was a battle of reading each other’s moves in advance.

It was especially annoying when he used a Fireball to distract me and set a Dark Magic trap in front of me.

“Now, then...”

Since we were far enough away from the holy city now, I decided to try to talk sense into the demon lord.

Up until now, the only way I could deal with a demon lord was by defeating them. But now that Shizuka was on my side, I could come up with other options.

“Sage! It’s still not too late. Just give up your God Fragment, ’kay?”

“LllllllllllEEEEeeES!”

The demon lord’s roar was followed shortly by three magic circles in the air.

Three wyvern-like demons with camouflage coloring emerged from them.

“Kweh-heh-heh-heh, it’s no use, indeed.”

“A fragment imbued with the Evil God’s Protection is fused deep into the monkey-man’s soul, indeed.”

“Even with the depressed demon lord’s power, you can’t turn him back, indeed.”

The wyvern-shaped intermediate demons taunted the demon lord.

Judging by their speech and coloring, they must be underlings of the green greater demon.

“SllllLeeEEENCE, HELLLLL spaaAAaaawNNN!”

The demon lord’s flames destroyed one of the intermediate demons in one shot, while the other two narrowly escaped, mocking the demon lord as they flew toward the holy city.

They must have been sent to lead the demon lord back to the city.

*“Satou, demons.”*

*“I saw some here, too. I was able to defeat them in one blow, so they must be lesser demons, I believe.”*

*“Pochi beat two, sir!”*

My companions who were evacuating the holy city reported demon sightings one after another.

I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to check in on them.

*“I will not allow this slaughter, I declare!”*

*“Chaos baaad!”*

Nana blocked some walking cactus-like demons that were barging toward evacuees, while Tama used ninjutsu to immobilize some hedgehog demons.

*“Well done! Leave the rest to us!”*

*“Aim...and fire!”*

Once the demons were dropped into pits, trapped by shadows, or forced into buildings by gusts of wind, Liza and Lulu eliminated them one by one.

*“Sylphs, protect.”*

*“Rip and tear! Rip and teeeear!”*

Mia’s mini-sylphs guided and protected the citizens, while Arisa was getting weirdly fired up as she bought time for the others to arrive with a barrage of Space Magic.

I was a little too far away to support them with magic. Trusting that they could handle it, I returned my focus to the demon lord.

*“First, let’s get rid of the pests.”*

I pulled out my magic bow and notched two magic-overloaded Holy Arrows.

Using Acceleration Gate from my magic menu, I produced a hundred and twenty magic circles in front of the bow.

*It’s just like reading the wind.*

I remembered Lulu’s words as I adjusted my aim, then fired two arrows

toward the demons' projected positions.

"Speed alone can't catch us, inde—!"

"Nice try, indee—!"

The two Holy Arrows left laser-like trails as they shot straight through the demons and vaporized them.

"HeeEEEEeeerooOOOOoooOOO!"

The demon lord came after me enthusiastically with "Flashrunning."

I had no interest in dancing with someone wearing a dress of Reflective Scales.

*Time to settle him down a little bit.*

I waited for the demon lord to pause and fired off an Implosion spell.

"GUUaaaAAAAAAHhhHH!"

The demon lord howled in pain at the direct hit.

Using "Flashrunning" to run circles around the demon lord, I used spells like Fire Storm, Ice Storm, and Thunder Storm to keep him blinded. With help from the bird's-eye view provided by Clairvoyance to find his Reflective Scales' blind spots, I pummeled the demon lord with a barrage of Implosions.

The rapid-fire intermediate attack magic broke through his Reflective Scales in no time.

The demon lord seemed to have an auto-recovery skill like me, so I attacked as hard as I could without killing him.

After a while, the demon lord's groans and yells quieted.

"Ready to quit being a demon lord yet?"

"I surpassed human limits and became a demon LORD, reached a high level even compared to demon lords of the PAST, and yet I still cannot touch YOU? WHY?!"

Instead of answering my question, the demon lord started complaining in slightly more fluent speech than before.

Well, I'm more than twice your level. That's to be expected.

"So you realize you can't beat me now? Then surrender already."

"Surrender, you SAY?! You ruined the plans I spent a lifetime preparing just before I could SUCCEED, and on top of that, now you would offer me MERCY?! I have no desire to keep living in such disGRACE!"

The demon lord huffed out black miasma as he howled.

"I have no CHOICE but to use my last RESORT—"

*Does he mean Call Immortal?*

"If you try to use that, I'll finish you off without a second thought, got it?"

I didn't want to fight the Evil God's Spawn produced by the Unique Skill Call Immortal if I could help it.

To be honest, I'd almost prefer to deal with the outcome of whatever is sealed inside the Evil God's Prison getting released.

I prefer not to kill if I can help it, but that's not an absolute rule.

The safety of my friends is far more important.

"I would gladly lay down my LIFE if it means I can see FEAR on your FACE."

Uh-oh, the demon lord's getting desperate. I might really have to finish him off at this rate.

I really want to avoid the stress of killing someone who I had friendly conversations with, if possible, though...

As I racked my brains, I heard a very familiar voice from below me.

"Mr. Saaage, please stoop?"

I looked down and saw Tama peeking out from my shadow.

She must have used ninjutsu to get there. I didn't think she'd been in my shadow the whole time, though; maybe she'd used her natural instincts to travel here via the connection of Tactical Talk. If something like that is even possible anyway.

"What are you doing HERE?"

“Give up and say sorry, okaaaay?”

Tama used her limited vocabulary to try to convince the demon lord.

“How ABSURD. I will never suRRENDER.”

“But at this rate, you’re going to diiiiie?”

“What of it? Everyone dies in the END. Now that Shizuka is GONE, there is no point in me sharpening your ninjutsu any FURTHER. You cannot provide NUTRIENTS, either. You are worth less than TRASH.”

“Meeew...b-but...”

Even as tears welled in her eyes at the demon lord’s harsh words, Tama kept trying to talk him down.

When he’d insulted Tama before, I’d thought he was just acting evil for her sake. At this point, though, it was probably safe to assume that he was really just a villain.

“If Mr. Sage dies, I’ll be saaad...”

Tears streamed down Tama’s cheeks.

She still wasn’t giving up on the demon lord, even though he kept rejecting her.

But those feelings don’t always reach the other person, no matter how sincere they might be.

“Why should I care? Your tears have no value to ME... No, if you are over level fifty, I suppose you might provide some experience POINTS. Your life will give me more STRENGTH to defeat that monster who calls himself a HERO!”

The demon lord brought a giant lightning bolt down toward Tama’s head.

“Meeew!”

I picked Tama up and brought her to safety with “Flashrunning.”

Behind me, a jet-black shape like a cloak absorbed the lightning bolt and nullified it.

That was probably Tama’s shadow stone powder ninjutsu.

“You will not let even me crush the small fry, then...”

“It’s just as I said, indeed. If you wish to defeat this overpowered beast, you must use Call Immortal, indeed.”

A small green bat whispered in the demon lord’s ear.

It was another Avatar of the demon lord. I pulled the Dream-Chase Spinning Wheel Hikaru lent me out of Storage and drew back the string.

“I suppose that may be the only WAY...”

Uh-oh.

The demon lord was about to give in to the green demon’s cajoling.

“Quit making this harder.”

I used a Remote Arrow to knock the bat out of the sky.

“C’mon, don’t be hasty. When Cardinal Hozzunas used Call Immortal, he turned into a pillar of salt, you know?”

“Do not compare me to Hozzunas, who could not surpass human LIMITS.”

“Mr. Sage, nooo!”

“Be QUIET!”

The demon lord swung his arm and produced a torrent of flames that threatened to swallow us up.

I used “Flexible Shields” to deflect them, then canceled them out with “Ice Storm.”

“Mew!”

A giant spherical barrier appeared around the demon lord.

It seemed to be enhanced with Hayato the Hero’s Unique Skill Immovable Shield, too.

Was he planning to use that to buy time for Call Immortal?

“Tama, stay back.”

I used “Warp” to get close to the sphere and attacked it with a prototype

Dragon Claw Spear from Storage.

Blue and purple light clashed violently, and it pierced the barrier a few seconds later.

“...Seriously?”

There was yet another sphere inside.

The demon lord had produced several layers of spherical barriers and enhanced each of them with the “Immovable Shield” effect copied using Copy Plagiarism.

Inside the multilayered barrier, I saw a purple magic circle appear at the demon lord’s feet.

It must be a Call Immortal summoning circle.

“Tama! Come here, quick! I’m sending you to a safe place.”

I kept breaking through the barrier spheres with my Dragon Claw Spear.

“Buuut...”

Tama was uncharacteristically reluctant.

“I’ll take care of things here.”

“...Aye.”

Tama nodded, and I used “Unit Deployment” to send her to a secret location.

Arisa would probably be angry if she knew I’d used “Unit Deployment” without the soul shell garland, but this was an emergency.

Since the Dragon Claw Spear alone wasn’t cutting it, I also started using the dragon fang–coated dragon’s-claw short sword, which I’d made when I’d upgraded Liza’s spear, to pick up the pace.

*Shoot.*

A pillar of purple light stretched up to the sky.

The final stage of the summoning.

In just a few seconds...



“You’re too late, indeed. Call Immortal is complete, indeed.”

A gecko that seemed to be another green demon Avatar appeared next to me. I evaporated it with a laser without slowing my destruction of the barrier spheres.

Unfortunately, this cut the thread that I’d attached before, but I couldn’t worry about that now.

“One more!”

Just as I reached the final barrier sphere, it exploded from the inside and vanished.

A jet-black shape descended in the pillar of light, and the demon lord reached up to it.

*It’s so...small?*

It was small enough to fit in the palm of the demon lord’s hand.

And thin, too, like a piece of jet-black parchment.

“Wh...what is THIS?”

A magic circle appeared above the paper, and a feminine silhouette appeared inside.

*“Thank you for using our summoning system. At this time, you are outside of our service area, so your summoning request has been canceled. Be assured that we will not collect any usage fees. We are also working on expanding our service area in the future. We appreciate your understanding.”*

The shadow girl read off a long message in “Hallowed Language” with the droning intonation of text-to-speech software.

This must be the Evil God’s doing. Treating it like a cell phone service area seemed a little wrong to me, though.

But of course, if no Evil God’s Spawn was going to show up, I’d happily take it.

“Aah, so it was a failure after all, indeed.”

A lesser demon teleported into view.

It was another Avatar of the green demon.

“What do you mean, a FAILURE?”

“Exactly as I said, indeed. Better luck next time, indeed.”

The green demon’s Avatar patted the demon lord’s back with its short arm.

“Next TIME? I have lost Call Immortal NOW! There is no next time for ME!”

The demon lord stamped his feet, crying bitter tears.

He tried to tear up the black parchment in frustration, but even his powerful claws couldn’t rip it in the slightest.

“It’s no use, indeed. Those are indestructible, indeed.”

On hearing the green demon’s words, the demon lord rolled up the parchment and threw it to the ground.

“Aah, I wouldn’t do that, indeed...”

“What do you—?”

Before the demon lord could finish his question, the ground turned black.

I instinctively used “Flashrunning” to back away. By the time the demon lord tried to do the same, his feet were already sinking into the ground.

*Geh.*

An endless amount of hands reached for the demon lord from the blackened ground.

My “Sense Danger” skill told me that they were just as dangerous as the Evil God’s Spawn.

“NooooOOOOOO!”

Though they were all silhouettes, I could see the shapes of human hands, beast paws, fish fins, lizard legs, bird feet, and all manner of insect legs, all grasping at the demon lord and dragging him into the ground.

“Sage! Give me your hand!”

Although I wouldn’t gain anything from saving him, Tama would still be sad if he died.

The demon lord reached out to grab my hand, only to knock it away at the last second.

“I do not need your HELP!”

He had prioritized fending me off over trying to fight the countless hands.

The demon lord shook off my Magic Hand with Shadow Magic and fired all kinds of attack spells to keep me from getting any closer.

“I have surpassed the limits of HUMANITY! I am the sage! The enlightened ONE! Sorijeyro the SAGE!”

Even as I tried to slip past his attack magic with “Flashrunning,” I could tell I was never going to make it in time.

With a myriad of limbs twined around him, the demon lord sank into the ground and vanished before my eyes.

The black surface washed away like the tide, turning back into normal sand.

“...A pitiful end for a monkey who wished to revive his people, indeed.”

The green demon’s Avatar looked down at where the demon lord had vanished, and it sneered.

I resisted the urge to destroy him immediately. I had questions to ask first.

“What was that? Where did it take the demon lord?”

“Oh my, your tone is different from before, indeed?”

The green demon flapped around me self-importantly before it went on.

“That was a jailer left by the great Evil God. The demon lord is now in the true Evil God’s Prison, enjoying a full course of hell with the other prisoners, indeed.”

So the sage who tried to undo the seal on the Evil God’s Prison was now a prisoner of it instead. What a painful irony.



“That is the end for this round, indeed.”

The green demon made a selfish declaration.

“Since the jailer is awake, I cannot approach for another hundred years, indeed. If I try too soon, far from removing the seal, I will suffer the same fate as the monkey, indeed.”

I didn’t know whether I could trust the words of a demon, but after seeing those “hands” for myself, I suspected that he was probably just about right.

“You win this time, indeed.” The green demon applauded me mockingly. “But I won’t let it happen again next time, indeed. Next time I will gather enough resources and strategies to outwit you once and for all, indeed.”

“There won’t be a next time. Not for you, that is.”

When the green demon appeared using the lesser demon Avatar, I used the Dream-Chase Spinning Wheel on it.

Now I pulled on the thread, targeted the tiny seal slate I put on its other end, and used Return to teleport there.

Before me was the green demon, its body joined to a giant magic device.

“H-how did you find this place, indeed?!”

The green demon sputtered, trying to buy time. But I wasn’t letting this once-in-a-lifetime chance slip away.

I’d already made preparations before I teleported.

“Check...”

My black Divine Blade slashed faster than the speed of light.

“...mate.”

The green demon was dead before I finished declaring my victory, and the seeds of evil that it had planted throughout Parion Province and other nations to sow chaos all turned into black smoke and disappeared.

## Epilogue

***Satou here. Things often don't go the way we want them to in life, but I think you can overcome most of those things as long as your loved ones are by your side. It's better to think positively and keep forging ahead than to sit around feeling downhearted.***

"Talk about an evil lair..."

Once the log in my AR display confirmed that I'd defeated the green demon, I could finally take the time to look around his hideout. There was only one way to describe it.

A structure made of metallic materials spread throughout the large space with oddly organic-looking lines.

The giant magic apparatus the demon was hooked up to seemed to have broken when he died. It was rotting and crumbling away, as if it, too, had been a living thing.

"Looks like there are a few lesser demons..."

My "Search Entire Map" skill showed me the locations of enemies in the area. I used the Remote Arrow and Laser spells to wipe them out.

The log in the corner of my vision began scrolling at a rapid rate.

I must have satisfied the conditions for "Automatic Loot" by defeating all the enemies on the map.

Skimming the list, I saw that most of the items were only useful for the purposes of evil: jars and accessories full of miasma, eggs to summon demons, short and long horns to transform humans into demons, and so on. I created a "green demon" folder and stashed them all in there.

When the log stopped filling up, I went outside.

"I'm outside the province, huh?"

I assumed it was in Parion Province because I was able to get there using Return.

Evidently, it was actually in one of the monster territories that bordered Parion Province to the south.

“Guess I better destroy this place.”

Rather than let other demons try to use the place, I drained the magic from some of my mass-produced Holy Swords to use a barrage of the powerful Explosion Magic spell Explode to destroy the underground structure beyond all hope of recovery.

Just in case I needed to reinvestigate the place, I put a marker there on the map.

After quickly checking the map to see if there were any other bases in the area, I decided to go back to my friends.



“...Tama.”

I went to the temporary base where I had evacuated Tama and saw her sitting with her head buried in her knees. She looked up sharply when I approached.

“Masterrrr!”

She stood and trotted over to me.

“Is Mr. Sage...gooone?”

“The sage was captured by a jailer and thrown into the Evil God’s Prison.”

As Tama looked down with tears in her eyes, I patted her head gently and told her the truth.

“Meeew?”

Tama tilted her head.

She didn’t seem to quite understand.

“That means he’s still alive.”

“Mew!” Tama wiped her eyes and gazed up at me. “Can we see him agaaain?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. We can’t visit him in there, so probably not until he gets released.”

“Too baaad.”

Tama looked disappointed, but at least she recovered her smile.

*“Master, Tama went missing. Is she with you?”*

I got a World Phone call from Arisa. I guess our Tactical Talk got disconnected during the battle with the demon lord.





*“Yes, she’s here. We’re both fine, don’t worry. And I’m done, so I’ll bring her back now.”*

*“Oh, good. We finished evacuating the holy city, and the Temple Knights are investigating whether there are any demons left in there now. Some of the citizens were injured, but it doesn’t look like anyone was killed.”*

*“That’s a small mercy, at least.”*

*“Yeah. They were all saying that the goddess must have protected them for there to be so few casualties despite a demon lord attack. Everyone was giving thanks to Goddess Parion and the hero.”*

That sounds about right for a religious nation.

*“Oh, right. If you’re coming back to the holy city, could you hide in the cathedral?”*

*“Um, sure? That’s an odd request.”*

*“The cardinal and the old Holy Woman lady insisted that they wanted to rescue you, since you saved their lives. They sent a whole squadron of Temple Knights in there.”*

I’m guessing the Holy Woman genuinely wanted to return the favor, while the cardinal probably didn’t want to risk damaging the province’s reputation...

*“All right. I’ll wait in the cathedral, then.”*

I ended the call and used Return several times to get back to the holy city with Tama.

We arrived a short distance away from the cathedral. From there, I put on a transparency cloak from Storage and headed toward the cathedral with “Flashrunning.”

Since there were Temple Knights patrolling around the cathedral, I entered through the broken dome. Then we waited for a good time and walked out together, our clothes and faces dirtied using the “Disguise” skill.

*“Sir Pendragon!”*

*“Master!”*

I knew Arisa and the others were here, but I wasn't expecting the cardinal to show up with them.

"I'm terribly sorry for worrying you."

"Thank goodness you're all right! It wouldn't look good for me if the man who saved my life was buried alive in there," the cardinal said haughtily.

*"Sure, he says that now. He was freaking out earlier, telling his men that they had to rescue you no matter what."*

Arisa held back a smile as she told me the truth via Telephone.

I guess the cardinal was actually at least somewhat grateful that I'd stepped into his fight with the sage.

"Hey, mister."

The old Holy Woman showed up on her palanquin.

"Madam Holy Woman! It's still too dangerous for you to be in the city."

"Don't worry, Dobbs. The goddess told me it'd be fine."

The palanquin was lowered to the ground, and the Holy Woman stepped down with a childish little "Hup!"

"Thanks, mister. The goddess said to say thank you for her, too."

The old Holy Woman held up her hand, and blue light rained down from the heavens like snow.

It reminded me of the light that Goddess Parion shone on Hayato the Hero when she sent him back to Japan after defeating the demon lord.

"Don't you dare!"

"Stop."

Arisa and Mia must have had the same thought; they each latched on tightly to one of my legs.

I patted their heads with a smile. I'm sure the goddess wouldn't just send me back to Japan without even asking or warning me.

*Thank you.*

I heard a grateful young voice in my head.

> **Title Acquired: Favored by Parion**

> **Title Acquired: Mark of Parion**

> **Title Acquired: Parion's Apostle**

> **Title Acquired: Blessing: Goddess Parion**

Apparently, my mission in Parion Province was completed.

I looked at the titles I'd acquired one by one.

The first one aside, I wasn't sure what the second one meant; as for the third one, I never agreed to be anyone's apostle, so I almost wished I could delete that one. As for the final one, I seemed to remember Hayato the Hero having the same "blessing." Strange that I was able to receive it just fine, considering that the blessing got rejected when I was baptized in Tenion Temple in the old capital.

"Oooh..."

When the blue light faded, the cardinal and other onlookers who had been frozen in silence finally started to stir.

"That was the Goddess Parion's holy light, no doubt about it!"

"Sir Pendragon received a direct blessing from Goddess Parion, even though he's not even a hero!"

"A new saint has been born!"

Everyone but the Holy Woman was apparently shocked. The Temple Knights each got down on one knee and prayed to the heavens, while the cardinal and other priests raised their hands to the sky with tears of gratitude.

"Goddess Parion has granted us a blessing firsthand!"

"We must celebrate the birth of the new saint!"

Getting weirdly excited, the cardinal and his pals excused themselves to take care of some business. The Temple Knights followed after the cardinal. The old Holy Woman had fallen asleep from the exhaustion of serving as Goddess Parion's Oracle in an unusual way; her entourage put her on the palanquin and

carried her back to the Holy Woman's shrine.

Now that no one else was around, my companions and I could finally celebrate each other's safety.

"Tama! How many times must I tell you not to run off on your own?!"

"Exactly, sir! Pochi was very, very worried, sir."

"I'm sorryyyy."

Tama threw herself down on the ground in front of Liza and Pochi.

"Looks like things have finally settled down?"

"I think so."

The threat of the demon lord was gone, and the demon probably wouldn't try any more funny business for a while.

Restoring Parion Province was probably going to be a lot of work. I figured I'd provide help in the form of supplies and money and let them figure out the rest.

For the time being, we decided to leave things to the locals and go check on the people we'd rescued from the "Aptitude Transfer" ceremony.



"Ms. Elf! Miss Arisa!"

Jimuza and Abul, the kids from the magic school, were delighted to see Mia and Arisa again.

"Hey, Mr. Noble! It'sa me! Raito!"

Raito waved from across the crowd and came running over.

"...Raito?"

A man nearby reacted to Raito's name.

His overgrown hair and beard covered most of his face, but the barely visible patches of rough sandy skin suggested that he was sandfolk like Raito.

"Raito!"

The man pushed his way through the crowd to get closer to Raito.

“Huh? Who’re you?”

“It’s me! Raitoooo!”

The man pushed his long hair aside.

“Dad! DAAAAAAD!”

Raito clambered over the rest of the crowd, running toward his dad.

“Dad, it’s really yooooou!”

“Raito! My booooy!”

Raito and his father hugged each other tightly, their faces getting soaked with tears and snot.

I was surprised when I saw Raito’s father’s name in the AR display.

“Mr. Yuusaku?”

“Yeah, s’me. Who’re you? We met before?”

Raito told me his father’s name was Iyusahk, but apparently it was really Yuusaku. He was one of the reincarnations that the demon lord Shizuka mentioned.

I had a lot of questions for him, but for now I thought it was best to let him enjoy his reunion with Raito.

“Young master.”

I turned around to find Pippin carrying a large sack on his back and two more under his arms.

“I rescued the people who were being forced to work in the mining area in the Bottom Stratum, too.”

“Thanks, Pippin. Is that the evidence Lord Kuro asked you to collect?”

“Yep, and there’s a ton of it. Right pain in my rear.”

“In that case, you can borrow this.”

I produced a small-capacity Magic Bag from my Garage Bag and handed it to Pippin.

There were still tons of them sitting around in my Storage.

“Oh-ho, much obliged.”

“Don’t worry about it. You helped us out a lot with everything, too.”

If anything, I should have provided him with a Magic Bag via Material Transfer when I gave him the assignment as Kuro.

“What happened with that sage bastard?”

“He went on a rampage in the cathedral. We would’ve been in big trouble if Sir Nanashi the Hero hadn’t come to our rescue.”

“Sir Hero showed up, huh? Guess it musta worked out fine, then.”

I almost got the feeling that Pippin was more loyal to Kuro than to Nanashi.

Not that it matters, since they’re both me anyway.

“By the way, seems like most of the folks who were doing the ‘Aptitude Transfer’ ceremony still trust that sage bastard, y’know.”

He added that even some of the people who were forced to work in the experience factory still believed in the sage.

I’m guessing the sage used a combination of his Psychic Magic and knowledge of manipulation techniques to trick people into admiring him.

For now, we decided to give them food and a place to rest. Then people who had lost their love for the sage or anyone who needed protection would be brought to a nearby town, those who had a place to go would be given travel funds to get there, and we could hire anybody at a loss for what to do at the new Echigoya Company branch in the West Gate Area.

With our plans to make trade points between Shiga Kingdom and Parion Province, there would be plenty of job openings for sure.

As for the people who still believed in the sage, I figured the cardinal and other Parion Province priests could try to help them see reason. Otherwise, they might get deceived again by anyone who showed up claiming to be the sage’s successor.



“...Shizuka.”

Once people were settled into an encampment for the night, we went to the mirage city.

“How is the pontiff doing?”

“He’s resting right now. He hasn’t regained consciousness yet, but his breathing has calmed down, so I think he’ll be fine.”

Demon Lord Shizuka was looking after the pontiff’s health in one of the houses.

“So, who are they?”

Shizuka pointed at the entrance.

My companions were all peeking in through the door, their heads stacked like totem poles.

It was a bit of a strange sight when they were wearing their golden armor. They were supposed to be waiting outside, but they must have been too curious to resist.

“Come on in.”

I beckoned them inside, and the younger girls came in right away, followed by the older ones.

“Is this your harem?”

“They’re my friends. Sort of like a family, really.”

Shizuka must have gotten the wrong idea, because all of them were female. I quickly corrected her.

“For now, why don’t we all introduce ourselves?”

I took off my Nanashi the Hero disguise.

*“W-wait, should you be revealing your identity like that?”*

Arisa sent me a surprised Telephone message.

*“It’s fine.”*

Demon Lord Shizuka wasn’t going to side with the sage or some demon lord—

worshipping cult, and she didn't seem like the type to go around spreading rumors.

Besides, since she was a demon lord herself, I thought the best way to earn her trust would be to reveal my identity and give her knowledge of my weaknesses, too.

I turned to face Shizuka.

"I'm Viscount Satou Pendragon, vassal of Count Muno of the Shiga Kingdom. I'm also their Vice-Minister of Tourism."

"Pendragon? Vice-Minister of...Tourism?"

Demon Lord Shizuka raised an eyebrow at the words that seemed out of place in this world.

"My name is Arisa. I'm a reincarnation, like you."

Following my example, Arisa removed her veil and blond wig, revealing her purple hair and striking a weird pose as she introduced herself. The others did the same, taking off their helmets or veils to introduce themselves one by one.

For some reason, the younger kids and Nana also imitated Arisa's weird pose. Even Liza and Lulu struck poses of their own, looking embarrassed as they did so, which was very cute. It's not every day you get to see Liza looking bashful.

"I'm Shizuka. A demon lord."

"Demon lord?!"

Liza and Nana reacted dramatically to Shizuka's introduction. Other than Arisa, the rest of the girls got into battle positions, too.

"Wait, wait! She's fine, she's one of ours!"

Arisa hurriedly stepped in front of Shizuka and spread her arms.

Shizuka's only reaction to the sudden hostility was to tilt her head and repeat, "One of ours'?"

"But Arisa. Aren't demon lords enemies who should be defeated?"

"I'm telling you, not this one."



Liza frowned in confusion as Arisa tried to convince her.

“Actually, I agree. You probably should.”

That comment came from Shizuka herself.

“Come on! Don’t say that like it’s not your problem!”

“Now that I’m a demon lord, I can never go back to normal. He said it was convenient that he got to collect so much miasma, too.”

Demon Lord Shizuka lowered her head gloomily.

Her comment prompted me to look at her with “Miasma Vision.” Sure enough, traces of miasma were seeping out of her body.

Was it because she was turned into a demon lord, or because her soul vessel was broken?

*...Hmm?*

The pontiff, who drank an elixir earlier, wasn’t leaking any miasma.

“Here, try drinking this, please.”

“All righty.”

Shizuka took the elixir and drained it without a second thought.

She really didn’t hesitate when it came to this sort of thing.

“...Nnngh!”

Several magic circles appeared along Shizuka’s skin and began healing her, body and soul.

The miasma coming off her body slowly faded away.

“Was that an elixir?”

“You got it.”

I kept an eye on Shizuka as she breathed heavily.

Even after a few minutes, it didn’t look like any more miasma was going to come out.

“Mia?”

“Mm, safe.”

Mia, who was extra sensitive to miasma, nodded her head.

Shizuka’s title was still “Demon Lord,” though. Despite my hopes, I guess drinking an elixir wasn’t enough to change that.

“Now you won’t give off miasma anymore. You can live in civilization without worrying about having a negative effect on people or crops.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Shizuka didn’t look too happy.

“Sorry, should I not have done that?”

“No, I’m glad I won’t affect crops anymore, but I don’t really like living among people. I don’t have very good memories with them... I was born as a changeling in this life, and my previous life wasn’t much better.”

“Pochi is a ‘changeling,’ too, sir!”

“Tama too?”

Pochi and Tama raised their hands cheerfully.

“Are you really?”

“Aye!” “Sir!”

Demon Lord Shizuka gazed at the pair, looking dazzled. “Well, seeing you two gives me the strength to think that maybe I should try again to live a good life.”

“If there’s somewhere you’d like to go, I’ll gladly take you.”

“I’m still not sure I want to live among people, so I’d like to build a cottage outside some town or other and live by myself. Do you know a good spot for that?”

Shizuka didn’t seem to want to go back to her homeland.

“Secret base,” Mia muttered quietly.

“Ooh! That’s a great idea!”

“Mm. Soothing.”

Arisa and Mia grinned at each other.

“...A secret base?”

“It’s a hideout we have near a spirit pool.”

The Long-Legged Spider Crab there turned into a tamed mythical creature. Maybe Shizuka could get rid of her “Demon Lord” title by spending time there, too.

Shizuka seemed on board with the idea, so I used Return repeatedly until we arrived at the secret base.

“It’s beautiful.”

The demon lord sighed in admiration as she gazed around the base, lit by the morning sun.

I hadn’t really made the secret base itself with livability in mind, so I decided to make a new house near the pond with the composite magic spell Create House.

“Would this be a good spot to build the house?” I asked Shizuka.

“Hmm...maybe a little closer to that big tree over there. I can build a little hut myself, if you’d lend me some tools?”

“I’ll definitely give you some tools for DIY, but I can build the house, don’t worry. How about something like this?”

I used the Light Magic spell Illusion to display a sample of the house, which I tried to model after an English cottage that a witch living in a forest might have in a fairy tale.

“Oh, how cute. Maybe a little more Germanic style? With windows like this, and the entrance like this.”

Shizuka picked up a stick and sketched designs in the dirt. Her drawings were great.

“Tres bieeen?”

“Very good, sir!”

Tama and Pochi lit up when they saw her artwork.

I altered the model house based on Shizuka's drawings.

"Yeah, that's perfect! And it'd be nice if the inside was like this."

She quickly added more sketches on the ground. Her requests were more specific than I expected.

"Were you a manga artist, Shizu?"

"*Doujinshi*, not professional. But my work was pretty popular in certain circles."

Shizuka sounded a little proud.

"Looks like we've got another fellow *fujoshi*, Arisa."

"Wh-who's that?"

Shizuka exclaimed in surprise when Hikaru stepped out of the secret base.

"I'm Hikaru, Satou's childhood friend. Nice to meet you!"

"Y-you too."

"I was just a reader myself, so I'm thrilled to have a real artist here!"

Hikaru took Shizuka's hand and shook it emphatically.

"O-okay, great, just please let go of me..."

Overwhelmed by Hikaru's enthusiasm, Shizuka staggered toward me and got another shock.

"Wh-what? How is the house we just designed already finished?"

"It's just the outside. There's only a bed and the bare minimum of furnishings inside, so Hikaru can help you get everything else in the royal capital."

Shizuka should be able to handle shopping in the city if Hikaru was with her.

Just to be safe, I set it so that she could only use the teleport mirror to the royal capital if Hikaru was with her, but I was hoping to give her solo access to it eventually, too. If I gave her an emergency contact device to connect to Hikaru, she should be safe even if something happened.

"Satou, just what in the world are you?"

Demon Lord Shizuka stared at me in disbelief. I wasn't sure how to answer, so I just smiled vaguely like any self-respecting Japanese person.

"Can we go iin?"

"Pochi wants to see, too, sir!"

"G-go ahead."

Once Shizuka gave permission, the girls gleefully went inside.

"My dream house..."

Demon Lord Shizuka stayed outside, gazing at the house in awe.

"Am I going to be kept here as a mistress?" My "Keen Hearing" skill picked up on her muttering. "A young boy's lover...definitely a crime, but not a bad forbidden love plot."

I pretended not to hear any of that, although she and Arisa would probably enjoy discussing it.

Shizuka wound up offering to cook breakfast for us to test out the new house. She let Lulu and Liza help her, but when I tried to come into the kitchen, she told me there were "no boys allowed." Sounds like gender discrimination, if you ask me.

"Oh, right, Hikaru. Thanks for the spinning wheel. I was able to defeat that green greater demon because of it."

"What? Really?" Hikaru's eyes widened. "I'm amazed you were able to chase 'Green' down, that speedy coward."

"It helped that a few things happened to distract him."

I thanked Hikaru and returned the Dream-Chase Spinning Wheel.

"I'm sure Micchy is happy up in heaven now, too."

Hikaru nodded, referring to the magic tool artisan who made the spinning wheel.

"Thank you for waiting. Breakfast is ready."

Lulu and Liza carried large serving platters out of the house and started

putting out food on the table I'd made in the garden.

Since the house was built for one person to live in alone, the dining room was too small for this many people.

Arisa gave the usual signal of "thanks for the food" to start the meal.

Which was great and all, except...

"Wow, it seems like the popular genres are pretty similar even across different time lines."

"The titles are quite different, though. What sort of works were you into, Shizuka?"

"Oh, almost anything, I'd say. I'm not a big fan of the really muscular or violent types. I'm a suit-and-tie kind of girl, so I like office romance and boss-employee BL, that sort of thing. I was just starting to get into the older woman/younger boy dynamic a little bit, too."

"Mm-hmm, good stuff."

Hikaru, Shizuka, and Arisa were getting deep into *doujinshi* talk.

The other members of the group mostly sat there so confused that there were basically question marks floating above their heads.



I prodded them to eat and dug into my own plate. Demon Lord Shizuka's cooking, while not mind-blowing cuisine, was very impressive for someone without the "Cooking" skill.

"Did you draw in those genres, too?"

"Oh, my work was mostly all-ages. My previous life ended at twenty years old, after all."

"Aah, gotcha. Did your Japan also have, um...let's see, what's the official title...?"

"...Twenty?"

Arisa seemed to be deeply disturbed about something.

Hikaru and Shizuka went on with their hard-core nerd talk, oblivious to her pain.

It looked like they still had a lot to talk about even after breakfast was over, so we left Shizuka and Hikaru to it and headed back to Parion Province.



"People of Parion Province!"

Dressed as Nanashi the Hero, I was giving a speech from the sky above the cathedral.

I brought Pontiff Zarzaris back from the mirage city and left him in the old Holy Woman's care at the Holy Woman's shrine. She seemed like a good choice, since she was good-natured and also happened to be close with Cardinal Dobbunaf, Parion Province's number two.

"I've defeated the evil demon that was disguised as Pontiff Zarzaris. Your beloved pontiff is safe and sound!"

At that, the crowd around the cathedral erupted into cheers.

"His Holiness! Where is he?!"

"He's currently in the care of the goddess, healing his injuries from the demon lord. No doubt he will show himself before you once he is fully recovered."



The cardinal helped me come up with these carefully chosen words at the Holy Woman's shrine.

Rather than trying to convey it in Nanashi's casual tone, I decided to read off the lines that the cardinal wrote for me.

"I heard His Holiness turned into a demon lord!" one person shouted.

But the rest of the crowd ganged up on him indignantly. "How disrespectful!" "Are you a demon lord worshipper?!"

"O faithful believers!"

The cardinal took over with a speech of his own.

I half listened to it as I thought about what would happen next in Parion Province.

There probably wasn't much hope of the pontiff returning to his post after the effects of the demon lord transformation. Once he recovered, the plan was for him to show his face to everyone to reassure them he was well, then retire and live out his remaining years in a picturesque mansion in the North Gate Area.

The cardinal told me that the new pontiff would be chosen with a vote from all the clergymen ranking as pastor or above. Until then, the cardinal would serve as the pontiff's stand-in.

Sir Mezzalt, the Holy Sword user who was appointed as the new captain of the Temple Knights, was supporting the cardinal, whose election as the next pontiff was widely regarded as a sure thing.

Incidentally, I firmly rejected the proposal to add the name Satou to the official list of saints. The cardinal hadn't quite given up yet, but I was determined to respectfully decline.

"The threat of the demon lord is gone! From this day forward, let it be known that His Holiness, and indeed Goddess Parion herself, wills that we all devote ourselves to the restoration of the province!"

With the cardinal's command, and specific instructions from the priests, the people of Parion Province began the work of rebuilding and restoring the holy

city and province.

I waved to the people of Parion Province and headed to the West Gate Area, where my friends were waiting.

“Welcome back, Master!”

Arisa and the others were gathered at a large trading company building.

I waved back at the girls, who were leaning out the window to greet me, and started walking toward the entrance of the trading company when I was met by a familiar face.

“Hey, young master. Took you long enough.”

“Pippin... Then this must be the Echigoya Company branch office?”

I couldn’t help turning my statement into a question. The building was so large and magnificent, the same size as the main office in the royal capital of Shiga Kingdom, that I didn’t believe it at first.

“Viscount! Welcome to Echigoya Company’s Parion Province branch!”

Merina, an executive of the Echigoya Company—no, now the manager of this branch—greeted me with a smile.

Since she was a manager now, she was wearing a similar outfit to the kind Manager Eluterina wore, instead of her usual executive clothes.

“Hello, Ms. Merina. This is quite an impressive building.”

She giggled. “That’s all thanks to you, Viscount! You put in a good word with the cardinal for us, didn’t you? That’s why we were able to set up shop in such a prime location. I can’t stop shaking with excitement!”

Ah, so the cardinal pulled some strings for us. I would have to thank him somehow.

The real estate that Pippin had secured before this was going to be used as a showroom to test out and market new products.

Arisa came down from the second floor.

“Master, they said they’ll hire everyone we brought here to work at the Echigoya Company.”

“Hee-hee. We were planning on hiring locals anyway.”

Despite Merina’s smile, it must have been pretty difficult to hire so many people all at once.

I decided to come back as Kuro tonight and bring some percentage of the trade goods I had accumulated in the Shiga Kingdom trade city Tartumina. If they had enough products, they could probably make deals with West Gate Area merchants, and hopefully not wind up in the red, even after the expense of hiring all that new staff.

“Master, she said the Echigoya Company can take care of the nilbok research, too.”

“Yes, if it goes well, it will reduce our expenses for the soup kitchens.”

Lulu and I thanked Merina, who smiled sheepishly and assured us not to worry about it.

If they figured out a way to make nilbok taste good so that everyone in Parion Province could eat and enjoy plenty of food, maybe I could have them research the gabo fruit next?

Once I wrapped up my conversation with Merina, Pippin approached me. “Are you sticking around this area for a while, young master?”

“Yeah, we’re planning on doing some sightseeing along the inland sea. Are you going back to Shiga Kingdom already?”

“Lord Kuro’s ordered me to tour around the western regions and lay the groundwork for more branch stores. He’s really working me to the bone.”

Despite his complaints, Pippin looked pleased.

I gave him plenty of funds this time and sent a few prospective branch managers from the Echigoya Company to travel with him. Hopefully, that would make the preparations for opening branch stores easier than it had been in Parion Province.

“Let’s grab a drink if we run into each other on the road, yeah?”

“Sure, it’ll be my treat.”

Pippin and I shook hands, and he headed out on his journey.

“Master, Raito says he wants to talk to you.”

I parted ways with the busy-looking Merina, and Arisa led me to where Raito and his father were waiting.

“...Hey, Mr. Noble. I think I’mma head back to our hometown.”

Raito’s tone was light. I’d invited him and his reincarnation father, Mr. Yuusaku, to work at the Echigoya Company, but they’d refused.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t stay after all?”

“What are you saying, Dad?! You promised we’d go visit Mom’s grave together!”

It seemed they had lingering business before they could work at the Echigoya Company.

“Well, if you decide to come back, stop by here anytime. I’ll tell the manager Ms. Merina to keep an eye out for you.”

“Got it. Thanks!”

Raito smiled cheerfully, and Yuusaku breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mr. Yuusaku, do you happen to know a Daigo or Chinatsu?”

“Nope, never met ’em. Sounds like Japanese names to me—are they reincarnations, too?”

I guess they were here at a different time from Mr. Yuusaku.

Evidently, he was as hasty as his son. By the next day, they had departed on camels for the West Gate Area.

I eventually learned that Daigo and Chinatsu were being confined in a crumbling monastery in the North Gate Area, so I paid the ghostly pale director a small sum to rescue them and was assured that they would be recorded as having passed away.

Both of them were weakened to the point of death. I healed them with lesser elixirs and brought them to Demon Lord Shizuka’s house to ask her to nurse them back to health. I’ll never forget the look on her face as she embraced the

two kids in tears.

As it happens, I still had one last job to do in Parion Province: helping the poor.

At first, I thought I had done my part by putting the Echigoya Company in charge of finding a way to make nilbok taste good. But as I was going to bed, I realized there was a more fundamental solution to the problem.

“I can’t believe you thought of this...”

Arisa looked into a deep pit the size of a manhole.

I’d used the Earth Magic spell Pit to dig a hole that reached the underground water vein I’d found on my map.

“Deeeep?”

“It’d be bad to fall in, sir.”

Tama and Pochi tried to peer into the hole. Liza grabbed their belts to keep them from falling.

“But Master, won’t it be awfully difficult to draw water from such a deep source?”

“Yes, Lulu. It would be hard even with a pump, I concur.”

“Are you going to use a windmill or something?”

“Nope, even better.”

I winked at Arisa and brought over a breezebranch tree I’d found with my map search.

It was a huge tree with a trunk far wider than the pit, its rings suggesting that it was around a thousand years old. The abundant roots were incredibly long.

“A baobab...? No, the trunk is too big.”

“Breezebranch trees can store a massive amount of water inside their trunks.”

I’d learned this property when I was fighting the sage in demon king form and happened to see a breezebranch tree get cut down and produce a big geyser of

water.

“Mia, can you help me get the roots to reach the water source below?”

“Mm, got it.”

I gave Mia a Treespirit Pearl from Storage.

Then I poured a big jar of nutrients on and around the breezebranch tree and unleashed my normally sealed spirit light.

That should do it for preparations.

“I, Misanaria of Bolenan Forest, entreat the breezebranch tree of Parion Province. Accept the power of the Treespirit Pearl, and let your roots reach all the way down to the plentiful water source that sleeps deep in the earth.”

Mia used one of her rare lengthy speeches to address the breezebranch tree.

The strength of the Treespirit Pearl and the nutrients filled the tree, and I saw with my Practical Magic spell Clairvoyance that its roots were stretching down toward the water source at an astonishing rate.

“Done.”

When Mia’s magic was around half drained, the breezebranch tree’s roots reached the water below.

“Thank you. Can you ask it to draw the water up next?”

“Got it.”

I restored Mia’s MP with “Mana Transfer.”

“I, Misanaria of Bolenan Forest, entreat the breezebranch tree of Parion Province. Accept the power of the Treespirit Pearl and draw from the plentiful water source that sleeps deep in the earth to restore the parched land.”

Mia held up the Treespirit Pearl and prayed again, and there was a low rumbling from deep in the earth.

“Mew?”

“I hear something, sir.”

Tama and Pochi backed away from the breezebranch tree, while the rest of us

watched over it with Mia.

“There.”

Just as Mia spoke, the ground near the breezebranch tree grew dark with moisture, and soon droplets of water were trickling from the leaves of the tree.

“Master, look at the branches, I declare.”

“The water!”

Nana pointed at the water flowing down from the top of the breezebranch tree. There was so much of it that Liza exclaimed in surprise.

Before long, it spilled onto the earth and began dampening the dried-up soil, eventually forming a pool of water big enough to be called a pond.

Once the Treespirit Pearl’s effects ran out, it didn’t produce such an extreme amount of water, but the droplets from the leaves didn’t slow down. Even in the harsh sunlight of Parion Province, the amount of water in the pond didn’t shrink.

This should be more than sufficient to serve as a water source for people to draw from.

Before the sun set, I discussed the matter with the cardinal in my Nanashi disguise and went around creating oases of breezebranch trees near the poorest towns and around the city.

Mia got exhausted partway through, so I did the rest of the Treespirit Pearl work by myself.

As tiring as it was, I think it was well worth the hard work.



“Now we can finally get back to sightseeing.”

Once we’d taken care of all our concerns in Parion Province, we went to a restaurant in the West Gate Area where branch manager Merina had helped us get reservations.

“It’s about time. Where do you all want to go next?”

While we waited for our food, I asked everyone about our upcoming plans.

I had an arrangement to study the hero summoning magic circles in Saga Empire, but there was no particular rush to get there.

I'd also taken a look through the materials Pippin had collected the day before when we'd picked up the delivery of trade goods. While there was plenty of proof of evil deeds, there was unfortunately no information on how to undo a chimera transformation.

I made arrangements for the evidence to be delivered to the cardinal, and happily accepted the rest of the research materials and spellbooks, planning to use them to help people whenever possible.

"Pochi wants to meet the samurai general, sir!"

"The samurai general, hmm? I'm more interested in meeting the master swordsman."

"I'd love to try the cooking of that 'Kaleidoscopic Chef' person."

Pochi, Liza, and Lulu each wanted to meet famous people we'd heard stories about.

The "Kaleidoscopic Chef" Lulu mentioned was also known as the "Deviant Chef." I wasn't entirely sure if I wanted her to meet someone like that.

"I think I'd like to check out the Sage's Tower. I bet there'd be lots of spellbooks there, don't you think?"

I was curious about that place, too. The Sage's Tower was a nickname for the City-State of Kalisork, which was built around a tower that a sage had built in ancient times—no connection to Sorijeyro the Sage. It was also known to locals as the "Tower of Wisdom."

"What about you, Mia?"

"Great concert hall."

"That's in Myusia Kingdom, right?"

"Mm. Island."

The great concert hall was built by a music-loving emperor in the Flue Empire era. It was said to be a place where you could hear heavenly music that couldn't



be recreated with any modern technology.

“I would like to see the Land of Dolls, I declare.”

“Curious,” Mia agreed.

Nana was referring to Lodolork, a small nation famous for making dolls, stuffed animals, and so on.

It was close to Parion Province, so we’d seen some of their products in the bazaar.

“Meeew...”

Tama grumbled quietly, looking somewhat listless.

Noticing everyone’s concerned expressions, she quickly exclaimed, “Meat!” then added, “A place with lots of yummy meeeat?”

“Pochi, too, sir! Pochi wants to go somewhere with lots and lots of meat, sir!”

“I’ve heard that there are many kinds of nations along the inland sea. Perhaps one of them has meat that will satisfy our appetites.”

“I can’t wait to see what kind of cuisine they make.”

Pochi quickly backed up Tama’s words, and Liza and Lulu joined in on the topic, until everyone was happily discussing what kinds of meat dishes they wanted to try.

“Thank you for waiting. I’m afraid it’s not meat, but it’s still quite delicious, I assure you.”

The waitress brought out tasty-looking seafood dishes and began placing them on the table.

“Yummyyyyy?”

“Pochi is hungry in her tummy, sir!”

Tama’s and Pochi’s smiles spread to the rest of the group.

“All right, then, let’s eat.”

“Thanks for the food!”

A chorus of cheerful voices rang out into the Parion Province skies.

The meal really was delicious. Tasty food and smiling friends are the best part of any journey.

There were supposed to be all kinds of delicious dishes in the western regions, too. I couldn't wait to try them all together.

## Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Volume 21!

It's thanks to the support of all of you readers that I can keep putting out so many volumes.

I'll keep on finding ways to add even more fun to the series as we go along, so I hope you'll continue to follow on the journey.

Now, for anyone who uses the afterword to decide whether to buy a book, let's review what happened in the last volume and some of the highlights of this one.

Previously, Satou and friends were reunited with Hayato the Hero in Parion Province, a land far away from Shiga Kingdom.

They teamed up with the hero party, a Holy Sword user, and the black knight, the sage, and other worthy warriors to defeat the demon lord known as the "Sandstorm Lord." Once they emerged victorious, Hayato had fulfilled his duties and had gone back to Japan.

This volume picks up from there.

The stage moves to the Village of Adept, where Raito was summoned from the holy city after the demon lord's defeat. What is an Adept, and what is an "Aptitude Transfer"? These and other secrets hidden in the village will soon be revealed.

But it's not all mystery-solving in the Village of Adept.

As you can see on the cover, Tama also undertakes ninja training in the Village of Adept. Along with Pochi and Satou, she learns ninjutsu from a "normal" ninja. But what's the difference between "normal" for ninjas and "normal" for

Satou's party? I hope you'll enjoy finding out.

While Satou and company are enjoying their training, something more sinister is going on behind the scenes. The evil mastermind, who was revealed at the end of the previous volume to be Sorijeyro the Sage, is carrying out a mysterious plan in the shadows of Parion Province.

The story takes a very different direction from the web novel version, so even those who have already read the web novel should find plenty to enjoy here.

How will the showdown with villains like the sage and the green demon unfold? How will the roles of characters like Pontiff Zarzaris, Holy Woman Shizuka, and Cardinal Dobbunaf change? Will the Holy Sword-wielding Temple Knight Mezzalt ever get his chance to shine? Will Raito be reunited with his father? All these questions and more will be addressed, which I hope will keep readers on the edge of their seats until the very end.

And of course, the tourism that serves as the core theme of this series is still going strong.

The gang searches for souvenirs in Parion Province's port bazaar, enjoys specialty foods from all over the world, and visits various sightseeing spots. Satou gets invited to a certain gourmand's dinner meeting and is presented with the finest delicacies of the western region. He's thoroughly satisfied by dishes that have been handed down since the days of the Flue Empire, and I hope the reader will be, too.

Even Pippin, who was originally just a bit part, has plenty to do in this volume. And of course, there are scenes with the Echigoya crew and Hikaru, too. I probably could have given Miss Aaze a little more screen time, though.

Before the thank-yous, one quick announcement.

Volume 11 of Ayamegumu's comic adaptation of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody* will release in December, so please pick that up as well.

In Volume 11, Sara finally appears!

It's a must-read for those Sara fans who have been suffering a Sara deficiency during her long absence from the novels, as well as for any other *Death March* fans.

Sara is lovely in the original books, but her manga version is wonderful as well.

Finally, the customary acknowledgments!

To my formidable lineup of editors, Mr. I, Mr. S, and A: Thank you for your continuing support. Your precise identification of passages that could be more exciting or parts that weren't sufficiently described have done wonders for the charm and clarity of the story. I hope you'll continue to guide and encourage me for a long time to come.

I can never say enough thanks to shri for always creating such enchanting illustrations that bring the world of *Death March* to life in vivid color. The gloomy yet gorgeous Shizuka, who makes her first appearance in this volume, looks absolutely perfect. As always, I'm thrilled to put the visual aspect of *Death March* in your capable hands.

I'd also like to thank everyone in the Kadokawa Books editorial department, and everyone involved in the publication, distribution, sales, marketing, and tie-ins that helped make this book a reality.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all goes to you, the readers!

Truly, thank you for reading this volume all the way to the end!

I hope to see you again in the next volume for the western regions touring arc!

*Hiro Ainana*

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