

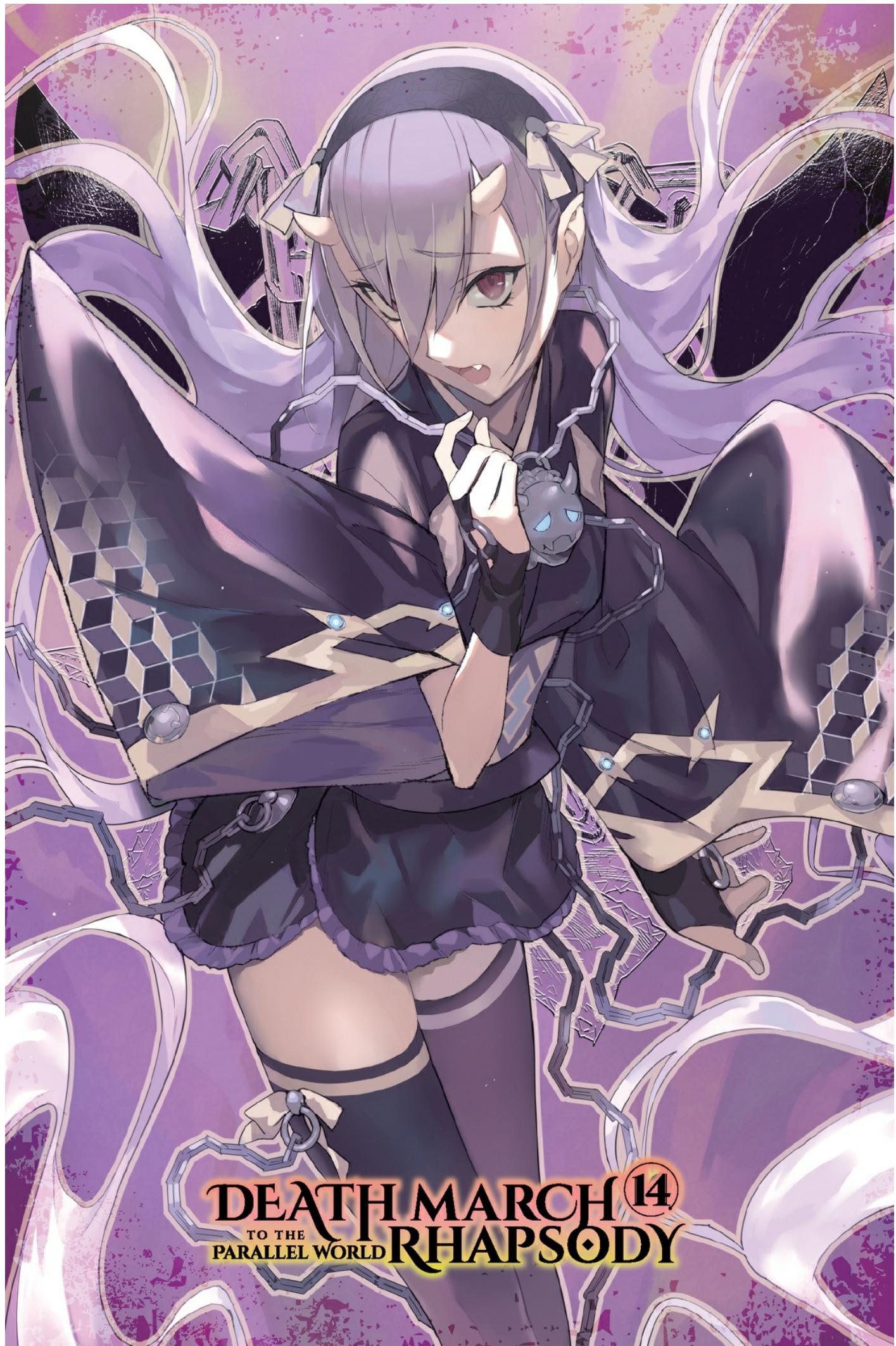
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DEATH MARCH Rhapsody

TO THE PARALLEL WORLD

14



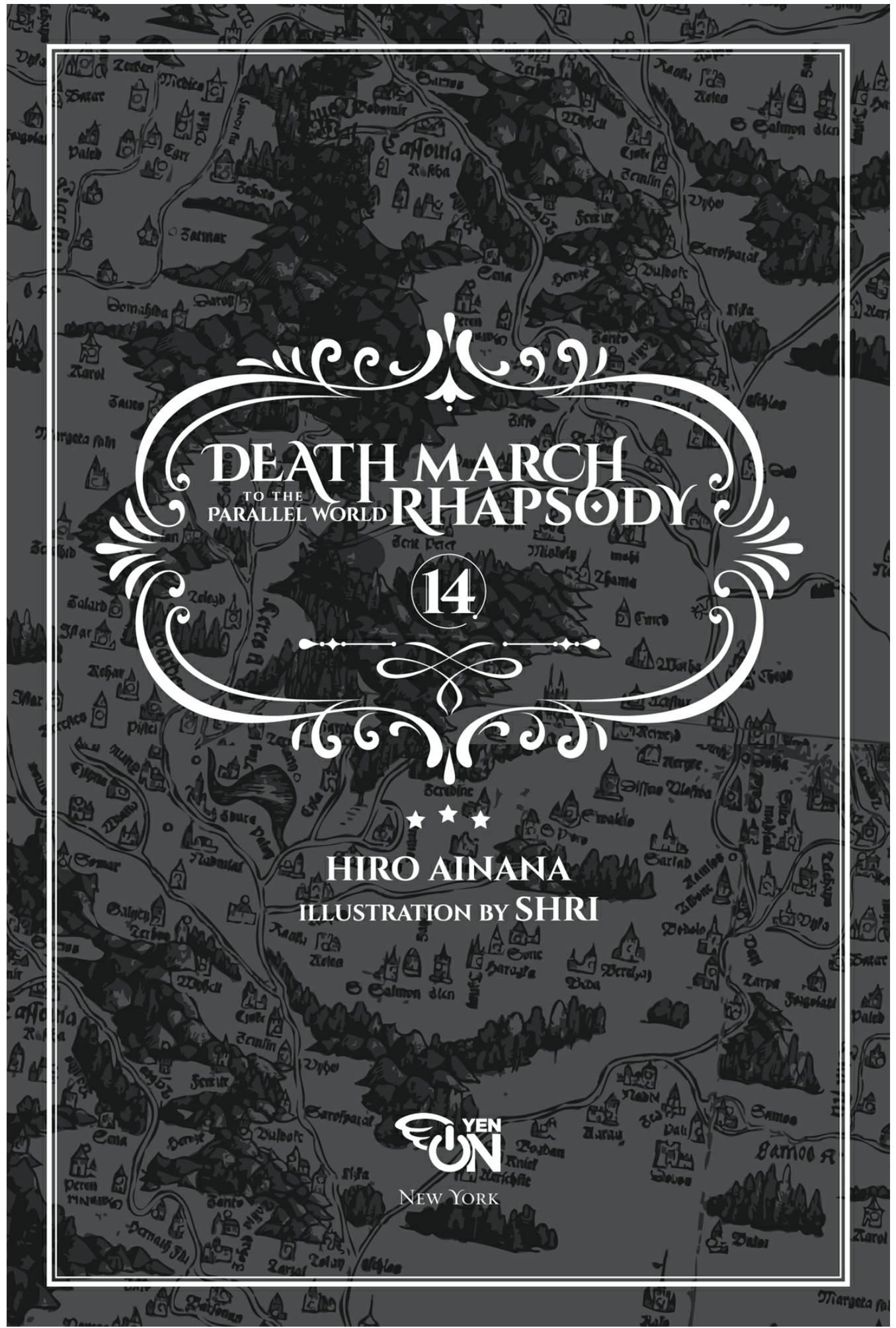
DEATH MARCH ¹⁴
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD **RHAPSODY**





“Satou,
what do you
think?”

Summoned to the
viceroy’s wife’s tea
party? Time for a
wardrobe update!



DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY

14

HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI



NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 14

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon Cover art by shri

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Prologue

Satou here. I've had many troubles in my life, but very rarely did I solve any of them by toughing it out alone. Even if you're the one who ultimately has to make the decision, I think it's important to consult with other people first to get viewpoints besides your own.

“LEVEL THREE HUNDRED AND ELEVENNNN?!”

Upon hearing my explanation, the lilac-haired Arisa screeched so loudly that it hurt my ears.

I had worried my friends during the battle against the Dogheaded Demon Lord, so I decided to tell the two biggest worrywarts, Arisa and Liza, about my real level.

Since I'd already told Arisa about some things, like my Meteor Shower spell and the fact that I'd defeated Doghead, I hadn't expected her to be nearly that surprised.

“Calm down.”

“How am I supposed to calm down?! You're level three hundred and eleven!”

I'd been level 310 for a long time, but when I defeated Doghead, I finally got enough experience to level up again.

Unlike Arisa's wild reaction, Liza of the orangescale tribe calmly accepted it, although she did seem surprised.

“Impressive as always, master.”

It was a little unusual to see her looking this pleased.

She seemed to be in a very good mood, judging by the way her tail was flicking the ground.

Even the scales around her neck and hands seemed to glitter, as if reflecting

her emotions. Perhaps she was unconsciously using a skill like “Magic Power Armor.”

“Aaaargh! Seriously, Liza?! Now’s not the time for that ‘impressive, master’ line! Come on—act more surprised!” Arisa bellowed, rounding on the lizard girl. “Even the ancestral king Yamato and the first emperor of the Saga Empire were only around level eighty-eight or eighty-nine, you know? Same for all the strongest Heroes in history! But master is more than three times that?!”

“We’ll have to work much harder if we want to be of use to master, then.”

Liza nodded meekly.

The difference in their reactions was probably because only one of them had information that showed just how out of the ordinary my level really was.

Liza in particular usually hunted enemies far above her level thanks to her boosted armor, so she probably didn’t have a good sense of how the amount of experience needed to level up drastically increased as one’s level went higher.

To her, even level 311 probably seemed like something she could eventually achieve with enough hard work.

“Calm down, Arisa.”

Once she calmed down a little, I went on to warn the pair to keep my level top secret.

“I know, I know.”

“Understood, sir. I shall protect this secret even at the cost of my life.”

The two of them agreed at once.

Since it didn’t seem to be a problem, I figured I’d call the others over and tell them about it as well, but Liza and Arisa stopped me.

The others knew that I was a Hero and could use chant-less magic and so on, and they had never once let that information slip to anyone else. So I thought it would be fine, but...

“Tama and Pochi are still children.”

“If some crafty adults asked them leading questions, they might answer

without thinking.”

...their reasons were certainly valid.

“And it would be mean to inform everyone but those two, so I think it’s better if you don’t tell the others, either. We’ll just say that Liza and I dragged the information out of you, okay?”

Liza nodded in agreement with Arisa.

That was fine, I suppose; if I was off fighting a tough enemy, as long as Liza and Arisa confidently insisted that I’d be fine, the other kids probably wouldn’t worry too much, either.

“Although even if the information did get out, I’m sure people would think we were full of crap anyway.”

I smiled wanly at Arisa’s joke, then used the Space Magic spell Return to bring us back from the labyrinth vacation house to the labyrinth hot springs, where the rest of our group and the elf teachers were staying.

“I still couldn’t bring it up...”

I had yet to talk to Arisa about the matter of the God Fragments.

My reasoning was that there was no point worrying her with a situation I had no solution for yet.

In the back of my mind, part of my conversation with Doghead echoed.

A seedling child who carries God Fragments within her...

The resulting discussion about reincarnations like Arisa certainly didn’t explain everything, and a lot of my conclusions were based on guesswork, but I’d definitely gained a few key pieces of knowledge.

To summarize, Arisa and other reincarnations had something called “God Fragments” within them, which had the potential to turn them into demon lords.

But according to what the Undead King Zen had told me in the Cradle, abuse of Unique Skills was the trigger for such destruction, so it didn’t seem like Arisa was in any immediate danger of turning into a demon lord just yet.

◆
“Have we heard of God Fragments, you ask?”

“Nope.”

“A purple light that appears when a demon lord is defeated... Sorry, no, I’ve never seen such a thing.”

I tried asking the elf teachers if they knew anything about God Fragments and reincarnations, but I wasn’t able to get any new information.

“Daisaku the Hero rarely spoke of defeating demon lords, and we elves are always told to go back to our own forests unless there’s a Season of the Demon Lord or something along those lines.”

That was Hishirotoya, one of the more articulate elves.

“I see... Well, sorry to trouble you.”

“Not at all. When I get back to Bolenan Forest, I’ll see if anyone there knows.”

They gave that reassuring promise as I left their room.

Once alone, I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact the high elf of Bolenan Forest, my beloved Miss Aialize.

She’d been alive long before the demon lords appeared in this world, so I thought she might know something.

“...Satou!”

As soon as the call connected, she said my name in a high-pitched voice.

“Hello, Miss Aaze. Do you have time to talk at the moment?”

“Yes! Of course! Now is perfect!”

Her soft, soothing voice was a balm on my anxious heart.

I asked Miss Aaze the same questions I’d posed to the elves before, but she could only give the same answer they did.

“I’m sorry, Satou.”

“Please don’t apologize, Miss Aaze. You were kind enough to go out of your way to the World Tree’s memory storehouse for me...”

Miss Aaze had left her home to go to the World Tree to connect with her stored memories in the hopes that her demi-god self might know something.

“I’ll come visit again soon.”

“You’re always welcome. I want to congratulate Mia and the other girls, too, so I’d be thrilled if you could give me a few days’ notice before your visit.”

Though I was reluctant to part from her, I said my good-byes to Miss Aaze and ended the call.

I tried asking the high elves of the other clans, too, but unfortunately, none of them knew anything about God Fragments, Unique Skills, or the potential of those to trigger a transformation into a demon lord.

The elves often holed up in their respective World Trees, and thus they didn’t seem to know much about reincarnations in general.

I even tried calling the mysterious stalker girl who had shown up when I was fighting the Dogheaded Demon Lord, but she didn’t answer once.

It’d be nice if there was some ancient, long-lived reincarnation who had all the answers, but this wasn’t a story, so I doubted it would be that easy.

There was nothing in the documents I had on hand, either; I concluded that the only way forward was to keep seeking as many ancient documents as I could find.

“There you are, master!”

As I was fretting alone in my study, Arisa appeared.

Her energetic voice cheered me up a little.

“The elves are doing Water Magic art in the hot springs! Let’s go watch!”

“That sounds fun.”

Shaking off my gloom, I headed to the hot springs with Arisa.

Since we’d defeated the floormaster so quickly, we were planning to stay and celebrate in the labyrinth for five days or so. I decided I could spend some time resting up in the hot springs while giving serious thought to how best to go about gathering more documents.

There was no point rushing—as they say, good things come to those who wait.

Triumphant Return

Satou here. I don't mind participating in a big festival, but I never thought I would end up being in the spotlight at one. I appreciate people celebrating us, but it's also a little embarrassing.

“““PENDRAGON! PENDRAGON! PENDRAGON!”””

We could hear the crowd chanting our explorer team name from the roadside.

“Whoa, what a welcome!”

Clad in her magical-girl-style dress, Arisa ran to the front of the fancy two-story carriage and waved excitedly at the audience gathered by the road.

Of course, her unlucky purple hair was hidden under a blond wig as usual.

“Arisa, be careful or you'll fall over the railing.”

I grabbed her by the belt and pulled her back from the edge.

Today we were participating in a parade celebrating our floormaster conquest, arranged by the guildmaster and the viceroy.

Pulled by golem horses, our enormous carriage proceeded smoothly down the mazelike streets of Labyrinth City. The explorer schoolkids walked ahead of the carriage, scattering petals from baskets to lead the way, contributing to the enjoyably festive atmosphere.

“I knooow, master.”

Arisa grinned back at me.

The rest of the group had evidently drawn lots during dinner last night to determine the seating arrangements and even went so far as to have a preliminary lottery to see who would draw first.

They must have been really excited for the parade.

Everyone was dressed to the nines, beaming at the crowd around us.

Their outfits were accessorized with cosplay-style shoulder pads, short cloaks, and so on, giving their outfits the overall impression of explorer costumes. In particular, the round glass orbs pointlessly affixed to their shoulder pads had the nostalgic air of a Showa-era outfit.

Of course, I was dressed up to match my comrades, too.

I wore a noble's ceremonial white suit with golden embroidery, along with an extravagant gold-braided short cape that Arisa had picked out.

"So many peeeeople?"

"Everyone's smiling and waving at us, sir!"

Arisa was flanked by the young, dog-eared girl Pochi and cat-eared Tama, who were waving frantically with their arms and tails.

"Master, you should wave at the crowd, too, I advise."

Seated on my left in the second row of the top deck, the busty blonde Nana tugged on my arm, giving off an air of excitement despite her usual expressionless face.

All right, I get it. Just please stop pressing my arm into your chest.

Since she was wearing a gold breastplate, it was somewhat painful.

"Mrrr, guilty."

Sitting on my right was Mia the elf, who yanked my arm from Nana's breast.

Carried away by her own momentum, she ended up basically diving into my lap.

"It's dangerous to play around in the carriage."

Mia looked up at me from my lap.

Her aqua-colored pigtails bobbed and swayed, giving a glimpse of her slightly pointed elf ears.

"Sorry."

As always, she was very brief with her words.

“Master, your hand.”

Nana persisted with her request, so I obliged and waved.

“Sir Kniiight!”

As soon as I did so, a group of young women in the crowd raised high-pitched shrieks.

I felt like a famous singer or actor, which was somewhat embarrassing.

“You should wave, too, Lulu.”

I beckoned to Lulu, who was shrinking into the back row.

“B-but no one would want me to wave at them...”

Despite her stunning good looks, Lulu’s features were unfortunately considered unattractive by the bizarre beauty standards of this world.

Today she was wearing her usual maid outfit, adorned with cosplay armor to match Arisa and the others.

“That’s not true. Here, take a look.”

I patted Lulu’s black hair and pointed at one section of the crowd.

“Miss Luluuuuu!”

The young maids from our mansion waved with all their might.

Because Lulu had taught them cooking, self-defense, and so on, they all looked up to her very much.

“Awww...”

Seeing them, Lulu’s face broke into a big smile.

As always, her smile was a sight for sore eyes.

“Liza, go on and wave, too.”

“Yes, master...if you insist.”

Liza looked nervous as she agreed.

Even during a parade, she held her Magic Cricket Spear on her shoulder; when she waved hesitantly, her orange scales glittered in the sunlight.

“““Ooooh! It’s Liza of the Black Spear!“““

Amid the explorers in the crowd, men and women alike shouted Liza’s name.

Liza kept her expression calm as always, but her tail was thumping against the floor of the carriage, so clearly was she pleased on the inside.

“Bean warriors! Have your wounds healed?”

More cheers arose from the crowd.

“Bean warriors” probably referred to Pochi and Tama, who wore round armor.

The injuries the crowd was kindly expressing concern about were actually fake; when we returned two days ago, I had dressed everyone up in dented armor and painted-on injuries, since it would look too suspicious if we were all unharmed after defeating a floormaster.

Pochi’s and Tama’s dummy armor was particularly busted up, and Liza had carried them out like corpses when we returned. It was no wonder they must have left a strong impression.

“See? I told you they were fine! They even waved at us!”

“Yeah, but when have you ever seen the untouchable Pendragon party so beaten up before?”

Certain explorers had started calling our explorer party “untouchable” because Team Pendragon always returned from the labyrinth unharmed.

Of course, it was really just because we always healed up after each battle and before returning to the surface; every one of our members had been injured at least once before, even the rearguard trio.

“Yeah, and the shield maiden’s beloved shield was even broken.”

That seemed to be referring to Nana.

“Shield maiden! No shield to daaaay? If you need a new one, come to Benson the armorer’s shooop!”

I had to admit, it was gutsy to name-drop his own store in his cheer.

“Liza of the Black Spear! I’ll beat you next tiiime!”

"Yeah right, idiot! I'm the one who's gonna beat her first!"

"Psh, come back when you've learned 'Spellblade'!"

Since returning from the labyrinth, more explorers and fighters had come to challenge us than before.

Since I was already busy enough, Liza had been taking them on for me.

Recently, there were even some challengers who sought out Liza from the beginning.

"""Arisaaaa, over heeere..."""

"""Nanaaa! Say hiii!"""

The voices of children rose up from the roadside: The kids from the orphanage were here for the parade, too.

"""Lady Miaaaa!"""

On the other side of the road, some scrawny young boys who seemed to be fairy races called out.

"Lady Mia! You look as lovely as ever!"

"Ah, Lady Mia, your fleeting profile is like a lily of the valley in bloom..."

Wow, Mia's popular.

"Looks like you've got fans," I teased Mia lightly.

"Nuh-uh," she grunted irritably.

Whoops. Maybe that was a little insensitive of me.

"""Arisa! Treat us to meat skewers sometime!"""

Alas, the only people calling out for Arisa were young girls and bratty-looking boys.

She probably didn't want to be comforted about this, either, so I decided to leave it be. She kept glancing in my direction and loudly muttering, "Just kids again, huh?" but sometimes it can be cruel to be kind. Better to just ignore her.

It had been less than a trimoon—ten days—since the Dogheaded Demon Lord appeared in the great desert to the west of Labyrinth City and was defeated by

a sky-rending Meteor Shower, but it seemed like people had already forgotten about it.

Of course, it probably helped that I used the power of the former Flue Empire City Cores sleeping under the desert to prevent any damage from reaching the city.

It certainly was a surprise when our ceremony to call a floormaster wound up summoning a demon lord, but since he'd shown up in front of me, I was able to resolve it without any of my friends getting killed, so I decided to view it as a blessing in disguise.

"If you don't hurry up, we're going to drink it all!"

Amid the crowd, I saw the foxfolk officer and captain from the labyrinth army waving to me.

I raised a hand lightly to them in return.

If it wasn't for that coincidence, both of them probably would've been killed by the demon lord, along with Lady Helmina of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and the rest of their investigation party.

"You should wave more, too, then, master!"

Smiling gleefully, Arisa grabbed my arm and waved it back and forth.

""""Sir Kniiight!""""

A few pretty women who seemed to be ladies of the night called out to me from the side of the road. I waved at them with a smile.

For some reason, Arisa and Mia pinched me from both sides. Unbelievable.

And here I'd been spending my days focused purely on training, without even indulging in any nighttime pleasures.

Since I should have more free time soon, maybe I could invite some Labyrinth City friends out for a night on the town.

"Guilty."

"You're having impure thoughts, aren't you?!"

Despite making full use of my "Poker Face" skill, Mia and Arisa both saw

through me somehow.

“Ha-ha... Of course not...”

As I responded stiffly, the two-story carriage reached its destination.

“Wow, the hall is packed.”

The parade’s destination, a hall near the west explorers’ guild, was full of people from all walks of life.

This place had been arranged for by friends of mine like the viceroy’s wife, General Erthal of the labyrinth army, and the guildmaster.

I didn’t think such a big venue would be necessary, but looking at this massive crowd, I realized they were right to say that the plaza near the guild hall wouldn’t be big enough.

In fact, at the announcements after Mr. Jelil’s party defeated a floormaster, the crowd had overflowed all the way to the front of the guild.

“All right, we’ll do it like we planned. Once I’m done with the greetings, Arisa will take the lead on showing the spoils.”

There were guest speeches in between, but all we had to do for that was sit and listen like obedient students, so I left that part out.

“Okey-dokey!”

Arisa responded cheerfully.

“I’ll heat things up so they bring in tons of cash at the auction!”

“Just don’t overdo it.”

“I know, I know! I’m sure they’ll put out reports on each item before the sale, so I’ll be careful not to tell any lies.”

With Arisa’s promise, I went back to rereading the “Analyze” results of our spoils of war.

“It’s too bad we can’t keep all those amazing items,” Lulu murmured anxiously.

Yeah, really.

The spoils from the floormaster my group had defeated were considered “offerings to the kingdom” and temporarily confiscated, then sold at an official auction in the royal capital. The next day, we would receive the same amount of money they earned as a reward.

The guildmaster had told us all that when we returned from the labyrinth.

Now, in the incredibly rare case of the appearance of a magic item or weapon that could threaten the balance of the kingdom, the government would keep it locked away in the royal treasury. In that case, we would be paid three times the amount the item was estimated to be worth.

“True, but it makes sense. This practice has been in place for a long time to prevent disaster.”

In the past, when spoils like that were released to the public, they had resulted in bloody wars between nobles.

However, the conquering party technically had the right to claim first priority for one item from among the spoils.

Some nobles might chase the party down, hoping to buy that item, but it would be more effective to just look for the item they wanted at the auction, so there were fewer fights like that since the practice had been put in place.

“...Master, they’re done looking things over. We can head in anytime.”

“Let’s get going, then.”

I led my group over to the venue.

“Team Pendragon would like to thank you all for gathering today...”

Standing atop the stage, I addressed the crowd with the standard formalities while Liza stood at my side, holding up the core of the thunder squid emperor.

After the introduction, there were lengthy speeches from nobles, knights, and mithril-badge explorers.

Clearly, bigwigs talked too much even in a parallel world.

I used my “Poker Face” skill to get through this painfully long segment with a smile.

Although some of our number, like Nana and the younger children, grew visibly bored partway through.

“Thanks for waiting. This part’s all you.”

“I’m on it!”

I accepted the mic from the presenter and handed it to Arisa.

It was actually a staff-shaped magic item with voice-amplifying abilities, but to anyone with the knowledge of modern Japan, it clearly looked like a microphone.

I was told that it was generally used for giving instructions in battle, cheering on allies, and such.

“Now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for—the reveal of the spoils!”

Arisa’s cheerful voice echoed through the hall.

“Wooooo!”

The crowd was easily swept up in Arisa’s enthusiasm.

“First, we have this! It’s an all-purpose Full Restore—I mean, a miracle potion! From loss of a limb to poison to petrification, from incurable illnesses to demon lords’ curses, this elixir can cure it aaaaaaall!”

“““OOOOOOH!“““

Next to Arisa, Lulu held up a large five-hundred-milliliter vial containing a deep-crimson liquid.

For some reason, the elixir we’d found in the treasure chest was a different color from the ones I made myself.

The “Analyze” result confirmed it was an elixir, and it seemed to have the same effect, but it strangely contained more liquid than the blue elixirs I’d made, which fit in a standard small vial. It must be created with a different method or ingredients.

Since I used the lesser elixir we’d previously found in an areamaster treasure box in too much of a rush to worry about the color, I hadn’t noticed the difference until recently.

“We found other kinds of potions, too, but we’ll save those for later! For now, it’s the fan-favorite magic weapons and armor!”

The crowd would get bored if everything was introduced in order, so Arisa insisted on centering the featured products.

The guild would release a properly ordered list of the items tomorrow anyway.

“Really? The star of the show is taking a break backstage already?”

The guildmaster came up behind me in formal wear.

“No, it’s the girls who are the stars today.”

“I was worried when the untouchable Pendragon party came back looking injured, but it appears they’ve all healed up just fine.”

The guildmaster looked kindly at the rest of my group in the hall.

“Did the folks who challenged the floormaster with you go home already?”

“Yes, they left Labyrinth City the same day we visited the guild.”

As I responded, I thought back on the day we returned...



“Honestly, I can’t believe you really defeated a floormaster.”

“Yes, although we had no small amount of help from these fine people.”

Right after we returned from the labyrinth, I went to the guildmaster’s study to report the details of our victory over the floormaster.

I was accompanied only by the leaders of the parties that had officially participated in the battle; the others had been transferred to the mansion under the pretense of healing their wounds.

“So you undertook the battle with a team of eight parties and a hundred and two people, then returned with sixteen survivors? That’s a heavy loss but the fastest time on record.”

I was a little surprised that we’d set a record, but my “Poker Face” skill carried me through.

We'd spent a good five days partying in the labyrinth to kill time, but we still somehow beat the fastest record...

"Yes, well, our composition focused on firepower."

I made an arbitrary excuse.

Secretary Ushana lined up various documents on the desk and continued.

"So we'll be presenting mithril badges to sixteen members from the six groups Pendragon, Ghost Arrow, Samurai General, Blue Rose, Twin Demons, and Great Ghost, then?"

"I shall pass on this honor."

"We need no titles granted by a mere human child."

"Agreed."

"We came only to repay our clan's debt."

"Erm..."

I should have given the elf teachers another acting lesson. During our party, I'd lectured them on what to do, but they appeared to have forgotten all of it.

Ushana seemed unsure how to respond to this, so I quickly cut in.

"We'll be happy to accept the honor."

"R-right. So other than Pendragon, no other group wishes to apply for the distinction?"

"Dull."

"We'll leave the rest of this business to you, Sir Pendragon."

As the elf teachers firmly responded, the guildmaster and Miss Ushana decided to accept it and move on.

Aside from me, the rest of the group left the office with the guildmaster's permission.

"Talk about unapproachable."

The guildmaster gazed at the closed door and sighed.

“Shall I try to talk to them again later?”

“No, we wouldn’t want to force a mithril badge on anyone. If they say they don’t need it, we won’t insist. For now, get started on recording the spoils and filling out mithril-badge applications for Satou and company.”

“Very well.”

Once Miss Ushana left the room, the guildmaster turned toward me. We were alone.

“Those were elves from the Bolenan clan, weren’t they? They were just in disguise.”

I smiled vaguely at the guildmaster without giving a clear response.

But considering that the elf teachers had said obviously fairy race-esque things like “mere human child” and “our clan,” and the guildmaster had a long relationship with the Bulainan elf Miss Sebelkeya, who served as her adviser, it wasn’t surprising that she would figure it out.

“They said something about a debt. What in the hell did you do that they’d be willing to help you fight a floormaster?”

“Enough with the ridiculous interrogation, Lilian.”

Whacking the guildmaster on the head with a wooden staff, Miss Sebelkeya appeared in the room.

“Don’t call me that.”

The guildmaster—whose real name was Zona—groaned at the painful old nickname.

“And I’m not just asking out of curiosity here. This guy assembled a force that could easily take down the whole city like it was nothing, okay? You know I can’t just let that slide.”

I had arranged for stand-in reinforcements to hide my group’s strength and equipment, but I never imagined that would be a problem in itself.

“Talk about being paranoid.”

Miss Sebelkeya rapped the guildmaster’s head lightly with her staff a few

more times.

“Cut it out. I know as well as you do that Satou isn’t that kind of guy.” The guildmaster brushed Sebelkeya’s staff away. “But not everyone knows Satou’s lack of ambition as well as we do.”

Oh, I see. She wasn’t interrogating me—she was worried about me.

“There’s no need to be concerned, Guildmaster. It was a miracle that I was able to assemble forces like that this time. I’m sure it won’t happen again.”

I used skills like “Fabrication” and “Making Excuses” to assure the guildmaster that the elf teachers’ assistance was a onetime deal. There really was no reason I could think of that I would need to gather them again in the future anyway.

“Well, all right, then. Now, I’m sure you know this, but...”

Fortunately, the guildmaster accepted my excuse. She told me about the rules and exceptions regarding floormaster spoils and laid out plans for the parade, the ceremony in the royal capital, and so on.

According to her, at the kingdom meeting happening at the beginning of next month, mithril-badge explorers could receive awards, honorary titles, and so on.

In cases like mine when one already had a title, most people only received medals, but since I was the leader of a party that had defeated a floormaster, it was all but certain that I would be conferred an honorary baronet title.

Although I was perfectly content with my honorary hereditary knight title, which granted me noble status.



“...Satou. You listening, Satou?”

The guildmaster shook me by the shoulder, bringing me back to the present.

“Ah, sorry. I was spacing out a little.”

“So have you decided which item from the spoils you want to keep?”

“Yes, I believe our top priority item will be the ‘Analyze Goods’ orb.”

By “orb,” I was referring to a Gift Orb: a one-use artifact that allowed the user

to gain a skill.

We'd found three Gift Orbs in our treasure chest: "Analyze Goods," "Paralysis Resistance," and "Water Magic."

I'd secretly been hoping for a Chant orb, but of course life wasn't that easy.

The guildmaster had informed me that all three orbs were great finds, with "Analyze Goods" being especially rare.

We debated over the decision for a while: Should we teach "Paralysis Resistance" to our tank, Nana, or healer, Mia? Should we teach "Water Magic" to Nana or Lulu? Should we teach "Analyze Goods" to our scout, Tama; resident cook, Lulu; or the knowledgeable Arisa?

In the end, it was decided that if Lulu had "Analyze Goods," she could make sure ingredients were safe before cooking, so we chose the "Analyze Goods" orb as our reserved item to have Lulu use it.

It was typical of my food-loving kids to base their decision on that logic.

""WOOOOOO!"""

A loud cheer interrupted my conversation with the guildmaster.

They must be showing off the magic equipment in the main hall.

"Seems like you found a lot of good stuff."

"Yes, even excluding cursed equipment, we still found more than ten pieces."

The main attractions were an adamantite war hammer and a Paralyzing Thorn Spear, but there were also mithril daggers and twin blades, a blue steel battle-ax and halberd, a longbow made of wood from the Face Tree, a Mantis Berserker Sword, a Thunder Pearl Staff, and several Thunder Rods, among other things.

"Huh? What, you don't like cursed weapons?"

The guildmaster looked at me strangely.

"Don't like them...? Isn't it normal to avoid them?"

"Not at all. Check it out."

The guildmaster pointed at a garnet-badge explorer who wore a black broadsword on his back.

Even without activating “Miasma Vision,” I could tell from its suspicious design alone that it was a cursed weapon.

“And that’s not all...”

The guildmaster pointed out a few more in the crowd.

Among the higher-level explorers, as many as 20 or 30 percent were equipped with cursed weapons.

“Now that you mention it, there are quite a few.”

“Yep, cursed weapons show up in treasure chests in the labyrinth much more often than normal Magic Swords. And most of all, they’re much stronger than ordinary weapons. So there are a good amount of folks who’re willing to ignore the negatives and use ‘em.”

I guess there weren’t as many “once you touch it, you can’t let go unless the curse is lifted”-style weapons here as there were in games.

Of course, any potentially lethal cursed items were brought to temples immediately to be purified.

Come to think of it, the dwarf Elder Dohal who I made the fairy sword with in the Bolehart dominion of Ougoch Duchy used a cursed war hammer, too.

“““OOOOOOH!“““

There was another chorus of cheers.

Whenever Arisa brought out a new item, the crowd roared.

“Ta-da! This is today’s biggest highlight!”

As Arisa exclaimed, there was a *da-da-daaa* sound effect.

Mia seemed to be providing background music and effects to liven up the event. She’d even called on a musical pseudo-spirit called an “Instrumentalist” for support.

They were really going all out.

"It's a full set of Thunderhand Armor! This beauty is made primarily out of mithril, and it's got these totally amazing tentacles!"

“““WOOOO!“““

Uh, should you really be getting so excited before she explains what's amazing about it?

Pochi and Tama each pulled on a tentacle, adorably demonstrating the length.

"You won't believe this! The tentacles move on their own to defend the wearer from attacks!"

“““Woo!“““

Huh? The cheers died out a little. Maybe that wasn't what they were hoping to hear?

I thought it was pretty convenient, but apparently, wearing it reduced your maximum MP by 100 points, so maybe it would be difficult for magic users.

The Thunderhand Armor offered full-body protection, but it had the ability to automatically adjust its dimensions to the wearer so that anyone could use it regardless of size.

I thought it was an impressively gamelike feature, but maybe it wasn't that unusual for Magic Armor from the labyrinth.

But unlike a game, there was a limit to the automatic adjustment, meaning it could give or take only about 20 percent of its scale. That seemed somewhat limited, but it should be enough to cover for anything but the most extreme body types.

From what I heard in the elf village, the rare automatic-adjusting metal armor that occasionally showed up in labyrinth treasure chests was usually a variation on a teal silver-and-adamantite alloy, but this one was primarily made of mithril.

There must be some recipe I didn't know about.

Just between us, I'd nearly given in to my scientific curiosity and taken it apart.

In the end, the armor Arisa had called the “highlight” didn’t get as big a reaction as the adamantite battle-ax or the indestructible large shield.

The latter gave the user the same effect as the “Indestructible Body” skill, so it was very popular.

Maybe I would try making one sometime, since I had the right materials. Something that nice-looking might make good dummy equipment for Nana.



“Great job out there.”

“Whew, I’m beat...”

“Mm. Tired.”

I gave Arisa and Mia some cold veria water when they returned from the stage.

After a solid two hours, we had finished the official announcement of our floormaster conquest and resulting treasures.

Between Arisa’s natural skills as an entertainer and Mia’s skillful pseudo-spirit sound effects, the crowd’s interest had multiplied, and their excitement had reached almost dangerous levels.

We had just finished the last of the program for the day, and now a buffet party was beginning in the hall.

Onstage, an orchestra brought in by the viceroy’s wife was playing a cheerful tune; Sarishusas, the minstrel we’d met during the explorers’ school scholarship tournament, was reciting poetry about us.

“A tempting sceent?”

“Smells delicious, sir.”

Tama and Pochi closed their eyes and sniffed the air.

Multiple food stands had been set up around the perimeter of the venue and were offering food and drinks for free.

The cost was being covered by the explorers’ guild—or rather, the king. I wouldn’t have minded paying for it myself, but since it was evidently

customary, I decided to take them up on it.

“No eating yet, you two. We have work to finish first.”

Liza joined the guild employees in transporting the spoils.

They would be stored for safekeeping in a vault under the guild house until they were shipped to the royal capital.

“Are you really okay with all this, though?”

“What do you mean?”

As we were walking to the vault, Arisa looked at me awkwardly.

“I mean, you said before that you didn’t want to stand out too much.”

“It’s all right. The only reason I didn’t want to stand out was that I was afraid to attract the wrong kind of attention before my kids could protect themselves.”

At this point, my group could probably handle a whole army on their own.

Besides, as I had built up plenty of connections and such, too, I was bound to hear about it if any people or organizations were targeting us. Then I could take care of it, whether by getting involved myself or pitting other mutual foes against them.

For my part, besides not wanting to draw attention, I also was afraid of doing anything flashy that might draw the attention of a demon lord.

It would be hard to go sightseeing if I was constantly being pursued.

For the same reason, I didn’t intend to tell anyone but my closest companions that I was really Nanashi the Hero, either. I didn’t want to be too busy with duties to have any fun, like Hayato the Hero.

“But what if the Shiga Kingdom tries to assign you some weird post?”

“It should be fine. The guildmaster, the cabinet leader of the Ministry of Labyrinth Resources, the general, and positions like that are all the exclusive domain of high-pedigree nobles. Even if I do get an offer, it’ll just be an invitation to an order of knights or an intelligence agency or something, right? And I should be able to turn down anything like that with my connections and

such, so I'm not worried."

If anything, it was more likely that I'd be asked to become a chef at the royal palace.

Accompanied by the guild employees, we brought the spoils we'd just shared to the underground vault.

"...Transport complete. We'll have guild employees and the royal capital's local guards take responsibility for bringing this to the royal capital."

"Thank you very much."

Secretary Ushana locked the vault as she promised to take care of the rest.

Just to be safe, I put markers on all the most valuable items.

"Good work today, everyone. What do you want to do now? I have to say hello to all the bigwigs at the party, but you're welcome to go back to the mansion and rest if you're tired."

As we went back to the ground floor of the guild, I asked the rest of my group about their plans.

"No way! We're gonna put on a concert on the stage!"

"...A concert?"

The established program had ended with the unveiling of the spoils, but Arisa insisted that she wanted to perform on the stage once it was free.

"Mm."

"Tama's a tiny dancerr?"

"Pochi's gonna spin around, too, sir!"

"Sounds like fun. I'll be sure to watch, then."

I patted the kids' heads and promised to come to their concert.

"Mm. Pinkie promise."

"You have to come, okay?!"

"We'll do our best..."

“It’ll be the best show ever, sir!”

That settled things for those four, but what about everyone else?

“Master, I promised to visit the food stalls with the orphanage larvae, I report.”

“This is no time to rest. I have a duty to conquer every kind of meat available at the food stalls!”

These two never change.

“Meeeat?”

“This is bad, sir. If we’re busy dancing, we’ll miss out on meat, sir.”

“Toughiiie?”

Tama and Pochi flailed their arms in a panic.

They must have realized that they couldn’t go to the food stands if they were performing.

“Don’t worry, you two! I’ve already asked the maids to save some tasty meat for you and bring it to the stage.”

“*Très bieeen?*”

“Arisa’s amazing, sir.”

Much to Pochi’s and Tama’s admiration, Arisa never missed a beat.

“Master, I’ve been asked to demonstrate how to butcher a maze bass. Is that all right?”

“Yes, of course. But make sure you use this normal knife.”

I put a large knife in a Magic Bag within Storage and gave it to Lulu.

It probably wouldn’t be wise to show off the shiny golden orichalcum tuna knife she normally used in the labyrinth vacation house.

“Yes, sir!”

Still, maze bass were found only in the Middle Stratum of the labyrinth. *I wonder who went to catch them?*

It would've taken too long to go fish some up and come back in the short time since we'd returned, so maybe they came from a gourmet merchant or something.

“Lady Lulu, are you ready?”

Clad in aprons, the maids from the mansion came to get Lulu. They must be helping with her demonstration.

“Master?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll come by and check things out later.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lulu nodded excitedly.

Now I definitely have to remember to go.

“Master, I will retrieve the orphanage larvae, I declare.”

“Sure. You’d better hurry; I’m sure they’re excited.”

“Yes, master.”

Nana nodded and headed for the private orphanage.

“We’d better get going, too, then.”

“Yeah, let’s...”

As I was responding to Arisa, I trailed off abruptly.

The radar in my AR display told me that I was about to be reunited with a dear old friend.



“Goodness, the main explorers’ guild certainly is crowded.”

“You’re right, Miss Iona... I didn’t expect it to be this busy.”

I still couldn’t see her in the crowd.

“Lou, let me have one of those meat skewers.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll trade you for one of the red ones.”

“Honestly! I was wondering where you two went. I should’ve known you were

stuffing your faces!"

"C'mon, all the food stalls are free. It'd be a shame not to load up!"

"It seems like some kind of festival is going on. A very generous one, if they're offering everything for free."

"Yeah, I heard it's 'cause some noble called Sir Pendragon beat a superstrong monster."

Her group was as noisy as ever.

Across the crowded room, I caught a glimpse of a distinctive hair color. A brighter blond than even Nana's.

"Really! We ought to be greeting the guild staff first—"

...Our eyes met.

"S-Satou!"

She practically threw the bags in her arms at Lilio and ran over, making her way through the crowd. Though she apologized to anyone she bumped into, she never took her eyes off me.

"Satou..."

"Hello."

Caught up in her own momentum, she jumped into my arms, and I caught her gently. Her light leather armor was soft yet sturdy against my skin.

"Satou...!"

I waited for her to say something other than my name. As she peered up at me, there were tears in her eyes.

"...I—I made it."

There must have been a great deal of emotions packed into those few words. Her voice was trembling as she stammered them out.

"Welcome to Labyrinth City, Miss Zena."

Upon hearing my words, the uncertain smile on Zena's face blossomed like a flower in full bloom.

It'd been a while.



Reunion

Satou here. They say boys grow up fast, but it's not just boys who can change a lot after you haven't seen them for a while. If anything, I'd say girls change even more drastically.

"When did you get to Labyrinth City?"

"Late last night."

Zena and friends had joined a force called the "Labyrinth City Celivera's Elite Training Corps."

I had already noticed on my map information that she was in Labyrinth City Celivera, but it would've been a little creepy to coincidentally show up at their base, so I held off.

"Excuse me; pardon mee. Back away, please and thank youuu."

"Mm, shameless."

Zena and I hadn't even realized that we were still embracing as we talked, but Arisa and Mia shoved their way between us and pushed us apart.

Once she noticed our position, Zena flailed her hands wildly and backed away.

"I-I'm sorry; I'm so stupid..."

"Not at all. I'm glad you were so excited to see me again, too."

Zena had always had an unexpectedly passionate side. When we'd reunited during the Seiryuu City labyrinth incident, she had practically tackled me.

"Hmm? Is this your sweetheart, Satou?"

The guildmaster came over to stick her nose in my business.

"This is an ally who helped me out quite a bit in Seiryuu City, Miss Zena of the Marienteil house, a magic soldier in the county army."

Something about my introduction made Zena's face fall a little.

Should I have introduced her as a dear friend instead?

Behind us, the crowd was murmuring rumors about Seiryuu County: "I heard a new labyrinth formed there." "They were attacked by a powerful demon but escaped unscathed." "Their army makes all the soldiers fight against wyverns."

It must be a pretty famous place, if this many people knew about it even in a territory on the other side of the kingdom.

"...Lady Zena."

Liza placed her Cricket Spear on the floor and got down on a knee to show her respect to Zena.

"My name is Liza. You may not remember me, but you saved our lives in Seiryuu City. It's thanks to you that we've been able to serve our beloved master and grow stronger. I cannot possibly thank you enough."

She had already thanked Zena when we met up in the Demon's Labyrinth, but Liza had a very strong sense of duty.

"Of course I remember you!" Zena looked bashful about Liza's approach.

"Whoa, Liza of the Black Spear laid down her weapon!"

"That girl must be crazy strong to have saved *her* life!"

"I guess the rumors about the Seiryuu City army seeing wyverns as low-threat are true."

"That girl's a little plain-looking at first, but she's actually kinda cute, isn't she?"

The peanut gallery was getting annoying.

"Gratefuul?"

"Thank you, sir."

Liza's actions reminded Tama and Pochi who Zena was, and they quickly knelt down next to her.

"Though there is little I can offer you, please let me know if there is ever

anything we can do to be of assistance. With master's permission, we will come running to your aid at a moment's notice."

"Goodness, your words of thanks are more than enough!"

Blushing, Zena politely deflected Liza's earnest offer.

At Liza's current strength, she could probably take down a wyvern solo, if not a dragon.

"Oh dear, sir."

"Pochii?"

Pochi lost her balance and tumbled over, then went "hee-hee, sir" to cover her embarrassment. Miss Zena ended up giggling as well.

The other people around us all smiled at Pochi's cute actions.

But then a man's gruff voice broke through the peaceful mood.

"Liza of the Black Spear! I am Kerun, Knight of the White Lance! I challenge you to a one-on-one duel!"

The man who called himself Kerun was equipped with a white lance and familiar-looking armor: the armor of a Holy Knight.

"Master. May I?"

"Sure, go ahead. Just don't kill him."

"Yes, sir."

Next to me, I heard Zena exclaim "Wha—?!" in a panic.

"Ha! You won't be so confident once we get started!"

The Holy Knight Kerun readied his spear, looking self-assured.

Wait, you're planning to fight right here?

"Fighting is forbidden inside the guild hall. Take it outside, please."

There was a temporary battleground area set up outside the garrison of the labyrinth army.

During special events in Labyrinth City, it was very common for people to get

carried away and start fights. Since many residents of the city were strong fighters, they had to take measures like this to avoid buildings getting destroyed in the process.

“Very well.”

Liza nodded and beckoned the knight to follow her outside the guild house.

“Um, Satou, shouldn’t you go with her?”

Zena glanced anxiously between Liza’s retreating figure and my face.

“It’s all right. Liza will be able to win without hurting him, I’m sure.”

There was a significant level gap, so it would likely be a one-sided battle.

If I went to watch, Liza might get carried away and end up injuring him more.

“B-but...he looked very strong, didn’t he?”

Perhaps Zena didn’t realize how strong Liza had gotten?

“Don’t worryyy?”

“Liza is strong, sir!”

Tama and Pochi beamed up at the nervous Zena reassuringly.

“Are you certain it’ll be all right?”

“Yes, Liza can definitely handle it,” I said.

As she opened her mouth, probably to ask why we were so confident, a young voice interrupted us.

“Aaaah! Arisa, there you are!”

“Arisa, Lady Mia, come over to the stage right away, please. Pochi and Tama, too.”

“We asked the opening act to stall for time, but that won’t work for much longer!”

The young maids Iruna and Jena of the Lovely Wings, who were in charge of running the entertainment on the stage, came to get Arisa and the others.

Oh, right. They said they were putting on a concert.

“Whoa, it’s time already? I completely spaced.”

“Mm. Forgot.”

“Hurryyy?”

“Oh no, sir!”

The younger group ran off to the stage in a hurry but then paused.

“Master, you’d better stop standing around flirting and come watch us!”

“That’s right, sir! I want you to see our heroics up close, sir!”

“Okay. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Mm. Promise.”

“Waitiiing...”

I waved at the young kids as they ran off.



“Well, if it isn’t Zena’s boy toy.”

“No wonder she ran off in such a hurry.”

“They were reunited sooner than expected, hmm?”

The rest of Zena’s squad—Lilio the scout, Miss Lou the tank, and the lovely swordswoman Miss Iona—caught up to us through the crowd.

“I-I’m sorry. I know we still had things to do...”

“It’s all right. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about, so we can take care of it.”

As Zena apologized, Miss Iona gave her an almost motherly smile.

“Besides, there’s still plenty of time before we have to report in. Please take your time rekindling your...relationship.”

“Zenacchi, I’m giving you my permission. Jump his bones, ’kay?”

“Make sure you take a break from your love affair to get some food, though.”

“Lilio, Lou, let’s not editorialize, hmm? Just don’t forget to meet at the west gate when the clock strikes noon, dear.”

With that, Zena's trio of comrades vanished into the crowd.

"Honestly! All of you!"

Zena shook her fist after her friends as they left, but there was the hint of a smile on her face. She probably wasn't actually all that angry.

"All right, Satou, I'm off to drink some free booze."

The guildmaster and company also disappeared in the same direction as Zena's squad.

Without the peanut gallery, Zena and I were the only two people remaining.

"So we're alone..."

"Seems that way."

I looked around, nodding in agreement with Zena's words.

Hmm?

For some reason, Zena seemed a little dejected.

"This guy's the worst."

"That pretty girl is trying to set the mood, and he's just blowing her off..."

It took rude comments from the crowd for me to notice. Zena had been murmuring to me in a maidenly voice, but I'd just responded normally without a second thought.

"I'm sorry, Miss Zena."

"N-no, um. It's fine. Please don't worry about it!"

Zena seemed to have heard the crowd's commentary, too; she turned bright red and waved her hands frantically, clearly embarrassed.

Collecting myself, I tried to start the conversation over.

"So if your squad is with you, does that mean you're here on a mission?"

"Yes! We're part of an elite force assembled on the count's orders."

According to her explanation, Zena and the rest of the Labyrinth Elite were sent here to study labyrinth management and law enforcement in Celivera.

"They mentioned you were gathering at the west gate, didn't they? Are you going into the labyrinth?"

"Yes, we'll be meeting up with some guides at noon to enter it and investigate how it differs from the one in Seiryuu City."

I wasn't sure how going into a labyrinth would connect to learning how to manage one, but some government officials had accompanied the force as well; maybe they were going to research that side of things at the guild.

Perhaps Zena and company were supposed to see what a labyrinth needs from the perspective of explorers.

"So soon after arriving? That's pretty rough."

"It'll be all right. We got a good night's rest, and we've trained for this."

Zena sounded like an overworked employee.

But I guess I couldn't really talk, since we'd challenged the labyrinth the same day we arrived, too.

"Have you registered as explorers already?"

"Yes! We went to the east guild when we arrived yesterday to fill out the paperwork."

Zena showed me the wood badge on her chest.

"And you've got everything you need for your exploration?"

"I believe so. Our supplies chief Morando and some of the other officials gathered all the supplies and equipment we'll need, so all we have to do is carry our portion of the supplies and show up."

Zena was wearing the same leather armor and cloak I'd seen in Seiryuu City and had a short staff at her waist. Lou had left with the bag Zena was previously carrying, which meant she was traveling fairly light.

Since Miss Iona said they'd take care of things at the guild, technically she didn't have to stay here, right?

"So your squad is going into the labyrinth at noon?"

There were still two hours until then. Zena nodded, and we decided to go

around to the free food stalls on our way to see Arisa and the other girls' concert.

"Shall we, Miss Zena?"

"Yes!"

Zena and I left the west guild building.

"This is quite a crowd."

"Yes, well, there's a festival of sorts today."

Even then, there were a lot of people. Several times, we nearly got pushed apart by the crowd.

"With this many people around, it might be hard to find each other again if we get separated."

"I suppose..."

I could still find her on my radar if we got separated, but it might be difficult to move against the flow of the crowd.

"Shall we hold hands, then, Miss Zena?"

"...All right, Satou."

Zena looked at my proffered hand bashfully for a moment, then shyly accepted it. If a situation like this had happened to me in high school, I might have fallen in love. I somehow felt a bit guilty toward my beloved Miss Aaze in the elf village, so I silently apologized to her in my mind.

"Will you be staying in the labyrinth overnight?"

"No, we're planning on coming back by the end of the day."

She said that their plan this time was to enter for half a day to ensure that they weren't short on equipment, then start seriously exploring the labyrinth and staying overnight two days from now.

"So do you have tomorrow and the next day off?"

"I'm not sure about both, but I know we have a break tomorrow!"

Zena raised her hands excitedly as she answered.

“If you’d like, I can show you around Labyrinth City.”

“Really?! That would be wonderful!” She responded with a sparkling smile.

“Ah, it’s the man of the hour.”

“Hey, mister, let’s hear some stories of your adventures sometime!”

“You’ll treat us to drinks, right?”

“We’d be the ones treating *him*, moron!”

A lot of townspeople and explorers I didn’t recognize greeted me, maybe because of the parade earlier. Zena seemed to misunderstand this and gave the dubious observation that I seemed to have a lot of friends.

“Hey, mister!”

“For you, I wouldn’t even charge to—Ow!”

Along the way, some women of various ages accosted me, too, but the lovely lady who seemed to be their leader called it off when she noticed Zena at my side.

“Oh my, I see you have an adorable young lady with you.”

As they left, she seductively whispered, “Do come by our place sometime,” in my ear.

According to my AR display, they worked at some kind of high-class adult establishment.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested, but I couldn’t let that show while Zena was with me, so I brushed it off with a light excuse, and we kept moving.

“Looks like they haven’t started yet.”

When we arrived at the stage, Arisa and company hadn’t emerged yet. We were just in time to see the opening act leaving the stage, so they must have been in the middle of changing things over. Since Mia had to summon her musical assistant pseudo-spirit and all, it would probably take a bit longer for the girls’ concert to begin.

“...Let’s take a little detour.”

“O-okay!”

Looking around, I saw that Lulu had begun her demonstration, and I led Zena that way.

“What an enormous fish.”

“It’s called a maze bass, and it lives in the Middle Stratum of the labyrinth. I’m told it’s delicious, but it’s difficult to transport, so you don’t see them very often.”

It was apparently used occasionally at some high-class restaurants in Celivera, but because we didn’t eat out very often, I’d never tried it before. Nobles usually avoided monster meat, which was why it never showed up at their dinners or anything.

“Wow, Satou, look at that! What an enormous knife!” Zena exclaimed in surprise when she saw the broadsword-size giant knife, which was an inferior copy of the orichalcum knife I’d made in the south seas for butchering giant tuna.

“Amazing! It’s huge, but she’s so delicate with it!”

As Lulu began fileting the fish, Zena tugged on my clothes with her free hand.

Of course, the rest of the crowd around us was watching Lulu’s knife work in admiration, too.

“Wow, she’s slicing up that maze bass like it’s nothing. Normally even a steel sword would have trouble cutting through it...”

“I guess that’s the Maid King for you.”

Some of their remarks were a bit strange, but I decided to ignore them.

Once Lulu finished breaking down the fish, she smoothly transitioned into frying up filets of the maze bass.

The sound of the sizzling pan alone was enough to make you drool.

“Freshly fried maze bass! Please give it a tryyy!”

The young maids from our mansion began distributing the fried filets with bright voices.

The kitchen maids Rosie and Annie, along with the head maid, Miss Miteruna, were in the booth helping Lulu cook.

“Young master!”

One of the maids noticed me in the crowd.

“Hi there. Thanks for all your hard work. Could we have two pieces?”

“Yes, right away!”

The cheerful young maid mimicked Pochi and Tama’s trademark salute pose.

I heard Zena quizzically murmur “young master?” so I explained that she was a servant employed at our house.

When I turned back, the little maid was still frozen in the same pose.

“Wait, huh? There’s a new lady with you!”

She seemed to be surprised by Zena’s presence. The little girl’s eyes shot back and forth between us and Lulu, who was still cooking behind her.

“Don’t worry—Lulu already knows her.”

“Oh, heh-heh... M’kay, I’m gonna go get your fish!”

The maid giggled awkwardly, forgetting her manners as she dashed back to the booth.

She and the other maids had learned a lot under Lulu’s tutelage, so they must be firmly on her side.

“Thanks for waiting, young master!”

“Thank you.”

I accepted the paper-wrapped fried fish filets from the maid and handed one to Zena. She hesitated for just a moment before releasing my hand and taking the fish.

“We’d better eat them while they’re still hot.”

“R-right...”

Since the maze bass was a rather grotesque-looking fish, Zena seemed reluctant to try it at first, but she gathered her courage and took a bite once she

saw me digging in.

“...It’s delicious!”

Zena’s eyes widened in surprise at the taste.

“Wow... It looked so unappealing, but the taste is so delicate! Even though it looks just like a Seiryuu croquette, it really melts in your mouth... And this white sauce goes unbelievably well with it!”

After her first bite, Zena unleashed a torrent of opinions.

In a matter of moments, her fried fish filet had disappeared into her stomach.

“That was so good. She’s incredibly talented for such a young age.”

Hearing Zena praise Lulu’s cooking made me as proud as if she were my own child.

“Thank you very much. Lulu is really one of the best chefs in Labyrinth City.”

As I bragged a little, I looked around the area to hide my embarrassment.

Before my eyes, a long line had formed in the time it took to eat our filets.

Considering how delicious they were, it was no surprise that so many people were lined up.

“Lulu, that was so tasty.”

“Master! I didn’t know you were here!”

Lulu burst into a smile when she saw me.

“I watched your demonstration, too. It was fantastic.”

“Oh my goodness! I still have a long way to go compared to you, sir!”

Even as she smiled bashfully, her hand was moving nonstop as expertly as a veteran chef. Her cooking skills were getting so impressive that I could imagine her becoming a household name throughout the Shiga Kingdom in the near future.



“Well, I don’t want to be in the way. We’d better get moving.”

Lulu seemed busy, so I waved at her, and we left the fish fry booth behind.

“Looks like it’s about to start.”

The kids’ concert was just beginning as we returned to the stage.

In addition to the noble seats, there were seats reserved for our group, since we were the stars of the day, but Nana, who was looking after the orphanage kids, was the only one sitting there.

I tried to head over, too, but there were so many people in the way that we decided to sit in the ordinary seats instead.

“Listen to my sooooong!”

Arisa began the concert by shouting like a certain galactic songstress.

“What wonderful music. Is the sphere behind them making those sounds?”

“Yes, it’s fairy magic called an ‘Instrumentalist.’ But it can only perform as well as the one who summoned it.”

I gave a quick explanation of the pseudo-spirit Mia was controlling.

“Ah... I see now. It sounds wonderful.”

Mia performing an entire orchestra on her own was certainly impressive, but Arisa using that as accompaniment for an anime theme song was a feat in itself.

As I listened to the music, I was equally soothed by the sight of Pochi and Tama twirling in time to the music onstage. Shrieks arose from the crowd at the pair, who were dressed like winged fairies as they jumped and spun.

Listening closely, I realized that Pochi and Tama were singing as they danced.

There were singing voices coming from the crowd, too. Maybe from the orphanage kids Nana had brought along?

Arisa was too engrossed in her heartfelt singing to notice, but Pochi and Tama spotted me in the crowd and waved at me as they spun.

When I waved back, they did even more airborne spins in their excitement.

“They’re so nimble! Just like you, Satou!”

Zena's compliment was very characteristic of her.

I suppose she wasn't wrong, though.

"...Wow, that was amazing."

Zena looked flushed as she gave the concert a rave review.

After an hour or so, the kids' performance had just come to an end.

It was energetic from start to finish; like Zena, the rest of the audience around us still looked airily excited.

I wanted to go backstage and congratulate my girls on their show, but Zena had to be at her meeting point soon, so I praised the group by way of the Space Magic spell Telephone and let them know that I was seeing Zena off to the west gate.

"Sorry to take up your time right before you enter the labyrinth."

"Not at all! It was so much fun!"

Zena looked pleased from the bottom of her heart.

"That's good, then. So, want to grab a light snack on our way to the west gate?"

"Yes, that would be lovely! Satou!"

Zena seemed a little more high-pitched than usual today.

I guess the atmosphere of a festival is exciting even when nothing in particular is happening.

We quenched our thirst with some veria water, then munched on various skewers and labyrinth *manju* as we made our way through the festivities.

It was reminiscent of when we toured through the shopping stalls in Seiryuu City.

That reminded me—since Zena had introduced me to some of her favorite products of Seiryuu City, maybe I could show her some rarities here in return.

With that thought, I suggested we take a little detour and led her to the area where Neru and the other girls from the downtown tenements—now

employees of the Echigoya Company, Celivera branch—were working their food stalls.

“Satou, what are all those casks and boxes piled up for over there?”

Zena was looking at the sloped plaza near the west gate of the labyrinth, where there were huge stacks of casks, barrels, and crates.

“Oh, those are empty. They probably held all the food and supplies for today’s festival.”

“A-all for this festival? That’s incredible!”

I didn’t know why they were over there specifically, but it probably just happened because there hadn’t been any designated spot to put them, so they just piled everything in a random corner.

It was the same kind of thing you might see at a poorly planned college festival.

“What did you say?!”

“Oh, did I hit a nerve, Sir Ashinen?”

As we were approaching the food carts, my “Keen Hearing” skill picked up an argument from some young boys ahead of us.

“Is someone fighting?”

“It happens a lot in Labyrinth City.”

The voices sounded familiar, but since I didn’t think it was an adult’s place to interfere in an argument among children, we ignored it and kept moving. It sounded like it was some distance away from the food carts anyway, so we probably wouldn’t get caught up in it.

“Hey, good to see you, mister! Come have some grub!”

Neru, a redhead girl around high school age, waved at us from one of the stalls and called out casually.

Since she worked in front of a hot iron plate, she was wearing a tank top that left me carefully averting my eyes.

“Hello, Miss Neru. Quite a line you have.”

“Yeah, ’cause everyone’s food is free today, courtesy of the higher-ups. It’s been like this all morning.”

Ah, so kids who normally couldn’t afford to buy much food were lining up to eat as much as they could.

We would probably have to line up for at least an hour to get anything.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to get to your meeting point in time if we wait in this line. Shall we go to another stall, Miss Zena?”

“It’s too bad, but I guess I’ll have to come back some other time.”

Zena looked around at the signboards and nodded, looking disappointed.

Like so many others, her appetite had probably been attracted by Tama’s masterpieces Twirling Takoyaki, Dancing Croquettes, Winning Skewers, and Flying Fried Potatoes.

“Here you are, young master.”

Someone handed me bundles of *takoyaki* and the other dishes. It was Polina, the manager of the Echigoya Company.

“We wouldn’t want to cut the line, though—”

I guiltily tried to decline the special treatment, but she shook her head with a smile.

“We’re celebrating *your* achievements today! I’m sure no one will mind.”

She looked back at the people in line, who all grinned and chimed in with agreements. “Yeah, of course!” “It’s thanks to you that we get to eat so much good stuff today!”

“Well, thank you very much, then.”

I bowed to the people in line and accepted the package from Polina.

“Satou, this festival...is for you?”

Zena tilted her head in confusion.

“Do you know what we’re celebrating today, Zena?”

“Y-yes, I thought—”

“Zenacchiiii! Over heeere!”

A loud voice interrupted Zena’s words.

“Lilio!”

Amid the crowd watching the kids’ quarrel was Lilio and the rest of Zena’s squad. All three of them were holding wrapped food, too.

“Did you guys line up as well? This *takoyaki* stuff is amazing!”

“The skewers, too.”

“I liked the fried potatoes best.”

Zena tried each of their recommendations in turn, exclaiming “delicious!” each time.

I didn’t mind standing and eating, but it might be nice to sit down somewhere.

As I looked around for a spot, my eyes met across the crowd with a very young-looking girl.

“Sir Satou!” she exclaimed. “Sir Satou! Over here, no?”

It was Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom, jumping up and down and waving at me.

She was a friend of Arisa and Mia, but after rescuing her from the Plunderer King Ludaman, we hadn’t seen her much between my group’s training and our floormaster battle.

Standing behind her was her stony-faced and dependable lady knight, Ravna.

I couldn’t just ignore them. I headed over with food in hand.

“Hello, Princess Meetia.”

“Greetings. Allow me to congratulate thee on thy accomplishments.”

The princess put a hand next to her face and sighed with a large smile. She must be using her Heraluon-given gift, Breath of Purification.

“Thank you very much, Princess.”

“Indeed. And who might this young lady be?”

Turning around, I saw that Zena had followed behind me.

“This is a friend of mine who saved the lives of Liza and the girls—Lady Zena Marienteil of Seiryuu County. Miss Zena, this is Her Highness Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom.”

“Oh-ho, it must have been no small feat to save the amazing Miss Liza, no?”

“A p-p-princess?”

Zena looked surprised and quickly bowed in respect to a foreign royal.

“No need to be so formal. Any friend of Sir Satou is a friend of mine indeed. Thou may simply call me Meetia.”

Zena grew only more flustered at the princess’s friendly demeanor.

“Hereditary Knight Pendragon, congratulations on your illustrious deeds. I shall learn from your example to further myself as well.”

As I was watching the pair interact, the stony knight offered me words of praise.

“...Hereditary Knight? Pendragon?”

Zena’s eyes widened as she stared at me as if in utter shock, stammering.

Just as I had started to suspect, Zena didn’t know that I had become an honorary hereditary knight in the Muno Barony and taken on the surname Pendragon.

Come to think of it, while we were walking around, everyone had just been calling me “mister” so far. And she must not have seen the parade in the morning.

But was it really something to be that shocked about?

According to Viscount Nina of the Muno Barony, lesser hereditary knights were appointed at least several times a year in any territory.

“You didn’t know? I was awarded the title of honorary hereditary knight and took on the name Pendragon.”

I was pretty sure I’d written as much in the letter I sent her from Muno City.

“Whoa, then wait, this festival’s all for you?”

Lilio stuck her head in behind Zena.

“Not just for me. We challenged the floormaster in a large group.”

To be even more exact, the festival was for my kids, and I was just tagging along.

“I believe I wrote to you about this in the letter I sent from the Muno Barony. Maybe you didn’t receive it?”

“N-no, the last letter I got from you was from Sedum City in Kuhanou County...”

She’d left for Labyrinth City after that, which was why she hadn’t received any subsequent letters.

Unlike modern Japan, it took a long time for mail to reach its destination in this world, and sometimes it didn’t even get there at all. So issues like this were inevitable.

“Well, when I show you around Labyrinth City tomorrow, I can take you to a nice restaurant as well. If you’d like, I can tell you all about it then.”

“R-right. You have to, okay?”

Zena still seemed to be in shock as I made her a promise.

It would take a bit too long to get into it here, and I didn’t really want a crowd of people to overhear anyway.

“Sir Satou, art thou all right?”

Princess Meetia called out to me cautiously.

Oops. I was so busy calming Zena down that I neglected the princess.

“My apologies, Princess Meetia.”

“Not at all. Thou art the star today, after all, no?”

As always, her imperious tone was at odds with her childlike features.

“By the way, what are they fighting about over there?”

I nodded toward the boys and girls who were still arguing nearby.

I knew a few of them, namely Gerits, the third son of the viceroy of Celivera, and his usual hangers-on.

We'd spoken a little bit at the viceroy's wife's tea parties, and then I had rescued them from the plunderers' plot to start a chain rampage in the labyrinth, but that was about it— No, I suppose they'd also asked me to start running courses for noble students at the explorers' school.

The preparations for their request were almost complete, but I'd been planning to aim those toward lesser nobles' kids, not prestigious families like theirs.

"Indeed, I am told those are noble friends of Sir Gerits and company, but evidently they have been at odds since their elementary school days."

At odds—so maybe they were rivals?

It was a group of seven or so armed boys and girls from noble families who were clashing with Gerits and friends.

Apparently, this new group was about to go into the labyrinth, since they were accompanied by two strong guardian knights with levels in the high 20s, as well as six soldiers and four bag carriers.

The weapons the kids were holding were clearly brand-new and unused, but they were quite well equipped. In particular, their leader was barely of adult age, but he wore a dwarf-made mithril-alloy sword at his waist.

"I-it's a race, Bowman!" I heard Gerits shout. "We'll see who gets a garnet badge first!"

"Aren't you listening to me, pal? I don't care about being an explorer. It's just a stepping stone on the way to government service, that's all."

"D-don't insult explorerrrrrrrs!"

Gerits roared in anger at the boy named Bowman's careless remark.

"It's not the kinda job any coward can do!"

That was a bit surprising to hear. I didn't realize Gerits had such strong feelings about the explorer profession.

"All right, all right. Fine, it's a race. But we're not interested in garnet badges. Let's see who can get to level fifteen first instead," Bowman countered.

"Level fifteen? But that's on par with a knight!"

"I'm level four, and you said in your last letter that you're level seven, right? We've already got our preparations in order, so I think it's a perfect handicap, yeah?"

Gerits was actually only level 5. He must have been exaggerating in his letter to his rival.

The beastfolk girls had reached level 15 or so in the Seiryuu City labyrinth alone, so that should take them only a few days, right?

"We're gonna spend some time in the beetle area now. If it goes well, we might hit level fifteen before the New Year. So if you wanna win, you'd better show me what you've got, and fast."

With that confident declaration, Bowman and his friends walked away toward the west gate into the labyrinth.

"S-Sir Geriiits, should you really have made a promise like that?"

This nervous question was from Luram, a pudgy young boy who was a friend of Gerits's.

I often ran into him buying food at Neru's and the other girls' food carts on our way out of the labyrinth, so he might be the child I knew best out of the group.

"Sh-shut up! Nobles don't go back on their word!"

As Gerits snapped angrily at Luram, our eyes met.

"Sir Pendragon!"

He came running up to me like a man who had just found his ticket out of hell.

"You saw that, right?! You've gotta open up courses for us at the explorers' school! Starting tomorrow, if you can!"

Without waiting for an answer to his demand, he ran off into the crowd with his friends.

"Honestly, that Sir Gerits is a troublemaker, no?"

Princess Meetia sighed.

"It's all right. We were planning on having courses for noble students anyway."

Of course, I'd intended to aim those toward the less financially blessed nobles, but I couldn't turn a blind eye after hearing of Gerits's passion for explorers. Besides, the viceroy's wife had done a lot for me.

Most of all, it'd be hard to sleep at night if I kept all the labyrinth glory for my group and myself.

"We'd be so honored to be educated by a mithril explorer like you, Sir Pendragon!"

One of Gerits's friends, Baronet Dyukeli's daughter Mary-Ann, clasped my hand in gratitude.

This young girl's desire to be an explorer was so strong that she'd once followed some nasty female explorers into the labyrinth and nearly met her death, yet she still refused to give up.

"I'm terribly sorry, Lady Mary-Ann, but I'm afraid I won't be personally instructing you. You'll have another teacher."

I was planning on entrusting the job to Miss Ayaume or Sir Kajiro, who was currently recovering with his newly healed leg.

"Thou must not ask the moon, Lady Mary-Ann. Sir Satou is surely quite busy preparing for next month's kingdom meeting, so we shan't get in his way, no?"

"Of course... I'm sorry, Sir Knight."

"More importantly, thou must prepare to begin your course tomorrow. Go on, Lady Mary-Ann!"

"Yes, Princess Meetia!"

Comforted by her royal friend, Mary-Ann bowed to me quickly before scurrying off after Gerits and company.

"My apologies, Miss Zena."

I apologized to Zena and company for neglecting them while I dealt with Gerits and the other kids.

Since it was almost time for their departure, I accompanied the somewhat distraught-looking Zena and her squad to the west gate.

“...Hey, kid. Was that cute little girl your lover or what?”

“No, certainly not.”

I shook my head immediately at Lilio’s strange question.

“See, Zenacchi? Nothing to worry about.”

“I—I don’t know what you mean!”

Turning bright red, Zena looked away from the chortling Lilio.

“Looks like everyone else is there already, yeah?”

“They’re rather early, considering that the noon bell has yet to ring.”

Lou and Iona waved at a group of people gathered by the west gate, wearing similar equipment.

“All right, I guess we’ll be off, Satou.”

“Okay. Please be careful.”

For some reason, Zena wasn’t looking away, so we got stuck staring into each other’s eyes like the protagonists of some romantic comedy.

“Guilty?”

“Not sure...”

The younger girls from my group came up behind us, snacks in hand.

“Master sighted, I report.”

Nana was there, too, with the orphanage kids in tow.

“Aaaah!” Seeing Nana, Lilio exclaimed loudly. “If you’re here, does that mean John’s around, too? And that Mito person?”

“I don’t understand, I declare.”

“What do you...?”

“The names John and Mito are not registered in my name list.”

In her roundabout way, Nana was trying to say that Lilio had the wrong person.

“Wait, did you meet Nana’s sisters, by any chance?”

“Seven girls with the same face? One of them’s called Number Eight or Hachiko or something?”

I hadn’t heard the name Hachiko before, but if they all looked like Nana and one was called Number 8, then there was no mistaking it.

“Yes, I believe so. Are they all right?”

“Oh, so he’s not with you...”

“Yes, they were all in very good health.”

As Lilio’s shoulders slumped, Zena answered me instead.

She said they had last seen Nana’s sisters in Fau, a town in Zetts County. The homunculi had been working as waitresses at a restaurant there to save up money.

Glancing at the markers on my map, I saw that they were now in an area called the Fujisan Mountains, heading toward the Muno Barony.

They’d leveled up at some point, too: Even the lower members, who’d been around level 7, had doubled to level 14.

A little curious, I used the marker on the map as a target to activate the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance and see how they were doing.

Even in an unknown map, I could still use the spell if I had a marker to target, as it turned out.

...A spider?

They were all riding on the back of a gigantic creature that looked like a fusion between a crab and a spider.

Number 8 now had “Animal Training,” so she had probably tamed the monster. It looked very strong and had gigantic, long legs, meaning they should be able to traverse even the toughest terrain with ease.

I would've gone to help them if they were having trouble getting to the grave they needed to visit, but it looked like they didn't need my help after all. I wasn't going to stick my nose in and hurt their pride for no good reason.

"...Zena, you can have this."

"A brooch?"

"There's a small water stone inside it to use in case of an emergency. If you touch the stone and charge it with magic, it'll produce water."

As I was checking in on Nana's sisters, Arisa started talking to Zena.

They would probably be fine, since it was only a half day's trip into the labyrinth, but I gave her a set of veria magic potions that were supposedly from the labyrinth as a parting gift.

Zena tried to insist that she couldn't accept such expensive items, but Arisa insisted. "Just take it to reassure our worrywart master."

"Thank you very much, Satou, Arisa— Huh?"

As Zena sheepishly took the gifts, her eyes suddenly widened.

She was staring at something behind me.



"Pen— Erm, S-Satou!"

A single figure came rushing over from the explorers' guild, flying into the plaza by the west gate.

Even silhouetted by the sun behind her, her distinctive chest and tight curls revealed her identity.

She did an impressive somersault in midair, although that might not be the best idea in a dress.

Despite myself, though, I couldn't take my eyes off the twin miracles before me.

Finally, she landed on her feet right in front of us.

"I am here!"

Flushed with embarrassment, she still crossed her arms dramatically as she announced her presence.

There was no mistaking her gorgeous good looks and her unique golden curls in their large, luxurious glory.

It was Miss Karina Muno, the second daughter of Baron Muno, my master.

“Karinaaa?”

“Time for a battle, sir!”

Ah—

Pochi launched into the air, and Tama used the nearby wall for a double jump, both charging to attack Karina.

“Wait!”

Tama heard my order mid-leap and changed directions to avoid Karina, tumbling in a different direction.

Pochi still crashed squarely into Karina, though, and the two of them went flying through the nearby pile of crates. They disappeared into the wreckage, so I couldn’t see how they’d landed.

“Oh dear, is Miss Busty all right?”

“Hmm?”

Arisa and Mia blinked in confusion at the sudden development.

“I’m sure Miss Karina is fine. She played with Pochi and Tama like that quite often at Muno Castle.”

“I guess they played in the old capital, too, but still, that didn’t look fine to me...”

“That could put a larvae’s life in danger, I observe.”

Liza didn’t seem concerned, but Lulu and Nana were still looking at the pile of crates nervously. True enough, an all-out attack from Pochi could probably kill Miss Karina if it hit her directly.

“S-Satou, we have to go help them!”

Zena started to jump into action, but I grabbed her arm to stop her.

There was no need to worry.

“Ouch... Good heavens.”

Karina emerged from beyond the wall, covered in dust but utterly unharmed.

There were probably a few reasons for this: Pochi had held back by not using “Blink,” Tama had grabbed her at the last second to slow her down, and most of all, Raka must have protected Miss Karina as always.

“Lady Karina, you mustn’t let your guard down.”

“Thank you, Mr. Raka. I do believe I just narrowly escaped death thanks to you.”

The glowing blue pendant at Karina’s chest spoke in a low, masculine voice. This was Raka, a magical Intelligent Item.

I let go of Zena and walked up to Karina.

“Lady Karina, are you all right?”

“S-Satou! I-I’m fine, th-thank you.”

I reached toward her only to brush the dirt off her hair, but Miss Karina turned bright red and backed away.

I guess she’s still not totally comfortable around men.

“Zenacchi! The captain says we’re heading into the labyrinth soon!”

“O-okay! I’ll be right there!”

Lilio, who was over with the rest of the Labyrinth City Celivera’s Elite Training Corps, called over loudly.

“Satou, I’m sorry; it sounds like I have to go.”

“All right. Be safe in there.”

Zena looked like she wanted to ask about Karina, so I promised to explain the whole situation while I showed her around Labyrinth City the next day.

“Satou, you seem quite close with that young lady, hmm?”

Once Zena left, Karina put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed it tighter by the second.

Could you please not make it sound like I'm a cheating boyfriend?

"Pochii?"

Tama came back with a droopy-looking Pochi from beyond the wreckage. The girl's dog ears were flat on her head, and even her normally energetic tail was tucked between her legs.

She sort of looked like a criminal turning herself in.

"Tama, Pochi! Come over here."

"Aye-aye."

"Yes, sir."

When Liza called Tama and Pochi over, their voices were stiff.

Hearing this as well, Karina let go of my shoulder and turned to look at them.

"How many times have I told you not to use your strength recklessly in public? And yet, you did it anyway, didn't you?"

"...Aye."

"Yes, sir."

Liza bopped each of them on the head with a balled-up fist.

"And you, Pochi. You weren't wearing your limiter bracelets, were you?"

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I took them off for the concert, and I just kinda forgot to put them back on, sir."

"Just kinda forgot" is no excuse."

Ahhh, she wasn't wearing a power-dampening magic item. That explained why they went flying fast enough to break through a wall.

"Liza, wait—"

Liza looked like she was about to strike Pochi on the rear, but I stopped her.

A little bit of light physical punishment was one thing, but considering how

often Pochi got hurt in the labyrinth, I didn't think physical pain would really do anything to deter her behavior.

"But, master..."

In an unusual moment, Liza started to protest, but she didn't say anything else. Personally, I would prefer that she forget her status as a slave and speak freely.

"Master, you shouldn't be so soft on her," Arisa said instead.

"Yeah, I know."

If it weren't for Raka's protection and Tama's help, Miss Karina could have been seriously injured.

So I thought it would be best to teach her a lesson in the hopes of preventing her from losing control like this again.

"Pochi."

"I'm very sorry, sir. Pochi did a terrible thing, sir."

Making little kids feel bad about themselves could have the opposite of the intended effect, so I stopped her from apologizing more.

"Listen, Pochi..."

I explained as clearly as I could why I was scolding her.

She didn't quite follow my scientific explanation, but Arisa stepped in and managed to get through to her.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"No, it's my fault, too, for letting my guard down, I must say."

Karina reassured the unhappy Pochi.

I decided her punishment would be going without meat for three days, starting with tonight's dinner. For her, there was probably no punishment more severe, so it should serve as an effective deterrent.

I didn't start enforcing it right away out of a samurai's mercy.

Arisa said I was being too soft, but it would be cruel to deprive her of enjoying

the festival.

In addition to Pochi's punishment, I now had homework of my own.

The power-dampening bracelets were simple and activated automatically when equipped, but that wouldn't prevent incidents like this one if they forgot to wear them.

Ideally, they should be worn at all times and have some kind of automated on/off feature.

In fact, an Intelligent Item like Miss Karina's Raka would be ideal.

I didn't think I could make something quite that advanced, but if I used all my current knowledge and equipment, I could probably make an inferior copy. I decided to start working on it that night.



“Lady Karinaaa, where are youuu?”

When I heard someone calling for Karina from across the crowd around the food stalls, I looked over and saw Erina, one of Karina's guard maids.

Unlike Karina, who had taken a shortcut with her several-foot-long jumps, her maids were sprinting along a normal path.

“Erina, over here.”

“Ah! Hey, Sir Knight!”

Behind her was a female soldier I'd never seen before, probably a new recruit from the Muno Barony.

“Isn't Pina here?”

“Sure she is. She actually went to the west guild lookin' for you. Miss Pina's a lady-in-waiting now, not a guardian maid, so this gal here's the newbie.”

Erina pushed the newbie forward as she gave this incomplete introduction.

“Our coworker Taruna wanted to come, too, but she couldn't make it 'cause she got assigned to escort the study-abroad students to the old capital and Bolehart City and stuff.”

The revival of the Muno Barony seemed to be coming along nicely.

As I caught up with Erina, I also introduced myself to the newbie.

“Now, Erina, it’s not fair if you keep Sat—er, Sir Pendragon all to yourself.”

Miss Karina pushed in between Erina and me, folding her arms beneath her chest.

The volume had somehow grown since I last saw this particular sight, which was giving off a dangerous level of bewitching attraction. Talk about magical.

“Guilty.”

Mia yanked on my ear.

She must have noticed the direction of my lech—erm, *healthy* gaze.

“By the way, Lady Karina...” I cleared my throat and changed the subject. “What business brings you to Labyrinth City?”

It wasn’t particularly unusual for noble children to come to Labyrinth City, not even counting the recent example of Bowman and his friends, but normally it was warriors seeking military training or children of poor nobles seeking a quick fortune in the labyrinth.

For an upstanding noblewoman like Miss Karina, especially since she was the daughter of a feudal lord, a visit was more unusual.

The Muno Barony wasn’t exactly prosperous, but in this world, feudal lords had special powers granted by their control of a City Core.

Aside from certain exceptions, like when she went to the royal capital recently to represent the Muno Barony, it was unlikely for someone like Karina to go on a trip just for fun.

“To get stronger, of course!”

Karina gave a childishly excited grin.

So she was taking the warrior’s option, then.

“Very cooool?”

“That’s our Karina, sir! You can work hard with us, sir!”

"Yes, but of course! Perhaps I shall even become a Hero's attendant someday!"

Karina got fired up with Tama and Pochi. As usual, she was a bit more beauty than brains.

"I'm impressed that Baron Muno allowed you to come."

"Well, that's—erm, a secret."

I glanced toward Erina and the newbie.

"The baron wasn't thrilled, but Miss Nina said—"

"E-Erina!"

Karina hurriedly clamped a hand over Erina's mouth. I guess Nina must have been plotting something.

When I was in the Muno Barony, they had hinted at proposing a marriage between Karina and me, but what with their current revival in progress, it would be better for her to marry into a proper family than to marry a suspicious new, low-ranking noble like me.

But of course, it wouldn't make sense to send her on a dangerous trip to Labyrinth City just for the sake of a marital courtship.

I would have to get the details out of Miss Karina's lady-in-waiting Pina later.

"At any rate, Lady Karina..." I tried to rescue Erina from being smothered at the hands of her employer. "Have you found an inn yet?"

"Not yet. Lady Karina was dying to see y—"

"ERINA!"

Karina clamped Erina's mouth shut again.

As they reenacted the same drama, the newbie flailed anxiously.

"Sorry, Liza, but could you contact Miteruna and ask her to prepare one of the guesthouses for company?"

"Right away, sir."

With that, I accompanied Karina and the others to the west guild to meet up

with Pina.

“Still, I was surprised to see you here so suddenly.”

I hadn’t received any letter that Karina was coming to Labyrinth City or anything.

“It’s a surprise, like Arisa told me about before.”

Karina looked a little pleased with herself.

Since she was puffing up her chest as she talked, the bouncing was even more violent than usual. Around us, a murmur arose from some captivated men.

“Pssst, look at that.”

“I-is this real life?”

“Oh, gods...thank you for this blessing...”

I knew how they felt, but that last guy was being a bit overdramatic.

“Damn, she’s gorgeous...”

“Ah, my goddess of beauty! Have you forgotten m—?”

A handsome explorer with a large shield came rushing up to Karina.

“I’ve never seen you in my life.”

Before I could intervene, Karina used Raka’s Strength Enhancement to send the man flying across the crowd.

“She sent Jel of the Iron Defense flying with one blow!”

“Beautiful *and* strong... Wait, is that the young master?”

“So she’s another one of his mistresses...”

“Dammit, that guy gets all the fun!”

I should probably have a word with some of these people to clear up a few things.

“Satou, we found Pina.”

Miss Karina dragged me by the arm, briskly pushing through the crowd. I sort of felt like a father on his day off being yanked around by a big, excited dog. But

regardless of her goal, the labyrinth wouldn't be that dangerous with Raka to protect her, so she could probably enjoy Labyrinth City with the likes of Pochi and Tama.

For now, though...

"Satou, you look like you want to say something."

Karina stood in front of the white explorers' guild building and turned to face me, looking slightly annoyed.

"Yes, well, I forgot to say it before..." I gave a theatrical little flourish.
"Welcome to Labyrinth City. It's a pleasure to see you."

Karina's eyes widened for a second, and then she broke into a warm smile.

The Clumsy Maiden

Satou here. The saying jack of all trades, master of none makes the talent sound like a bad thing, but I think having a variety of skills is something to be proud of. Although in games, specializing in one thing is usually preferable.

“Welcome back, young master.”

“Thanks.”

When I finally got back to the mansion that evening, I gave my overcoat to one of the maids and headed for the living room.

“Are the other girls and our guest already back?”

“Our guest is in the bath with Pochi—I mean, Madam Pochi and Madam Tama—right now.”

After I asked the maid about Karina’s status, I sank onto the couch.

We had parted ways after we met up with Pina, and I went around to greet all the important guests at the venue and drank a good deal of the ale General Erthal had supplied with the guildmaster. Though we didn’t meet up much, I was confident that Karina and company had enjoyed the festival, too.

“Ahhh, how very refreshing.”

“Wait a sec, Lady Karina. We didn’t tie your sash yet!”

“Lady Karina, please don’t move until your hair dries.”

Karina and her maids entered the room from the main bath area, where they’d been washing away the exhaustion from their trip.

Normally, we wore bathrobes after the bath, too, but I wasn’t expecting them to come into the living room dressed that way.

Miss Karina was wearing a knee-length robe, so she was covered below the

waist, but her chest was a good deal more exposed.

The depth of that cleavage threatened to suck me in.

Aah, the devil is whispering in my ear. This must be how Adam felt when Eve tempted him with the apple...

“Guilty. ■■■ **Darkness Yami.**”

The glorious vision was cut off by Mia’s Spirit Magic from behind the other girls.

But I would never, ever forget what I’d just seen.

“What was that? Magic?”

“Lewd.”

“Yeah, no fair trying to seduce master with those overpowered weapons of yours.”

“Lady Karina, I’m terribly sorry, but...you look a bit too stimulating in that outfit, so please put this dress on instead.”

Mia and Arisa complained to the confused Karina, while Lulu politely offered her new clothes.

As all this was happening behind the curtain of darkness Mia’s Spirit Magic had created, I couldn’t see any of it. Of course, I could watch if I used my Clairvoyance spell, but I didn’t want to resort to peeping.

“Young master, the guesthouse is read—”

Miss Miteruna entered the room but froze when she saw that half of it was cut off by darkness.

“Wh-what is this? An attack? H-help—”

“Don’t worry. It’s just Mia’s magic.”

Miteruna panicked and almost called for help, but I hastily reassured her.

“Anyway, thank you for preparing the guesthouse. Sorry it was such short notice.”

I appreciated her getting the guesthouse ready for Karina and her escorts.

"Not at all. I was simply doing my job." In spite of her modesty, Miteruna looked proud of her work. "Young master, will you be needing the carriage this evening?"

"No, I'm not going back out today. I'd appreciate if you put the horses back in the stable."

"Right away."

We'd been invited to celebrations almost every day since returning from the labyrinth, but today I'd turned them all down so that we could welcome Karina and company.

I'd already partied with the viceroy's wife, General Erthal, and the guildmaster.

Mr. Dozon's explorer party congratulated us at the guildmaster's party, as well as Zarigon and the Hellfire Fangs, who we'd rescued in the labyrinth. Mr. Jelil, the leader of the Red Dragon's Roar party, did the same at the viceroy's wife's banquet.

At the banquet, Mr. Jelil also returned the Flame Sword I'd lent him to defeat the Middle Stratum's floormaster.

He was pretty insistent about wanting to buy it off me, but I'd be in all kinds of trouble if someone was to take it apart and analyze it, which was why I refused. I'd be happy to trade it for a Chant orb, but I didn't think such a thing even existed.

"...Release."

After a while, Mia rescinded her spell, and Miss Karina returned to the doorway with her chest thoroughly covered.

She and her attendants hadn't brought any spare outfits besides their traveling clothes and the dress Karina had been wearing earlier. I didn't want them to have to put the same dirty clothes back on after a bath, so I had given Karina some of Nana's spare clothes to change into.

I won't say where, but it seemed a little tight on her. I could almost hear the fabric screaming.

Her cheeks were somewhat pink and flushed. I didn't know if it was because of the bath or the bathrobe situation from a moment ago, but it gave off an unintentionally sexy air.

"I'll reach out to the tailor tomorrow afternoon and order you some new clothes. Please bear with those for the time being."

"New clothes? How luxurious!"

Despite being a feudal lord's daughter, Karina had a sense of money that seemed to be rooted in her long experience with being poor.

"The viceroy's wife has invited us to dinner and a tea party. It wouldn't be proper to attend in your traveling clothes, would it?"

I guess we were being watched when we'd reunited at the festival—when I got back to the mansion, the invitation was already waiting. As always, the viceroy's wife was quick to pick up on information and equally quick to act.



“No, I shan’t be attending. Please decline for me.”

That wouldn’t do. I pressed the topic further and got her to agree in exchange for preparing equipment and weapons for her to challenge the labyrinth.

And there was another thing, too.

“I’ll be departing for the royal capital in ten days or so, since I have to attend the kingdom meeting next month.”

Generally, a lesser noble from another territory like myself wouldn’t need to attend, but I was obliged to go in order to be awarded for defeating a floormaster and such.

“Baron Muno and Viscount Nina have contacted me to instruct that I bring you along.”

I’d received this letter from Miss Karina’s lady-in-waiting Pina when we met up.

“I shall not!”

“It’s already been decided.”

“Absolutely *not*.”

Karina stomped childishly.

“Karina, don’t be selfiish?”

“You gotta do your duties or they’ll get mad at you, sir!”

Tama and Pochi joined in to convince Karina. Did they consider her a younger sister to them?

“But it isn’t fair! I wish to be an explorer with Tama and Pochi.”

As Karina shook her head rapidly, her ample chest bounced until a single button popped off the shirt, exposing a glimpse of what she was wearing underneath.

Instead of the Shiga Kingdom’s standard chest wraps, she was wearing a modern-style brassiere, which Arisa had popularized in the Muno Barony.

Taking care to avoid looking in that direction, I attempted to persuade Karina.

“Couldn’t we simply return to Labyrinth City once the kingdom meeting is over?”

“But what if they tell me to go straight back to the Barony?”

That seemed fine to me, but I could understand that she wouldn’t want to head back home after finally reaching her destination.

“Well, if it comes to that, I’ll support you.”

“It’s a promise!”

I certainly would, although I couldn’t guarantee that she’d be permitted to come back.

“Sir Knight, will it really be possible to finish a dress for Lady Karina by the day after tomorrow?”

Pina made a good point. Personally, I’d be able to do it overnight, so I had miscalculated a bit.

“Then I guess we should choose some clothing to rent tomorrow.”

There was still time until sundown, but I doubted they would want to go back out after taking a bath.

“I’ll make arrangements, then. Shall I secure a tailor to do the modifications as well?”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Miteruna.”

In Miss Karina’s case, the chest would definitely need to be taken out.

“Huh, you used an airship to get from the old capital to the royal capital?”

There was still time before dinner, so I was asking Miss Karina and company about their journey.

“Yes, Uncle Tolma supplied it for us.”

Tolma was the younger brother of Viscount Siemmen, who owned a scroll workshop, and a relative of Miss Karina and the rest of Baron Muno’s family.

He was also a friend of mine, who had helped me establish many connections in the old capital. Come to think of it, he and Karina’s brother, Orion, once

dragged me around for a night of mischief on the town.

“The rest of the journey was the tough part.”

“So much walking, and only dried foods to eat...”

Erina and the newbie maid guard grumbled.

“Walking? You didn’t take a stagecoach?”

If I remembered correctly, there was a regular stagecoach route that traveled between the royal capital and Labyrinth City.

“Lady Karina didn’t wanna.”

“Wh-whenever I ride one of those, men always stare at me.”

Karina pouted and looked away.

Well, I could understand the other passengers’ temptation, as well as Karina’s discomfort. They probably didn’t charter a private carriage because of Miss Karina’s frugal instincts. I guess they traveled light to make their journey on foot a little easier.

“But wasn’t it dangerous to make the trip on foot?”

“Nah, not really. There were barely any monsters.”

“Yes, and no robbers, either.”

“It seems we timed it right as the knights from the royal capital were patrolling the road.”

Pina chimed in with Erina and the newbie.

It sounded like they had been pretty lucky.

Just then, we heard loud, pattering footsteps.

“Karina! Look at me, sir!”

“Tama toooo.”

Pochi and Tama had come running back with large rings in hand, and they started spinning them on their waists: Hula-Hoops.

I’d had Arisa make them for exercise when we were on standby before

returning from the labyrinth.

I'd been wondering where the pair had gone, but apparently, they went to retrieve the Hula-Hoops from their rooms.

"My, how incredible! You're both so terribly cute."

Karina clapped her hands happily, and Pochi and Tama gleefully sped up their spinning.

"Your darling Arisa won't be shown up!"

"Mm."

"I shall participate as well, I declare."

Somehow, this sparked competition from Arisa, Mia, and Nana, who retrieved their hoops and started spinning as well.

Arisa's skills made sense, since she had experience from her previous life, but Mia was surprisingly good at it, too. It was a little stressful watching out of fear that her pigtails might get tangled up in the process, though.

Nana seemed to have a lack of natural rhythm like me, and she soon dropped hers. Though her expression didn't change, she seemed frustrated.

"I-I'd like to try it, too."

"Suuure..."

"It's easy, sir! I'm sure you'll master it in no time, sir!"

When Miss Karina timidly expressed her desire to join in, Tama and Pochi nodded eagerly while still spinning their hoops.

"You can borrow my hoop, I declare."

Nana offered her Hula-Hoop to Miss Karina. The other girls' would probably be too small for her.

"How do you do it?"

"On your hiiips."

"Then you just move your hips around, sir!"

Tama and Pochi stopped and slowly demonstrated how to get started.

“Erm, like this?”

Miss Karina tried to spin hers, but it fell to the floor almost immediately.

“Nooo.”

“Hit it right here, sir.”

Without dropping their hoops, Tama and Pochi tried to demonstrate the secret to Hula-Hooping. It was adorable to watch them swing their hips around.

“I see, so like this!”

Karina imitated Pochi and swung her hips, managing to spin her own hoop, albeit unsteadily.

Thanks to her impressive figure, her movement was very dynamic.

“Niiice.”

“That’s the ticket, sir!”

The hoop dropped to the floor after a few rotations, but Karina seemed to have gotten a knack for it.

“I did it! Pochi, Tama, I made it spin!”

“I knew you could do it, sir!”

“*Très bieeen.*”

It certainly was *très bien*.

The way her upper half bounced rhythmically in time with her hips was—
“Guilty!”

“Honestly! If you’re going to look at something, look at your beloved Arisa!”

Mia and Arisa obstructed my view as if they’d read my thoughts.

I didn’t get it. I was sure my “Poker Face” skill was making me look as innocent as an old man watching his grandchild at play...



“Woo, Sir Knight’s cookin’! I’ve been dreamin’ about this. Take a look, newbie! It’s a mountain of fried food!”

Miss Karina's battle maid Erina seemed to be the most excited about the banquet food we'd brought in.

"Erina, we're here to accompany Miss Karina. Be sure not to eat more than your fair share, hmm?"

"You got it!"

Today we were having a banquet to welcome Miss Karina and celebrate the completion of the parade, and Miss Karina's attendants were participating, too. Although it was really more like a living room party than a fancy seated banquet.

I sent some of the banquet food to the private orphanage and the explorers' school, too.

The kids especially loved the Kintaro candy I included, which I'd made in the labyrinth to kill time. I didn't want to scare the kids by including the legendary Kintaro's face in the cylindrical candy, so I made shapes like chicks and rabbits instead.

"Let's eat before it gets cold."

As we all started to dig in, Pochi stared between the food and me with drool sliding down her chin and the question *Can I have some?* in her eyes.

"You're not having any?" I asked.

Pochi's eyes widened, and her tail started wagging.

"Can I, sir?"

"No."

"You can't."

Arisa and Liza mercilessly shot down Pochi's hopeful question.

I was about to ask why, until I finally remembered that I'd told Pochi she couldn't have meat for three days.

"Just for tonight—"

"I said no!"

I was going to give her permission, but Arisa stopped me.

“Honestly,” she grumbled. “You’re like a father who’s too soft on his kids.”

Then you’re like an overly strict mother, Arisa.

I shook my head to dispel the ridiculous image.

Pochi would have to settle for a tofu hamburg steak tonight—or so I thought, but just as I finished making it, Arisa rejected this, too. “If you give her a substitute, it won’t really be a punishment, will it?”

“Boo-hoooo, sir.”

Pochi drooped her head, tears in her eyes.

“Pochi, come here.”

“...Yes, sir.”

I couldn’t give her any meat, but I figured I could at least let her sit on my lap, which was always hotly contested territory.

I thought the scent of meat might be torturous for her, so I tried using the Wind Magic spell Air Control and the Everyday Magic spell Deodorant to prevent the smells from reaching her, but then she just got even sadder. “I can’t even smell Mr. Meat anymore, sir...”

If it was this bad for the first meal, the next few days were going to be rough.

“Doziiing?”

“...You sleepy, Karina, sir?”

Miss Karina seemed to be exhausted from her long journey; soon after she ate her fill, she began to nod off.

Even her escort maids seemed to be getting sleepy.

“Oh dear...”

I couldn’t have them falling asleep here, so I went over to pick up Miss Karina and carry her to her room bridal-style.

“Waaah!”

The newbie watched this with a blushing, excited expression.

Next to her, Pina was grinning, too, but Erina's expression was harder to read.

At first I thought she was jealous, but considering her appetite, she was probably just reluctant to see the banquet end.

"Just a minuuute!"

As I was starting to lift Miss Karina by the back and knees, Arisa stopped me with an old-fashioned pose.

"Nana, lift."

"Yes, master."

On Mia's orders, Nana smoothly lifted up Karina princess-style in my place.

Karina's magic boobs formed a complicated line against Nana's respectable bust.

It was quite a sight to witness, but I was a little jealous, too.

"Master, is Lady Karina sleeping in the guest room?"

"No, I thought that might not look good, so I had Miss Miteruna prepare the guesthouse for them."

"Good thinking. Okay, Nana, you heard him."

"Yes, Arisa."

Nana carried Karina away to the guesthouse.

The newbie hurried after Nana; as Erina frantically stuffed her cheeks with fried chicken, Lulu offered her a basket to take along instead.

"Sir Knight, if you marry Lady Karina, you could carry her to your heart's content."

Pina whispered to me mischievously, then sped off after Nana with a giggle.

I was surprised by her unusual behavior, until I looked at her now-vacant seat and saw an empty mead bottle. I guess she was drunk.

"Mr. Meat, oh, Mr. Meat, wherefore art thou Mr. Meat, sir?"

As we relaxed after dinner, Pochi waxed poetic as she gazed at an image of meat in a picture book.

I guess going without meat for the night was a serious shock to her.

Incidentally, some of the others like Tama and Liza had tried to voluntarily go without meat in solidarity, but I'd rejected that because I didn't believe in collective punishment.

"Pochi, for breakfast tomorrow—"

"Oh my gosh, sir! Can I have meat tomorrow, sir?!"

Pochi jumped in hopefully, but it was probably best to get her to regret her actions a little more, so I couldn't be that easy on her.

"—you still can't have meat, but I'll make your favorite curry."

"Boo-hoooo, sir."

Her excitement short-lived, Pochi slumped down dramatically on the cushion. I guess even her beloved curry wasn't enough to cheer her up.

Next to her, Tama tried to slip Pochi some jerky, but I confiscated it with my Magic Hand.

"Nooo?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Thank you anyway, Tama, sir. But I gotta accept my punishment, sir."

I decided to ignore the melodramatic line, since it was probably due to Arisa's influence.

After that, I waited for everyone to fall asleep, then headed to the Ivy Manor —a mansion built by the elf sage Trazayuya long ago, complete with a research laboratory. While not quite on the same level as the equipment in the elf village, it contained a great deal of tools and magic devices.

My goal here was to experiment with whether I could make a lesser imitation of an Intelligent Item like Raka for Tama, Pochi, and the others.

I spent the night working on the problem and decided to try using the intelligence circuits in the golems made by elves as a reference.

I'll try and come up with some circuits during the day so I can put them together tomorrow night.

“Sir Pendragon! You’re late!”

“We’ve been waiting for you, Sir Satou!”

The next morning—although the sun had already risen by the time I left the Ivy Manor—I took Miss Karina and the others along to visit the explorers’ school after breakfast. When we arrived, a bunch of noble kids; the viceroy’s third son, Gerits; and Princess Meetia of the Nolork Kingdom were already there waiting.

I hadn’t expected them all to show up exactly on time. They must’ve been even more excited for the classes than I realized.

“A-and who’s this lovely lady?”

One of the kids, whose name I’d forgotten, stared at Miss Karina behind me.

Standing on either side of her, Tama and Pochi looked strangely proud. I guess they were happy to hear praise for Miss Karina.

“This is Lady Karina Muno, the daughter of my lord, Baron Muno.”

I introduced her to the noble kids, then gave her their names in turn.

At first, I was planning on having Karina train with the beastfolk girls in the labyrinth, but instead I decided to bring her here so she could make more friends.

They were all a bit younger than she was, but I was hopeful that the sociable Princess Meetia and the brave Miss Mary-Ann might make fast friends with her.

“She’s so pretty.”

“Wow...”

The boys seemed to be hypnotized by Karina’s good looks and incredibly large chest. That was probably normal for boys their age, but considering the look Mary-Ann kept shooting at Gerits, they probably should have been more careful.

I didn’t think he heard my thoughts or anything, but Gerits noticed Mary-Ann’s expression and quickly straightened himself out.

“Thou art incredible, Lady Karina. Never before have I met anyone better

endowed than my own mother.”

Princess Meetia bluntly commented on Karina’s bust size.

Taken aback by her frank compliment, Miss Karina blushed and squeezed her arms around her chest as if to cover up, which of course had the opposite effect.

I was tempted to type a REC command.

“Take your seats, please!” I said to cover up my stupid thoughts. As I did so, the teachers Mr. Kajiro and Miss Ayaume entered.

“Sir Knight, I did not know you were here,” Mr. Kajiro greeted me.

“Sorry to have you do this on such short notice.”

“It is my pleasure to be of service to you, Sir Knight. We had already finished preparing anyway, so it is really no trouble.”

“Are you all right with one more student, then?”

I introduced Miss Karina and asked permission for her to join.

“Yes, of course.”

Kajiro was happy to accommodate my request. He had Miss Karina take a seat, too, then turned to address the students.

“I am Kajiro, your teacher. And this is my assistant, Ayaume. The course will last half a month. As long as you do not drop out, you should all be as strong as knights by the time we are through.”

Kajiro introduced himself and explained the goal.

Almost all the kids, especially Princess Meetia and Miss Mary-Ann, stared at him with their eyes sparkling.

“However, do not expect special treatment during class because of your social standing. I will not address you as superiors as long as I am your teacher. If this is an issue for anyone, please quit the course at once. I shall introduce anyone who desires special treatment to a different teacher tomorrow.”

Most of the kids nodded as if to say *bring it on*.

Once Mr. Kajiro wrapped up his introduction, I decided to excuse myself. Kajiro and Ayaume could take care of the rest.

“Are you leaving, Satou?”

As soon as I turned away, Karina called out to me frantically.

“Yes, I have business to take care of today.”

I had promised to show Zena around Labyrinth City.

“But...how could you?”

“Karinaaa?”

“It’s bad to be selfish, sir.”

“But I...”

Tama and Pochi scolded the disappointed-looking Karina.

“Now, don’t run off to play after your class is over, all right? We’re going to the clothing rental shop this afternoon, remember.”

“I—I know *that*.”

Karina looked away and pouted.

Maybe it was my imagination, but she somehow seemed even more childish than when I last saw her in the royal capital.

Maybe she was acting more like Tama and Pochi because she was so excited to see them again?



“I still have time before I meet up with Zena...”

Looking at the clock in my menu screen, I decided to transform into Kuro and go check on the Echigoya Company in the royal capital.

Three rounds of Return brought me to their headquarters, which was in an uproar.

“Manager! The Seventh Order of Holy Knights contacted us again about their Magic Sword order.”

"I told them we couldn't do it right now! Write a polite refusal with the usual form, could you?"

The blond noble Eluterina, now the manager of the Echigoya Company, was doing battle with a mountain of paperwork on her desk. As a girl came running in from the hallway with a message, she shouted back at her in a harried voice.

"Manager, the Tenth Order—"

"Again, we can't do it right now!"

"No, this one's an additional request to their first aid kit order."

"Well, all right, then. How many more do they need?"

"A hundred kits."

"A hundred? Tifaleeza, do we have the stock?"

"We have thirty-one spare kits in stock. There are enough bandages and antidotes for more, but we don't have enough vials for the antidotes or fever medication. If we're to accept, we would have to hire some part-timers to make the fever medication into powder and pack it into paper."

There was a flash of silver hair amid the stacks of paper. Tifaleeza must be sitting in there somewhere.

"All right! Liz, you hire some part-timers—five should do the trick. Rory, go stock up on fever medication from the doctors' guild, please. Their vials are too expensive, so go to the wholesale dealer and—Lord Kuro!"

"""Welcome back, Lord Kuro!"""

As soon as they spotted me, the near-murderous tension evaporated, and everyone greeted me with a smile.

I was impressed by their ability to shift into business mode so quickly, and their smiles were so bright that they didn't seem forced at all.

"Looks like things are going well here. Don't mind me; just keep up the good work."

With that, I waited for the manager to finish giving orders before asking for a status update.

"Well, we closed the deal on land for the airship construction site. It should be ours by the end of the month. And we're feeling out whether we might be able to buy a workshop that went under due to lack of funds. Here are the notes and contract for that."

I took a quick glance at the notes on the workshop's previous owner and other details.

It was very well researched. There didn't seem to be any problems with the sale, so I checked over the contract and approved it on the spot.

At this rate, I could probably let the manager take care of things without me checking it first from now on.

"We've been inundated with requests for Magic Swords, Spears, and so on, but we've only been taking orders for five per month at two months in advance, per your instructions. There haven't been any of the airship-related inquiries you were worried about."

"I see," I replied shortly with a nod.

"Sales of the vegetable oil and simple fire tools we've been producing at our Labyrinth City location have been slowly increasing. The armor and equipment made from monster parts are very popular with commoners, and I think it's safe to assume they'll continue to be in demand. And we just now sold out of the first aid kits you suggested the other day, so we already need to restock."

Miss Manager was so eager as she gave her report that I could easily picture a tail wagging behind her.

Since we had been forced to stay shut up in the labyrinth for a while after defeating the floormaster recently, I had started disguising myself as Kuro to go to the Celivera location of the Echigoya Company to help train the salespeople.

Between my training-related skills and the natural talents of the employees, many of them gained production skills pretty quickly.

However, since their skill levels were low for now, they could make only very simple magic tools like plain fire-starters and beginner crafts like wooden boxes and metal fittings.

But practice makes perfect in both games and reality, so I hoped they would create more and increase their levels.

All that being said...

“Are you taking enough breaks and days off?”

Miss Manager and the other Echigoya staff had bags under their eyes, and my AR display showed that their stamina gauges were all on the verge of running out.

“Don’t worry, Lord Kuro! We don’t need any breaks if we take the nutrition supplement potions you gave us!”

No, that’s definitely cause for concern.

If they were working nonstop, they could very well die of exhaustion someday.

“Unacceptable. Don’t be foolish.”

“Lord Kuro?”

The manager smiled at me with the manic all-nighter energy I had often seen during death marches at my job. I bopped her on the head lightly and did my best to scold her gently while still keeping up Kuro’s signature brusque tone.

“Always take regular breaks, no matter how busy you are. It’s far better to work steadily and healthily over time than to bet it all on a short period. The occasional overtime or all-nighter is fine in emergencies, but make sure it doesn’t become a habit.”

“““Yes, Lord Kuro!”””

Unlike my current body, theirs wouldn’t hold up unscathed if they went without sleep for days on end.

Just as I thought, it’d be best to bring at least the management staff of the Echigoya Company into the labyrinth and raise them to level 30 or so.

The elf teachers had advised against power leveling, but that was only because one wouldn’t absorb skills and battle techniques effectively.

If the goal was just to raise their stamina, it should be fine, right?

I decided to prepare an area for light power leveling for Miss Manager and company.

“Lord Kuro?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Whoops, I’d spaced out mid-conversation.

“Make sure you eat on your breaks, too. Here, I got these from a noble in Labyrinth City as thanks for some errands.”

“What a sweet smell. Are they pastries?”

“I’m told they’re called soufflé cakes. They’d go well with blue-green tea, I think.”

These were actually my handmade cakes and showed Satou as the creator’s name.

Once I watched the Echigoya workers gather around the sweets, I checked my map marker view and noticed that Zena’s status had changed from **Sleeping** to **None**, so I decided to head back.

“I’ll leave more magic potions and such in the basement storage. If there’s anything else you need—”

“Lord Kuro, here’s a list, if you please.”

With a bright smile, Tifaleeza handed me a list of supplies they needed.

“Very good work, Tifaleeza. Please keep supporting Miss Manager.”

“Yes, Lord Kuro.”

Tifaleeza’s silver hair bobbed as she nodded, looking pleased with herself.

She was usually very cool and collected, so I was happy to see that she’d gotten comfortable enough to show this side of herself.

As if in competition with Tifaleeza, Miss Manager stared at me intently.

Oh, right.

“Miss Manager, do you know of any noblewomen in high society who wear fashionable dresses?”

I thought it might help with finding a dress for Miss Karina.

“Fashionable? Do you mean the sort who has a strong sense of the latest trends or the sort who sets the trends?”

“The former.”

Karina seemed to like relatively conservative dresses. I didn’t think she would want to be on the cutting edge of fashion.

Miss Manager gave me the names of a few noblewomen, and I did a quick map search.

Several of the girls whose names she’d mentioned were having a tea party together, so I used my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to take a peek and my original Picture Recorder spell to take a screenshot of their outfits from the neck down.

I didn’t record their faces in order to respect their privacy, not that it made much of a difference.

“Do you have enough golems for protection?”

“Yes, the adamantite golems and stone golems have prevented any more attempted burglaries and break-ins, and they keep the Magic Sword deliveries safe.”

The normal-size stone golems could reach only level 30 at most, so I used the Create Earth Servant spell to make four adamantite golems and dispatched them as well.

I went out of my way to use adamantite because that raised their level once they were turned into golems.

Both varieties were consecrated golems, made with anti-demon holy circuits.

“The stone foxes are especially popular!”

This comment came from a short-statured noble girl who was riding on one.

“Louna, I told you not to ride the stone foxes inside!”

“Awww, but this one likes it...”

If they were riding around on the stone foxes indoors, they must have really

been fond of them.

“Louna!”

“Fiiine.”

The young lady reluctantly dismounted from the stone fox.

Grumbling to herself, Miss Manager turned back toward me.

“If anything, I believe the stone horses are more popular. We’ve even received requests from some nobles to sell them.”

“Awww, but the stone foxes are cuterr.”

The cores that powered the golems were often used in elf technology, and they weren’t well suited for sale as magic power supplies, so I didn’t want to sell them.

“I have no plans to sell any golems. Please decline, even if the kingdom government asks.”

“Understood, Lord Kuro.”

Maybe I should try making a long-lasting orichalcum golem with a Holytree Stone furnace next, I thought absently as I nodded to Miss Manager. Once I put some fresh stock in the basement storage, I went back to Labyrinth City.



“I guess I still have a little time?”

I checked my map and saw that Zena hadn’t yet left her lodgings.

Not wanting to arrive too early and be left with nothing to do, I went for a leisurely walk toward the west guild instead.

As I passed the schoolyard of the explorers’ school, I saw that the noble kids were exercising in pairs.

“...Hmm?”

For some reason, Miss Karina was sitting alone in the corner.

No, wait—I hadn’t seen them through the grass at first, but Pochi and Tama were with her, too.

“Everyone makes mistakes, sir. Don’t let it get you down, sir.”

“Karina, don’t give uuup!”

“But...”

It sounded like she’d had a few mishaps, and Pochi and Tama were comforting her.

Curious, I went into the explorers’ school and asked Mr. Kajiro about it.

“Well, I wouldn’t call it a *complete* failure, but...”

As Mr. Kajiro hesitantly explained, he’d started out with a lesson to test each of their abilities, but Karina had accidentally destroyed part of the school building with a wooden sword.

Before that, she also broke another student’s shield with a wooden sword during form practice and nearly hit someone directly.

“M-my hand just slipped a little, that’s all...”

“I am sorry, Lord Satou. I should have deactivated Lady Karina’s ‘Body Strengthening.’”

As Karina made excuses, the Intelligent Item Raka spoke up for her.

“The building can be repaired, but if she was to hit a noble child with that strength, they might be seriously injured, so I asked her to observe instead.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Mr. Kajiro probably didn’t want any injuries on the very first day of class.

“It wouldn’t be such an issue if they had the instincts to deal with sudden situations or once they acquire enough resistance to handle a little impact, but...”

Strengthened by Raka, Miss Karina’s punches could knock out even a lesser demon that had killed armor-clad knights with its fists. A careless mistake on her part would be far too dangerous for children with single-digit levels.

Miss Karina herself was only around level 9, but since she was accustomed to having Raka’s support, her physical stats—especially her strength—were on the low side. Without Raka’s strengthening, even swinging the practice swords was

difficult for her.

“I’ve been expelled on my first day, it would seem.”

“Cheer uuup?”

“No sulking, sir.”

Tama and Pochi comforted Karina as she plodded along. I was bringing her to the explorers’ guild, since she wanted to get her badge.

Karina was holding a fake sword in a sheath, the same small size as Tama’s and Pochi’s.

“Lizaaa?”

“Liza’s fighting in the field, sir!”

There was a crowd in the soup kitchen plaza, where Liza was doing battle against a foreign martial artist of some kind. Apparently, the space by the labyrinth barracks previously reserved for such duels was no longer available.

“Her opponent appears quite strong.”

Karina’s observation was right, but Liza was a higher level, and her strategies were far more advanced after so many mock battles with the elf teachers and Tama and Pochi.

Unlike her opponent, who was just hopping left and right, Liza was avoiding her opponent’s attacks with the most minimal movements.

“You can do iiit.”

“Now, sir!”

For just a moment, Liza glanced toward us. She must have heard Tama and Pochi cheering her on.

“Uh-oh!”

“Look out, sir!”

Her opponent tried to strike while she was distracted, but she twisted to the side and dodged his attack without even looking, then used the momentum of her turn to knock him down with her tail.

Then, before he could stand up again, Liza thrust the tip of her Magic Cricket Spear at his face, stopping just short of his nose.

“I give up, dammit!”

“The winner is Liza of the Black Spear!”

As soon as the opponent surrendered, the referee loudly declared Liza’s victory. Torn-up tickets fluttered around the area. It seemed like there were bets on the match.

“Well done, Liza.”

“Hey, brat! Stay outta the way.”

I went over to congratulate Liza, but a large monkeyfolk man shouted at me angrily.

“I, the great Kimon the Indestructible, am the Black Spear’s next opponent!”

“Hey! Wait your turn!”

“I didn’t see you in the preliminary matches! If you wanna fight her, you gotta earn your spot!”

More complaints followed from a tigerfolk man and a red-faced human. Behind them were six or seven other men and women, all apparently waiting to challenge Liza as well.

“I won’t tolerate any rudeness to my master.”

Liza stepped in between her challengers and me.

“Master?”

“Wait, don’t tell me this kid is Pendragon!”

“The guy who Liza was bragging is even stronger than she is?”

Liza was bragging about me?

Glancing at her, I noticed her cheeks were a little red.

“I’ve still got a bit of time. Want me to take on some of them?”

I felt bad letting Liza get stuck fighting all these people.

“No, it’s all right, master. There’s no need for you to bother yourself...”

However, Liza looked like she still wanted to say something.

“Go on—what is it?”

“I was hoping you might spar with me instead.”

“Sure. But since we’re in town, let’s not exchange real blows today, all right?”

Normally, she would be wearing her gold armor, so the occasional light hit wasn’t a big deal.

“Wait, d-did he just say ‘today’?”

“So normally they really hit each other...?”

“No wonder she’s been getting strong so fast.”

The people in the peanut gallery turned pale, obviously misunderstanding something.

“Liza of the Black Spear versus the mysterious young Sir Pendragon! Place your bets here!”

The bookmaker’s voice sounded familiar—I looked and realized it was Skopi, the boss of the local underworld.

Liza explained that they had a deal in which she received 60 percent of the bet earnings.

“Ready, set, fight!”

The showdown between Liza and me began with a shout that reminded me of a fighting game.

Unlike in her previous match, Liza was using battle skills like “Body Strengthening” and “Reflex Acceleration.”

She sped toward me—she was using “Blink” for real.

Six gale-like attacks closed in on my face and body.

I wasn’t going to quite be able to dodge her spear targeting my belly button, so I twisted to one side and knocked the spear’s handle with my palm to divert the attack.

If I'd countered with my fairy sword, I might've been able to win the match, but instead I just watched her speed past me.

"You've gotten really strong, Liza."

I gave a murmur of praise without thinking. Liza didn't answer, silently catching her breath.

"She didn't move like that when we fought her, did she?"

"So she was holding back against us..."

"Wait, forget that for a sec. Did you see how *he* was moving?"

"No, I couldn't follow most of it."

"He evaded all those attacks from the Black Spear without hardly even moving."

The crowd chattered noisily.

Given that I didn't even use "Spellblade," "Body Strengthening," or any special moves, I thought they were overreacting.

BWOOM. I heard a small noise.

Liza's spear was glowing with red light, which began to emit from her body as well. She must be running "Spellblade" throughout her whole body.

"Liza's gonna make a move!" someone shouted in the crowd.

As if on cue, Liza shot forward like a bullet.

She moved as fast as lightning, leaving a red trail in her wake.

Obviously, this strike was meant to be a one-hit KO.



Along the way, she sped up like an arrow, moving faster than I expected.

I brought my fairy sword down, but her Magic Spear slipped past it.

An explosive noise echoed through the field, and a sharp blade stopped at a throat.

“You really have gotten so strong.”

“...Yes, master.”

As silence fell over the crowd, our whispered exchange vanished into the air.



“The winner is Pendragon!”

The referee’s voice echoed through the plaza.

“Huh? What just happened?”

“Dunno. He swung down his arm, and the Black Spear got past it, but next thing I knew, her spear had been knocked aside, and his sword was stopped at her throat.”

The challengers weren’t able to follow all the precise moves of the fight.

“Did you see everything, Tama and Pochi?”

“Of cooourse?”

“Master used the hilt of his sword to knock Liza’s spear aside like SMACK; then he struck like SHOOM, sir.”

“SMACK-SHOOM.”

Tama and Pochi gave a slow-motion reenactment as they explained.

The rest of the crowd watched as well and finally seemed to understand what had happened.

“That’s crazy. He blocked a thrust that fast with the hilt of his sword...”

“No, that’s not the wild part. He was swinging his sword down right before then, y’know?”

“How’d he contort himself from that stance into the other one so fast?”

Contort? That's rude.

"Guess this explains why Liza of the Black Spear is always saying things like *My master is far stronger than the likes of me*, huh?"

"Wait, was that supposed to be a crappy impression of Lady Liza?! You've got some guts to do that right in front of her fan club!"

This was one noisy crowd.

Wait, Liza had a fan club now? What was this, a light novel?

"You've proven once again how far I have to go, master. Fortunately, I have plenty of practice partners, so I will continue to train."

"Just don't push yourself too hard," I responded to Liza's intense expression, and we left the plaza behind.

"Aah, what a delicious fargance, sir."

"Fargaaance..."

Tama and Pochi closed their eyes, happily sniffing the scent of roasting meat from the food stalls and carts. They were probably trying to say *fragrance*.

This was likely torturous for Pochi, who wasn't allowed to have meat right now, so I quickly led the way past the stalls.

"That's why I'm saying we need to form a rescue party!"

"You say that, but there's a fee for rescuing anyone who doesn't have a gold badge."

"Then we'll pay it after!"

As we entered the explorers' guild, we heard an argument going on at the counter.

Although that was business as usual here.

"Ooh, it's Usasa and Rabibiiii?"

"And Gaugaru, sir!"

Tama and Pochi spotted some friends of theirs, the first scholarship students at the explorers' school, and ran over.

I walked up to the teacher who was standing behind them.

“Miss Jena, isn’t the final graduation test today?”

“Oh, Sir Knight. Well, we were running the test in the labyrinth when we found a near-dead noble kid...”

Apparently, that was the identity of the young boy who was causing a fuss at the counter.

“Miss Iruna, you said we’d get money for rescuing a noble, but he’s not paying up at all,” one of the students complained.

“I said ‘in many cases,’ remember?”

According to Iruna, noble kids who couldn’t inherit their family wealth often came to Labyrinth City, but in cases when they didn’t have military experience, it wasn’t unusual for them to attempt exploration beyond their means and get injured or killed.

“Although it’s not just nobles who get themselves killed when they’re starting out,” Iruna added.

When one had rescued a noble, most of them would pay the amount they promised, but in the cases of those who’d come to the labyrinth because they were short on money, they might go back on their word.

It’s just as they say: The poor can’t afford manners.

“I swear I’ll pay you after!”

The noble boy kept shouting the same thing over and over.

Come to think of it, he looked somewhat familiar. Searching my memories, I realized it was Bowman, the boy who’d been facing off with Gerits and company the day of the parade.

It looked like his injuries had been treated, but the clothes I could see under his beaten-up armor were soaked with blood.

“So where are his guardians?”

“He was alone when we found him.”

His guards had all been level 20 and up. What had attacked them that they

couldn't handle...?

I opened my map and looked at the area where the graduation test had been taking place, but there didn't seem to be any particularly strong monsters there.

"It was a giant beast! It had arms like swords and scythes, and it ripped through Laris's shield and Dokken's steel armor like paper! The explorers' guild is just gonna let a dangerous monster like that run free?!"

The boy waved his bloody arm around wildly.

"This is the first we've heard about it. Besides, the most we generally do in a situation like this is warn others that such a creature has been sighted."

"Then at least send a rescue party..."

"As I stated before, hiring a rescue party requires payment. And be advised that the price varies depending on the range of the rescue and the amount of time required."

The receptionist replied to the boy in a terse, businesslike voice.

It did seem a little cruel, but seeing as though it cost a lot of money for a risky search and rescue mission, I couldn't blame them for requiring payment in advance.

Since he wasn't able to do so, it probably meant that he didn't have any relatives in Labyrinth City.

"Grrr..."

I felt a bit of compassion for the loyal kid, who refused to give up on his comrades anyway, so I searched the map for the names he'd mentioned.

Unfortunately, Laris and Dokken had both passed away.

I used my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to investigate the area where their bodies lay and saw that there were several other bodies lying nearby as well.

If memory served, it was the same number of people the boy had had with him when we first saw him.

Just as he said, many of them appeared to have been cut down by a blade like

a broadsword or a scythe.

For just a moment, I thought they might've been killed by plunderers or other explorers, but most of the wounds looked like they came from a higher angle than a human's, so it must have been the work of a monster with sharp limbs.

Looking at the map, I didn't see any enemies above level 20 in the area; the creature that had killed the boy's party must have vanished into a spawnhole somewhere.

"May I interject?"

"Who are you supposed to be?!"

The boy spun in the direction of my voice. I explained that I was with the people who had rescued him, then turned to address the receptionist.

"I'll pay the request fee. Please search in the vicinity from where Miss Iruna and the others rescued him to the labyrinth village. The length of time will be four days. It's likely that the others were injured, so I would advise bringing extra stretchers or carrying packs."

At the very least, we could try to recover the bodies before they were eaten by monsters.

Out of the boy's earshot, I whispered to the clerk that I would still pay even if they weren't recovered alive.

"Th-thank you..."

"It's Pendragon."

I realized I hadn't introduced myself yet, so I quickly gave my name.

"...Sir Pendragon. I swear to pay you back someday."

I parted ways with the boy, who wept as he thanked me, and went to a service window to get Miss Karina registered.

"This makes me an explorer, too, does it not?"

Miss Karina hugged the wooden badge to her chest.

I somehow managed to restrain myself from following it with my eyes.

“Of cooourse?”

“There’s a long path ahead of you to reach the top, sir!”

“Yes, I’m certain I shall!”

As I smiled at the exchange between Karina and the kids, I noticed the point on my radar that indicated Zena was approaching.

Judging by her speed, she seemed to be running with magical assistance.

I checked my menu’s clock to see if it was past our meeting time already, but there was still an hour or so to go.

Thinking that something might have happened, I called Karina and the others to come along and headed in Zena’s direction.

“Zena!”

As soon as we stepped outside, I saw Zena standing near the front of the guild, looking around frantically, so I called to her loudly.

She was still wearing her military uniform, even though we were supposed to walk around town today.

“Satou!”

Zena came running up to me, looking unusually panicked.

She jumped into my arms, clung to my chest, and exclaimed, “Satou, you won’t believe it!”

Ladies of Labyrinth City

Satou here. I think lack of communication is the biggest cause of conflict between people. Sometimes you assume you won't be able to reach an understanding with someone, but if you talk it out, you might find that they're actually not so bad.

“L-l-let go!”

Flustered, Karina pushed between Zena and me as the latter clung to me. Karina looked oddly displeased.

“Eek!” Zena let out a cute little squeal of surprise at the unexpected push, but thanks to her well-honed reflexes, she quickly recovered.

“Violence baaad?”

“No fighting, sir.”

“I wasn’t fighting! It simply seems inappropriate to embrace someone out of nowhere.”

Tama and Pochi scolded Karina for removing Zena with her Raka-enhanced superstrength.

“I’m sorry for jumping on him all of a sudden...”

For some reason, Zena was apologizing to Karina, not me.

“A-as long as you understand.”

In response, Karina blushed and turned her back on the other girl.

Clearly, she was still as shy as ever.

“So who is this young lady?”

“Oh, I guess you haven’t been introduced yet.”

I wanted to know what Zena was in such a rush about, but I figured I should

introduce them first.

“Miss Zena, this is Lady Karina, the second daughter of my lord, Baron Muno.”

Karina turned a bit red and looked aside again. “Karina Muno,” she mumbled. She must have been too nervous to make eye contact.

Because of the way she was crossing her arms under her chest and jutting out her chin, Miss Karina’s proportions were particularly noticeable.

“...Wow, she’s pretty,” Zena muttered quietly, putting a hand to her own chest and looking a little intimidated.

I couldn’t blame her, since Karina’s combination of good looks and ample bosom was so rare.

“Lady Karina, this is Miss Zena of the house of Sir Marienteil the hereditary knight, a magic soldier in the army who looked out for me a great deal in the capital of Seiryuu County.”

“Hereditary knight... Is she Satou’s lover?” Karina muttered, very off the mark.

“She saved Tama’s life.”

“And Pochi’s and Liza’s, too, sir.”

Tama and Pochi chimed in to tell Karina of Zena’s good deeds.

“You saved them? That is certainly impressive.”

At that, the harshness left Karina’s face.

I guess she felt that any friend of Tama and Pochi’s was a friend of hers.

“Not at all! Mr. Satou saved my life when a wyvern sent me flying once, too.”

“You fought a wyvern?”

“Yes, but not alone. I was with my patrol squad.”

Zena shook her head sheepishly, but the battle-loving Karina was already hooked. Her shyness seemed to have conveniently vanished.

“Satou saved my life once, too. When I was on my way to meet the giants of —”

“Lady Karina, let’s keep that story for once we can sit down and relax

somewhere, all right?"

I appreciated her enthusiasm, but it seemed like Zena had some urgent matter to tell me about, so I wanted to get that sorted first.

"So what's the matter?"

As I brought things back to the matter at hand, the alarm returned to Zena's face. "Oh, right!" she exclaimed. "L-look at this..."

Zena held out a familiar-looking envelope with a fancy seal.

Looking at the opened wax seal's design, I observed, "It's a letter from the viceroy's wife—that is, the house of Marquis Ashinen."

"That's right! I don't know why, but it came to my barracks yesterday!"

She said it had been delivered by one of the viceroy's wife's servants while she was away.

"Is it an invitation to tomorrow's tea party?"

"Ze—Erm, you too?"

Zena looked at Karina and me in surprise.

Karina had probably refrained from saying her name out of shyness, not rudeness.

"I thought so. As it happens, Lady Karina and I both received invitations as well."

A look of understanding flashed across Zena's face, but she still looked nervous.

"But why would she invite *me*?"

"I'm sorry. It's probably because you're a friend of mine."

I was guessing that Karina had been invited for the same reason.

"Oh, I see..."

Zena looked downcast, but for a different reason than the shy Karina.

"I didn't bring many of my things on this excursion, so I don't have any clothing or experience with attending a viceroy's wife's tea party... I was going

to decline, but..."

Her superiors and the officials in the force had all insisted that she go.

"Our supplies chief Morando and some of the officials like Karana went to arrange for some clothes, but since we just got to Labyrinth City, none of us knows our way around very well..." Zena looked at me imploringly. "So I was hoping you could help me find a secondhand shop where I can get clothes for the tea party, please."

"The dresses at secondhand shops tend to be a bit behind the times, so I wouldn't especially recommend it."

Zena's shoulders slumped at my response.

"Well, how about this? We were just on our way to a rental shop to find an outfit for Lady Karina. Would you like to come along?"

"May I?!"

Zena's clouded expression quickly cleared up again.

"Yes, of course." I smiled and nodded reassuringly.

"But I don't want to intrude..."

Zena glanced at Karina.

Pochi and Tama looked up at her, too.

"I-it's quite all right! You saved Pochi and Tama, after all."

Karina did look a little dissatisfied, or maybe even pouty, but she kindly agreed even as she turned her face away.

At a glance, it seemed like she was jealous that I was so close with Zena, but as far as I could tell from our past, it didn't seem like she was in love with me or anything.

If anything, maybe it was more like the shock when you find out that a close friend of yours has another close friend you didn't know about?

In Karina's case, it's sometimes tough to tell whether her feelings were girlish or just childish.

I used the Space Magic spell Telephone to contact Arisa back at the mansion and asked her to bring Pina and the others to the clothing rental shop.



"Hey, isn't that young Sir Pendragon?"

"You're right. He's with a gorgeous woman and a sweet-looking young lady... He likes 'em pretty, huh?"

"Lulu, look, it's the young master."

"Master!"

As we passed by the tailor next to our destination rental shop, I spotted Lulu among some maids. The other girls seemed to work for the Ashinen family.

"Hey, Lulu. Shopping with friends?"

"Yes, sir!"

As always, Lulu's smile was charming enough to move mountains.

She explained that the Ashinen maids had asked for advice in getting maid outfits similar to the Pendragon girls', so she'd brought them to this tailor.

Looking rather pleased, she said they were going to the three girls' favorite accessory shop after.

Lulu had served as our coachman at some of the viceroy's wife's tea parties and banquets, which must have been where they became friends.

"Take care of our Lulu."

"""Yes, Sir Knight!"""

We parted ways with the cheerful maids and headed into the rental clothing shop next door.

I chose the highest-grade rental shop in Labyrinth City Celivera, but when I saw the almost off-puttingly flashy clothes lined up in front, I started to get a little nervous.

"Hello, I made a reservation under the name Pendragon—"

"Young master! Miss Miteruna only mentioned one person. Which of these

lovely ladies is looking for dresses today?"

I had never been to this place before, but the shopkeeper seemed to know me somehow.

"I'm terribly sorry to change plans last minute, but would it be possible for both of them to pick out clothes today?"

"Yes, that's fine, of course."

The shopkeeper struck her chest reassuringly.

"As far as dresses that are popular in Labyrinth City right now... Something like these, perhaps?"

The woman placed a few dresses on the counter that looked like they would suit Zena and Karina, who sorted through them with serious expressions.

"Byooti-full."

"Like princesses, sir."

Tama and Pochi usually only cared about food, but now they hung off the side of the counter with their eyes sparkling.

As I was watching them fondly, I felt a smack from behind.

"Master, we're here."

It was Arisa, with Pina and company in tow.

Once I introduced everyone, Pina and Karina's other maid guards went to help her choose a dress.

"These seem pretty flashy."

"Do you think so? If you pick something too plain in this city, you won't stand out."

The shopkeeper tilted her head at Arisa.

The explorers in Labyrinth City seemed fond of gaudy clothes, which appeared to have influenced the overall sense of fashion; flashy clothes that showed a little skin were especially popular here.

Still, maybe that was inevitable, since I suppose the only people who would

come to a rental shop in Labyrinth City were higher-ranking explorers or visiting lesser nobles from other areas.

“Doing okay, Zena?”

“Well...”

Zena seemed to be stuck between a rock and a hard place: Everything was either too flashy or too revealing for her usual sensibilities.

“...We’re going to the viceroy’s wife’s tea party. Do you have anything a bit more reserved?”

“The viceroy’s wife’s tea party!” the shopkeeper exclaimed and hustled off to the back to search for clothes.

“Did you see any dresses you liked?”

“E-erm... Maybe this one?”

Zena produced a relatively mature-looking dress from who-knows-where and held it up in front of herself.

The material looked a little cheap, but since Zena herself was made of good material, it suited her surprisingly well.

“Miss, that’s a maid outfit,” the shopkeeper explained when she came back.

No wonder the material looked cheap.

“How about these, young master?”

The shopkeeper placed some dresses on the table. They looked a little old-fashioned, but they were probably still better than the first batch.

“These are so old ladyish.”

Arisa voiced a similar thought as she sorted through the dresses with Zena.

“Well, they are on the older side.”

The shopkeeper shrugged. Apparently, she herself was aware that they were old-fashioned.

“How ‘bout this one, Zena? If we got rid of the high collar and updated the old-fashioned lace on the shoulders, it wouldn’t be bad, don’cha think? I’d

wanna fix the weird cuffs on the sleeves, too, while I'm at it."

Arisa offered the flummoxed-looking Zena a lifeboat.

It was a good plan. With those modifications, this dress wouldn't look so far off from the ones those noblewomen in the royal capital were wearing.

If it came down to it, I could probably stay up all night and use my "Sewing" skill to make dresses for Zena and Karina myself.

"Well, if you modify it that much, you'd have to buy it, not rent it."

"That's fine, right, master?"

I nodded at Arisa's question.

As far as I could tell from my "Estimation" skill, buying them outright wouldn't be much more expensive than renting them.

"Sir Knight, what about something like this?"

In front of Karina, Pina held up a very sexy-looking dress with a huge opening at the chest.

I couldn't say it out loud, but I would love to see her wearing that.

"This is far too embarrassing."

Karina turned bright red and squirmed, as if put off by the very thought.

Karina sometimes seemed a bit immature, but she could occasionally show this charmingly girlish side, too.

If she could just get over her communication issues, I was sure she could marry into a good family right away.

"It might be nice for an evening party or a ball, but I think that could be a bit too sensational for a tea party."

Evening parties and balls held by nobles tended to be good meeting places for potential marriage partners, so I didn't think there was anything wrong with showing off a little at those, but it might be a bit too out of place at a tea party.

"Arisa, can you help them out with trying things on and suggesting alterations?"

“Okey-dokey. Wait, where are you going?”

“Just to stock up on clothes.”

At that, Arisa rolled her eyes and muttered, “So you’re gonna cheat again, huh?”

I left the rental store, got a room in a nearby inn, and used the Create Stone Object spell to make life-size models of Zena and Karina.

Their faces didn’t look entirely right, but the rest should be fairly accurate.

I used the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to make sure I didn’t have any major mishaps, then moved on to the next step.

I pulled up the screenshot of the noblewomen from the royal capital and picked a few dresses that would suit Zena and Karina.

“For the fabric...I’ll use the extra jade silk from the old capital and the crimson silk from Lalagi.”

The delicate jade would suit Zena well, and the luxurious crimson would match Karina’s golden locks.

Obviously, I would have to resist using ultrarare fabrics like fairy silk or orichalcum fibers.

Using my “Sewing” skill, I cut the fabric without even making a pattern. If Arisa could see me, she would definitely scold me for being such a cheater.

All this sewing would be difficult with only two hands, so I used the Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to make things easier.

“This should do it, right?”

Far sooner than I expected—in less than ten minutes, in fact—I’d finished two dresses for each of them. The bases were all the same, but I modified the decorations and degree of exposed skin.

I put the dresses on the models and looked at them from various angles to assess whether they matched their inspiration.

They were certainly a bit simpler than the original dresses, and I’d used different jewels and such to decorate based on what I had on hand, but they

should be fine overall.

I put the four dresses in a Garage Bag and went back to the rental shop.

“Oh? Something wrong, master?”

“No, I finished the clothes already, so I brought them.”

“For real?”

Arisa stared at me in shock.

Stop giving me such disturbingly weird faces.

“Are they still trying things on?”

“Yep. I think they should be out soon.”

Before Arisa finished her sentence, Zena emerged.

Prior to modifications, the dress was theoretically plain and old-fashioned, but it ended up looking mysteriously good when Zena wore it.

“It looks great on you.”

“Oh gosh, I don’t know...”

Zena looked flustered but happy.

“Sir Knight, give this one a look, too, please.”

Standing in front of Karina’s changing room, Pina forcibly pulled aside the curtain.

Uh, WOW.

An incredible amount of skin was thrust before my eyes.

She was wearing clothes, of course, but still.

The cleavage was out of control.

“EEEEEK!”

Forgetting her usual noble mannerisms, Karina shrieked, covered her chest with her hands, and squatted down.

All this sudden movement was too much for the fabric of the dress, which let out a scream as the magic boobs began to push past the clothing’s limits—

“Arisa uses Iron Protectiooooon!”

—but Arisa jumped in front of me to block my vision before that happened.

A bit of a shame, but still: Thank you, Arisa.

If I’d witnessed that head-on, I didn’t know if even my “Poker Face” skill would have been enough to carry me through.

As I quietly tried to calm down, I pulled out the clothes I’d made for Zena and Karina (who had changed back into her original outfit) and handed them over.

“Th-they’re pretty nice and all, but they’re not flashy enough to be popular in Labyrinth City, if you ask me.”

Aside from the shopkeeper’s bitter comments, everyone else seemed impressed.

Of the two dresses I’d prepared for each, both of them chose the one that showed less skin.

I didn’t think it was so bad to show a little shoulder and back, even if they were shy to expose their cleavage, but the girls were too embarrassed.

“Satou, what do you think?”

Karina was the first to change into her dress for any modifications.

“It looks wonderful. I knew the crimson color would bring out your beauty nicely.”

“B-beauty...”

The direct compliment was enough to make steam come out of Karina’s ears.

Considering how gorgeous she was, she didn’t seem very accustomed to being complimented.

“...She’s so pretty... I’m sure Satou must...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Zena’s comment.

I wasn’t sure what the rest of that sentence was supposed to be, but I was eager to see how the dress looked, so I turned around.

Nice job, me.

It looked so good on her that I was tempted to congratulate myself out loud.

“You look amazing, Miss Zena. The delicate jade silk suits you well.”

“Thank you very much. Even if you’re just flattering me, I appreciate it.”

“No need for modesty. You look lovely.”

At my insistent seal of approval, Zena turned red and cutely mumbled, “Thanks.”

That sort of gesture suited her ridiculously well. If they could see her now, tons of fancy nobles would surely be clamoring for her hand in marriage.

“...Sh-she’s far too cute... This girl and Satou might...”

Behind me, my “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Karina muttering this time.

Somehow, it sounded very similar to what Zena had said. Maybe these two would actually get along pretty well.

“Sir Knight, what shall we do with the dresses these two didn’t choose?” Pina asked.

“I’ve already bought those, too, so let’s get them altered as well.”

Since it’d be poor manners to ask them to alter clothes I’d brought in myself, I bought some of the clothes Miss Karina had ruined and a few others they’d tried on to balance it out.

The clothes I’d made needed only minor alterations, so we moved on to buy some accessories to match them.



“Trying to pull one over on us ‘cause they think we’re bumpkins!”

As we were on our way to the accessory shop, we heard a familiar voice cursing in front of an alchemy shop.

“Lilio!”

“Oh, Zenacchi and her boy!”

As the two of them shrieked at their unexpected reunion, Iona and Lou emerged from the shop to complete Zena’s squad.

"Miss Lilio, you really shouldn't call him 'boy.' 'Sir Pendragon' or 'Sir Knight' would be more appropriate."

Miss Iona scolded Lilio firmly.

"Oh, right, I forgot he's a noble."

"'Boy' is fine, thank you. As long as we're not in an official setting anyway."

"See? My boy here says it's fine."

Iona looked like she wanted to say something else, but since I'd basically given my permission, she refrained from pressing the matter further.

"So what were you doing at the alchemy shop?"

"Nothing in particular—"

"Zenacchi, get this! We don't have enough potions for our trip tomorrow!"

Iona tried to pass it off, but Lilio ignored her and blurted out the full situation.

"Th-that's awful! But didn't Sir Hence say he found a good source?"

"That's the whole problem, Zenacchi."

"The potions Sir Hence purchased are all really low-quality."

"And our supply chief Morando is upset because Sir Hence stocked up without permission."

Thus, Lilio and the other soldiers were going around to alchemy shops trying to buy up more medicine.

"Were you able to get any potions?"

"Well, they tried to charge us at least three times what they're worth..." Lilio grumbled.

"That's the standard here in Labyrinth City. Recently, there's an alternative available called 'veria magic potions,' but otherwise potions here are more expensive than the royal capital."

At that, Zena's squad exchanged worried glances.

While we were killing time in the labyrinth after defeating the floormaster, the explorers' guild had collected all the components of the veria potion recipe.

I didn't want the power balance in the city to fall to shambles, so I had some employees of the Echigoya Company's Celivera branch convey the remaining recipe to Baronet Dyukeli and the alchemists' guild.

However, since there was a bit of a trick to making the potions, only a handful of skilled alchemists had succeeded so far, and the resulting product was fairly low-quality.

It would probably be a little longer before the novice alchemists who specialized in selling low-price potions were able to produce and sell good-quality veria potions for cheap.

"Hey, boy. You got any connections that could help us out?"

"Lilio!"

Zena exclaimed at Lilio for her frank request.

Iona looked like she wanted to scold Lilio, too, but they didn't have anyone else to ask for help in this area, so she hesitated.

"It's all right. I should be able to help you."

With that, I turned to Arisa and the others.

"You heard that, right? Can you take care of the alterations and such?"

"Oh, fine. Just leave it to your darling Arisa."

Arisa, heroic as always, was quick to agree.

"I'll trust you with the accessories to match Zena's outfit, too. Here's your budget. If you finish that, arrange for extra clothes for Karina and the maids, too, please."

With that, I handed a few purses of gold coins to Arisa from the Garage Bag.

As we started to walk away from Arisa and company, Karina grabbed my arm.

"You're leaving?" She looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. "Is Z—is she more important to you?"

She seemed to feel neglected.

"It's normal to help a friend who's in trouble. If Pochi or Tama needed help,

you'd take care of them, too, right?"

As I responded, both Zena and Karina muttered "friend" in two very different tones.

Um, that wasn't the point.

"Very well. Yes, friends are quite important."

Karina looked at Tama and Pochi, then nodded and walked over to the accessory store with Arisa and the others. I guess friendship was a pretty weighty concept for her.

"Shall we get going, too, then?"

"R-right. Of course..."

Zena was looking down as she answered, but then she gave herself a light slap on the cheek and looked up.

"I'm sorry. Let's go, Satou!"

"Sorry, Zenacchi." As Zena returned to her usual smile, Lilio murmured an apology.

She probably felt bad for interrupting Zena's private shopping trip.

"If you want to buy cheaper magic potions, I'd recommend the pharmacy on the second floor of the explorers' guild or the bargain shops in Kuuts Alley. You can get them in the downtown area or the stalls by the labyrinth, too, but most of those are duds, so I don't suggest it unless you have the 'Analyze Goods' skill."

Miss Iona and the others discussed it for a moment and decided to split up to investigate.

Zena and I would go to Kuuts Alley, Iona to the eastern explorers' guild in the nobles' district, Lou to the western explorers' guild, and Lilio to the stalls near the labyrinth, specifically to the ones I'd said were trustworthy.

Of course, this was just a front—I'd actually used my map search to locate which merchants were selling good-quality potions and suggested them to her.

Since we didn't have cell phones or anything, we agreed to use Zena's Wind

Magic spell Echo to get back in touch in an hour. Echo was a spell specific to the Seiryuu County army and could convey simple sound waves to basic magic tools carried by the soldiers to relay short messages.

“Thank you very much, Sir Knight.”

Miss Iona thanked me for the group, and we parted ways to go to our different destinations.

Of course, if they weren’t able to get enough supplies, I was willing to share some of my own stock.

“Is this Kuuts Alley?”

“It is. They sell lots of products besides potions here.”

The alley was a jumble of shops with narrow entrances. As usual, it was very crowded.

“What, you don’t have any?! Dammit!”

A particularly loud shout came from a liquor store up ahead.

“As far as cheap wine, this one’s good, too.”

“I told you, what I want is Lessau’s Lifeblood!”

“They’re all the same, right?”

“No, they’re not! And you don’t have any, yeah?”

“I’m afraid not. We haven’t gotten any shipments from Lessau County ‘cause of the whole demon affair. Try asking at the liquor shop on the north-south main street.”

“If they had it there, I wouldn’t be comin’ to a dump like this in the first place.”

“Well, I’m sorry our dump isn’t to your liking. Shipments were stopped up in Zetts County until recently, so maybe the merchants went to sell in the Eluette Marquisate instead of here?”

A man who seemed to be the liquor shop owner was having it out with a familiar explorer in front of the store.

“Good day, Lord Dozon.”

“Oh, hey, young master.”

Dozon waved at me lightly.

“You need something?”

“A little bird told me you were looking for this.”

I produced a bottle of Lessau’s Lifeblood wine from Storage by way of the Garage Bag.

“Ooh! That’s the stuff! I owe ya one, young master. Now I can beat Mahiruna for sure.”

Dozon accepted the bottle from me, gave me far more money than was necessary for some cheap wine, and marched away triumphantly. He was probably looking for it on request from the labyrinth village.

When we last visited the labyrinth village, the drink vendor had said he wanted to buy all my Lessau’s Lifeblood for the Blue People. This leftover bottle was my last one.

“That reminds me. What path did your force take to get here, Miss Zena?”

On our way to the shop, Zena shared some stories from her eventful trip to Labyrinth City.

“...Sounds like you had a difficult time.”

The journey was hard in itself, but their battle against an intermediate demon army in Lessau County sounded particularly life-threatening. If an amazingly skilled mage by the name of Mito hadn’t intervened, it could’ve gone far worse.

Intermediate demons usually weren’t that bright in my experience, but I guess these ones were clever enough to launch a surprise attack and nearly wipe out an army. For that matter, Ludaman’s demon lord was pretty scary, too, and the most recent scuffle with intermediate demons had been handled only with the help of Helmina from the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga and her Holy Knights.

“Our difficulties were nothing compared to the citizens of Lessau County,

who've been terrorized by monsters and demons."

Though Zena played it off, it seemed to me like they'd had a pretty harrowing journey.

Lessau County was the home of the horrible lord who'd harassed Tifaleeza and Neru and made them into criminal slaves, but that wasn't the fault of the citizens. If they collected funds to help reconstruct their territory, I decided to contribute on the generous side.

"We even ran into a lesser dragon at the Zetts County border."

Zena smiled and changed the subject.

The Flying Dragon Knight of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, Sir Torel, had challenged the lesser dragon and was bitterly defeated. Then Mito, the same mage who'd defeated the intermediate demons in Lessau County, chased the lesser dragon off, according to Zena.

"What sort of person is this Mito?"

I couldn't help being a little curious.

"A very pretty lady with black hair. She seems to be in her twenties, but she uses amazing Practical Magic techniques like standing in midair on magic footholds, like something out of the legends of the ancestral king."

"She sounds like a Hero."

In this world, where youth-rejuvenating potions and other such things existed, it didn't seem that unusual that a Hero from one or two generations ago might still be alive.

"...Yes, perhaps."

Zena hesitated a little before she nodded.

There must be some secret circumstances surrounding this mysterious Mito person.

The existence of an unknown entity this powerful worried me a bit, but from what Zena said, she seemed like a good-natured person, so there was probably no need to push the subject further.

“That’s the shop.”

We finally arrived at the store I was heading for.

“Huh? Hey, it’s Mister Knight.”

“Sir Pendragon.”

I was running into a lot of acquaintances today.

This time, it was Sumina, the chief explorer and elder-sister figure of the Echigoya Company’s Celivera branch, and the branch manager, Polina.

“Are you having any trouble?”

“Not at all, Sir Knight. Business at the food carts has stabilized with your help, and the orders from the explorers’ school and private orphanage have been a great boon.”

Polina bowed her head in gratitude.

Still, all I’d done as Satou was help them get permission to open the food carts, lent them carts I’d made on the down low for free, and gave them some recipes by way of Lulu.

Oh, and I’d had Tama draw the signboard for them, I guess.

“There’s no need to thank me. I haven’t done very much at all.”

Besides, it went both ways, since I was always asking them for pretty big favors.

“That’s not true! The tomatoes and cherry tomatoes you gave us are growing quite nicely on our experimental farm, so we’ll be sure to send them along as soon as we can harvest them.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it.”

The experimental farm in question was located outside the southern wall of Labyrinth City.

I made it in order to help improve the state of farming in Labyrinth City and provide a source of income for the Echigoya Company’s Celivera branch.

Disguised as Kuro, I’d enclosed a large empty field with Earth Magic, had

golems plow the field, and dug in some leaf mold from the monster territories to use as mulch. I'd really had a lot of time to kill in the waiting period after we beat the floormaster.

The tomatoes and cherry tomatoes must be the ones I'd given to Neru when the food carts first started up, from the garden Lulu was cultivating at the mansion.

Based on what they'd told me as Kuro before, the cultivation was going well overall, but they were having difficulties fending off birds, moles, and other pests.

"Polina, we don't wanna get in the way of Mister Knight's date."

Sumina clapped Polina on the shoulder.

"Oh my—pardon me! I wasn't thinking."

I didn't see a point in going out of my way to protest that it wasn't a date, so I simply said my farewells and parted from the pair.

"You seem to have an awful lot of friends in Labyrinth City."

"Yes, everyone's been very kind to me."

Confused by the low tone in Zena's voice, I answered as simply as possible.

"It feels like you've gotten so far away from me..."

Zena murmured almost to herself, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

"I-I'm sorry! I don't know what I was thinking..."

As she shook her head and hands frantically and apologized, Zena turned bright red.

Fortunately, since the shop had just recently gotten in a shipment, we were able to buy the amount of veria potions the force needed.

While Zena relayed her success to the rest of the squad with the Wind Magic spell Echo, I put the veria magic potions away in a Magic Bag.

"Huh? Whaaa—?!"

Zena exclaimed in surprise as I put the dozens of potions into the bag.

“Satou, is that a Magic Bag?!”

“Yes, it is. In fact, you can find lower-capacity bags for sale right here in Labyrinth City.”

I responded nonchalantly to her question.

It wasn’t relevant to me, but according to Baronet Dyukeli, who had a finger on the pulse of all things related to magic tool sales, Magic Bags were found only in labyrinth treasure chests at a rate of about a dozen a year.

Most of them carried a fairly small amount of objects, and since the alternate spaces within weren’t sealed completely, even the weight-lessening effects were incomplete. However, they sold at high prices to merchants and military nobles.

Since these nobles and wealthy merchants had them, they were no rarer than a Magic Sword or mithril weapon.

High-capacity, better-quality Magic Bags, like the ones I’d found in the haunted fortress in Muno or from the Emerin fleet, were far rarer and more valuable.

“Oh, I see. They’re very rare in Seiryuu County, so I was really surprised.”

Zena smiled, looking a little embarrassed.

Aside from occasionally being lent to the military for big expeditions, the ones in Seiryuu County were usually stashed away in the castle’s treasure warehouse.

“Well, it seems like we’ve completed our mission.”

“Right.”

Zena gazed at me for a moment, then looked away.

It seemed like she wanted to ask something but couldn’t quite say it.

“Zena, did you eat breakfast?”

“W-well...no, I was so busy with the invitation...”

I thought so.

Unfortunately, it was already well past lunchtime, so most proper restaurants and cafeterias would probably have shut down their kitchens for the afternoon.

“Shall we buy some food at the carts and eat in the park?”

At my suggestion, we bought some meat-filled galettes and veria water, then walked toward the park.

“I never would have imagined there was such a big park so close by.”

“This is actually one of the city’s emergency evacuation sites.”

There was a monster-proof shelter beneath the park.

“There’s an open bench in the shade of that tree over there where we can sit and eat.”

I placed a handkerchief on the bench and gestured for Zena to sit.

“Hee-hee.” A smile crept across Zena’s lips.

“What is it?”

“Oh, this just brings back memories, that’s all.”

She looked at me as if to ask whether I remembered.

“Ah, yes, like the time you showed me around Seiryuu City.”

“Exactly!”

Zena’s smile widened.

“It’s nice and cool in the shade here.”

Finishing her galette, Zena looked around at the people in the park.

“Yes, it’s nice.”

The chirping of birds among the trees was soothing to the ears.

“Satou...”

“Yes?”

Zena hesitated after saying my name, so I waited in silence for her to gather her thoughts instead of trying to force a new topic.

“When you were in Seiryuu City, were you, erm...a noble then?”

"No, I was just an ordinary citizen at the time."

Zena's shoulders sagged at my response. *Was that what she wanted to ask me?*

I briefly explained how when I'd visited the Muno Barony after I left Seiryuu City, I ended up helping to defend Muno City from monsters and was rewarded by the marquis with the title of honorary hereditary knight.

"...Then, um...that lady from before, Lady Karina, is sh-she...?" Zena stammered even more. "S-Satou, is she your...um...you know, your f-fiancée?!"

Zena clenched her fists as she finally managed to ask the question.

"No, she's not."

"B-but...why would a young noblewoman from such a faraway place come somewhere as dangerous as Labyrinth City...?"

Zena seemed to think that Karina had followed me here because she was in love.

"She's here for the labyrinth, not for me. I'm told she's always wanted to come to Labyrinth City. She was even taking classes at the explorers' school just this morning."

For the sake of Miss Karina's honor, I didn't mention that she'd already been expelled.

Zena still looked doubtful, as if the idea that a marquis's daughter would want to explore a labyrinth didn't sound convincing.

"She once told me that it's always been her dream to be a Hero's attendant, so perhaps that's why she wants to get stronger."

I couldn't remember when she'd said this, but it must have been at Muno Castle or after we met the Hero's attendant Miss Ringrande in the old capital.

"Oh, I understand that!"

So now you're convinced...?

Maybe Zena and Karina were more alike than I realized.

Now that Zena had been reassured, we chatted for a while, then delivered the

potions to their lodging house before the sun set.

That evening, I did some investigating in the labyrinth for an area to train the Echigoya staff, then went to the Ivy Manor to spend the night working on developing simple Raka clones to support Pochi and Tama.

Since I packed in a few too many features, they ended up on the same level as the Ivy Manor's False Cores, so I decided to whittle things down to the bare minimum as I compressed the magic circuits.



"Welcome, Sir Pendragon. And it's a pleasure to meet you, young lady. I am Reythel, wife to Marquis Ashinen, the viceroy of Celivera."

The next afternoon, I accompanied Miss Karina to the viceroy's tea party as her escort, and the viceroy's wife greeted us as soon as we came into the parlor.

Marquis Ashinen's family was sending a carriage to pick up Zena from her lodging house, which was why she didn't arrive with us.

"...Lady Karina."

Karina froze up immediately, so I gently nudged her to introduce herself.

"I—I am Karina Muno—erm, the second daughter of Baron Leon Muno of the Muno Barony. Pleased to meet you."

She got the order wrong, but she still managed to introduce herself.

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Karina. Please have a seat right here."

Her face still stiff with nervousness, Karina sat on the sofa the viceroy's wife had indicated. I sat next to her so I could try to help her stay calm.

The viceroy's wife had a higher standing than Karina, but she was probably calling her "Lady" because she was a guest.

"My, what a lovely outfit you're wearing."

"Is that the latest fashion from the royal capital?"

The young women who were already in the salon were sharp-eyed enough to identify the basis of Karina's outfit right away.

"This fabric is crimson silk from Lalagi, is it not? Material of this quality is rarely found on the market."

In addition to the hostess, her noblewoman friends spoke kindly to Karina, too.

"The embroidery on the silk is lovely as well, but these little inlaid jewels... Could they be Heaven's Teardrops?"

"Goodness, they're sparkling like rainbows. Even small ones like these are terribly rare."

"What a gorgeous dress. I'd expect no less of a baron's daughter or a close friend of Sir Pendragon."

The women all gazed raptly at Karina's dress.

Since she was remarkably shy, Karina looked very uncomfortable.

"Most impressive of all is that ruby brooch with your house crest. Imagine carving a crest into such a large ruby without hesitation... The Muno Barony must be quite prosperous."

For some reason, they were all complimenting her clothes and accessories instead of her good looks. Was there some unspoken rule about not commenting on that?

Miss Karina's infamous shyness was in full force: She was only replying to the ladies' questions with "yes" or "no," so the conversation wasn't getting very far.

I tried to intervene to keep things going, but whenever I did so, I wound up being the only one joining in on the conversation instead.

I guess the best way to fix her shyness would be for her to make female friends her own age.

"Lady Karina, are you, by chance, engaged to Sir Pendragon?"

Once the topic of clothes and accessories had mostly run dry, Baron Ralpott's wife, who loved gossip and romance, brought up this subject with a sly smile.

Karina seemed too embarrassed to even confirm or deny, so I cut in. "Lady Karina ought to marry someone of far higher class than the likes of me."

The baron's wife suggested her fifth son, who was near thirty, but a slight prompting from me changed the subject to a rumor that this same son was currently dating a certain hereditary knight's daughter, sparing Karina the pain of responding.

When Lady Karina shot me a rather disappointed glance, I thought the conversation might've taken the wrong turn somewhere, but Baron Ralpott's wife seemed satisfied to latch on to the other topic I'd brought up.

"But don't you perhaps harbor some intentions on Sir Pendragon, dear Lady Karina?"

Another wife tried a similar attack on Karina, but she was quick to shake her head and say, "No?"

This was just a guess, but judging by her lack of reaction, I suspected that the sheltered Miss Karina didn't understand what she meant by "harboring intentions."

Things were starting to get a bit awkward, so I decided to settle things down by gesturing for the maids to bring in the shortcakes and cheese tarts I'd brought in advance.

Hmm?

One of the ladies-in-waiting who entered the room whispered something to the viceroy's wife, who hid a mischievous smile behind her fan and looked in my direction.

I should probably get ready to act surprised.

The blue dot on my radar that indicated Zena gave away the viceroy's wife's surprise guest, but if I didn't react when she entered, her hard work would go to waste.

"It appears our other guest has arrived. Please come in."

Escorted by a lady-in-waiting and fully dressed up, Zena entered the room.

I did my best to give a show of surprise that wouldn't seem exaggerated.

"Oh my, it's quite unusual to see our coolheaded Sir Pendragon get so flustered."

Evidently satisfied with my reaction, the viceroy's wife chuckled and murmured incorrectly, "So this one really is where his heart lies."

"I am the daughter of Sir Marienteil, hereditary knight of Seiryuu County, Zena. It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

Zena gave a somewhat stiff, military-style introduction.

"My goodness, she's adorable *and* chivalrous."

The viceroy's wife looked at her with an approving smile.

"Lady Zena's rank seems closer to Sir Pendragon. Could *she* be his fiancée?"

Nosy as always, Mrs. Ralpott waggled her eyebrows.

Karina's gaze turned on Zena.

"N-no, no! I-I'm Satou's—I mean, Sir Pendragon's—um, f-friend? That is—I'm his close friend, but..."

Zena's eyes started to spin, so I stepped in to rescue her.

"Miss Zena was very kind to me when I visited Seiryuu City. As it happens, she saved the lives of some of my comrades, too."

Somehow, my explanation didn't seem to thrill the other ladies.

"But Lady Zena is definitely fond of Sir Pendragon, hmm?"

At this comment from Baron Ralpott's wife, the purehearted Zena turned bright red.

"Ah, to be young again."

Baronet Dyukeli's wife smiled warmly at Zena.

"Lady Zena, is your dress not made of jade silk from the Ougoch Duchy, perhaps? Just as with Lady Karina's crimson silk, that's quite a high-quality fabric that's hard to find on the market."

"Is it made by the same designer as Lady Karina's dress, by chance?"

"It's small, but Lady Zena's pendant has the same style of carving."

"How impressive to carve a family crest into a stone as hard as sapphire..."

Baronet Dyukeli's wife changed the subject, and the other wives followed suit.

"Could it be that they were both gifts from Sir Pendragon?"

I nodded at the inquisitive viceroy's wife.

"Yes, I had them altered by a merchant I often work with. I'm told they were made using magical means."

The jewels in Karina's and Zena's brooches were actually artificial gems made with the Earth Magic spell Create Stone Object, so they were extremely cheap to make.

"Magic? Well, that must be a joke, I'm sure."

One of the wives, a particular fan of gemstones, rejected my claim.

"A joke? I thought there was an Earth Magic spell called Create Stone Object that could alter stones, if memory serves..."

"You're quite knowledgeable, Sir Pendragon. But in this case, I'm afraid your studies are incomplete."

I apologized meekly and prompted her to explain my apparent mistake.

"Only the most talented of Earth Magic mages are able to alter gemstones with Create Stone Object. And even then, it would require an incredible amount of concentration and talent to modify such stones without affecting their translucent quality."

"Oh, I see..."

Sorry, but I did that in a matter of seconds while humming a little tune.

"Since you're not an Earth Magic user or anything, it's perfectly reasonable that you wouldn't know, Sir Pendragon."

"Next time you're in the royal capital, I recommend visiting their gem museum. They have incredible jewels created by a legendary mage of old who was known as the Gemstone Mage."

Ooh, that sounds like a fun sightseeing spot.

"I'll definitely have to go there sometime," I responded with a smile.

“Do you know where you’ll be staying when you do visit the royal capital? If not, you are quite welcome to stay in our mansion there.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Hee-hee, I’m only joking. That would be rude to Baron Muno.”

The viceroy’s wife smiled mischievously and went on.

“If you’re to buy a mansion in the old capital, we do know a few good companies, and I’d be happy to write a letter of introduction for you. It should still make it in time with our fastest horses.”

She explained that inns in the royal capital were hard to come by around New Year’s, so I was happy to accept her offer.

“Ah yes, I nearly forgot to ask. When do you plan to go to the royal capital?”

“His Majesty is generously providing an airship. I’ll be riding that there.”

The airship was originally sent specially to bring Sir Jelil’s company and their spoils from defeating the Middle Stratum floormaster to the royal capital, but since the timing worked out well, they’d offered to give us a ride, too.

“Oh my, is that so? We’re planning to take the regular service at the end of the month there, so you’ll be arriving well ahead of us. If you have any troubles before I arrive in the royal capital, please do have Emma help you. She might be a bit of a prankster, but she’s still quite dependable. I’ll give you a letter for her later, too.”

Emma Ritton, the wife of Count Ritton, was apparently a very influential person among the nobles and high society in the royal capital; it would be good to have a person like that vouching for me.

I thanked the viceroy’s wife and asked about Mrs. Ritton’s likes, personality, and so on, keeping her from locking on to Zena or Karina in the process.

Thus, I made it through the anxiety-inducing tea party and subsequent dinner and managed to keep from incurring any bad feelings amid the viceroy’s wife’s community.

The one saving grace of the evening was that Karina and Zena ended up chatting about their shared interest in stories about heroes.

That might be an unusual topic of choice for proper young ladies, but it was one of the few times that the normally shy Karina became exceptionally talkative.

I wasn't sure if they'd become friends just yet, but at least they were on the acquaintance level.

If possible, I hoped that Zena would befriend the awkward Karina in time.

Labyrinth City Life

Satou here. Sometimes when you're spending your days uneventfully, you'll start vaguely imagining that something special might happen. But when you've experienced an out-of-the-ordinary life, you start to treasure ordinary days that much more.

“I never wish to go to a tea party or banquet again.”

When we returned to the mansion, Karina threw herself down on a sofa.

“You’re a baron’s daughter, so you’ll have to keep dealing with high society, I’m afraid.”

“Well, I don’t want to.”

“Karinaaa?”

“Tell Pochi your troubles, sir.”

Tama and Pochi came over to Karina’s side.

For some reason, Pochi seemed to be emitting the aura of a priest offering to hear a confession.

“The noblewomen always tease me, and the men always stare.”

It sounded like the dinner after the tea party had been pretty stressful for her.

“Have some honeyed pastries.”

“When times are tough, eat sweets and forget your troubles, sir. Sweets can even distract from the pain of no meat, sir. Meat, ah, Mr. Meat... The dripping fat of grilled meat, the tenderness and flavor of Mr. Hamburg, the simple yumminess of *shabu-shabu*... Aaah, meat...”

Pochi tried to comfort Karina, but the second half of her speech ruined it with her longing for meat.



“Pochi, drooool?”

“Oopsie-daisy, sir.”

Upon Tama’s observation, Pochi reached into her Fairy Pack, produced a handkerchief with a cartoon meat pattern, and wiped her mouth.

Wow, she’s growing up. Not long ago, she would’ve just wiped it with her arm.

As I was lost in thought, Pochi started sadly chewing on the meat pattern on her handkerchief. Considering that her no-meat punishment was ending the next evening, I wished she would hang in there a little longer.

“I swear I’ll go to the labyrinth tomorrow!” Karina jumped up abruptly and exclaimed.

She seemed peevish that Tama and Pochi had gotten distracted from reassuring her.

“That won’t do, Lady Karina,” chided her lady-in-waiting Pina. “More importantly, you should be trying to seduce Sir Knight, since you’re all dressed up.”

“Yes, she’s right! Try showing off that cleavage a little more!”

One of Karina’s other maids, the newbie, chimed in.

“H-her cleavage? How lewd!” the other maid, Erina, declared in a rare show of common sense.

I couldn’t help briefly imagining a seductive Karina.

At that moment, our eyes happened to meet.

“Satou, you pervert!”

With that, Karina ran out of the room.

Tama chased after her, hastily followed by Pina and the other maids.

I looked around awkwardly to cover up my slight blunder and found Pochi looking at me from below.

“What’s the matter?”

“Are you a pervert, sir?”

How am I supposed to answer that?

“Being a pervert isn’t good, sir.”

With that, Pochi went stumbling after Karina and the others.

“I think Pochi’s no-meat punishment might be affecting her a little too much.”

“Yeah, maybe we should end it a little earl—”

As I started to respond to Arisa’s concern, Mia tugged on my sleeve.

“It’s okay.”

Mia pointed at the entrance to the room.

Glancing over, my eyes once again fell on Pochi, who was peeking at me from just past the door.

Judging by the way she’d sped off immediately, she probably would be fine if we proceeded as planned.

“That girl doesn’t know how to seal the deal,” Arisa murmured.

I guess she must’ve put the idea in Pochi’s head to try to lighten the punishment out of pity.

Arisa was the one who had insisted she needed to be punished properly, but it was probably her deep empathy and love that prevented her from sticking it out to the end.

That night, I made equipment for Karina as promised and used the rest of the time before sunrise to work on experimenting with the Raka clones for Pochi and Tama.

Too many all-nighters in a row is never a good idea, so I made sure to get a few hours of sleep at dawn.



The morning after the viceroy’s wife’s tea party, I went to the labyrinth gates to see off Zena and the Labyrinth City Celivera’s Elite Training Corps.

“Satou, you came to see us off?”

“Yes, and to give you this.”

I pulled out a small pouch from my Garage Bag and gave it to Zena.

“It’s so cute... W-wait, Satou, don’t tell me this is—?!”

I nodded at Zena, whose surprise only doubled.

The pouch I gave her was a kind of Magic Bag.

I’d acquired several of them when we traveled the southern seas; this one was a small-capacity model that I’d just updated a little, so it shouldn’t be too big of a deal.

“There are potions inside. With this bag, outside impact won’t affect the contents, which means you don’t need to worry about them breaking while you’re exploring—it’s very convenient.”

“Yes, it certainly is, but—”

The potions inside included five intermediate magic recovery and five stamina recovery potions, five all-purpose antidotes made from White Dragon Stone, and others including paralysis cures and a good deal of two varieties of watered-down potions.

I also included one cure-all from the labyrinth, just in case. You never know what might happen in a labyrinth, after all.

“You may not need them, since your force has its own stock of potions, but please use them freely if you end up running out.”

Zena’s eyes widened at the abundance of intermediate-grade potions.

I’d written instructions and warnings on the labels, so I suggested that she glance them over later.

“But I can’t accept something so valuable.”

“Miss Zena, you could always return them if you don’t use them.”

Zena hesitated, but Iona helpfully encouraged her to accept.

“So I guess I wasn’t really able to show you around Labyrinth City before.”

“I’m sorry; it’s my fault—”

I wasn’t trying to blame Zena, so I interrupted her apology to finish my

statement.

“...So I’ll have to show you around when you get back from the labyrinth, if that’s all right.”

At that, Zena broke into a smile.

“Once you return, I’ll bring you to a really good restaurant, so please look forward to it.”

“...I will!”

Zena responded with the look of a maiden in love, which made the nearby spectators watch with sparkling eyes. I wasn’t even remotely trying to romantically court Zena with my offer, but I guess it seemed that way to the people around us. I guess I should be more careful about how I phrased my invitations.

“Zenacchi, looks like we’re about to head out.”

Lilio pointed behind us, where members of the explorers’ party Silverlight were marching over, clad in silver body armor. The ones in the rear were wearing chain mail instead.

This group was unique in that they rarely used equipment made from monster materials, and the members were all noblewomen; despite its large size, at least a quarter of them had crimson badges.

“Everyone here? The Silverlights are joining us, so we’re heading in!”

A young knight who seemed to be the commanding officer called out orders, and Zena’s comrades began gathering their things and walking toward the west gate.

“All right, Satou. We’re off.”

“Have a safe trip, Zena. Please be careful not to get hurt.”

I wished I could go along with her, but I held off because having an outsider follow her on a mission into the labyrinth for military training might be bad for Zena’s reputation.

The Silverlights were veterans, and I doubted they’d go anywhere too

dangerous, so it would probably be fine.

“Don’t worry. I’ve always had good luck.”

Don’t say things that sound like obvious flags, please.

I kept this thought in my head as I waved to Zena until she disappeared through the west gate.

I’d forgotten to ask when they were getting back, but since I doubted they would spend a long time in the labyrinth on their first excursion, I decided to just make reservations at the restaurant for every day until I was supposed to leave for the royal capital.

On the days I couldn’t go eat there, I could just send staff like Kajiro, Ayaume, or Miteruna as thanks for their hard work.

Come to think of it...

It occurred to me later that saying, “Once you return, I’ll bring you to a really good restaurant,” was a pretty ominous flag in itself.

There was probably nothing to worry about, but I decided to check in on her occasionally with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance just in case.



“I’m back.”

“Welcome hooome.”

“Welcome back, sir!”

When I returned from seeing Zena off, I found Tama and Pochi playing a variation on the classic Japanese game of Look Over There! with Miss Karina.

Erina was the only maid guard in the room, with Pina and the newbie nowhere to be found.

“Welcome back, Satou.”

Karina greeted me with her head hanging gloomily, having just lost to Tama.

“Karina’s baaad?”

“That won’t do, sir! Watch Pochi and me battle, sir!”

Tama and Pochi started playing Look Over There!

The usual rules were to look in a different direction than the other person pointed, but since these two instinctively looked wherever someone pointed, our house rules for Look Over There! were that whoever couldn't follow the other's finger would lose.

"Satou, I'm terribly bored."

Unable to follow the pair with her eyes, Karina looked up at me and frowned.

"Then would you like to try harvesting hopping potatoes and walking beans in the labyrinth with Tama and Pochi?"

"Yes, I'd love to!"

At that, Karina jumped to her feet.

Today she was wearing a loose shirt from a premade clothing boutique, so the bouncing of her chest was especially dynamic to watch.

The potatoes and beans would serve both as materials for the private orphanage kids to practice kitchen prep and ingredients for their dinner.

"All right, but please go and change first. I had your new armor sent to the guesthouse."

"Very well. Erina, assist me, will you?"

"Yes'm!"

Karina and Erina dashed out of the room.

While we waited for Karina to get back, Pochi and Tama continued their Look Over There! battle at a speed too fast to follow with the naked eye.

"This light broadsword is perfect!"

Going through the weapon storehouse I'd established for the explorers' school, Karina chose a broadsword made from the blade arm of a war mantis.

It was considerably light for its large size, with a dense and sturdy blade that was perfect for practice.

Noticing that her guardian maids Erina and the newbie, who were

accompanying her into the labyrinth, looked like they wanted new weapons, too, I gave them swords made from the blade arms of guardian ants.

Karina's lady-in-waiting Pina was staying behind, as she wasn't as skilled in battle as the other two.

"Raka, please make sure Lady Karina doesn't swing that around in the middle of town."

"Understood."

Karina could be even more careless than Pochi, so I asked her Intelligent Item to keep an eye on her.

Most people would complain about that, but Karina didn't seem particularly bothered.

"Master, are you training Lady Karina?"

As we left the explorers' school, we happened to spot Liza, who was coming back from her jog around the Labyrinth City perimeter.

"Not exactly. I asked for her help on a little mission, that's all."

As I chatted with Liza, Tama and Pochi ran over from the mansion all prepared.

Since they weren't going anywhere very dangerous, they were only wearing simple armor and wooden carrying racks strapped to their backs.

"Now, let us set forth!"

"Aye-aye."

"Roger! SIR!!"

At Karina's cry, Tama responded with her usual laid-back manner, but Pochi was much louder than usual.

She'd been saying "sir" even more than usual, too. Maybe the stress of having no meat was getting to her?

I guess I really should save this no-meat punishment for only extreme cases in the future.

"I'll make a full-course meat extravaganza for dinner tonight, so do your best in there."

"GWAH! Yes, sir!"

The light returned to Pochi's eyes, and she pumped her fists with renewed energy.

"Full cooourse?"

"That's right. We'll have three kinds of roast beef for the appetizers, then *shabu-shabu*, deep-fried chicken, teriyaki, beef stew, and a niiice thick steak. And of course, seven different flavors of hamburg steak. There'll be some light shrimp and crab in between; then we'll wrap it all up with *sukiyaki*."

With every dish I named, Pochi's tail wagged faster and faster.

"Aah... I'm so excited, I might go crazy, sir."

"I can't waaait."

"That certainly sounds wonderful. I'll have to fight especially hard against my challengers today to work up an appetite."

Pochi and Tama began spinning around to express their happiness, while Liza's tail also began slapping against the floor.

Do you guys really like meat that much?

"Good luck," I said with a wave to the excited beastfolk girls.

Karina and her maids seemed a little taken aback, but I assured them that they'd be invited to the meat fest, too, and encouraged them to do their best.



On my way back from seeing off Karina and company, I stopped by the orphanage and saw Mia in the garden teaching the kids how to play instruments.

Attracted by her music, little birds were sitting contentedly on Mia's head and shoulders.

"Aah, what a delicate song."

“I want to paint a picture of Lady Mia playing her music.”

“Then I’ll write a poem about her.”

Some young fairyfolk boys and girls were hovering around Mia in admiration. Her only response to their showering praises was an indifferent “mm.”

If anything, she seemed to enjoy teaching the kids instruments much more.

“Satou.”

“Hey, Mia. Are you teaching the kids how to play music?”

Since Mia had spotted me, I ambled over to say hello.

“Instruments.”

Mia nodded toward the kids.

“Are you saying you’d like more instruments so the children can practice?”

“Mm.”

She nodded, so I agreed to provide some.

I could ask Miss Miteruna to order them later.

“Yes, very good. Straighten your blade a little more, sonny. It takes less strength to hold it that way.”

Near Mia and company, a few elderly folks were teaching some kids woodworking and carving.

These folks were retired artisans and regular attendees of Mia’s lakeside concerts.

“Good afternoon.”

“Why, if it isn’t the young master.”

“Thank you very much for obliging my request.”

“Pah, no need to thank us.”

“We’re just payin’ the lassie back for her concerts.”

“How could we say no to Lady Mia?”

Through Mia, I had requested that they start offering training or DIY

workshops for the kids to give them more options for future employment.

They were doing it as volunteers, but I was planning to thank them with sake, pastries, and so on.

Past the workshops, Lulu was teaching cooking classes.

“Have you gotten the hang of using the knife? I’ll show you how to break down a hopping potato next.”

Lulu and some of the maids from the mansion were teaching the kids how to prepare hopping potatoes.

Most of the students were girls, but there was a fair amount of boys, too.

All of them looked very serious.

“Master!”

As she finished up her demonstration, Lulu noticed me and broke into a shining smile.

“Do you need anything for the classes?”

“We’re fine, thank you.”

Once I confirmed this with her, I praised the kids for their seriousness about the class, and...

“When I grow up, I’m gonna be a chef like Lady Lulu!”

“I’m gonna start with a food cart and own a restaurant one day!”

...for some reason, they started telling me their dreams.

I was impressed that they already had such clear aspirations at their young age. Their futures were looking bright.

“Nanaaa!”

“C’mon, say *larvae*.”

“Nana, let’s play with building blocks!”

Once I left Lulu’s class and went into the orphanage, I found Nana inside surrounded by her beloved “*larvae*.”

Despite her straight face, she seemed to be having great fun, so I carefully made my way around to proceed through the hallway without interrupting.

In one corner of the shared space where Nana and the kids were playing, some sort of line had formed.

On investigation, I learned that they were waiting to charge the electric fan-style magic tool I'd given them.

"Hee-hee, my turn."

The kids seemed to enjoy channeling their magic power into the tool.

It looked like spinning around rhythmically like an electric fan was becoming a fad, too.

Since they were apparently charging the fan with magic power as a game, I had noticed recently that more of the kids were starting to get the "Magic Manipulation" skill.

Since that was a very useful skill, I also supplied the orphanage and explorers' school with lamp magic tools, easy-to-charge wooden swords, and so on, hoping that even more of them would gain it.

"Goat!"

Another group of kids was playing with practice cards in the hallway, using the benches as tables.

"Nope, that one's 'goat meat.'"

"What?! Then 'goat' is totally right!"

"But Pochi and Tama called it 'goat meat'!"

It was cute to watch, but I worried about them committing the wrong thing to memory, so I politely informed them that "goat" by itself was correct.

When the child who'd believed Pochi and Tama looked teary-eyed, I added, "If you see Pochi or Tama, you can tell them they were wrong."

On another bench nearby, an older kid was slowly reading a picture book to a younger one.

Clearly, education at the orphanage was going well.

“Gimme it! I wanna read it!”

“Cut it out. I’m not done yet!”

Hearing some children arguing, I peered into a room and saw two older kids quarreling over a book in the library.

“Stop it, both of you!”

A familiar voice interrupted the fight: Arisa.

“The rule is a half hour per person, remember? Hamuna, give the book to Ralin.”

“Fiiine.”

“Yaaay, thanks, Arisa!”

As the boy called Ralin happily took the book, I noticed the cover.

It was a children’s introductory spell book that I’d made with Arisa and Mia.

I’d written it in the style of the instruction books often seen in modern-day Japanese bookstores, like *Learn Spreadsheets in Two Weeks*, so it was businesslike and succinct with frequent illustrations and diagrams on each page.

It was a very practical basic textbook. I limited theory and principles to optional little boxes so that the main text was solely for learning to use magic.

Noticing me, the kids murmured among themselves.

“Why, if it isn’t master.”

Arisa beckoned to me, and I entered the library.

“Say, master. Do you think we could mass-produce this textbook?”

“We could probably transcribe more copies, sure.”

I had a feeling I could make a printing spell in theory, but I’d learned during the Doghead incident that there was a god who forbade printing presses, so I wasn’t planning on crossing that line at the moment.

“But if we do that, then it might get copied and leak to the public.”

The only available means of production in this world was copying by hand, meaning there was no real concept of copyright in most nations.

“Then we can just outsource the illustrations. I don’t think anyone will figure things out from the pictures alone.”

If it was just writing, I could easily make copies using a combination of “Parallel Thoughts” and Magic Hand.

Pictures were probably possible, too, but they would be more of a pain than the writing, so I didn’t really want to do it myself.

“I’ll put in a request to an art studio for just the illustrations, then. How many copies do you want?”

“Thank you, master. Ten would be plenty for here, but I’d like to put some at the explorers’ school and stuff, too. Could we do twenty to be safe?”

I readily agreed, since ten or twenty didn’t make much of a difference.

“Arisa, practice chants with me.”

“Me too!”

“O-oh, and me!”

Once we finished up our conversation, the kids gathered around Arisa.

“We’d distract people who are trying to read in here, so let’s do it outside. Care to join us, master?”

Not wanting to pass up her invitation, I joined in on the chant practice with the kids.

In the process, I somehow ended up promising to do my usual morning and evening practice with the kids starting the next day.



“Ooh, I’m so happy, it’s scary, sir.”

That evening, when the girls came back from the labyrinth, I treated them to the full-course meat festival I’d promised Pochi.

“So fuuull.”

“What a spectacular feast.”

Tama and Liza had been going light on the meat out of sympathy for Pochi the

past few days, so they were almost as pleased as she was to indulge in meat again.

The three of them had their bellies bulging like something out of a manga and were lying around contentedly in the living room.

They looked extremely happy and relaxed.

Mia and I had given up after one round, but the beastfolk girls kept fighting the good fight against round after round of meat dishes.

“That was delicious but way more meat than anyone should eat in a single day.”

“Mm.”

Despite her words, Arisa had hung in there until the third round and had been groaning that she was going to die of overeating until I gave her some stomach medicine.

“Ahhh, what a delight.”

“The fried chicken was so good.”

“I could just melt...”

Karina, Erina, and the newbie were also lying around happily on the sofa.

However, Pina was scolding the other two maids for not being more mindful of their station.

Once they’d eaten their fill, Nana and Lulu went to deliver the “accidental” extra portions to the orphanage and the explorers’ school.

“Master, you ate more than usual today yourself.”

“I guess.”

I nodded.

Pochi and the girls were so adorable as they blissfully ate the meat that I couldn’t resist joining them in filling up.

From now on, I swore to avoid any food-related punishments, even if I had to punish the kids for something in the future.

Meals tasted better when everyone could enjoy them together, after all.

I was too full after dinner to want to do much, but I still worked on the Raka clones a bit before I went to sleep.

I had finished selecting the magic circuits but determined that my equipment and the Ivy Manor machines couldn't produce them at a small-enough size to be conveniently portable.

Currently, I was stuck on whether to ask the elves of Bolenan Forest for help or store a larger machine in a subspace like I'd done for Lulu's Acceleration Gun.



"Looks like they're working pretty hard."

The next morning, after I saw off Miss Karina and company as they went to train in section 1 of the labyrinth and put in an order for the illustrations to make the textbook copies Arisa had requested, I went to stop by the explorers' school.

In the courtyard, Gerits and the noble kids were working up a sweat practicing with the first and second generation of students.

Hmm?

Across the way, I saw the first-generation students returning from their final graduation test.

They were a little earlier than I expected, but judging by their proud, cheerful expressions, it looked like the kids had managed to pass the test.

“““Hey, mister!“““

Noticing me, the first-generation kids came running over.

“We did it! We beat the test!”

Usasa grinned at me proudly.

After praising them all for their efforts, I told them to wash up so we could have a graduation ceremony after lunch.

I contacted my group with the Space Magic spell Telephone and told them about the graduation ceremony, then went to ask Miss Miteruna and the other

maids to start making the preparations.

Since it was a sudden plan, we would probably have to get most of the food delivered from dining halls or restaurants.

Before long, many of the involved parties were gathered in the courtyard of the explorers' school.

Since Erina and the newbie had returned from Karina's labyrinth exploration looking deathly pale, they went back to the mansion.

I gathered that they had fought a ton of goblins, since they were darkly muttering things like "C'mon, please, no more goblins" and "The shadows, the ceiling, they're everywhere!"

Unlike Karina, the two of them didn't have Raka's protection, so I was sure it was a lot more harrowing for them.

"I apologize for my lateness, master."

Liza arrived last, carrying a bag full of money that she said was her winnings from the day's battles.

"This seems like more than usual."

"Yes, some famous warriors came from the royal capital today."

"You'll have to tell me about how they fought after the ceremony."

"Yes, master!"

I changed the money she gave me into gold coins, then paid it back to her as a "reward."

She wouldn't like it if I just had her keep it from the start.

When Arisa came over to get me, I went on the stage that had been set up in the courtyard.

"Congratulations on graduating, everyone..."

A long speech would just make everyone sleepy, so I briefly praised them for working hard at the explorers' school and reminded them to prioritize their survival above all else.

Next, the principal, Mr. Kajiro, Arisa, and a few other speakers offered their congratulations, and in the end we gave them their equivalent of diplomas.

“...Now, we’ll award each of you cloaks as proof of graduation.”

I called up the graduates by name one at a time and put a blue cloak on each of them.

Since the cloaks were made out of highly shock-resistant hydra membrane and cut-resistant wyvern leather, they could probably continue wearing them until at least level 40 or so.

On the back, they were dyed with a variation of my house crest.

“It is a bit different from thy crest, no?”

Princess Meetia looked at the cloaks with interest.

Arisa had helped me come up with the crest, which was the silhouette of a chubby-looking dragon plush raising both arms, with a spear-like pen on its shoulders.

“Since it’s a cutesier version, maybe we should call it ‘Pendra.’”

Somehow, Arisa’s muttered words quickly spread among the students, and soon the graduates were saying “Pendra” to one another with completely straight faces.

Little did I know that Pendra would eventually become the nickname for graduates of the explorers’ school throughout Labyrinth City.

After that, we had a simple celebration with carbonated juice and party food, then wrapped things up.

Afterward, the graduates and teachers were going to the leisure quarter to celebrate. They invited me along, so I figured I’d pop in later.

“““Mister!“““

As I was leaving the explorers’ school, some kids from the orphanage flagged me down.

They’d been watching the graduation ceremony from the other side of the hedge.

“I wanna join the explorers’ school, too!”

“Me too!”

“I’m good with a sword!”

The kids all clamored for permission to enroll in the school.

Since I was sure they had thought about this seriously, it would be cruel to just shut them down with a *Maybe when you’re older*.

“I understand your requests, but I’m afraid it’s not possible right away. There’s a limit to how many students we can take on at once.”

“Exactly! You’ve got to at least pass the selection test or you wouldn’t last a minute in the labyrinth.”

The kids grumbled at my and Arisa’s words. “But Arisa gets to do it...”

Since they spent so much time with my kids, they had probably gotten the mistaken idea that they should be able to be explorers, too, since they were around the same age.

“I’m not telling you to give up, though, okay?”

I patted the kids’ heads.

“Mister?”

“I said ‘not right away,’ not ‘never.’ I’ll arrange for a teacher for you soon.”

At that, the kids all broke into smiles.

In true childlike fashion, they started asking things like “How soon is soon? Tomorrow?” but I just responded, “Soon just means soon,” even as I started planning how to put my promise into action.

At the next soup kitchen, I could look for some retired explorers or soldiers and see if I could hire someone to teach the kids self-defense and basic training techniques.

After the graduation party that night, I left the girls in the care of their former teacher Iruna and took the guys around to some hostess spots and bars. It was pretty fun how each place was very different from the next.

“Now then...”

We ended up drinking almost until dawn, but I still made my way to a depopulated area in the Upper Stratum.

It wasn’t just empty of explorers—there were hardly any monsters left, either.

I was planning to make a facility here to power level the Echigoya executive staff.

“First, I’ll make some enclosures to keep in the monsters.”

I used the Earth Magic spell Pitfall to make evenly spaced shafts about thirty feet deep and wide.

Once the shafts were formed, I used the Earth Magic spell Wall to make the sides of the pits slanted, with a slippery overhang at the top.

“Next, the lids...”

It’d be a pain to make grates out of metal to cover each hole, so I produced a few big boulders from Storage and used “Spellblade” on my fingertip to slice them into pieces about three feet thick.

Finally, I used Create Stone Object to beef them up to about triple the thickness for extra safety.

“Maybe there should be a window, too?”

I created three manhole-size openings in each lid, then fused panes of crystal into them. While I was at it, I carved Holy Stone magic circuits into the crystal windows.

“Whew, I’m beat.”

All that was left was one last push.

Finally, I tossed in some monster corpses in Storage that I had no use for, along with some maze rats and cockroaches that I’d gathered for this purpose, throwing a few into each hole.

Now, if I just left this for a few weeks, there should be enough monsters for some good power leveling.

It’d be trouble if they ate one another and reduced the numbers too much,

though, so I would check in on them with Clairvoyance every few days.

Stifling a yawn, I teleported back to the mansion aboveground.



After breakfast, as I was in the study checking my plans for the day, Karina came bursting into the room excitedly.

“Today I’d like to hunt frogs so we can have some tasty fried frog legs!”

Since I had pulled another all-nighter, her cheerful shout hurt my head.

“Niiice.”

“That’s a very, very good idea, sir.”

Tama and Pochi came in behind her, looking at me for permission with sparkling eyes.

As long as Karina had Raka, a frog probably couldn’t hurt her, but...

“No, no frogs.”

If I gave them permission, Karina would almost certainly end up getting dragged into the pond and soaking her clothes.

I couldn’t let a young woman expose such a sight in front of a bunch of boorish explorers.

Even if I personally would love to see it.

“If you’re going to hunt, go to the maze ant territory near section four.”

Maze ants had soft carapaces, and their only special attack was spitting formic acid. The acid could melt through cloth and leather, but Raka’s protection should hold up to it just fine.

“Nectar fevrrr?”

“There are balls of sweet nectar inside the ants’ nests, sir!”

Tama and Pochi grinned and squished their cheeks together.

Karina looked excited, too, but I had to put my foot down again.

“No going into the maze ants’ nest, you two.”

“Nyooo.”

“Why not, sir?”

“If you drag her into the nest, Lady Karina would be in danger.”

Even with Raka’s defenses, Karina didn’t have enough magic or stamina to fight off a whole swarm of ants in their nest.

“At the very least, she ought to be level twenty or so first.”

“That sounds terribly far away...”

Karina slumped. She was still only level 9.

“Gooo, Karinaaa?”

“That’s right, sir! One step forward, two steps back, sir!”

Pochi, that’s not right. Arisa had probably taught her this old saying, but in this case, that meant Karina would never get anywhere.

“Very well. I shall take it one step at a time!”

Well, I guess it’s fine if it cheered Karina up anyway.

“Sir Satou, we’ve prepared some explorer clothes for Lady Karina. Which do you think would be best?”

Karina’s lady-in-waiting Pina and her two guard maids came into the room, each wearing oddly revealing explorer-style outfits. They all seemed very loose in the chest area since they were made for Miss Karina.

“Pina! I thought I told you I wouldn’t wear such an embarrassing outfit!”

Lady Karina’s golden curls shook in rage.

The clothes would’ve looked right at home in some old games or anime, but she would probably die of embarrassment if she wore them in public.

There were some fairly cold places in the labyrinth, so I politely advised against wearing overly revealing clothes for exploring.

“Very well. But wouldn’t you like to see Lady Karina wear such clothes as these?”

Pina was a little red-faced as she said this. I guess she was embarrassed, too.

Of course I wouldn't mind seeing Karina's ridiculously curvy figure in skimpy clothes, but...

The second this thought ran through my mind, the door burst open, and the iron-wall pair of Mia and Arisa came charging into the room.

“Guilty.”

“My perv sensor was going off, and sure enough! You’re in here making maids wear clothes that’re too big in the chest for them and smirking! If that’s what you’re into, I’m always telling you to ask your beloved Arisa!”

Arisa started to reach for her top button, but Mia bopped her on the head.

“Calm down.”

“C’mooon.”

“This is a misunderstanding. Pina and the others were modeling new clothes for Lady Karina, but I was just telling them that they’re not appropriate attire for the labyrinth.”

Karina and the maids nodded when Arisa looked at them, so she believed my explanation.

“Retreat.”

“We can’t have master losing control. Just hurry up and change, please.”

Mia and Arisa ushered the maids out of the room.

“I told you! Lady Karina’s charm is in little gaps and her defenselessness, not in straightforward sex appeal.”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on the newbie grumbling to Pina and Erina.

The two of them were looking much less pale after a good night’s sleep. If anything, they seemed to be in good spirits after getting money for selling the cores from their hunt.

“Let’s hunt even more prey today!”

Once they got prepared and set out for the labyrinth, Karina raised her fists excitedly.

“Ay, ay.”

“Ohhh! Sir!”

Raising a cheer they must’ve learned from Arisa, Tama and Pochi formed the letters A-A-O as they shouted. It was adorable.

Come to think of it, I felt like I’d seen a cheer like that in an old *shojo* manga.

“I’d like to do it, too!”

... “Ooh,” *indeed*.

The A-A-O poses were just cute when the kids did them, but with Karina’s proportions, they came across very sexy. Making the first A with her arms was normal enough, but things got spicy when she raised them and bent back for the second A, then formed an O in a way that made her chest jiggle absurdly.

“See? Like I said, her lack of defenses is Lady Karina’s charm.”

“Grrr... You’re right, but that smug face still bugs me, dang it!”

Behind her, the newbie and Erina murmured among themselves.

“Hey, mister! You going to the labyrinth today, too?”

“Hello, Miss Neru. No, I’m just here to see them off.”

Neru came over to say hello, leaving a younger girl in charge of the food cart.

“By the way, I haven’t seen that noble kid lately. He sick or something?”

“You mean Sir Luram?”

“That’s the one!”

Neru struck an exaggerated pose when I guessed the name correctly.

Luram, one of Gerits’s friends, was a regular customer of Neru’s cart, which was probably how they’d gotten friendly.

“He’s actually hard at work with his friends at the explorers’ school.”

“Oh yeah? If he’s not comin’ for a while, I guess we better stop preppin’ his special set for now. It wastes way too many ingredients.”

At first, I had wondered if this was the beginning of a romance, but I guess

that wasn't why she'd asked.

"Sir Knight, I think they're headin' out."

Erina came over to get me.

"This another one of your pals comin' over, mister?"

"Who's this chick? She better not be mockin' me."

Come to think of it, Neru and Erina had similar manners of speaking.

"Now, now, don't fight."

I clapped my hands to interrupt the argument, and the two of them relented.

Their personalities were similar, too, not just their speech, so I had a feeling they might make good friends if they had a chance.

I pushed Erina along toward the west gate, where we saw off Karina and company as they entered the labyrinth.



"We have four scrolls from the Overgrown Labyrinth: **Cherry Blossom Shower**, **Mowing**, **Grass Spin**, and **Binding Grass**. As for the price..."

This time, the weaselfolk merchants with the scrolls were massively overcharging at ten gold coins per scroll.

"That's fine."

The scrolls were being held at the west guild, where I paid the price and accepted them.

"Their categories are unknown. Would you like the guild to analyze them?"

"No, it's all right. I just collect them as a hobby."

According to my AR, **Cherry Blossom Shower** and **Mowing** were Practical Magic, while **Grass Spin** and **Binding Grass** were Earth Magic.

"We've also received word of two more scrolls that these merchants would like to show you. They'll be in the royal capital through the beginning of next year. If you're in a hurry, I can give you their contact information."

I wasn't sure why they kept these scrolls separate from the other four, but I

accepted the information because I was curious what they were.

It should work out perfectly, since I would be in the royal capital around New Year's, too.

As I left the west guild, I spotted an armored party covered in wounds.

It must be a party made up of mostly nobles and knights. These kinds of chain mail and full-body armor were extremely expensive, so Labyrinth City explorers didn't normally have them.

For some reason, there was a strangely bloodthirsty mood in the air.

Maybe something happened?

“Hey!”

Oh, it's Lilio.

That must mean that this was the Labyrinth Elite from Seiryuu City.

I hadn't noticed because Zena's marker wasn't there.

...Hmm? Wait, then where is she?

Lilio came running over.

“It's Zenacchi! Zenacchi...!”

As if to confirm my fears, Lilio grabbed on to me and repeated Zena's nickname.

Search and Rescue

Satou here. The phrase search and rescue makes me think of the mountains or the ocean. Fortunately, I've never gotten lost in such a place before, but I do remember being shocked when I read the high costs of being rescued in an article somewhere. Safety first, as they say.

“Miss Lilio, please calm down. What happened to Zena?”

As Lilio grabbed my arm so tightly it was almost painful, I quickly opened my map and chose Zena from the marker list instead of searching for her.

Her location was...the labyrinth's Lower Stratum?

Why in the world is she down there...?

“Zenacchi went missing in the labyrinth!”

“She's missing?”

Even as we spoke, I manipulated the map and looked at Zena's details in my AR display.

I panicked for a moment when I saw that her status was **Fainted**, but her health bar hadn't gone down. At the very least, she wasn't seriously injured, poisoned, petrified, or any immediate danger like that.

However, her stamina bar was drained, and her mana was almost empty, so this was no time to relax.

“Zenacchi got abducted by monsters! You know a lot of people here, right? Please, you've got to find her!”

Lilio pleaded desperately, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I had to hurry. Zena seemed safe for now, but I didn't know for how long.

“All right. I'll go track her down.”



“Wait a minute.”

Iona, who had come up next to Lilio, grabbed my shoulder.

Her armor was cracked, too, and her shoulder was badly injured.

“What is it?”

I wanted to go save Zena as fast as possible.

“Where were you going to go without even asking where or how she went missing?”

“Right...”

Oops, I got ahead of myself. That might've seemed unnatural.

I needed an excuse, and fast. “*Fabrication*” skill, it’s your time to shine.

“I was just going to gather some people—I thought I’d ask a friend who excels at search-related magic for help. I’ll come ask for details later, so please go to the temple branch office at the guild and have them heal you first.”

“Please bring someone who can heal with you, too. Right before she was captured, Zena was seriously injured by a monster that looked like a black cloud.”

Seriously injured?

From what I could tell on the map, she was at full health.

And I didn’t know of any monsters that looked like a black fog...

Wait, I can worry about that later.

I assured Lilio and company that I would save their friend, and I left the guild behind.

“*Sorry, Arisa, but I need a favor...*”

As I ran, I contacted Arisa with the Space Magic spell Telephone.

“Can you gather everyone and get ready to go into the labyrinth?”

“*Okey-dokey.*”

Dependable as ever, Arisa promptly agreed without even asking the reason.

I quickly explained that Zena had gone missing and asked her to form a dummy search party.

Then I ducked into an empty alleyway and put on a transparency cloak, then teleported into the first section of the labyrinth with the Space Magic spell Return.

I opened the map and looked for the shortest route to Zena's location in the Lower Stratum.

"...What's going on here?"

For some reason, her marker appeared to be somewhere *in the ground* within the Lower Stratum of the labyrinth.

"Is she in a blank area?"

I remembered the blank areas in places like Kuhanou County.

But those were because of gatherings of spirits or monsters that weren't controlled by Count Kuhanou...

"I can think about all this later."

This time, I targeted Zena's marker to use the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance.

"...It failed?"

For some reason, Clairvoyance wouldn't work. This had never happened before.

Was there an anti-Space Magic barrier around the area or something?

If so, whatever had captured Zena was more powerful than I thought.

"I have to get there as fast as I can."

Setting my target to the area closest to Zena's location, I scrolled through the map of the Lower Stratum.

"The only pit that goes straight to the Lower Stratum from the Upper Stratum is the deepest area that includes the elder root..."

Muttering to myself, I searched through the Middle Stratum map for routes to the Lower Stratum.

There were three pits in the labyrinth's Middle Stratum that led to the lower one, so going down to the middle via the pit in section 1 seemed like the fastest option.

There are more people around than I expected.

The route went through the Room of Trials where Jelil's party had defeated the Middle Stratum floormaster.

These explorers must be using their newly created safe area as a base for exploring the middle labyrinth.

"Guess I'll have to fly."

I kept hidden in the transparency cloak so that they wouldn't see me, transformed into Kuro with my "Quick Change" skill just to be safe, and zoomed up to the ceiling with "Skyrunning."

I might've caused a bit of a breeze in the process, but that was the least of my concerns.

As I sped through the Middle Stratum, I used Wind Magic to blow a hole through a giant slime that blocked my path, produced a barricade of Flexible Shields to smash my way through a forest of man-eating plants, and used the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis to slice my way through the webs of some giant spiders.

I dealt with other giant monsters along the way, too, but that's not important.

"...A door?"

The path down to the Lower Stratum was blocked by a mysterious metal door.

On closer inspection, it appeared that you had to solve a riddle to pass.

My "Decryption" skill couldn't solve it, and I didn't have time to stand around thinking about the answer, so I used the Holy Sword Durandal to cut my way through.

A little violent, maybe, but there was no time to lose.

"So now it's a spiral staircase..."

Layers of spiderwebs blocked the staircase, but I used Flexible Sword and Flexible Shield to barge my way down at high speeds.

Finally, the map name in my AR display changed to **Celivera Labyrinth: Lower Stratum**.

I opened the map and checked my shortest route again.

The Lower Stratum was designed a little differently from the Upper and Middle Stratums.

If I was to compare the corridors to a plant, it'd be like eight giant, bumpy roots underground, with a web of hundreds of smaller roots intertwining around them.

And many of these smaller corridors were cut off unnaturally partway through.

The empty area where Zena was located was at the end of one of these cut-off corridors.

Should I try to get there by going to that dead end or take the nearest hall and use Earth Magic to dig my way through?

...Hmm?

As I hesitated, I noticed that Zena's blue dot on my map was starting to move.

Her status had changed from **Fainted** to **None**.

Judging by her movements, she seemed to have woken up and escaped from the place where she was being held.

I decided to take the shortest possible route, which meant finding the closest corridor and digging to her with Earth Magic.

I found a place directly above my goal and used the spell Pitfall several times in a row.

I'd used this spell to escape from the underground labyrinth in the old capital before, too. But in this labyrinth, there was much more resistance to creating new openings, so it cost even more of my magic.

“...A cave?”

I came out in a large underground cavern.

At the same time, I felt myself breaking through some kind of barrier.

According to the information in my AR display, it was the **Eternal Night Castle Barrier**.

With my “Night Vision” skill, I could see a lake surrounded by forests and fields. There seemed to be a white castle in the middle of the lake.

The sight wasn’t so much like an underground city as an “underworld.” Somehow, there was even a night sky with stars and a moon.

Instinctively, I checked my map, but I was still in the labyrinth.

The moonlight illuminated the enormous space. It was probably a spell or magic tool of some kind.

“So that must be the Eternal Night Castle...”

Feeling a growing sense of dread, I used my magic menu to select “Search Entire Map.”

Sure enough, Zena was hiding in one of the empty rooms, probably to avoid the handmaidens patrolling the halls.

I didn’t yet see any movements that looked like someone chasing Zena, so I decided to quickly check the information on the map.

“You’re kidding me...”

As soon as I searched the map for enemies, right away I identified the culprit who’d kidnapped Zena.

It was a level-69 vampire—and a progenitor, at that.

I wasn’t sure if vampires in this world were the same as the ones I knew from mine, but judging by this one’s many race-specific skills, they were definitely dangerous: “Mist Form,” “Shadow Walk,” “Binding Gaze,” “Bewitching Gaze,” “Control Undead,” “Servant: Bat,” “Servant: Wolf,” “Merge Animal,” “Blood Control,” “Blood Covenant,” “Blood Contract,” and “Blood Servant” all sounded like skills to be reckoned with.

Searching the documents I had on hand, I saw that “Blood Covenant,” “Blood

Contract,” and “Blood Servant” were all ways of creating more vampires and servants.

“Blood Servant” was specifically used on corpses to make monsters called Vampire Servants.

The one for turning people into vampires was “Blood Contract,” which required three rituals on the night of a full moon. If the rituals were successful, the victim would get the status **Blood Contract: Active**.

Immediately, I double-checked Zena’s status, but she didn’t have anything of the sort.

According to the notes in my documents, the average “Analyze” skill wouldn’t be able to identify this status, but my menu’s information was more accurate than even a maxed-out “Analyze” skill, so surely it was true.

There wasn’t much information on “Blood Covenant,” except that it was used for making higher-class vampires, but since it could only be used after a successful “Blood Contract,” I probably didn’t need to worry about it as far as Zena’s safety.

Feeling a bit more relieved, I decided to look a little closer at the vampire’s information before rescuing Zena.

Judging by his skill setup, he was probably a magic soldier-style fighter leaning toward magic.

The progenitor vampire had a lot of skills, even for his level, and even had a Unique Skill called Concentration.

According to my map, the vampire’s name was **Ban Helsing**—not unlike the name of a certain famous vampire hunter from Earth legends and stories, although that seemed like a strange name for a vampire.

If anything, it definitely seemed like the sort of name a reincarnation would choose. The detailed information in my AR read **Founder of the House of Count Helsing**, meaning he had probably chosen the family name himself.

Throw in the knowledge that he had a Unique Skill, and the possibility that he was a reincarnation became even higher.

For a second, I thought that I might be able to get vital information about Arisa's situation if I was to contact him, but they say "If you run after two hares, you will catch neither," so I decided to focus on the information I needed to save Zena first.

Because the progenitor had titles like Day Walker and skills like "Sunlight Resistance," it was safe to assume that he could deal with the sun, unlike my usual concept of vampires.

Aside from the progenitor, the Eternal Night Castle held seven other high-class vampires, a plethora of poltergeists, and seventeen human women, including Zena.

Strangely, there wasn't a single lesser vampire to be found.

Ten of the human women had the job title Handmaiden of the Eternal Night Castle; those ones must be employees here.

The other six were slave girls, who were sitting quietly in the room that Zena seemed to have left.

The lake that surrounded the castle was full of monsters like ghost fish and skeleton fish, and the forest was populated by many undead monsters like ghost birds and skeleton wolves, but they were all single-digit levels, so they wouldn't be any threat.

I used my "Telescopic Sight" skill and Clairvoyance spell to investigate the castle and the surrounding area.

Near the castle, some skeleton peasants were hard at work in a large vineyard, and living dolls were stiffly carrying the harvested grapes to the castle.

There was a zigzag bridge from the shore to the castle, which was guarded by gargoyle-like figures.

On top of that, my AR display informed me that there was a detection barrier above the lake.

Talk about tight security.

"Now, how should I rescue Zena...?"

I could theoretically charge in through the front door, but I decided to sneak

in instead, since I didn't want to risk Zena being used as a hostage.

Of course, I could try talking to the lord of the castle directly to get him to let Zena go, but I wanted to put Zena's safety first.

Knowing that he had apparently healed Zena's injuries, he might not be a bad guy, but still—he was a vampire. What if he had captured Zena as food or to make her his bride or something?

I wanted to try checking on her with Clairvoyance, but I was afraid that would trip the detection barrier, so I held off.

Instead, I tried setting Zena's marker to **Active**, meaning her location would constantly be shown in my AR display.

This feature was originally intended so players could navigate toward NPCs for quests and stuff, but I guess it had other uses, too.

Just then, Zena's marker on my AR display began moving again.

Uh-oh.

There was another dot in the direction she was headed—the progenitor vampire.

He must be trying to recapture Zena.

Shoot!

There was no time to be stealthy now.

I pulled out the Holy Sword Durandal from Storage and jumped straight over to the castle with "Blink," stopping right in front of the wall. Then I used the Air Curtain spell behind me to dispel the gust of wind produced by my full-force "Blink."

There were three walls between Zena and me.

The wind that had escaped the Air Curtain rustled my hair lightly.

"...Now!"

I cut through all three walls in one blow and put the rubble away in Storage.

There. Now I could see Zena's face in profile.

She was standing still, facing the direction she'd been moving in—probably in point-blank range of the vampire—so I used “Blink” to pop next to her immediately, lifted her onto my shoulder before she could exclaim in surprise, and promptly used Return from my magic menu.

As we teleported away, Zena stiffened on my shoulder, probably from shock.

I'd been a little worried that Return would be blocked like my Clairvoyance spell before, but it worked without a problem. Either my passage had caused the barrier to break, or it only prevented things from entering, not leaving.

I'd cut it a little close there, but my mission was complete.

> **Title Acquired: Rescuer**

> **Title Acquired: Runaway**



Once we teleported to the labyrinth vacation home, I set Zena down from my shoulders.

But something was wrong—Zena seemed to be frozen in place.

Checking my AR display, I saw that she had the status condition **Bound**.

My log confirmed that right before we used Return, I'd also been hit with a “Binding Gaze” attack from the vampire.

I was surprised he'd gotten in an attack at all.

There were only a few seconds from the time I'd broken through the wall to when we teleported away.

Although, considering the timing, I might've just been in range when he was trying to bind Zena in place.

I didn't get any new resistance skills, so one of the ones I already had must have deflected it.

At any rate, it would be good to find out whether the Practical Magic spell Break Magic could get rid of status conditions.

Since this was my first time meeting Zena while disguised as Kuro, speaking first was probably the right move.

“Calm down. I came to rescue you.”

This seemed to relax her a little bit.

She was probably staying silent because the Bound effect was preventing her from speaking, not because she was wary of me.

The Practical Magic spell Bind Person only made it difficult, not impossible, to speak, but I guess a vampire’s race-inherent abilities had slightly different effects.

“We’ve escaped the place where you were being held. I’m going to dispel your status condition now. Give me a minute.”

With that, I selected **Break Magic** from the magic menu.

I felt a slight resistance, but it managed to get rid of the condition without a problem.

“Wh-where are we?”

“My base in the labyrinth,” I responded to Zena’s cautious question. “Just to be sure, you are Zena, are you not?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Good. I came to rescue you on request from some kid named Pendragon.”

“Pen... You mean Satou?!”

On hearing my name, Zena’s face brightened.

“I don’t know his full name. We’re going to teleport to the Upper Stratum now. If you see Pendragon, tell him this makes us even for the carts.”

I decided to make the cover story that Kuro had rescued Zena to pay back Satou for helping with the food carts for Neru and the others.

“So Satou sent you... Oh, I’m sorry, where are my manners? Thank you very much for saving me.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can thank the kid.”

I responded gruffly to Zena.

“M-my name is Zena Marienteil, magic soldier of Seiryuu County. Might I ask

your name, since you saved my life?"

"I'm Kuro, attendant of the Hero."

"A-a Hero's attendant?!"

Ignoring Zena's surprise, I started making arrangements for our escape.

It would be unkind to Lilio and the others waiting aboveground to take my time coming back.

"Arisa, is everything ready?"

"We've all met up and changed into our for-show equipment. We can go into the labyrinth anytime."

"No, that won't be necessary. Just wait outside the west guild, please."

"Sounds like you were able to rescue Zena, then."

"Yeah, we're heading back now."

I used Telephone to let Arisa know that Zena was safe.

"Here we go... Teleport."

With a brief word to Zena, I used Return to teleport us to one of the teleport points I'd set up in section 1.

"Ch-chant-less?!"

Zena exclaimed in surprise as we arrived.

"Lord Nanashi the Hero, whom I serve, gave me a legendary artifact that allows me to do so."

Thanks to my "Fabrication" skill, I offered a similar excuse to one I'd used in the past.

Right, I should give Zena something to protect her.

"I'll bring you to the entrance of the labyrinth. Carry this for your protection."

There was no real need for this, since the only monsters between here and the entrance were weaklings like maze moths and maze rats, but it was a good chance to give Zena some magic equipment and a high-powered staff.

“What a simple but elegant short sword... Wait, is this made of mithril?”

Zena looked in surprise at the sword I’d given her.

“No, it’s only coated in mithril on the outside. Don’t worry about it.”

“Goodness, it’s so sharp. It feels even stronger than Commander Delio’s Magic Sword.”

The short sword was a mass-produced Magic Sword I was planning to sell at the Echigoya Company.

“Looks like you have nowhere to put it. Use this sword belt.”

As Zena pulled the sword out of its sheath a few inches and gazed at the blade, I handed her a stylish sword belt, a product I’d been working on to sell to nobles.

Instead of the leather jacket she’d been wearing when she entered the labyrinth, Zena was now wearing a thin dress with heels and didn’t have a belt to hold the sword.

“Erm, I’m terribly sorry, but could I borrow a staff as well? I’m a magic soldier, so a staff is ideal for defending myself...”

“Sure. Use this.”

I was already planning on giving her one anyway: I produced a staff from my Item Box and handed it to her.

It was made from a branch of the Mountain-Tree, so it was extra effective at absorbing and using magic power. I’d also designed it for long battle situations in the labyrinth with minimal friendly fire.

Zena promptly used a buff spell on herself to test out the feel of the staff.

“What a remarkable staff. It conducts magic more smoothly than any I’ve ever used and wastes so little when you cast a spell.”

I was glad that Zena seemed to like it. The staff would probably be happier getting use than sitting around in my Storage anyway.

Besides, the creator name field was blank, and since Kuro had given it to her, she probably wouldn’t get too worried about where it came from.

We continued down the passage toward the exit.

“Lord Kuro, there’s a light up ahead. Could it be other explorers?”

“No, that’s the barracks of the labyrinth army.”

We had reached the start of the safe area.

“Once you go through the door, take the passage on the right and go up the stairs, and you’ll be at the labyrinth gate.”

Zena looked at me.

“What? Want me to escort you there?”

“No, it’s all right. Thank you very much, Lord Kuro.”

Zena bowed formally and offered the sword and staff back to me.

“Keep them. If anyone asks, you can say they’re the newest products from the Echigoya Company.”

With that dismissal, I used Return to teleport to the basement of the mansion, then went to catch up with Arisa and the others.



“Ah! Zena’s boy!”

When I arrived at the guild, I saw the Silverlight members gathered around Lilio.

The other Seiryuu City elite were there, too. Their wounds were healed, though of course they hadn’t had time to replace their damaged equipment.

“I happened to run into Sir Kuro on my way to the Echigoya Company, so I asked him to take care of Zena,” I reported to the concerned group.

“...Kuro?”

“He’s a Hero’s follower and knows flight and teleportation techniques.”

“Is he dependable?”

“Yes, he’s very strong. He wiped out all the elusive plunderers who were infesting the labyrinth in a matter of days.”

It felt a little weird, since I was technically praising myself, but I exaggerated because I wanted to reassure Zena's friends.

"And you know this guy somehow?"

"Yes, we've got a few connections."

In order to throw them off the trail, I briefly explained that Kuro had helped me out in the fight with the demonified Plunderer King Ludaman and that I'd thanked him by helping his subordinates set up shop.

"So you are Sir Pendragon? Thank you for looking out for my soldier."

The young knight Sir Hence, commanding officer of the Labyrinth City Celivera's Elite Training Corps, came over to greet me.

As I was speaking to him, my map informed me that Zena had passed through the labyrinth gate and was making her way through the Path of Death.

As her marker came closer to the west gate, I wrapped up the conversation and started walking in that direction to greet her.

"Z-Zenacchiiii!"

"Lilio! I'm back...!"

As soon as she saw Zena come out of the west gate, Lilio ran over and hugged her.

Iona and Lou were right behind her to celebrate their friend's safe return.

"Zena, I'm glad you're all right."

"Satou!"

As her squad clung to her, Zena managed to sneak one pale hand free of them and reach toward me, so I clasped it and joined the celebration.

Arisa and Mia stomped their feet a little, but I didn't think it was in good taste to be jealous when I was just rejoicing a friend's safe return.

"...A Hero's attendant named Kuro?"

"Yes, that was the name of the person who saved me."

I was with Zena in the guildmaster's office to accompany her during the

debriefing.

I'd already sent my group home, since they'd been helping me set up an alibi for saving Zena.

"And did he defeat the black fog monster that captured you?"

"No..."

As she explained to the guildmaster, Zena had been severely injured and had woken up in the vampire's castle, where she found that her injuries had been healed. As she was wandering the unfamiliar area, the Hero's follower Kuro came to her rescue.

Zena didn't mention that I'd asked Kuro to rescue her.

The guildmaster seemed aware that Zena was hiding something, but she didn't press the matter.

I could probably just go talk to her about the vampires and Kuro later.

"Zenacchi, sounds like we've got a few days off while they fix up our armor."

After the debriefing, we returned to the guild hall, where Lilio relayed information to Zena from the Labyrinth Elite commanding officer.

"That's right—your armor looked seriously beat-up when you got back. What in the world did you fight anyway?" I asked.

"Ahhh, what was it called again? That stupidly big, fast monster—"

"A sword ax mantis."

Instead of Lilio, an explorer from the Silverlights who had accompanied them answered my question.

Judging by the name, it must be a giant praying mantis monster with some combination of swords and axes for arms.

Come to think of it...

The monster that had wiped out the noble kid Bowman's party had been something taller than humans with bladelike weapons, too.

Maybe they were attacked by the same monster as Zena and company.

“It’s quite common for other monsters to come out of the spawnhole while you’re fighting maze beetles, but I’ve never seen something as dangerous as a sword ax mantis show up like that.”

It sounded like the Labyrinth Elite hadn’t been beaten up from a vampire encounter, then.

They went on to explain that Zena had been severely injured while fighting the mantis, then got captured by the black fog-like monster right after.

“I thought for sure that we would die, but we survived thanks to the bravery of the fighters from Seiryuu County, who chased off the sword ax mantis. One often hears rumors of the strength of the Seiryuu County army, but now I know they are even stronger than I heard.”

“Aw, shucks, you’re makin’ me blush. Right, Zenacchi?”

Lilio seemed pleased to be complimented by the Silverlight member.

Since Zena had been injured in the battle and captured by a vampire, though, she looked uncomfortable.

“Zena, about our plans for dinner...”

I had promised to take her out to eat when she got back from the labyrinth, but Zena must be exhausted, so I suggested that she rest for the night instead.

“I’ll come to your lodging house to pick you up tomorrow, then, if it’s all right.”

“Of course! I’m looking forward to it!”

Once I returned to the mansion, I teleported back into the labyrinth.

It was time to reinvestigate the vampires’ castle.

The Eternal Night Castle

Satou here. Is there any villain with more weaknesses than a vampire? But that means they can be defeated with courage and wisdom instead of just heroic strength, so maybe they make pretty good story villains.

“All right. This time, I should properly pay them a visit from the front door.”

I wanted to thank the vampires for saving Zena’s life and apologize for causing destruction when I came to Zena’s rescue, but most importantly, I was hoping to befriend the progenitor vampire—who seemed likely to be a reincarnation—and see if I could get information about Arisa’s God Fragments.

I didn’t know for sure yet if he really was a reincarnation, but I thought the odds were quite high.

And if he had lived for more than a thousand years, I was hoping he would have a lot of knowledge to share.

“...Well, this is creepy.”

The hall to the main entrance was lined with bones.

As I had confirmed before I came, the hole I made in the labyrinth wall when I first broke into the castle had been closed up.

Inside the entrance hall was a door with three faces, which were shouting, “INTRUDER!”

“Are those the gatekeepers, maybe?”

Once I took a step forward, the bones began clattering around me and took on human form, and semitransparent wraiths and wights appeared and swarmed me.

Don’t come any closer, please. I’m not good with horror.

I couldn’t go destroying the gatekeepers on my peaceful visit, so I unleashed

my suppressed spirit light to fend them off. For those that kept coming anyway, I activated a Holy Stone to chase them away.

When some nasty bone golems masquerading as skeletons tried to sneak up on me, I deactivated them with Mana Drain.

There was one called a bone snake that withstood my Mana Drain, but I tied it up and tossed it in a corner.

“The trial is completed.”

“The gate shall open.”

“Enter, O strong one.”

With that, the door swung open.

On the other side was the Eternal Night Castle Barrier.

It didn't seem like anyone was coming to greet me, so I decided to go on in.

“Pardon me...”

I slipped easily through the barrier.

Today, I was wearing Kuro's basic outfit with a different disguise for a custom version.

I could've just come as Kuro, but I'd made a new mask for the occasion, because I thought it'd be better to look like a Japanese person than a foreigner like Kuro if I was going to meet someone who might be a fellow reincarnation.

This new mask was based on Mr. Tanaka, a staff member on the external debug team. Mr. Tubs's face wouldn't suit my body type, so I picked a less distinctive appearance.

“...Oh, looks like the welcome party's here.”

Near the bridge that led to the castle over the lake, two high-class vampire women in black dresses were waiting for me.

They were apparently lords, although I thought ladies would be more accurate. Who came up with their titles?

It was part of their species name, so there was no sense complaining. Still,

since I found it distracting, I decided to call them “vampiresses” instead.

One was a short, youthful-looking girl, while the other was an older beauty.

They both had bluish-white skin. If I ran into them in the dark, they might look completely blue.

...Blue People?

A phrase suddenly ran across my mind.

The women were all beauties of various kinds, and the men were said to be handsome, too, with wavy, seaweed-like bangs.

I remembered the rumors I’d heard.

Some people encounter them when they get lost deep in monster territory. As long as you don’t antagonize them, they’re apparently perfectly friendly, but if you did attack one, you’d be killed without mercy.

If that was true, I’d better be extra careful to approach peacefully.

“Welcome, O strong one.”

The younger vampiress, who had white hair and pinkish eyes, spoke first. Though she looked like a child, she was around three hundred years old and level 49.

I guess the stories were right about vampires looking much younger than they really are.

“Have you come seeking battle? Or treasures like bloodpearls and moonlight grass?”

“I seek an audience with the great progenitor.”

I answered the blond vampire lady plainly—no role-playing as Kuro this time.

“I see... So you do not seek battle...”

For some reason, the lovely woman seemed disappointed.

Did she want to fight?

The younger vampiress said, “Wait a moment,” then turned one hand into a bat and sent it off to the castle.

Wow, that's convenient.

While we were waiting, I tried striking up a conversation with the two.

The younger one was stone silent, but the older one seemed to enjoy conversing and kindly answered my questions. However, whenever I expressed interest in a rare item, she offered it as a prize if I could defeat her in combat. I guess she really did hope to fight me.

I didn't want to assume that all vampires were as battle-hungry as she was, but I did wish she would stop looking at me with such sparkling eyes as she invited me to battle.

While we were talking, the bat returned and merged back into the girl's hand.

"The Lord of the Castle will see you now. Come."

With that emotionless declaration, the younger vampiress turned and started walking toward the castle without waiting for my response.



"Welcome to the Castle of Eternal Night. Are you enjoying your visit to the stronghold of the children of darkness, o ye who passed the test of the gate?"

The progenitor greeted me elegantly, swirling a wineglass full of a bloodlike liquid in one hand.

Up close, the progenitor vampire looked like a young man with wavy seaweed-like purple hair, bluish-white skin, and French-looking facial features.

Looking at his distinctive hair, I was certain: The Blue People I'd heard about in rumors from the labyrinth village and fellow explorers were definitely these vampires.

"<Hello, Sir Vampire.>"

In order to confirm my other suspicions, I tried greeting the progenitor in Japanese.

"...What?"

His eyes widened.

"Black hair, dark eyes, that name...and most of all, that face!"

The progenitor vampire stared at me and rose from his stylish chair.

“<Yer Japanese, too?>”

The vampire lord spoke to me in Japanese, so I nodded. “<That’s right. Born and raised in Japan, as you can see.>”

So I was right.

He was a reincarnation, too. I was excited that I might be able to get information about the God Fragments, which I needed for Arisa’s sake, but since that was a sensitive topic, I decided to start by building a mutual sense of trust first.

“I thought as much.”

He didn’t have any accent when he spoke the Shigan language. His Japanese sounded like the Kansai dialect; he must’ve been from Kansai in his previous life. I wondered if his name here, Ban, came from his Japanese name—maybe the kanji for *number* or *to sow*?

“You do not appear to be a Hero of the Saga Empire. Are you perhaps a Lost One? Someone who was spirited away?”

“I’ve never heard the term ‘Lost One’ before, but I think I’d be called a *transference*.”

At the moment, I didn’t know if mine was a case of transference (being teleported from one world to the other) or transmigration (a full-on rebirth), but apparently, the latter never had black hair, so I was going with the former for now.

“Oh-ho? Some hundreds of years ago, the Holy Province of Heraluon attempted to imitate the Saga Empire’s Hero Summoning ceremony and bring forth a Hero from Japan, but I knew not that any kingdom had attempted it since...”

The vampire lord crossed his arms gravely and muttered some disturbing things about “kidnapping” and “must I dispose of summoners and kings once again?”

I guess he figured a transference meant a summoning.

If the level-69 progenitor was to lead his army of level-40-to-50 vampiresses, he could probably at least take a small kingdom down easily.

But as far as I knew, there wasn't any place called the Holy Province of Heraluon on this continent.

"No need for all that. The people who were involved in the summoning have already been killed by a greater demon's attack, from what I hear."

"I suppose even demons do good deeds on occasion."

I really had heard a story like this from Princess Menea.

Technically, I hadn't confirmed if it was true, but there would be no reason for Princess Menea to lie about it, so I didn't see a point in doubting her.

"I should love to discuss stories of Japan, but first we ought to take care of other business, hmm?"

"Good idea. I came to tell you..."

First, I apologized for Kuro destroying part of the castle during Zena's rescue.

"That was a splendid rescue. Cutting through my Earth Magic-enhanced walls with a sword, resisting the 'Binding Gaze' of the progenitor vampire, and that bizarre yet brilliant move of digging through the labyrinth walls and entering by way of the ceiling! Truly magnificent."

The vampire sounded delighted.

I guess he didn't mind that I'd stolen Zena back.

"I can repair the broken castle and labyrinth walls later."

"No need. The dungeonmaster is likely to restore the labyrinth walls unbidden, and repairing the walls gives the people of the castle something to occupy themselves with."

Now that he mentioned it, the labyrinth walls really had been fixed already.

"By the way, why did you kidnap Zen—erm, that girl?"

That was one of my main questions.

If he had intended on sucking her blood, then I couldn't turn a blind eye,

fellow Japanese person or not.

But even if that was the case, I would probably try to evacuate Zena from Labyrinth City, not kick him out, since he'd lived here much longer.

"Mere happenstance."

"Happenstance?"

His response was so matter-of-fact that I just repeated it questioningly.

"It's a bit of a long story," he warned before explaining in more detail.

"Once every two months, a market is held in a settlement in the labyrinth's Upper Stratum. The boss of that market requested that I defeat a special monster known as the Rusting Slime, but on my way to battle it, I happened upon a maiden on the verge of death."

As he explained, Zena had just been mortally wounded by the sword ax mantis when he found and rescued her.

Apparently, traveling with a vampire in smoke form could stop the progress of poison and bleeding, so he had brought her to the castle and healed her with magic potions from his large stock.

I was curious how this "smoke form" worked exactly, but my curiosity would have to wait.

"Do you often do this sort of philanthropic endeavor?"

"When one lives as long as I have, one's most formidable foe is tedium. When I happen to espy someone in trouble, yes, I do make a habit of helping them."

Come to think of it, he mentioned earlier that fixing the wall would give the vampires something to do.

"And surely, there is no reason that should not apply to a beautiful maiden, hmm?"

"Fair enough."

He added that he never left the labyrinth Lower Stratum except to visit the market in the labyrinth village, so it had been about a hundred years since he brought someone to the castle to save them, like he did with Zena.

I thanked the kindly vampire for saving Zena's life and asked if there was anything he might want me to procure for him from the surface in return.

"Indeed. I do desire Lessau's Lifeblood."

That cheap wine again. I had half expected him to respond that he didn't need anything, but to my surprise, he had an immediate answer.

Thinking about it, I remembered someone in the labyrinth village mentioning that the Blue People liked this particular wine.

I'd just recently given away the last of my stock, though, and didn't have any left.

Since an intermediate demon had wreaked havoc in the capital of Lessau County, there wasn't any to be found in Labyrinth City, but I could probably get some in a neighboring city or brewery.

"All right, I'll try and find some. I do have an Item Box and teleportation magic, so I can bring fresh food or clothes and such if you like, too?"

The progenitor vampire looked at the vampiresses standing at attention nearby.

"A fashionable dress."

"Mithril or gold or silver ingots."

"Cute accessories."

"I'd like a lot of ink and paper."

I made notes of the vampiresses' requests in the memo tab of my menu's social networking column.

It was a long list, but aside from Lessau's Lifeblood, I had all of those items in my Storage already.

I could give the items to them right away, but I figured I'd deliver everything with the wine instead. I double-checked to make sure I'd gotten the list right and promised to bring the supplies on my next visit.

Oh, right.

I decided to ask about the slave girls I saw on my map search when I rescued

Zena.

“I purchased them legally as slaves.”

He looked bemused as to why I would ask but answered me anyway.

“Purchased them? Did you go up into the city?”

“Heavens, of course not. Slaves are sold at the big market I mentioned. I sell monster cores and parts there and use the money to purchase slaves being sold.”

He seemed to be a valued client there: He explained that merchants sometimes brought high-price slaves there only he could afford.

“But do you keep the slaves as a blood supply source?”

I was worried that it might be taboo to bring it up, but it was important, so I had to ask even if it was a little accusatory.

“How rude. They are valued employees of the castle. I’ll ask you not to speak of them like common livestock.”

His response was more adamant than I’d expected.

“Forgive my rudeness. It won’t happen again.”

“The slaves do provide ten milliliters of blood once a month, but otherwise they simply do housework in the castle. I would never force them to become vampires against their will or lay a hand on them in any way.”

It sounded like I wasn’t exactly wrong about them being blood supply sources, then, but at least their free will wasn’t being stolen or anything.

From the sound of things, he had lost his sexual drive upon becoming a vampire.

The vampiresses were all his wives, but they did nothing more than give the occasional kiss or embrace.

His only lustful indulgence was drinking a glass of wine with a single drop of blood in it three times a day, he said, which was a little different from the vampires I usually pictured.

This sounded more like a vampire who’d show up in a steamy romance novel.

"If a slave wishes to be freed, I generally do so after five or ten years of service, but only so that I can provide them with the necessary education and training to take care of themselves and enough money to buy a home once I free them."

With such kind treatment, I'd imagine plenty of people would want to serve him, even if he was a vampire.

"But if they live down here for ten years, won't they be sensitive to sunlight and such?"

"No need to fear. On the outskirts of this cavern lives a mage who excels in Light Magic. I send the handmaidens there once a day to bathe in sunlight."

"A Light Magic mage in a vampire's territory?"

"Indeed. A foolish son of a noble attempted to lay a hand on his beloved daughter, so the man killed him and fled into the labyrinth with the girl and his wife. I provide them with food, shelter, and daily necessities in exchange for his services."

Ah, I see.

This seemed like a lot of trouble for a vampire to go to for his slaves, but he had his reasons besides the goodness of his heart.

"If I was to harm or mistreat them, a Hero would doubtless come to stop me. It is better to coexist peaceably anyway."

The vampire gave an exaggeratedly villainous grin.

Since we seemed to be getting along so far, I decided to take my leave for the day without trying to push for too much information, but the progenitor stopped me.

"Since you have come all this way, shall we not have a bout before you go?"

As he smiled slyly, two long fangs poked out at the edges of his lips.



At first, I tried to act like it was a close fight, but it looked like this bout was going to end in my overwhelming victory.

“Check.”

“Time-out—that move is cheating.”

“But I thought you were going to stop saying ‘time-out’ after last time?”

“Grrr...”

The progenitor vampire glared at the board and growled.

That’s right: Our “bout” was in shogi.

He had provided the shogi board we were using to play, but he turned out to be laughably bad at it despite his apparent passion for the game.

The long-lived races of this world seemed to enjoy shogi, since the Bolenan Forest elves were big shogi fans, too.

“I shall offer you three bloodpearls if you wait just one more time.”

“All right. But this is the last one for real, okay?”

“Indeed.”

I didn’t mind waiting if it meant I could get rare vampire-made materials, but playing shogi against him was a bit more stressful than against the elves.

When the company I worked for made a shogi game app, I underwent special training from Mr. Tubs—who had played in tournaments before—so I was pretty good for a layman.

Since the app had difficulty levels, too, I had even learned how to effectively hold back against someone, but I was still finding it near impossible to let the vampire lord win.

Even when I made the most obvious openings I could think of, he had a hard time spotting a chance for victory.

He might not even be able to beat Mia’s father, the shogi-loving elf Lamisauya, who was until now the worst shogi player I knew.

“Don’t give up, Lord Ban!”

“Lord Ban, you can do it!”

But the vampiresses watching our match didn’t seem particularly bothered by

that. Every time their progenitor exclaimed “Time-out!” and groaned like a child, they gave him lovingly sympathetic looks.

Well, as they say, it takes all kinds.

“Ah, yes, Sir Helsing—”

“You may call me Ban. And I shall call you Kuro, if that is all right.”

“Sure. So there’s something I want to ask you...”

Now that our friendship had solidified, I thought I would try asking if he knew anything about the God Fragments.

“Such talk is uncouth during a bout.”

“You’re right, of course. Sorry.”

I meekly apologized.

“After our match, though, I shall direct you toward a more knowledgeable fellow. If you bring the bloodpearls I have given you, he will no doubt tell you whatever you wish to know.”

“That would be great.”

“Then with that settled, let us return to the match.”

As the vampire lord made his next move, the light clacking of shogi pieces echoed through the Eternal Night Castle.

Our shogi match continued deep into the night, until a certain visitor arrived.



“I’ve come to defeat you, Lord Ban!”

“Energetic as always, aren’t you, Semery?”

Riding a ruin scorpion and flanked by a Tyrannosaurus-style ancient land beast and a prey roper with ivy for limbs, a beautiful young girl faced off against the progenitor vampire in the castle courtyard. She had bluish-white skin and wavy black hair in braids.

This lovely young woman was a greater vampire, turned long ago by Ban. She had turned her mount and the monsters that guarded her into vampires

herself.

I was curious why one of his own subordinates would attack him, but he just responded lightly that she was “in a rebellious phase.”

This was probably just another way to pass the time for them.

Besides, although she claimed she was here to defeat the progenitor, Semery’s bluish-white skin was tinged purple.

In spite of her words, she had the eyes of a maiden in love.

“Now, who will be my vanguard today?”

“Me, Lord Ban!”

“No, please, allow me.”

“I wanna do it, too...”

In addition to the blond beauty from before, a redhead and a brunette also raised their hands insistently.

I guess it wasn’t just the one vampiress who was obsessed with battle.

“My turn.”

The young-looking white-haired vampiress, who’d been taciturn all this time, raised a small hand and walked into the courtyard.

She used one long fingernail to slice a cut in her wrist. The blood it produced squirmed like a living thing and took the form of a scythe.

...That was so vampire-like that it was almost cliché, but it was cool to see it happen in real life.

Semery drew a broadsword made from monster parts.

“Hmph, it’s Shirahime today, is it? I thought for sure it’d be the chubby blonde.”

“I-I’m not chubby! Just a little plump, that’s all!”

The busty woman Semery had called “chubby” wasn’t skinny, but I wouldn’t call her “chubby,” either.

Ignoring the pair’s exchange, the smaller girl entered the courtyard and

pointed her scythe at Semery.

“My vanguard will be Tyranon. Go, Tyranon!”

I couldn’t help feeling a bit of affinity for Semery’s dorky choice of names.

The ancient land beast turned on one foot and swung its tail, but the small vampiress struck it down.

Considering that it was almost twenty feet tall and looked like a huge Tyrannosaurus rex, the creature actually seemed to be pretty light on its feet.

The girl easily cut the beast’s tail off with her scythe—but it looked like it had been expecting that.

Somehow, the spray of blood that gushed from the cut-off tail instantly turned into flames.

Just as the flamethrower-like spray of blood was about to surround her body, the small vampiress turned into mist and evaded it.

But Semery’s side seemed to have a good grasp of the powers of vampires: The flamethrower still burned her body, even in mist form.

The watching vampiresses all gasped, and Semery’s smile widened.

“...How foolish,” the progenitor murmured.

According to my AR display, the small vampiress had taken only minimal damage.

She emerged from the shadow of the land beast and quickly cut off both its legs.

Evidently, the mist transformation had been fake, and she’d actually melted into the shadows and moved.

This was the race-specific inherent skill “Shadow Walk,” not Shadow Magic. Only a few of the vampires had it, including the progenitor and the small vampiress.

It seemed to be usable only by older vampires, as the 170-year-old Semery didn’t have it.

Without its legs, the ancient land beast could only flail helplessly as the white-

haired girl slashed it to pieces. It turned to ash, which must be what happened when a vampire's health ran out.

"Winner: Shirahime Ryuuna."

The quiet girl raised her fist in a small gesture of triumph.

Then she walked up to the progenitor vampire and presented her cheek. He gave it a light kiss, and she smiled just a little.

Okay, I guess that was kinda cute.

"My next fighter is Roper! Shirahime can't fight twice in a row, got it?"

The still-smiling girl started to walk back into the courtyard, but Semery stopped her irritably.

She looked to the progenitor vampire for judgment.

"Indeed. A one-sided match is no fun."

Thus, the second round was between Roper and the busty blonde.

Like the smaller vampiress, she cut her wrist and used her blood to make weapons, this time twin daggers.

The ivy monster promptly attacked, but she dodged it with inhuman speed, using her dagger to parry any tentacle vines she couldn't avoid.

Unlike the land beast's blood, the prey roper's sap didn't catch fire. However, it seemed to be sticky and was slowing the blond vampiress's movements.

The nail-like ends of the tentacles were gradually slashing up her clothes, too. Now here was a monster that understood the value of fan service. *Keep up the good work.*

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Good one, Roper! Expose that shamefully pudgy body of hers to the light!"

"I'm! Not! Pudgy!"

Agitated by Semery's taunt, the blond beauty finally completely ran out of energy to dodge the attacks and got wrapped up by several tentacles and lifted in midair.

Wow, that's quite a sight.

Since I felt bad staring at her in that state, I politely turned the other way.

Behind me, I heard crackling sounds.

The tentacles had emitted some kind of electric attack, putting her in a paralyzed state.

She didn't seem to be able to turn into fog or fight back now, so the match was over.

"Winner: Roper."

Since it seemed to be over, I turned around.

Yikes, that's gory... The tentacles tossed the remains of the woman to the ground, ripped in two and torn limb from limb.

Then it threw the blonde's head, which the smallest vampiress caught.

"That was rough."

"...How embarrassing."

Geh!

I guess that's a vampire for you.

They could talk even if all that was left was a head.

So these girls really are basically immortal...

"No need to worry. If I give her some blood, she'll recover right away."

As I stared at the talking head in shock, the progenitor kindly reassured me.

According to my AR display, her health was already recovering at an incredible rate.

"I'm keeping Roper in as my fighter. Bring out your general!"

Semery looked up at the progenitor excitedly.

Not appearing to notice her gaze, the progenitor vampire looked at me instead.

"Routine is the root of sloth. Let's change things up today, shall we? Kuro, will

you show me how you defeated my guardians?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Maybe I could just use a random Magic Sword to cut off its tentacles?

“What?! Roper was made exclusively for Lord Ban’s use. I won’t waste it on a mere human!”

Semery gnashed her teeth angrily.

...Exclusively? Didn’t you just use it on the blond lady?

And I was a little afraid to ask how exactly she planned to “use” it.

“Fine. I shall torment you myself.”

Sending Roper back behind her, Semery stepped forward into the battle arena, looking wrathful.

“I don’t want to hurt her. Any suggestions on how I should hold back?” I whispered to the progenitor.

“A human ventures to speak of holding back against me?! How dare you underestimate the great Semery!”

Oops. I guess vampires had pretty good ears.

Now she looked mad enough to pop a vein.

“Fear not. A greater vampire shall not perish, even if they turn to ash. A little blood and a core placed on the ash will revive them immediately, so feel free to fight without holding back.”

The progenitor looked gleeful as he gave this permission.

I wished he wouldn’t fan the flames, since Semery seemed easily angered.

“Lord Ban! If I beat this guy, the conditions don’t change, got it?”

“Of course. If you defeat him, I shall become your captive until the end of the month as promised. But if you lose, Kuro here will get the right to give you orders instead.”

Wait, I don’t need that.

As our eyes met, Semery’s expression wavered.

Then she abruptly covered her chest, hiding the generous amount of exposed cleavage.

Um, rude.

“Y-you can’t make any perverse orders!”

“Oh dear, Semery, are you already assuming you’ll lose?”

As if seeking vengeance, the blond vampiress’s head teased her mercilessly.

What a surreal scene.

“Hey, you with the black hair! Hurry up and get ready!” Semery shouted.

Since it seemed like she wouldn’t die if I beheaded her, that might be the easiest way to finish things.

I reached into Storage by way of my Garage Bag and pulled out one of my forged Magic Swords.

“Oh-ho? It looks simple, but that sword is truly the work of a master.”

The progenitor looked impressed by my sword.

I was kind of happy to hear such praise for my mass-produced work.

“Hi-yaaaaaaaa!”

With a loud battle cry, Semery charged at me, easily swinging a broadsword with her slender arms.

It would be rude to finish her off in one blow, so I raised my sword to fend off her jumping attack.

Oof.

The unexpected weight of her attack sent cracks through the stone paving at my feet, surrounding us with a cloud of dust.

She immediately followed up with a kick. I jumped away, and she swung her sword sideways, as if she’d anticipated my move.

“Wow.”

I assumed she was just a brute-force kind of fighter, but she actually had an impressive knowledge of sword techniques.

If I let myself get caught up in the flow of the fight, I might forget to hold back, so I decided to use the “Saga Emperor Sword Style” skill I’d once learned from Hayato the Hero.

“Oh-ho, a master of the Saga Empire’s techniques, are you? Even Semery might have trouble fighting you, then.”

“Th—that’s not true, Lord Ban! My long years of training won’t allow me to lose to a brat like this!”

Semery started moving her sword even faster.

She must’ve spent her 170 years of life practicing whenever she had a chance. Her polished swordsmanship was on par with Pochi’s teacher Miss Portomea.

However, she lacked the cunning and wisdom of the elf teachers—which made her easy to read.

And as a bonus, her face was extremely expressive.

I allowed her to use the moves she wanted while still driving her into a corner, like when I practiced against Pochi.

As the tide of battle slowly turned away from her, Semery sliced a cut in her wrist and used the blood to create needles and shoot them at me in desperation.

I made a “Magic Power Armor” gauntlet on my left hand to knock them away, then used the Magic Sword in my right hand to destroy her broadsword while her guard was down.

“Why, you...!”

Semery created a blood sword on the spot to go back on the offensive, but I parried it with my Magic Sword and twisted around to get into her blind side.

With “Magic Power Armor” deactivated on my left hand, I reached for her solar plexus.

As soon as my hand touched, I used Mana Drain to steal her magic power.

Then, once her magical defenses were down, I drove in a punch.

“Gah!”

Semery choked on the lack of air. I guess vampires still needed to breathe.

I withdrew my fist, then brought the sword in my other hand to her neck—and stopped short, despite myself.

Aside from her bluish skin, she looked just like a human girl, so I couldn't bring myself to cut off her head.

Even if I knew it wouldn't kill her, my instinctive aversion was too strong.

"Winner: Kuro!"

The progenitor still deemed me victorious.

Her strength drained, Semery dropped to her hands and knees, coughing.

"Kuro, what do you ask of Semery?"

Before I could open my mouth to answer, my eyes met with Semery's. She gnashed her teeth and glowered up at me, trembling with humiliation.

It was tempting to be sadistic, but I had no intention of making any sexual requests.

Not at all. I swear.

"Let me see..."

But you couldn't fault me for making her sweat it out just for a few seconds.

Semery seemed like a natural target for teasing.

"...Could you show me some of the sights of the Lower Stratum?"

Surprised by my request, Semery blinked a few times and repeated, "Sights?"

The progenitor seemed pleased, clapping me on the shoulder and laughing heartily.

A high-level vampire's arm strength is several times that of an ordinary human's, so he really shouldn't smack people so casually.

"The sights, you say! All right, then. I'll show you some amazing places the likes of which you've never seen!"

Semery seemed to take this as some sort of new challenge and pointed at me enthusiastically.

“Semery, you ought to take him to Yoroi and Mukuro, then.”

“Ooh, yeah! Their wars are so fun to watch.”

...Wars?

No, more importantly, I should be focusing on those names.

Could they come from the Japanese words for *armor* and *corpse*?

I wondered if they were an armored knight and some kind of non-vampire undead—like a lich or an Undead King.

Maybe the knight was even a headless dullahan.

“Are they reincarnations, too?”

“Indeed, that is correct.”

Considering that Ban was only the third reincarnation I’d met after Arisa and the Undead King Zen, getting to meet two more already was unexpected.

Maybe there were more reincarnations in this world than I thought.

“What about Yuika, Lord Ban?”

“You should ask Mukuro first, since he’s Yuika’s guardian.”

...Wow, *there’s still another one?*

Was the Lower Stratum a reincarnation hot spot or something?

As I thought about this, the vampire lord addressed me.

“Mukuro is the knowledgeable person I mentioned before. He’s lived for an absurdly long time and is always quite bored. I imagine he’ll be glad to answer your questions.”

“Mukuro can be moody, but he likes Semery, so you should be fine if you’re with her.”

From the sound of things, the progenitor must have had me fight Semery in order to introduce us in a roundabout way.

He seemed to be a big-picture kind of guy.

“All right, let’s go, Kuro!”

Semery jumped up impatiently.

There was still some time before dawn, so I could probably treat myself to a little sightseeing in the Lower Stratum.

Including a visit to these three new reincarnations, of course.

Mukuro and Yoroi

Satou here. With the aid of scientific advancement, people have become able to express themselves in new and exciting ways. Gone are the days of giants below the earth and gods in the skies. As ridiculous as those notions were, I always found them entertaining.

“First, let’s go see Yoroi and Mukuro!”

Her black hair fluttering behind her, Semery the vampiress pointed ahead.

After leaving the Eternal Night Castle, we were riding on the back of Semery’s pet monster, the vampiric Roper.

I had never ridden on a roper before, but it was a surprisingly smooth and comfortable ride.

“Is it far?”

“Not with Roper it’s not!”

Semery looked proud.

Opening my map, I checked to see where we were going.

“I thought so. It’s in one of the blank areas, huh?”

The territory we were heading into was protected by a similar barrier to Ban’s castle.

I had forgotten to ask the progenitor about it; I would have to find out the exact nature of the barriers that could block my Space Magic and “Search Entire Map” at some point.

“We’ll be there soon!”

Leaving the main passage, we went down a branch path toward the blank area.

“LWOOPWWWERRRR.”

The roper suddenly stopped in the middle of the path.

My AR display indicated that the Underworld Barrier was right in front of us.

I doubted that it really led all the way down to the underworld, but it certainly wasn't the most inviting name.

"You wait here, Roper. Let's go, Kuro."

As we got down from the monster, Semery reached out her hand toward me.

"We're about to enter Yoroi's territory, so you'll have to hold on to my hand to enter."

I accepted her slightly cold hand, and we went through the barrier together.

I probably could've gotten in on my own, but I didn't want to set off an alarm or something by entering without permission.

Once we were in, I used my "Search Entire Map" skill, intending to do a little research on Mukuro and Yoroi before meeting them.

They seemed to be nicknames, though: I didn't get any hits by searching the map for those names.

The highest-level entity on the map was a level-72 **King Mummy**, which had two intriguing Unique Skills called Metal Maker and Dream Factory. His real name was apparently **Tetsuo**.

The second-strongest was a level-53 **Iron Stalker**. This one was named Takeru and had a sinister-sounding Unique Skill called Soul Possession.

These were probably the two reincarnations Ban had mentioned.

Unless I was totally off the mark, the king mummy Tetsuo was probably Mukuro, and the iron stalker Takeru must be Yoroi. Funny, you would think their real names would be the other way around, since *Tetsuo* usually has the meaning of *iron*.

As soon as we entered the cavern past the barrier, we were standing on a battlefield.

"Awesome! Looks like they're just getting started!"

Grinning like a kid who'd found a favorite toy, Semery tugged me along by the

hand to a spot with a good view.

Before me, steel vehicles were rolling forward, each with two caterpillar tracks digging deep trenches in the ground.

The four tanks stopped on top of a hill and swiveled their turrets.

After a moment of silence, black smoke emitted from the muzzle and muzzle brake.

They're not using smokeless gunpowder?

The four shells shot across the battlefield, striking the steel golem that had just made it across the first trench.

The shots pierced through the golem's thick armor and into the dirt wall behind it, sending up a cloud of dust. Destroyed in one hit, the golem's body flew into pieces.

"Ooh, here comes Mukuro's catchphrase."

"Catchphrase?"

As if in answer to my question, a loud voice echoed through the underground cavern as if amplified with a megaphone.

"Drop dead! Fantasyyyyy!"

Wow. Really?

That sounded like something a certain familiar on a floating continent would say.

"That line again?! Use your own words to celebrate for once, you damn moron!"

From someplace unseen, the opponent shouted jeers in a synthesized-sounding voice.

This must be Yoroi, also known as the iron stalker Takeru.

Looking more closely, I saw that there were thin lattice towers painted either red or white dotting the battlefield, with something that looked like speakers on the top. That must be where the voices were coming from.

Checking on my map, I confirmed that the defending side was Mukuro, the king mummy Tetsuo.

Aside from the four tanks, the defending side also had four armored vehicles and fifty-six skeleton soldiers.

The attacking side had seven steel golems and fifty-six mud soldiers.

Instead of swords and shields, both sides were armed with bayonet rifles.

Including the golem that had just been destroyed, that meant it was an even sixty-four versus sixty-four.

This wasn't a war—it was more like a war *game*.

"Looks like Mukuro's gonna win this time."

Semery and I watched the battle from an observation tower. Just as I had suspected initially, this was more like a strategy game of sorts than an actual war.

Victory ended up going to the tank side, which dominated the whole time with ambush tactics.

Just once, a golem got close enough to destroy two tanks, but an ambush with a berserker destroyed the golem's leg, and then they finished it off with concentrated fire from a distance.

By watching this battle alone, you might think modern weaponry had won, but the golems' movements definitely seemed slow.

On the outside, they looked just like the golems that protected the progenitor vampire's territory, but their movements were sluggish, like they weren't outputting enough power.

If one of those gatekeeper golems was here, I thought it might be able to trash all the tanks easily.

Maybe there was some kind of handicap or regulation involved.

"All right, let's go see Mukuro."

Semery promptly jumped down from the tower, so I followed suit.

After watching a relatively modern-looking battle, I felt bizarre jumping down

from a sixty-foot-tall tower without a lifeline, even though I did that sort of thing all the time.

On the other side of the battlefield was a featureless white building that looked like a lab of some kind.

A seven-foot-tall wire fence surrounded it, complete with barbed wire on the top. If Arisa was here, she'd complain that it ruined the fantasy feeling of the world.

Semery seemed to be a familiar guest: Once she greeted the mummy guarding the gate, we were able to enter the building without a problem.

“Is this made of concrete?”

From a distance, I assumed the building was marble, but up close, it definitely looked like concrete.

A mummy guided us farther into the building.

It was wearing a maid outfit, but I would just forget I had seen that.

The mummy led us to an enormous room that seemed to be lit by fluorescent lights. There was a large table in the center of the room, with a diorama reproducing the battlefield we'd just witnessed, complete with miniature tanks, golems, and so on.

On either side of the table stood a mummy and a metal suit of armor, arguing about something.

My AR display confirmed that these two were the **King Mummy Tetsuo**, aka Mukuro, and the **Iron Stalker Takeru**, aka Yoroi.

“Hrmph. Semery, huh? Did you come to demand a tank so you can beat Ban?”

“If ye lemme squeeze those useless sacks on your chest, I’ll come up with an extra-strong elite design for ya.”

“Y-you pervy old man! And what if Lord Ban despises me for bringing such a boorish weapon to his castle, hmm?!”

Semery turned red at the inflammatory remark and chased the pair around, waving her arms in the air.

Running away from her, the pair definitely seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Should they really be acting like such little kids?

“By the way, who’s this guy?”

“Is he your you-know-what, Semery? Finally gave up on getting Ban all to yourself?”

The two finally took a break from inappropriately teasing Semery to notice my existence.

Yoroi made a vulgar gesture with his fingers, causing Semery to punch his helmet off his body.

Just as I suspected, the armor seemed to be empty on the inside.

If Arisa met him, she’d probably ask him to say “brother!” in a sweet voice.

“Of course not, moron! Lord Ban asked me to bring him here.”

“Oh, did he?”

Mukuro looked at me suspiciously.

For a mummy, his face was surprisingly expressive.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Kuro. I’m from the same place as Sir Ban—would it help if I say I’m Japanese?”

“Oh? A black-haired Japanese person who’s not a Hero?”

“Already looking for an immortal body at such a young age? Go enjoy life for thirty more years or so first.”



“Yeah, you don’t want a metal body like mine, pal. Even touching Semery’s chest wouldn’t be any fun with these steel jobbies, y’know?”

“My chest belongs only to Lord Ban!”

What a noisy reaction to me introducing myself.

Still, the two of them looked like they could easily be the mid-boss and final boss of a game.

Especially Mukuro—if I hadn’t met the Undead King Zen before, I might’ve mistaken him for a monster and destroyed him.

“So, whaddaya want? Are you really here to get an immortal body?”

“No, I asked Semery to take me to the best spots in the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum, and she said this was the most fun.”

“Seriously? You’re *sightseeing* down here?”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho, I’ve never known anyone to come here to the depths of hell for fun before.”

When I gave an honest answer, they both laughed at me.

“Oh well, that works. For the past thousand years, our only visitors have sought eternal life, lost knowledge, or some other stupid request.”

“Or would-be Heroes who think we’re demon lords and come to defeat us, but we make quick work of those losers.”

I couldn’t read their expressions at all, but I could tell they found all this annoying.

At any rate, it seemed like they welcomed my visit, so I offered them some gifts from the depths of my Storage, like gunpowder cannons and muskets.

I was worried about whether I’d be able to take the cannon out through the Item Box, but luckily, the opening changed size to allow me to do so.

“Damn, these are some rare antiques...”

“I set this cannon up myself when I was in the Flue Empire. They had a huge outbreak of magic-draining slimes, so I gave ‘em these to fend them off.”

Evidently, Yoroi had once been an engineer for the Flue Empire. If I remembered right, that was a civilization that was destroyed by the orc demon lord, the Golden Boar Lord, six or seven hundred years ago.

I felt a strange connection to them, since the City Cores I made contracts with in the desert were from the Flue Empire, too.

“And this gun is made with crimson ore... What kind of crazy person would do that? Guns don’t need to be that strong.”

Excuse me for being crazy. That was one that I’d made just for fun.

I covered my awkward thoughts with “Poker Face” as I watched the pair tinker with their gifts.

They seemed even more pleased than I expected: In exchange, they offered to let me into their subspace museum.



Mukuro entered a gold-adorned door floating in the air.

It must be a teleport gate, because his dot vanished from my map and radar.

Checking my marker column, I saw that his current location was marked as **Unknown**.

Out of curiosity, I used Clairvoyance to try to see him, but it didn’t work, just like when I tried to peek into the Eternal Night Castle.

I followed Yoroi and Semery through the golden door.

The map only read **No map available for this area**. I’d seen this message before—right, when I was stuck in Zen’s shadow.

This time, I found myself in a seemingly endless world of white.

“You made it. Come on.”

Mukuro and Yoroi led the way through the white space.

Soon, we reached an area with tall fifteen-story buildings lined up at regular intervals.

“Was this area made with Space Magic?”

“No, it was made by Yuika’s Unique Skill. This way, no matter what happens, not even the gods can spy on us inside.”

“You’re such a worrywart. The barrier outside would’ve been plenty on its own.”

Mukuro scowled at Yoroi’s gibe.

He had a point: Gods certainly have a reputation for watching the world from on high...

Oh, wait.

There was something more important I needed to ask.

“So this Yuika person made the barrier and this space?”

“That’s right. Not even the power of the gods can get through that barrier, never mind any advanced magic. The only way to enter is ‘through a designated entrance,’ ‘through specified means,’ or ‘by meeting certain conditions.’ Without meeting those conditions, even the seven gods can’t get through or even look inside.”

Huh? Wait a minute.

It made sense that I was able to enter the Underworld Barrier when holding Semery’s hand or the Eternal Night Castle Barrier when I met the conditions by passing the gatekeepers’ test.

But when I went to rescue Zena, I was able to enter the Eternal Night Castle Barrier without going through the proper entrance.

If not even the gods could pass through but I could...

I guess my ability to pass through barriers, which I always thought was no big deal, might actually have some secret to it after all.

But at any rate, this explained why my Space Magic and “Search Entire Map” didn’t work.

If it was an individual’s Unique Skill, I probably didn’t have to worry about demons or demon lords casually using it.

“It might even rival the legendary Valley of Dragons: Barrier.”

“Talk about a shut-in.”

Yoroi laughed.

“A shut-in?”

“Yeah... Enough laughing already!”

Mukuro smacked Yoroi’s helmet with his staff.

“Unlike us, Yuika was born as a goblin. She went through a lot of awful things, so she hides in her own territory to avoid people.”

Reincarnated as something other than a human...that sounded like hard mode to me.

This might be the first time I’d heard of a “goblin” without a “demi” attached —no, I guess there were stories about the Goblin Demon Lord that the first Hero fought.

Still, a girl being reincarnated as a goblin seemed particularly cruel.

“Yuika’s quiet, but she’s a good friend. She gives me romantic advice and stuff.”

Semery defended Yuika. Knowing her personality, I had a feeling she would force her way into a friendship whether Yuika wanted it or not.

“Oh, right, Mukuro. Is it okay if I take Kuro to see Yuika later?”

“Huh?” Mukuro looked at me for a moment. “Kid seems harmless enough, so if she’s okay with meeting him, sure.”

Actually, since we were already talking about Unique Skills, maybe this was a good time to ask my question.

“This barrier is very impressive, though. I guess Unique Skills really do have the power of gods, huh? If a person has God Fragments, then—”

“Kuro.”

Mukuro turned an icy gaze on me.

His friendly-old-geezer attitude had completely vanished.

I guess I must have touched a nerve somehow.

“Who told you about that?”

Does he mean the fact that Unique Skills come from God Fragments?

“Well...”

I wasn’t sure if I should reveal that I’d heard it from a demon lord, so I considered using my “Fabrication” skill to gloss it over, but my “Sense Danger” skill activated as I opened my mouth to speak.

I got the feeling that lying wouldn’t work on Mukuro.

Not because of a skill—I suspected it was purely because he’d lived for so long that he was probably very good at reading people.

So instead, I told the truth.

“...From the Dogheaded Demon Lord.”

“Kuro, who the hell are you? Is that a fake name? Or did you deliberately get a ‘Name Order’ to fool people?”

“What do you mean? I received this name from the ruler of the Black Dragon Mountains.”

Besides, I don’t really know how to answer the question “Who are you?”

“Then when did you meet Crow—Doghead?” Mukuro challenged.

Ah, so he’s asking me that because my name sounds similar to the purple-haired boy Crow who showed up after I defeated Doghead?

So maybe Crow really was the demon lord from before he transformed?

“Just a trimoon ago.”

“Tch, when’d that happen...?” Mukuro clicked his tongue.

“Mukuro, your wife didn’t say anything about it?”

“Psh, she wouldn’t tell me. It’s been, what, two hundred years since we last met?”

Was Mukuro’s wife a friend of Doghead or something?

I didn’t see any high-level individuals who might fit the bill in my map search, so they likely lived apart or something.

"Then there must be a real slaughter going on up there right now... Gives me the heebie-jeebies."

Yoroi made a gesture to ward off evil, but Mukuro shook his head dismissively.

"Bah, knowing that poser, he'll leave us alone as long as we don't get in the way of his slaughtering holy folks."

"Are you two friends of Sir Doghead, by any chance?"

"Ha! Yeah right."

"I wouldn't be caught dead being friendly with that fanatic."

Yoroi and Mukuro grunted.

"Whaaat, but you guys all hate the gods, don't you?"

"Don't lump us in with that freak," Mukuro spat. "Sure, I hate the gods, but I wouldn't be so crazy as to slaughter a buncha their ignorant followers just to make them less powerful."

"You hate the gods as well, Sir Mukuro?"

"Yeah, we had a little falling-out a long time ago. Are you saying you do, too?"

"No, I don't have any particular reason to hate them."

I did have the Godkiller title, but I didn't kill the dragon god out of hate or anything.

"Ahhh, so you meant Doghead..."

Mukuro nodded in understanding.

"Did you come here to find out how to kill him, then?"

"We're not gonna help, got it? We wouldn't stand a chance, for one thing..."

Mukuro and Yoroi both sounded adamant.

"...No thanks. We'd either die or turn into demon lords."

That's it!

"So it's not just a superstition that reincarnations can turn into demon lords if

they use their Unique Skills too much?"

"Kuro, did Doghead tell you that, too?"

"Yes, why?"

"Don't go blurting that out to other people."

"Yes, of course."

I nodded earnestly.

The purple hair common to reincarnations was already considered bad luck, so if word was to get out about this, it could easily turn into a full-blown witch hunt.

"I'm sorry if I came across the wrong way. One of my traveling companions is a young girl who's a reincarnation, you see."

I decided to stop beating around the bush and directly ask for information.

"I don't want to see her turn into a demon lord."

"So that's why you wanted to ask about Unique Skills—or should I say, the Divine Right loaned to reincarnations by the gods? Very well..."

"Wait, Yoroi. Kuro, what is this girl to you?"

Mukuro stopped Yoroi from answering me.

"She's very dear to me, like family."

Mukuro mulled over my answer in silence for a moment before speaking.

"Tetsuo the king mummy inquires: This girl is as important to you as yourself or even more so, correct?"

...An examination by an analyst?

"Answer the question, Kuro."

"Yes," I responded to Mukuro's question.

"Tetsuo the king mummy inquires: You wish for this girl's happiness, correct?"

"Yes," I said immediately.

"All right, then. I'll tell you as much as I know."

With that disclaimer, Mukuro began explaining about Unique Skills and God Fragments.

The information he revealed confirmed some of my suspicions but then went far beyond them.

“When reincarnations are reborn into this world, a god will give them Divine Rights.”

This referred to Unique Skills, which were loaned to reincarnations in order to grant their wishes.

And the source of these Divine Rights was God Fragments.

“...But the thing is, they’re not without their limits, see.”

Divine Rights could function only within the limits of the reincarnation’s “soul vessel.”

“If you use Unique Skills past your limits, it’ll damage your soul vessel. They’ve been known to heal if it’s just a few cracks, but in most cases, they break beyond repair—and that’s how you get a demon lord.”

“So once someone turns into a demon lord, there’s no way to turn them back?”

“Yeah, ’fraid not. There are some rare cases like Doghead where they manage to retain their sanity, but most just turn crazy and violent.”

“I hear the gods can repair a vessel, but they wouldn’t waste their oh-so-precious godly power on that, the bastards.”

“What about Prayer Magic by a high-ranking priestess?”

“No luck. It ain’t the kinda thing humans can do jack squat about.”

So I should assume that turning into a demon lord is irreversible...

“Don’t get so down about it. If you’re worried, just make sure she doesn’t use her Unique Skills past her limits.”

“Exactly. Proper dosage is important.”

I was hoping for more help than a pharmacist’s warning...

“What, don’t believe us? I’ve seen a whole lotta reincarnations in my day, but unless they go past the number of uses the god sets for ‘em at the beginning, none of ‘em has ever gone demon lord.”

“The god sets a limited number of uses?”

Now that I had thought about it, Arisa’s Unique Skill Never Give Up was limited to three uses, with one use being restored per month.

I didn’t know the limits for her other Unique Skill, Over Boost, so I’d have to ask her sometime.

“Can’t they also turn into demon lords if they try to use Unique Skills when they’re mortally injured or about to die of an illness or whatever, too?”

“Oh, right. And one even turned into a demon lord ‘cause of depression.”

Yikes. I couldn’t depend on the usage limits as the only gauge, then.

“Basically, a sound mind and body are really important.”

“Just keep her happy and healthy and maybe raise her level to improve her basic abilities, too, yeah?”

That made sense. It was good to have knowledge from my elders.

“Oh, and if this girl has a one-hit KO or limit-surpassing type of skill, you better warn her not to use it. Those can surpass the soul’s limit and turn ya into a demon lord right away if you’re not careful.”

Geh!

That described Arisa’s Unique Skill Over Boost all too perfectly.

“...What, she does have one?”

Mukuro and Yoroi exchanged glances.

“Look, I’ve got a Sacred Treasure in my Item Box that can preserve the soul vessel. It’s sort of like a physical restraint or a supporter, but it’s pretty damn effective—”

“You’d let me use it?!”

I jumped on Mukuro’s words eagerly.

“Hold your horses. It ain’t free, all right?”

Mukuro smiled wickedly.

“I won’t ask for something crazy like a dragon’s tooth. Maybe just a few dragon scales, some branches or leaves from a World Tree, and a little bit of Philosophium...”

“Hey now, that’s way too much to ask from a kid like this. Pick something more realistic, will ya?”

Yoroi rejected Mukuro’s proposed cost. But if it could help prevent Arisa from turning into a demon lord, it was a small price to pay.

“How many leaves and branches do you need from the World Tree?”

“Let’s say a carriage’s worth of branches and enough leaves to cover the floor.”

The World Tree’s branches were thick, so enough for a carriage would be easy.

“All right. Should I just pull them out here?”

“You’ve got ‘em?”

I nodded at the surprised-looking Mukuro, and he directed me to a storehouse, where I began taking them out through my Item Box.

“Damn, I can’t believe you really have them.”

Yoroi stared in amazement as I pulled out the items.

“The hell is this?”

“A dragon scale? Why, what’s wrong with it?”

“Isn’t this from a full-grown dragon?”

Mukuro whistled in surprise.

“And these leaves ain’t from a sapling—they’re from the real thing, yeah?”

The scales aside, I wasn’t really sure why Mukuro was so surprised about the leaves and branches. But they seemed to be acceptable payment, so I handed him a fingernail-size chip of Philosophium—a Philosopher’s Stone.

"This one's the real deal, too. Damn, Kuro, who *are* you?"

"I just happened to have some connections with the elves and a dragon or two."

"Connections don't explain why they would give World Tree branches, never mind something as precious as Philosophium, to a human..." Mukuro trailed off. "But I guess I'm not gonna interrogate ya."

"Damn right, Mukuro. This guy came all the way down to the depths of the earth and gave us some seriously valuable stuff without even haggling. That girl must be really important to him."

They were right, but it was a little embarrassing to hear it repeated like that.

"Here, Kuro. This is a soul shell garland. Have her wear it as close to the head as possible, yeah?"

Mukuro handed me a broach-like item that looked like a layered ring of tiny flowers. This must be the item for protecting the soul vessel.

"After she's used a one-hit-kill technique, make sure she checks the soul shell garland. If the violet soul pearl inside is cracked or clouded, that means bad news. You'll wanna have her take an elixir or get healed by a priestess's Prayer Magic ASAP."

Oh good, then I can just give her an elixir.

"If ya need elixirs, I'm sure Ban would hook you up. He's always got extra stock for the handmaidens at his castle."

"Thank you so much for the advice."

I had some on hand already, so I didn't need to turn to the progenitor.

Actually, this was a good chance to ask another question.

"Sir Mukuro, is it possible to remove a God Fragment, to your knowledge?"

Doghead had mentioned that he stole Unique Skills from other demon lords.

He said it was impossible, but I figured if they could be stolen, there might be some way to remove them.

"...Hunh? What, so you can get rid of the danger in advance?"

I nodded.

"I get that you wanna remove the risk, but—"

"Enough buildup, dude. Just tell him already."

Yoroi interrupted Mukuro's roundabout explanation.

"Ugh, you're such a pain. Yes, it's possible to remove God Fragments. But the host will die in the process, okay?"

Ah, his answer is the same as Doghead's...

"That thing's roots dig into the soul real deep to ensure the Divine Right takes root. If ya try to tear it out, you'll rip the soul in the process. If you mess it up, they could turn into a demon lord on the spot, and even if you don't, they'll probably never be able to enter the cycle of rebirth again."

I guess it was even more dangerous than I'd thought.

According to Mukuro, there was a demon lord about a thousand years ago whose violent Unique Skill could steal Divine Rights from other reincarnations, and those victims were how they knew the results.

"There was also a demon lord whose Divine Right could be passed on to kin, but that's so specific, I doubt it's gonna help ya."

That was more or less the end of the God Fragments removal discussion.

From the sound of things, unless we were lucky enough to meet a reincarnation whose Unique Skill could remove God Fragments risk-free, there was no way to take them out of Arisa.



After my enlightening conversation with Mukuro, we went to check out his museum as planned.

"Kuro, should you really be casually touring a museum right now?"

I turned to Yoroi as he questioned me.

"Isn't Doghead tearing it up aboveground? You worried about your friends and that reincarnation girl or what?"

Oh, right. We got onto another topic partway through the conversation about Doghead's revival.

"It's all right. The Dogheaded Demon Lord has already been defeated."

"Defeated? Someone beat him already?"

"Well, there's no way those lazy-ass dragons moved that fast. The gods are too stingy with their power to deal with it, and even if they did, Doghead's got powers that could be a bad matchup for them, so they'd be hard-pressed to defeat or seal him."

Yoroi and Mukuro tilted their heads.

"According to the rumors, a Hero defeated him."

"A Hero?"

"Don't be stupid. That might work on some fresh-spawned demon lord noob, but no way could a Hero take down a demi-god-level demon lord like Doghead."

I was telling the truth, but the two of them didn't believe me.

"Sure, Heroes are strong, since they get power from Parion and all. But still..."

Mukuro looked at me doubtfully.

"...Thing is, they're still just humans who got a little piece of a god's power. Barely any better than us reincarnations, frankly. If the gods couldn't beat him directly, there ain't a chance in hell someone with a fraction of their power could do the job."

Sure, their logic did make sense.

Hayato the Hero was said to be humanity's strongest, but even then, I couldn't say how many humans of that level of strength it would take to defeat Doghead.

"Maybe the Hero had some help from the gods or dragons, then."

I used my "Fabrication" skill's help to give some arbitrary end to the subject.

"Well, as long as Doghead's not on a rampage, that's good news. I'd rather check out Semery's rear end than think about that weirdo any day."

Yoroi's gaze went back to Semery's curves as she walked ahead of us.

I couldn't argue with that, but it did seem inappropriate to say so within her hearing range.

"Hey! Quit staring like that! My rear end belongs only to Lord Ban!"

"C'mon! Don't be like that. A little peek never hurt anyone!"

"It has! I don't know how or when, but I guarantee it has!"

Semery scowled at Yoroi, who was like a pervy old man in empty armor.

"Enough already! I brought you bastards to my museum, so the least you can do is shut up and look!"

"Oh-ho-ho, sure, like you're doing us a favor. I know you're dying to show it off!"

This time, Mukuro and Yoroi started arguing.

They seem really close.

I turned my attention from the pair to the objects in the museum.

There were an awful lot of weapons: familiar-looking pistols and rifles, a submachine gun, mortars, and explosive projectiles, to name a few.

The next building of the museum was full of war machinery, including monoplane and biplane fighter aircrafts with reciprocating engines, tanks, and more. Unlike the tanks I'd seen aboveground, my "Analyze" skill suggested that even Semery would have a hard time fighting one of these.

"These ones use the blueflame engines that were developed in the Flue Empire. They require a valuable fuel source called bluecoins—ever heard of 'em?"

Bluecoins were a currency developed from Philosopher's Stones. If they used that as fuel, then the Flue Empire's blueflame engines must be similar to the Holystone engines the elves used.

According to Mukuro, the tanks we saw outside used internal-combustion engines.

"Crazy, ain't it? This guy goes all the way to the Middle Stratum to get the oil

for his stupid toys.”

“My underlings are the ones who carry ‘em! Tyranon is a great pack animal!”

As Yoroi sneered at Mukuro’s obsessive hobby, Semery boasted about her vampiric pet.

I had to admit, my mental image of the undead was deteriorating by the minute.

“This here’s a reproduction of the battleship *Ryokuhou* from the World War II period! It wasn’t easy to replicate these triple-.64-caliber turrets, just so ya know.”

Mukuro gleefully explained his work as he stood in front of a six-hundred-foot-long battleship, but something outside the window caught my eye.

“Is that...a railroad?”

“You got it. That’s what got the gods on my case in the first place.”

Mukuro explained that some three thousand years ago, he was reincarnated as the prince of a small kingdom.

He used his Unique Skills and military knowledge to build a great empire in the west of the continent, but...

“I created radio towers and railroad systems to stabilize the empire’s distribution and communication...but it seems that touched a nerve with the gods.”

They were met with one natural disaster after another: droughts, locust swarms devouring their crops, earthquakes, volcano eruptions, and more.

Even then, Mukuro managed to keep the empire going for another ten years, but when an oracle declared that his technological advances were the cause of the disasters, the empire was disbanded, and he himself was assassinated.

Luckily, he’d suspected the assassination would come, so he prepared a ceremony to make himself into a king mummy.

“Even in this body, they still kept chasing me down with a God’s Servant, but I convinced them to stop on the condition that I seclude myself deep in the

dungeon."

At that, Yoroi barked out a harsh laugh.

"Convinced? This barmy bastard used all of humanity as a hostage. He made a mountain of nuclear weapons and threatened to wipe out the human race if they didn't stop chasing him, ha."

I thought he was joking at first, but Mukuro just harrumphed without denying it. I guess that had actually happened.

Still, threatening the gods seemed crazy to me. No wonder he was able to create an empire.

He added that the gods had transformed the radioactive materials into lead so they couldn't be mined from aboveground.

Since his Unique Skill Metal Maker couldn't produce things like plutonium or uranium, he didn't have any nuclear weapons anymore.

Thank goodness.

The last thing a fantasy world needed was a nuclear winter.

At any rate, I was rather unpleasantly surprised to find more evidence for Doghead's claims in this unexpected place.

I guess trying to advance civilization too much really did incur the gods' wrath.

That being said...

"So boats and airships are fine but railroads aren't?"

"Seems like anything that makes it too easy for cities to communicate is out, yeah? Boats can't do anything about the threat of monsters, and it's impossible to mass-produce airships, plus they burn through monster cores like crazy."

I see. I guess I should cut back on airship production, just in case.

"Anyway, did you design all these vehicles and machines on your own?"

"You betcha! I got plenty of time on my hands, plus some magic and Divine Rights that make production easy to boot."

"Oh-ho-ho, don't inflate Mukuro's ego too much. Bastard'll never stop

bragging.”

“Ah, shaddup,” Mukuro snapped, but he seemed to be in a good mood. I ended up borrowing a few books and blueprints from him for internal combustion engines and the like, plus testers and other measurement tools.

I felt bad getting so much stuff from him, so I gave him some of the magic metals he wanted in return.

After this informative visit, we left Mukuro’s museum behind.



“Ooh, I didn’t realize this thing was so fast!”

“Oh-ho-ho, do you have a death wish, my friend? The rest of us will recover even if we get crushed or broken to bits, but that’d be the end for you, no?”

“I’m driving perfectly safely.”

I was behind the wheel of a vehicle borrowed from Mukuro—a military jeep with large tires.

When I spotted it on the way back from our museum tour, I got Mukuro’s permission to use it for sightseeing. I hadn’t driven a car in ages; carriage-style golems just weren’t the same.

The roar of the engine reverberated through my entire body as I went around a sharp curve.

Building up too much momentum, the rear wheels skidded—the grip was worse than I’d thought. Maybe it was inevitable because of the stone paving?

Discreetly keeping the car on track with Magic Hand, I enjoyed the drive.

“Incredible! Your driving’s nothing like Yoroi’s or Mukuro’s!”

Semery shouted excitedly and clung to my shoulders from the back seat.

Sadly, the seat between us prevented me from experiencing that joyous sensation.

“Don’t compare me to this so-called safe driver! I’ve got a gold driver’s license, dammit!”

“So-called”? How rude.

I wanted to retort, but I was afraid I’d bite my tongue, so I let Yoroi’s rude comment slide.

I’d marked the route on my map, and I was using the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to keep an eye on my blind spots and using the 3-D map to check the terrain. In a way, it was even safer than using a GPS.

I destroyed any obstacles or monsters ahead with Flexible Swords and Flexible Shields, and I used Magic Hand to put them away in Storage, so there was no issue there.

I might’ve been going a bit too fast, but given that I was pretty sure I was still under sixty miles per hour, I thought the “death wish” comment was a little harsh.

Compared to the speed of “Flashrunning,” we were barely even moving.

> Title Acquired: Joyrider

> Title Acquired: Dark Joyrider

> Title Acquired: Crazy Driver

Glancing at my AR display’s log window, I noticed I’d gained some rather rude titles, but I decided to let it go, since I was in such a good mood.

Only Semery and Yoroi were riding with me; Mukuro was already hard at work forging something with the legendary-class magic metals I’d given him.

Yoroi was a Flue Empire engineer, too, but he didn’t seem to be interested in research like Mukuro.

“Ooh, this is quite a view.”

“You know it! This waterfall goes deep, so don’t lean over too far and fall in, got it?”

Since there was no light source anywhere, it looked like a waterfall leading down into hell.

I used the Pixie Light spell to shed a little light on the depths.

“Whoooooooo! Th-that’s amazing, Kuro! It’s so pretty!”

In her excitement, Semery grabbed me by the collar and shook me repeatedly. The feeling of her chest smacking against me was nice and all, but this was a little too violent for me.

Still, I couldn't blame her for getting worked up about the fantastic sight.

I definitely wanted to bring my group here to see this, too, sometime.

Making a note of that, we moved on to the next sightseeing spot.

"Is that floating thing a slime monster?"

"Nope, just some water."

Before our eyes, several beach-ball-size globes of water were floating in the middle of a lustrous black room, their shapes gradually shifting.

"Things are weightless in this room."

I didn't understand how, but apparently, this room somehow didn't have any gravity.

"Don't go inside, though. It's a trap—the water will get in your lungs and drown you."

"So if I just keep my mouth closed, I'll be fine, then."

Unable to resist my curiosity, I ventured inside.

Ooh.

The sensation felt very different from floating in the abyss of space or free-falling. It was strange, almost like diving without water around you.

"Gwaaaah, it hurts! I can't breathe!"

Lured in by the sight of me having fun, Semery followed me inside and immediately started choking.

I put the wheezing vampiress in the back seat, and we moved on to the next spot.

The high-speed vehicle was making this underground sightseeing tour a lot easier.

"This place is called the Garden of Paradise."

When we made our way through the tightly sealed metal door, we arrived on a hill full of blooming crimson and lilac flowers.

Yoroi didn't call it the Garden of Paradise for nothing: It was quite lovely. Like the plant area in the Upper Stratum, the light seemed to come from roots in the ceiling that glowed like fiber optics.

"They're actually evil mustard plants, though."

According to Yoroi, a criminal guild that was conspiring with demons had cultivated this place four hundred years ago.

"Can I burn it, then?"

Yoroi gave a *go right ahead* gesture, so I used the Fire Magic spell Fire Storm to burn it away without a trace.

There were a few unpleasant places like that, but with the help of the high-speed vehicle, we were able to hit most of the sightseeing spots in the Lower Stratum.

"Yoroi, should we go to the lowest spot, too?"

"Hunh? Ain't nothing down there but the elder root."

"Its sap is so tasty, though."

"You're the only weirdo who'd try to drink that, Semery."

Yoroi snorted.

"That's not true! Shirahime likes it, too!"

"Besides, how do you even drink the sap of a huge monster that inflicts Life Drainer if you touch it?"

If I remembered correctly, Life Drainer could leech away not only your stamina but also your youth and level.

"But you can get back whatever it stole by drinking the sap, yeah?"

"Only vampire freaks like you can do that."

Semery looked disappointed, but I didn't really want to face a dangerous monster like that, either, so I ruled in favor of Yoroi.

◆
“Stop the car behind that boulder there.”

I followed Yoroi’s directions and parked the car.

This area was the home of a family of Evil Dragons. There were monsters like basilisks and flare scorpions, too.

“I hate this place. It’s always so smelly.”

“Is that sulfur?”

“That’s right... Hate to disappoint, but there’s no hot springs here, if that’s what you were hoping.”

It was a very Japanese assumption, but I was all set, since I’d already built one in the Middle Stratum.

“It’s actually very hot here.”

I got the impression that Yoroi was smirking at me from within his empty helmet.

Putting my cloak away in the Item Box, I followed behind him.

We passed through a few stone gates, the temperature rising each time.

Soon, it was as scorching as a midsummer day. The one perk was that Semery had changed into a sexy bikini-like outfit.

“What do you think? Pretty great, eh?”

“Yes, maybe heat isn’t so bad once in a while.”

I agreed enthusiastically with Yoroi as we proceeded down the corridor.

“I don’t get you guys.”

Semery seemed perplexed, but I didn’t want her to figure it out and do away with our precious perk, so I kept my mouth shut.

Of course, Yoroi didn’t say anything stupid, either. If he had an actual body, it might be fun to go visit some brothels together.

“That’s the spot over there.”

We passed through the last door and finally arrived at a large, open cavern.

"Whaddaya think, Kuro? Pretty fantastic, eh?"

"It certainly is quite a sight."

Lava was bursting out of the ground like geysers, forming flowing streams of red.

It reminded me of the Flame Lord's volcano I saw in the southern seas, but this was beautiful in its own unique way.

The geysers were producing lethal gas as well, though, so I used spells like Canopy and Air Control to take care of that.

All the monsters under the red light of the lava made the whole scene even cooler. Maybe I could hunt a few later and give them to Liza and the others as a souvenir.

Unfortunately, the Evil Dragons were napping deep in the volcano itself, where I couldn't see them.

"Hey, Kuro. Wanna know a secret? There are dragons living here."

Yoroi whispered in a conspiratorial voice.

Yes, I know.

"Ah-ha-ha, don't worry about it, Kuro. Those dragons are always sleeping on their island in the middle of the lava lake. As long as nothing makes a loud noise, we'll be totally fine!"

Before I could respond, Semery reassured me, although it sounded more like a setup for something bad to happen.

Normally, that'd be harmless advice, but since Semery seemed to be even clumsier than Pochi or Karina, I got the feeling she might mess something up.

"Dammit, why'd ya give it away? Now we don't get to see Kuro looking all scared."

"Honestly, Yoroi. You're such a jerk."

Semery put her hands on her hips, creating an enticing line from her back to her waist.

As I tried to put such thoughts aside and enjoy the scenery, I saw Yoroi

standing by a yellowed boulder and taking some tools out of his Item Box.

“All right, come help me with this,” he called.

“Are you mining for ore?”

“Nope, stocking up on sulfur. Mukuro can make normal ore out of dirt, so we don’t need to mine for those. Fire stones fall from the geysers sometimes—keep an eye out if you need any.”

Hrmm, fire stones?

I didn’t really need any, since I’d stocked up on a ton on the volcanic mountain of the Flame Lord, but I figured I might as well pick up a few more, since I was here. They had plenty of uses, like manufacturing Fire Rods and Magic Guns for the military.

“There really are a lot lying around.”

I did a refined search for fire stones in my immediate area; there were so many results that it hurt my eyes.

I narrowed it down to any of a certain size or larger and tried again. This time, I found that there were gigantic ones the size of a person lying around at the bottom of a nearby lava lake.

Worried that my clothes and shoes might burn up if I got too close, I used a combination of Clairvoyance and Magic Hand to recover them.

There were also Firelight Pearls, the more advanced form of fire stones, at the deepest parts of the lake.

Semery chipped away at the boulders with her blood sword, collecting the sulfur.

“Careful, Kuro. You might fall in if you get too close.”

“Don’t go dying on us now! I’ve still got to beat you and make you my manservant!”

Yoroi and Semery both chided me. To them, it must have looked like I was just spacing out near the lava.

I apologized and joined them in collecting sulfur.

It tended to collect in yellow patches near fissures in the rock, so it was easy enough to gather. I used some metal tongs to put the pieces into a large bag, handing each one to Yoroi whenever it got sufficiently full.

Suddenly, I heard a loud splash behind me and turned to see Semery looking sheepish.

“Sorry, I messed up.”

She must have made a mistake while cutting off sulfur and knocked a piece of rock into the lava.

“...Uh-oh.”

“I’ll check right now.”

Semery turned one of her hands into a bat and sent it up to the ceiling. Her ears transformed into bat ears and twitched a few times.

“Yeah, it woke ‘em up. One’s coming this way.”

She seemed to be able to receive transmissions from her bat as it flew around near the ceiling.

“A kid?”

“No, a parent...”

Just as she responded, there was a loud boom, and an arc of flames scorched the ceiling. That must be the Evil Dragons’ flame breath.

It blasted right into Semery’s bat, which was burned into ashes in a matter of seconds.

Judging by the movements on my radar, one of the Evil Dragons was indeed coming toward us.

Before long, a red-scaled dragon appeared from beyond the volcano.

“It’s not very big, is it?”

Including its tail, it was probably about a hundred and fifty feet long. The Evil Dragon was level 80, yet it was smaller than the level-68 black dragon Hei Long.

It was technically a lesser dragon, so maybe that was why it was smaller.

“It’s plenty huge, you moron!”

“You made it mad with your stupid comment, Kuro!”

Semery pointed at the dragon in consternation.

Spreading its wings to intimidate us, the Evil Dragon stomped through the craggy lava cavern at a considerable speed.

But still...

“Why doesn’t it fly?”

“Ah, well, see...”

“Mukuro used it for target practice with a tank once.”

Yoroi hesitated, but Semery explained in a strained voice.

So he’d used a flying dragon as a target for an antiaircraft tank? I hadn’t seen anything like that in the lineup when we toured the museum before. I’d have to ask him to show me when I returned the car.

“Quit standing around gaping and let’s get outta here, you two.”

“Right. If we pick a serious fight with a dragon without Lord Ban or Mukuro around, we’ll lose for sure.”

Semery bolted toward the exit at a quick pace; Yoroi followed close behind, clinking noisily.

A dark-red shadow flew overhead, kicking up a hot wind, and landed in front of the exit.

“Dammit, it jumped over us!”

There were no holes in the Evil Dragon’s wings, so its injuries from the tank must have healed already or something.

Maybe it was walking not because it was wounded but because it was paranoid about getting shot down again.

It looked like a red dragon, but on closer inspection, it seemed to be a gray dragon reflecting the red light of the lava with its scales.

“Semery, buy us some time. I’ll switch over to the rock golem.”

“C’mon...are you serious?”

Semery rejected Yoroi’s proposal in a shaking voice.

“I can do it, then.”

A little curious about this lesser dragon, I offered to buy time instead.

“*<Dragon, my name is Kuro. I am a friend of the black dragon Hei Long.>*”

I used my “Ventriloquism” skill to mimic the tone of a dragon and tried introducing myself in dragon language.

“GWLORWOOON.”

It raised a howl not unlike those of Hei Long, but unlike his, this one didn’t seem to mean anything that I could understand. Of course, I didn’t get any new language skill or anything, either.

Sadly, it looked like conversation wouldn’t be possible here.

From a short distance away, Semery produced a red double-handed scythe like Shirahime had.

Looking closer, I realized that the hand she’d transformed into a bat had already recovered.

“Hurry it up, Yoroi.”

Yoroi’s voice didn’t respond to Semery’s urgent call.

Instead, there was the clattering sound of metal hitting the ground behind me.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw the metal armor that had made up Yoroi crashing to the ground; in its place, the surrounding rocks were rolling together as if they had a mind of their own.

I guess that was what he’d meant by “switch over to the rock golem.”

“GWLORWOOON.”

The Evil Dragon howled at me again.

It sort of seemed to see itself as a cat toying with a mouse.

“I don’t want to kill it. What should I do...?”

I'd already killed too many dragons in the Valley of Dragons, even if that was out of my control.

"...Oh, I know."

I tried putting on one of my Dragon Slayer titles.

Immediately, the dragon focused on me in alarm. Its casual attitude vanished, replaced by a piercing gaze that seemed almost like hatred.

I guess Slayer titles made the target in question hostile toward you.

Next, I changed my title to Dragon Calamity.

It became even more hostile, but I thought I saw fear in its eyes, too.

So Calamity titles intensified their hostility but also added fear.

Finally, I tried the Dragon Destroyer title.

The Evil Dragon looked around frantically, as if seeking an escape route.

Destroyer titles seemed to make the target powerfully afraid and cautious.

"Now!"

Semery leaped forward to distract the dragon and was promptly knocked back by its distracted swipe, crashing into the rock wall. Normally, that would be enough to kill someone on the spot, but my AR showed that she was just fine.

The Evil Dragon focused on the wall where Semery had landed, readying its "Dragon Breath."

"Not gonna happeeee!"

The rock golem, a massive clump of rocks, drove a punch toward the dragon.

Its name read **Takeru**, Yoroi's real name.

"GWLORWOOON."

The dragon knocked Yoroi's rock golem form back with its tail.

The rock golem was smashed instantly, falling apart into several chunks and sinking into the lava.

I guess the strength of a level-80 monster is no joke.

“GWLORWOOON.”

This time, the dragon’s flame breath fired toward me.

Too slow.

The attack approached with all the speed of a fake flamethrower effect, burning the ground between us.

I chose Flexible Shield from my magic menu to deflect the breath attack.

The black dragon Hei Long’s breath could destroy two Flexible Shields in a matter of seconds, but this dragon’s breath could barely get through one.

I produced a rock from Storage and chucked it at the Evil Dragon’s forehead.

It landed a clean hit, since dragons seemed to be immobilized for a short time after a breath attack.

That was probably enough comparing greater and lesser dragons for now. Any more and I’d just be picking on the weak.

Oh, one last thing—maybe I’ll try changing my title to Friend of the Black Dragon?

“Uh, what the hell is this...?”

Returning to his original armor body, Yoroi stared in disbelief.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, wow! You’re something else, Kuro!”

Already fully recovered, Semery stared along with Yoroi and laughed.

“What did you do?”

“Trade secret.”

I certainly hadn’t expected the dragon to roll over like a pet dog.

As a result, I even gained titles like Dragon Keeper and Dragon Knight.

For now, I had changed my title to the latter, and now we were flying around the cavern on the Evil Dragon’s back.

Of course, I was recording the flight with Picture Recorder and Sound

Recorder to show to my group and Miss Aaze.

“Kuro! Look over there! They’re coming out to meet us.”

Semery waved at the Evil Dragon family as they flew up from their nest.

“Looks more like they’re coming to attack us...”

The one that seemed to be the eldest came charging at us. Its parent was far stronger and avoided its breath attack easily, knocking it back into the nest with a single strike of its tail.

The other dragons didn’t attack, but they circled around us threateningly.

“GWLORWOOOON.”

The Evil Dragon we were riding howled loudly, and the others howled in response and began flying in line behind it. I guess its family members had chosen to be subservient.

“GWLORWOOOON.”

The parent dragon landed in the nest with us still on board and started pushing treasures toward us from their nest.

I didn’t want to turn down a present, so I accepted some gold nuggets and trinkets. Then I used spells like Magic Mold and Forge to make some dragon-size crowns and bracelets, then presented them to the dragon family in return.

“KWLOLUOOOOON.”

“KUUULOLUUUON.”

“KWROLUOOOON.”

The dragons gazed at their new accessories with glee.

I guess dragons really did like shiny things.

“Hee-hee, thanks, Kuro.”

Noticing that Semery looked incredibly jealous, I used one of the gold nuggets to make her some matching accessories.

Then, since I didn’t want Yoroi to feel left out, I used the leftover gold to make some decorations for his armor.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho. Well? Do I look fancy?”

“Yeah! You’re killin’ it, Yoroi!”

Yoroi and Semery seemed satisfied.

While I waited for them and the dragons alike to calm down, I used a combination of my map search, Clairvoyance, and Magic Hand to discreetly collect some rare fire ingredients like fire stones and Firelight Pearls from the surrounding lakes, plus some scales, claws, teeth, and other fragments from the dragons’ nest.

“All right, we should get going.”

Waving to the Evil Dragon family, we left the giant cavern behind.



Once we left the Evil Dragons’ area, Semery announced that we should go see Yuika, so we changed our course.

If I remembered correctly, Yuika was the name of the other reincarnation in the labyrinth’s Lower Stratum.

I certainly had no qualms about meeting her, and besides, I couldn’t refuse the request of someone whose boisterous bouncing had been entertaining me in the rearview mirror all evening.

Of course, Yoroi had no objections, either.

“Stop the car here. Yuika’ll get mad if we mess up the flower field.”

“All right.”

“You two go on. I’ll wait here, eh?”

“What? You don’t wanna come, Yoroi?”

“If the younger Yuika is there, I might make her cry again.”

Does Yuika the goblin have a child?

I had just automatically pictured a solitary shut-in girl.

“A child? Perhaps I should’ve brought some pastries, then?”

“Hmm? Yuika’s not a kid. I think she does like sweets, though. If you make

some next time, I can bring you here again.”

Huh? I'm confused.

“So she doesn't have a child?”

“Of course not. Lord Ban said Yuika has something like *multiplying personality disorder*.”

“No, it's not multiple personality disorder exactly. If something really awful happens to Yuika, she uses her Unique Skill to cast off her personality and memories and change into a new person entirely. I know it sounds like a manga, but it's true.”

The old personalities, Yoroi explained, could only observe from the background like ghosts.

According to Semery, if the main Yuika fell asleep or fainted, one of her old personalities could possess her.

This sort of story was pretty common in old manga and anime.

In a way, it was like she was independently re-creating the same effect that the high elves of Bolenan Forest had created with the World Tree.

We left Yoroi with the car and walked toward the field of flowers, lit faintly from somewhere around the ceiling.

Of course, I didn't want to stomp all over her lovely flowers, so I carried Semery under my arm and used “Skyrunning” to float along above the ground.

“Kuro, see where those purple flowers form a hexagram? Land in there.”

I followed Semery's directions and touched down.

There was probably another detached area around here like the one that held Mukuro's museum.

“So where do we go now?”

“Nowhere. Hang on a sec.”

Semery sucked in a deep breath, so I quickly covered my ears.

Sure enough, she started bellowing “YUIKA!” over and over. So noisy.

The shout seemed to serve in place of a doorbell; the hexagram of purple flowers started glowing and produced six transparent floating doors, one at each point.

The doors were written in Earth languages: Four of them were in Japanese and read `WRONG`, `ENTRANCE TO HELL`, `IT'S A TRAP`, and `DON'T COME IN`, while an English one simply said `DEATH`. The last door had the English word `WELCOME` in Japanese hiragana.

My personal instinct would be that they were all traps, but...my “Sense Danger” and “Trap Detection” skills indicated that the `WELCOME` door alone was safe.

“Lemme see... I think it’s this one!”

Semery confidently bounded toward the `ENTRANCE TO HELL` door.

I quickly grabbed her by the back of the collar before she could go on.

“What’re you doing?!”

“That’s not the right one.”

“How do you know?!”

Without responding, I pulled her along into the `WELCOME` door.

“Whoa! You really were right! That’s crazy, Kuro!”

I asked the overexcited vampiress how she normally got in, and she replied that she simply kept trying until she got it right.

If she went in the wrong door, she just turned into mist or a bat and escaped.

Leave it to an immortal vampire to use that kind of trial and error.

“Man, it usually takes me about four tries to get it right...,” she grumbled, looking oddly vexed.

“No, she says she’s a *neat*, so she never goes outside.”

A NEET? It sounded to me more like she was retired.

At any rate, just as I suspected, this place said **No map available for this area**, just like Mukuro’s museum.

I tried using “Search Entire Map” to check the area, but there was nobody else to be found.

“Seems like no one’s here.”

“Yeah, Yuika’s a scaredy-cat. We have to go through about eight more sets of doors before we get to her.”

That was an impressive level of shut-in skills.

I figured I could get through all of them on instinct, but the odds of that were six to the ninth power—so about one in ten million? At any rate, we passed through a total of nine doors before we finally reached the space Yuika occupied.

We arrived to find a Japanese-style home adjacent to a field and a bamboo thicket.

The wooden porch looked out on a courtyard where chickens were eating feed, and onions and daikon radishes were hanging from the eaves. It definitely seemed like the perfect place to have a laid-back country life.

In fact, it gave the impression of a miniature garden re-creating the “good old days” of the Japanese countryside.

Time seemed to work differently here than aboveground; there was no sun to be seen, but the sky was bright as a normal afternoon.

“That’s Yuika’s house. She’s usually in the field... I wonder where she went?”

While Semery looked around, I used the “Search Entire Map” skill to inspect Yuika’s information.

Just as Mukuro had said, her race read **Goblin**. I’d been half hoping to see a high goblin or something, but I guess she was just normal.

Incidentally, goblins were considered a fairy race like elves in this world. They seemed to have long life spans like the other fairy races, since Yuika’s age rivaled Mukuro’s or Ban’s.

True to her nature as a shut-in, her title read **Hermit**, but I figured it was safe to ignore that.

Surprisingly, she was only level 50. She had mostly ordinary skills like “Cooking” and “Everyday Magic,” but her Unique Skills were something to behold.

Including Create My Garden, which had made this area, she had a total of fifteen different Unique Skills—several times more than even Doghead.

Even accounting for power inflation, that was way overboard.

I silently bad-mouthing the gods of this world in the back of my mind.

“Oh yeah. Yuika scares easily, so don’t make any sudden moves that might freak her out. I startled her the first time we met, and she squashed me flat into the depths of hell. It took ages to get back out!”

I was pretty jealous that vampires could recover from getting squashed flat.

“I dunno where she is, though.”

Bored of looking around, Semery grumbled and then took another deep breath.

“YUIKAAAA! WE’RE HERE! YUIKAAAAAAA!”

A moment later, my “Keen Hearing” skill picked up some shuffling from inside the Japanese-style house. Semery seemed to hear it, too, as she stopped shouting and headed for the house.

“Semery, is that you? I made the most delicious pickled daikon. Take some home for Ban, won’t you?”

“Geh, no thank you. You’ll turn Lord Ban’s lovely face bright yellow!”

Yuika opened the sliding door and emerged, speaking to Semery in a soft, youthful voice that belied her age.

Since when are goblins this gorgeous?!

She had very pale, fair skin, and her long, silky-smooth hair that reached all the way down to the floor was the light violet of orchids. Though not quite on Lulu’s level, she was every bit as lovely as the likes of Arisa or Mia.

Aside from her slightly pointed elf-like ears and the two small horns on her forehead, she could easily be mistaken for human. Her slender, straight frame

was reminiscent of the elves, too.

Come to think of it, the kobolds I'd met in the Muno Barony and the orcs I'd found beneath the old capital of Ougoch Duchy looked a lot like humans or elves, too.

At first glance, her outfit seemed to match her old-fashioned Japanese home, but her kimono ended in a short miniskirt accompanied by knee socks, which was definitely eye-catching.

"But it's classic Japanese home cooking. I'm sure Ban will..."

Yuika's red eyes locked on to me.

So she had finally noticed me. I think Semery's powerful presence had kept her distracted at first.

For a moment, she looked pleased, but then the smile froze on her face.



Wait, wha—? Nobody said anything about her being particularly androphobic...

Her lips moved, and for a second, I could swear she mouthed the word *Ichirou*.

But all I actually heard was...

“KYAAAAAAA!”

...Yuika screaming as if she'd seen a ghost.

The Strongest Reincarnation

Satou here. Long ago, when I read some classic children's literature, I remember being surprised to read depictions of goblins not as monsters but as mischievous fairies. I wonder if the current image of goblins comes from home video games?

“Stay awaaaaay!”

As Yuika spotted me and screamed, purple lights started flickering around her.

That's not good.

My “Sense Danger” skill was reacting more strongly than I’d ever experienced before.

“Y-Yuika?”

Semery sounded nervous.

“Calm down! I’m not going to—”

As I tried to call out to her, I noticed the appearance of small black dots.

Oh, crap.

Instinctively, I used “Warp” to get away from her.

The multiplying black orbs shrank, turning into black bullets the size of beads and zooming after me all at once.

Crap, crap, crap.

I used multiple rounds of “Warp” to flee from the speeding black bullets.

“GAAAAA—”

Semery was cut off mid-scream.

As soon as one of the tiny bullets touched her, she disappeared as if she’d

been sucked into it.

“You’re kidding me...”

Just as I suspected from the way Semery disappeared, my AR display revealed the small black beads to be artificial micro black holes.

If I had activated “Warp” a second later, I would’ve gotten sucked in along with her.

I definitely didn’t want to experience getting pulled into a black hole.

These bullets must be what Semery was referring to when she’d mentioned getting “squashed flat into the depths of hell.”

If she was able to get back safely before, it was probably all right to forget about Semery until I resolved this current predicament. She might get mad later, but I had a feeling she’d forgive me if I bribed her with some tasty food or a Magic Sword.

“WAAAAAH!”

Yuika started shooting black hole bullets even more frantically.

I kept dodging them with “Warp” and tried producing a Flexible Shield in front of one, but it got riddled with holes and sucked into the bullet within a matter of seconds.

No amount of Flexible Shields would be able to block a black hole, then.

I tried to stop her from moving by using my new Binding Grass spell, but she shook that off with a single flick of her arm.

“GET HIIIIIM!”

I don’t know why, but she seemed to be flying into a total panic.

As a result, her aim wasn’t very good; she was just shooting black hole bullets after me, so as long as I kept moving with “Warp,” I could dodge them easily.

The bullets that missed me hit the ground and created huge craters, sucking in pieces of the field and house.

I don’t know much about black holes, but watching them suck up huge chunks of matter and destroy them definitely made my stomach churn. Weren’t they

known for sucking things up and endlessly expanding?

“Yuika!”

I was hoping I could talk her down, but my voice wouldn’t even reach her amid the sounds of the black bullets exploding forth.

I tried using the Space Magic spell Telephone to call out to her, too, but like a real phone, it wouldn’t work if the recipient rejected it.

If only I had an advanced Space Magic spell like Force Telephone.

Crack!

Fissures began to form in Yuika’s artificial world.

“This could be bad.”

As I continued to dodge the black hole bullets, I tried using the Practical Magic spell Break Magic to get rid of them.

“Looks like that works, but...”

There was a limit to how many my Break Magic could destroy at once.

Unfortunately, she could produce them faster than I could get rid of them.

If this was a demon lord fight, I would just use Laser or Implosion, but I’d never do such a thing to an unhappy girl.

“Isn’t she going to run out of bullets...?”

Any normal person would be running out of magic power by now, but her MP gauge in my AR display kept going back up when it reached a certain point.

Her Unique Skills Mana Loop and Mana Spring probably optimized and restored her magic, and another Unique Skill, Infinite Chain, must be helping her rapid-fire the black hole bullets.

“AAAAAH!”

Yuika’s body flashed purple again.

I guess she still had another trick up her sleeve.

You overpowered cheater.

Just how many Unique Skills was she planning to use in a row?

No, more importantly—could her soul vessel really handle being pushed so far?

Now I was getting worried that she might turn into a demon lord.

I had to put a stop to her panic, and fast.

“You should probably run away at this point.”

As my anxiety built up, I heard Semery’s voice near my ear.

I turned to look for a second and found a tiny pea-size bat stuck to my shoulder.

For some reason, its otherwise normal body had Semery’s face.

I guess vampiresses were even tougher than I’d thought.

“Kuro.”

The mini Semery repeated my name, then pointed at something with her tiny bat wing.

“Yuika’s world...”

Looking in that direction, I saw that the cracks were spreading, threatening to break the miniature world in two.

“...is gonna break.”

Just as she said this, the miniature world shattered like glass, and we were tossed into the middle of a storm of flower petals.

“Isn’t this...?”

It looked considerably different, but it seemed to be the field of flowers where we had first entered Yuika’s space.

Yuika herself was standing in the middle of the flying petals, the wind whipping her long hair around and hiding her face.

That’s it!

I selected Cherry Blossom Shower from my magic menu.

“...Sakura?”

The resulting burst of cherry blossom petals filled her vision and distracted her.

Now's my chance!

Hidden by the flower petals, I used “Warp” to jump in close to Yuika.

I tried to knock her out with a punch, but my fist hit a hard wall of magic.

This must be another one of her Unique Skills, Guardian.

Something about it felt familiar—it was similar to the Fortress function I'd made for Nana's armor.

Then it should have the same weak points, too.

With my hand still pressed against the magic wall, I twisted myself around and pushed even harder, trying to drill through.

Then, in the brief opening this created, I used a pure ball of magic power to attack.

> Skill Acquired: “Armor Pierce”

> Skill Acquired: “Magic Power Attack”

“Ah!”

With one final gasp, Yuika collapsed.

It was a last-ditch attempt, but I guess my idea had worked. Somehow, I had managed to knock Yuika unconscious.



Snap.

I caught the dainty Yuika by the hand as she fell.

What was that sound?

Pulling her up as she crumpled like a rag doll, I reached out with my other hand to support her.

Swish.

There was another small sound as it happened.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her obi come undone.

And then the kimono it was holding in place fell loose, flapping open in the breeze.

As the swirling sakura petals danced over her delicate skin, I couldn't help being entranced by the beautiful sight.

But it would be impolite to stare, so I looked away from the lines of her body like a gentleman.

The rustling of her obi hitting the ground seemed to reactivate the world around us.

Though she'd fainted just moments ago, Yuika's eyes flashed open.

"You damn perveerrrrrrrt!!"

As she screamed, she swung a fist at me that I avoided by a hairbreadth.

She seemed a lot more ferocious than before, like a different person entirely.

Come to think of it, Semery had mentioned that her "old personalities" came out when she was unconscious...

Where was Semery anyway?

The tiny bat had disappeared from my shoulder.

We must've gotten separated when the world we were in broke apart.

"Don't mooooove!"

A wave of purple flooded around Yuika's body, and a far more powerful punch came toward me.

This was probably one of her other Unique Skills, Berserk Grappler. I wished she would stop using so many in a row.

What was she planning to do if she went overboard and turned into a demon lord?

I dodged the literal rain of powerful punches with my "Foresight: One-on-One Battle" skill.

Huh?

Yuika's level had gone from 50 to 55, and her primarily household-specific skill set had turned battle-oriented.

I'd figured her personality would change, but I didn't expect it to change her level and skills, too.

On closer inspection, even her title had changed from **Hermit** to **Punch Lord**.

I wish she would notice already, though.

Putting a little bit of distance between us, I gestured from my chest to my waist.

Confused, Yuika looked down at her own chest.

Immediately, her pale face turned bright red. If this were a manga, steam would probably be coming out of her ears.

Yuika scrambled to cover up her still-exposed chest and underwear.

“Grrrr...”

Her face screwed up with embarrassment and frustration as she held the cloth to her chest.

Well, she finally stopped moving, so maybe we can talk this out now.

“Here.”

I produced a long cloak from my Item Box and tossed it to her.

It spread out in the air and landed on Yuika, covering her.

“Heh-heh-heh.”

I heard her chuckling from underneath.

The cloak was tossed to the ground, revealing a completely different outfit from before.

She was now wearing a jet-black, gothic Lolita-style dress.

It definitely brought out her pale skin and lilac hair.

Her red eyes were now mismatched, one maroon and one azure.

On top of that, Yuika's stats had changed again. This time her level was down to 52, and her battle skill set was now more like that of a magic soldier, specializing in Dark Magic.

"Ha-ha-ha..."

Yuika covered her face with one hand, continuing to cackle ominously.

She's not turning into a demon lord, is she?

Her eyes glinting between her splayed fingers, Yuika slowly raised her head and fixed a piercing gaze on me.

"Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Finally, she tilted her head back and laughed loudly.

A three-stage laugh?!

What are you, a visual-kei villain from some famous fighting game?!

As if she could sense my consternation, Yuika flung her hand aside and started introducing herself with a speech.

"It is I, the despised descendant of darkness, the shrine maiden of Tenma, and the last surviving royal of the goblins..."

She struck a different pose and took a quick breath.

"For I am none other than Foilunis la Bellefille! The masses fear and worship me and call me thus: the Beauty in Black, Dark La Princess!"

...Oh, so she's just an edgelord.

Still, I wish she wouldn't mix French and English for her made-up name. There might even be a hint of German in there, too.

But since it'd probably only make things worse if I commented, I decided to go along with it.

"It's a privilege to meet you, Dark Lady Foilunis la Bellefille. I am called Kuro, a friend of Ban and Mukuro and the others."

Yuika scoffed at me.

"A friend of Ban and Mukuro, you say? As if a holder of the foul Hero title

could ever mingle with the denizens of darkness!"

Flames seemed to burn in her eyes as she responded.

"...Hero?"

"You cannot fool me, foolish fool!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "With the Divine Right granted me by the gods, I can see through any disguise! Concealment is useless before me!"

I couldn't tell which of her Unique Skills might have that effect. Maybe it was Divine Sight? I assumed that was more of an evil-eye-attack type of thing...

"Hmph, what a litany of false names. Trismegistus, Michelangelo, Echigoya, Ichirou, Hephaistos—just how many famous names do you dare to lay claim to?"

Wait, one of those was my real name. Sure, there are famous people with the same name, but still.

Besides, this *chuunibyou* girl was going by a false name, too.

"You're one to talk yourself... Yuika."

"Th-that is my secret name that I have concealed from the world! Never again speak of it, for it is a curse from the gods that means *one true god!* You must only call me Foilunis la Bellefille!"

Whoops. I was trying to hold back, but I couldn't resist calling her out.

Still, I didn't see anything in her status about a "curse from the gods," like a title or status condition, so maybe this was self-proclaimed, too?

Then again, maybe it was true, since there were some curses that didn't show up as status conditions.

"I alone am the strongest of all magic knights, who has consigned countless demon lords and Heroes alike to oblivion! As generations go by, my level is only half of what it used to be, but I shall teach you once and for all that a difference in level is not all that defines a fight!"

No, if I'm six times your level, I'm pretty sure that defines it, all right.

As far as I had seen from training my kids, an opponent about ten levels

higher than yourself was usually the upper limit.

Once you got into a twenty-level difference, most people wouldn't stand a chance unless they had a huge advantage in equipment or skill makeup.

Hmm?

As Yuika stretched out her arms at her sides, a wave of light rippled behind her.

Was she using some Unique Skill or other...?

“Geh!”

Something longer and thicker than a telephone pole emerged from the light and flew toward me at alarming speed, so I quickly used “Warp” to dodge it.

It was ivy.

Flying past me, the ivy vines sank deep into the labyrinth floor without slowing down.

“Wait, that’s...”

An AR display popped up near the ivy, revealing that it was the level-99 elder root that lived in the lowest depths of the labyrinth.

Everywhere it touched, solid rocks crumbled, and flowers turned brown and wilted on the spot.

That must be the work of the elder root's inherent skills like “Super Oscillation” and “Life Drain.” It also had skills like “Regeneration,” “Feign Death,” and “Spawn Creation.”

I remembered the sight of Prince Sharorik when he was “Life Drained” in the giant monster fish incident, which had rapidly aged him and drained his level.

“If I let it touch me, ‘Life Drain’ might lower my level.”

As I murmured to myself, I saw the tip of the vine burst through the ground right before my eyes and start closing in on me.

It looked like it would really hurt if it hit.

I chose the Light Magic spell Laser from my magic menu and fired it at the

approaching vine.

Sparks flew from the surface of the vine at the point of impact. It looked like its magic barrier had blocked the blow.

I used “Warp” to dodge as the ivy came closer, examining it as it passed.

The surface had carbonized, so it looked like the Laser itself still hit.

Turning around in midair, the vine zoomed down toward me from above.

As I dodged with “Warp” again, I saw something truly unfortunate: more ripples of light, like a puddle on a rainy day.

And then a rain of ivy vines practically filled my vision.

...My “Sense Danger” activated.

It wasn’t from the wall of ivy in front of me, though.

As I jumped back with “Warp,” a jet-black sphere flew past my nose. It was one of Yuika’s black hole bullets.

I whirled around to look and saw her fleeing from the vines.

Her shoulders were heaving as she produced a purple light blade and cut down a piece of ivy that was closing in on her.

“Didn’t you summon this thing?”

I found that strange, so I called out to her as we both dodged the ivy rain.

“I would never summon such a vile thing!” she shouted indignantly.

I guess the light ripples that had summoned the elder root weren’t actually her doing, then.

The vines she cut off took the form of a beast and attacked her.

“Then who did?” I asked.

At the same time, I produced “Spellblade” on all five fingertips of one hand and fired Spellblade Shots to dispose of the ivy beast.

“...a, the dungeonmaster!”

Yuika followed the falling beast with her eyes as she shouted back.

As I was dodging the ivy rain all the while, I couldn't quite make out the dungeonmaster's name when she said it.

"That careless idiot probably summoned this thing, thinking it would help me fight."

"But it's attacking you, too."

"That's why I said 'careless idiot,' idiot!"

Ah. No wonder some of the ivy was chasing her instead.

"Damn you!"

Yuika countered the ivy with black hole bullets and cut down any vines that dodged them with her purple light sword, carbonizing them.

She seemed to be blocking any attacks she couldn't quite dodge with the Unique Skill Invincible Strength. Or maybe she was just punching and kicking them away?

Regardless, even if she was depending on Unique Skills, I was impressed that she could fight off an enemy almost fifty levels higher than her so well.

"You're quite a skilled fighter."

As I complimented her, I used spells like Explosion and Implosion to blow up the ivy, then destroyed the resulting ivy beasts with Fire Storm and Ice Storm.

"Hmph, I take no pleasure in hearing that from the likes of you!"

Despite her claim, she was smirking as she continued to fight the ivy.

Almost like she was trying to compete with me.

"We're not getting anywhere..."

Although we were destroying vines one after the other, new ripples kept producing more, and the carbonized pieces kept regenerating, so it didn't seem like there were any less than before. The elder root was pretty annoying for a level-99 enemy.

Looking closer at the ripples that the ivy was coming out of, I noticed that there were several magic circle-like patterns inside. I realized that they weren't glowing exactly—rather, the light was coming through from whatever space

was on the other side of the spell.

It seemed like I could destroy them with Break Magic, but I gave up on that approach because several new ripples were created in the process.

“This is just the tip of it, too.”

The real elder root was several miles away, so it would be difficult to attack from here.

“Should we go after it, then?”

“Looks like that won’t be necessary.”

Yuika caught her breath, and we stood back-to-back as we exchanged words.

Behind me, I followed her gaze to see one enormous ripple appear, and a giant tangle of ivy emerged from it—the main body.

“Looks like it was nice enough to come to us to be defeated.”

As I spoke, I used the combination of Laser and Condense that had defeated the giant monster fish.

The intensified Laser let off the scent of ozone as it sliced right through the giant ivy creature.

In my AR display, the elder root’s HP gauge went down to zero.

“Did we do it?”

“Mukuro and Ban said it could regenerate infinitely, but surely that extreme level of firepower must have beaten it...”

As we watched, the burning remains of the main body gave rise to a fresh new wave of vines.

“...or not.”

Somehow, its empty health bar had recovered by half and was continuing to heal at a disturbing rate.

I guess that must be its “Regeneration” skill at work.

“It’s strong...”

“But of course. Long ago, Mukuro and Ban worked with the dungeonmaster

and Yellow Robes to try to create *a monster that could kill a god*, and this was the result of their magic modifications.”

Yuika grimaced as she spoke.

“And was it able to kill a god?”

“Certainly not. Even after three hundred years of trial and error, I’m told it could just barely defeat a God’s Servant. There’s no way it could stand a chance against a god who casts only a mere shadow from the divine realm on this world.”

I guess gods must be pretty strong.

Since I had been able to defeat one with Meteor Shower, I assumed they were just a little stronger than demon lords, but it sounded like they were on a different level entirely.

“Shall we move to round two, Kuro?”

“As you wish, Foilunis.”

She hadn’t seemed to like it when I called her Yuika before, so I used her made-up *edgelord* name instead.

Deciding it would be no fun to reuse the same technique as before, I shifted to backing up Yuika as she jumped in to lead the charge, then went on the offensive as she finished her attack.

Magic didn’t seem to have much effect, so I used a combination of Shooter and Acceleration Gate to fire a Holy Bullet that had been supercharged with magic power.

With a loud boom, a huge hole opened up in the elder root’s re-formed body.

The shock waves even made a hole in the wall on the far side of the cavern.

I hadn’t been too worried about that against Doghead, since we were in the desert, but it certainly caused a lot more damage this time.

“Wh-what in blazes?! What was that attack?!”

“My ace in the hole.”

I winked in response to Yuika’s surprise.

But that casual expression faded when I saw fresh green ivy budding from the wreckage to attack us all over again.

“It didn’t work?”

One of those supercharged Holy Bullets was enough to defeat a demon lord, so I was pretty taken aback.

I guess I underestimated the sheer difference in mass.

“This creature is a colony of sorts. One must destroy it all at once or it will regenerate.”

“I guess I’ll try doing that, then.”

I had about three hundred bullets left. First, I tried firing ten or so at once.

When the rain of blue light cleared, the giant cavern was full of dangerous gas created by the cloud of charred elder root remains and rock dust.

“You foolish fool! Why would you do such a thing in a confined space!” Yuika came over to me, bellowing. “What if the labyrinth collapsed?!”

I wanted to respond that she was overreacting, but the terrain on my map actually looked fairly messed up. At this rate, her prediction could actually come true.

“Did that finish it?” Yuika asked.

I couldn’t see much through the fog, but my map information showed that the elder root’s HP was at zero.

“I think so—”

Before I could finish, my heart sank. Its health was recovering just like before.

Using the Gust spell, I blew the floating cloud away to clear my vision.

Sure enough, fresh ivy was sprouting sharp points from amid the ashes.

I produced more Holy Bullets from Storage into my palm. “Looks like it’s time for round three.”

“Wait.” Yuika stopped me. “Are you truly trying to destroy the labyrinth?!”

Remembering the state of the map, I lowered my hand. I had to consider my

firepower carefully.

If this thing was a little smaller, I could probably teleport it along with me to the desert, but that was likely impossible with a creature this large.

Even if it did work, I suspected it might just regrow from the roots that were left underground.

“Kuro!” Yuika shouted. “If I could get the beast out of here, would you be able to defeat it with certainty?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

I nodded firmly.

“Then buy me some time! I’ll create the perfect stage for our show.”

Yuika grinned wickedly, so I smiled back and turned to fight the elder root.

Explosion, Implosion, Fire Storm, Ice Storm, Thunder Storm...

I used a successive barrage of intermediate attack spells to whittle away at the elder root.

Partway through, I got sick of using regular magic and started trying out more recently acquired spells like Binding Grass, Mowing, and Grass Spin.

“Ooh, that works pretty well.”

The Practical Magic spell Mowing wasn’t much more effective than a single Laser, but the Earth Magic spell Binding Grass allowed me to tangle up the vines, while I could use Grass Spin to shred the ivy beasts’ limbs and render them immobile.

This made it much easier to buy time and protect Yuika.

Eventually, I saw purple lines of light running along the cavern walls.

“Ready, Kuro!” Yuika’s voice rang out. “Let’s go! Behold the awesome power of the Beauty in Black, Foilunis la Bellefille! Create My Garden!”

The world was dyed in white and purple.

In the next instant, the space in front of me was transformed into a seemingly endless grassy plain.

“Wh-where are we?”

This was on a far bigger scale than Yuika’s hidden Japanese house or the white area that contained Mukuro’s museum.

My map only said **No map available for this area**, so I couldn’t tell how large the place was.

“A world I created that is all my own. Yes, this is a miniature world more independent than even the Otherworld incantation!”

“Wow...”

Now there was a power that seemed right out of a fairy tale.

In fact...

“Are you...a god of creation?”

“Not at all. I am but a maiden who has received the gift of God Fragments.” Yuika shook her head. “Verily, this world lacks the size of a full planet. At best, perhaps the size of a country...but that ought to be enough?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

I grinned back at her.

Before our eyes, the elder root that had been transported here along with us was burrowing into the plain, attempting to hide itself in the ground.

“Shall I dig it out?”

“Can you?”

“But of course!”

With a wave of Yuika’s arm, the dirt around the elder root began to fall upward.

She was probably using Gravity Magic.

The elder root tried to cling to the ground with its vines, but it got pulled into the air along with the earth itself.

“This won’t last long. Finish it in thirty seconds.”

“That’s more than enough.”

I used Magic Hand to float the magic-charged Holy Bullets into the air, then lined up several Acceleration Gates to create a virtual gun barrel and fire them through.

A rain of blue light crashed into the elder root, blowing it to pieces.

There was a loud boom and a flash as Yuika's miniature world shook; then the noise faded from existence along with the elder root itself.

"Such power..."

Releasing her Gravity Magic, Yuika murmured in a shaking voice.

Like the world that contained her Japanese-style home, this one began to crack from the damage my Holy Bullets caused.

"Before we go back, I'll disinfect the place just in case."

Yuika produced a purple mist from her fingertip.

It turned into a cloud of butterflies, which cleared away the powdered remains of the elder root in the air.



“Now, let me ask you this, Hero of many names and yet none!”

Once we returned to the labyrinth, Yuika went back to posturing.

For some reason, she was glowing purple and posing like she was ready for battle.

“What is the purpose of your quest here?!”

My “quest”?

I guess she was asking why I’d come to her place.

“I was just accompanying Semery to greet someone who once came from the same country as I do, that’s all.”

“What? You are a Hero, and yet you have not come to vanquish me?”

Her shoulders sagged in relief.

Apparently, even though we had just been fighting side by side, she’d expected to have to fight me next.

“As long as they don’t pose a threat to my kids, I wouldn’t try to kill anyone without talking it out first, not even a demon lord.”

Even in Doghead’s case, I probably wouldn’t have seen him as an enemy if he hadn’t meant harm to Sara and the other priestesses.

“...Impossible. My skill informs me that you are telling the truth...”

Staring at me in disbelief, Yuika relaxed out of her battle posture, and the purple light around her dispersed.

Phew. I guess that clears things up for now?

...Wait, there’s one more thing.

“Foilunis, you mentioned someone called Yellow Robes among the people who created the elder root. Is that a friend of yours?”

“Why do you wish to know?”

Yuika narrowed her eyes.

"It's just a name I've heard a lot lately..." I hesitated, then added, "Does it refer to the greater demon with yellow skin?"

"What, so you do know him?"

Yuika nodded confirmation.

"So do you associate with him?"

If so, I might have to reconsider my relationship with the reincarnations of the Lower Stratum.

"Don't be absurd. He joined in on creating the elder root uninvited, but that's the last time we'll ever tolerate him."

A vein twitched in Yuika's temple.

"Kuro, let me give you a friendly word of warning—never entrust your heart to demons. They see reincarnations as nothing more than demon lord eggs. It's no different than the devil whispering promises in your ear."

Yuika's distaste was obvious.

"I'm surprised you worked with him to create a monster, then..."

"He just took advantage of Mukuro's frustration with the development process. Never show weakness to a demon," she added.

"Thank you. I'll remember that."

I thanked Yuika earnestly for the warning.

I'd be the first to admit that I could still be plenty naive, so as far as demons went, I should probably continue my search-and-destroy policy.



"Good to see you again, Yuika—No, judging by those eyes, you must be Foilunis."

"Indeed. I am pleased to see you well, my brethren of the darkness, progenitor Ban."

Once I'd made peace with Yuika, we met back up with Yoroi and Semery and went to Yuika's guardian Mukuro's castle, but since we started talking about a

certain food there, we ended up all going to the progenitor's castle.

Semery, unfortunately, declared that she couldn't let Ban see her in a "disgraceful state" and left.

"It's rare to have a visit from Mukuro and Yoroi, though not as much as the shut-in Foilunis."

Ban looked around at the group, then turned to me questioningly.

"How in the world did this come to—?"

"Hark! My brethren of the darkness, progenitor Ban!"

Yuika interrupted Ban with a shout.

Of course, as was her nature, she accompanied this gesture with a dramatic wave of her cloak.

"You dare to interrupt me? Even if you are the last princess of the goblins—"

The vampire lord matched her tone, protesting her rudeness in an unnecessarily bombastic way.

But Yuika interrupted him yet again, waving around a short wand.

"Heh-heh. Would you still protest so if I told you that I had found one of the Three Lost Treasures?"

The progenitor froze, looking shocked.

Yuika smirked at his reaction. I had to admit, she did look kind of cool.

However, the effect was ruined by the fact that what she was holding wasn't actually a wand but the stick from a lollipop.

I guess it's my fault for giving her candy when she'd said she wanted something sweet, though.

"Surely you jest!"

"Not in the slightest! And do not call me Shirley."

Yuika opened her Item Box dramatically.

"Behold! The greatest miracle of all!"

What emerged, cut into a perfect triangle, was...

“I-it’s real pizza...”

“N-not for you! Kuro gave this to me.”

The vampire reached out in a daze, but Yuika nimbly jumped away.

She put it back in her Item Box carefully so that her precious treasure wouldn’t be stolen from her.

It was a slice of the single pizza I had made for dinner tonight, which I was keeping hot in Storage. It wouldn’t be nearly as tasty cold, so I wished she would just eat it already.

“Kuro, what is the meaning of this?” Ban turned to me, wild-eyed. “D-does this mean that you found tomatoes?!”

I politely pushed his pointlessly handsome face away from mine.

“Yeah, they were growing deep in the countryside to the east of the Shiga Kingdom.”

He was ridiculously strong. *Is it really necessary to use your vampire powers over something like this? If I was lower level, you could seriously hurt me.*

“What! But I could swear I had scoured the land there over many years...”

It seemed like there were a lot of immigrants from the east in that area; maybe they weren’t growing tomatoes yet when the progenitor vampire had looked there.

“I have actual tomatoes, too. Would you like some?”

“Truly?!”

The vampire tried to offer valuable bloodpearls as payment, but I declined and gave him a basket of tomatoes and a jar of my homemade ketchup.

There was no need to be stingy, since I could go back to the town of Puta to get more tomatoes anytime with the Return spell and the “Flashrunning” skill.

I also gave him some tomato seeds as a bonus.

“Are these seeds?”

“I wish I could give you seedlings, but I’m afraid I don’t have any on hand.”

I couldn’t store plants in my Storage if they still had roots.

“It matters not. I shall simply raise them from seeds.”

The vampire responded confidently and called over a middle-aged handmaiden who was standing by the wall. She was the oldest-looking person in the Eternal Night Castle.

“Please grow these tomato seeds with the utmost care and highest priority.”

“Understood, my lord.”

Oh. So you’re going to have someone else do it for you.

“We can help you with Earth Magic, too, then.”

The vampiresses immediately hustled forward to offer their assistance to the handmaidens.

“It would be best to prepare multiple kinds of dirt... Kuro, what sort of soil is best for raising tomatoes?”

It’d probably be difficult to grow an unfamiliar crop, so I gave Ban a paper with instructions on growing tomatoes. This was knowledge that I’d gotten from the village of Puta when I created a tomato field on Paradise Island in the southern seas.

While I was at it, I gave him a simple map to Puta as well.

“We will go make preparations, then.”

“Very good. I shall await your report.”

The handmaidens and vampiresses took their leave with the seeds and instructions.

Because I was growing tomatoes in our field outside Labyrinth City, too, I told them that starting next year, we should be able to harvest fresh tomatoes on a regular basis.

“Then please, allow me to assist you in protecting your field from pests. I shall dispatch my rouge bats and blaze wolves as guardians...”

“Don’t go too overboard, please.”

He was going awfully far just for the sake of tomatoes.

I hadn’t expected the progenitor vampire lord to be such a gluttonous character.

“Kuro! Let us hasten to the most important point!” Yuika exclaimed impatiently.

“All right, all right.”

“And what might that be?”

“Well, I heard that you have a brick oven in your castle. Is there any chance I could borrow it to make pizza?”

“Why, you would be more than welcome. If I may, it would be splendid if you could relay the recipe to my head chef, as well.”

“Yes, of course.”

I could probably improvise an oven with Earth Magic, but pizza made in a well-used brick oven would come out much tastier.

I spent the next two hours making pizza with the chef of the Eternal Night Castle.

The reason it took so long was that I had to make the dough and tomato sauce from scratch to demonstrate for the head chef. Besides, brick ovens took a long time to heat up.

“Mamma miaaaaa!”

“I keep telling you to use your own words for once, dammit.”

As soon as he took a bite of the pizza, Mukuro bellowed in a passable imitation of a certain gaming plumber, and Yoroi smacked him while working on a slice of his own.

I could sort of understand how a mummy like Mukuro would eat, but it was especially weird to watch an empty suit of armor somehow consume pizza while stretching out the cheese gleefully. Still, I was glad they didn’t experience the tragedy of acquiring eternal life only to lose their sense of taste.

“What troubles you, my brother in darkness, progenitor Ban?! Does the taste of pizza not please your darkly discerning tongue?”

“Do not bother me. I wish to savor the emotion of being reunited with pizza at long last.”

“Ohhh, sorry.”

The vampire didn’t open his eyes.

Since he stopped moving after just one bite, I was afraid I’d messed up somehow.

“Pizza really does taste better when it’s made in a brick oven.”

Chewing on a slice of pizza with a carbonated beverage in her other hand, Yuika grinned at me.

“Kuro! I never once imagined I would be able to eat pizza in this world. Can you make cola, too, next time?”

“I don’t even know the ingredients that go into cola, never mind the recipe.”

“Ingredients? Wouldn’t it just be cola fruit?”

Cola fruit? I’ve never heard of such a thing.

“I’ll look into it,” I responded vaguely.

“More carbonated water. And make the next pizza chicken teriyaki flavor. Make no mistake—the dough must be supple and thick. I like the kind with cheese in the crust!”

As she finished off a slice, Yuika made demands to the handmaidens of the castle.

I preferred the crunchiness of thin-crust pizza, as did most of the other men present, but Yuika seemed to like the soft and chewy kind best.

Maybe it was because the thin kind went better with booze.

Mukuro and I were drinking fairy wine, Yoroi was drinking Shiga sake, and Ban had a glass of Lessau’s Lifeblood wine with a single drop of maiden’s blood.

Incidentally, the carbonated water Yuika was drinking was sweetened and

flavored with fruit juice and sugar. So far, the flavors I'd made included melon, peach, orange, and veria.

"Kuro." Yuika addressed me again. "I'm sorry about what the newest Yuika did earlier."

"It's fine, it's fine. You already apologized."

She brought this up while we were waiting for the next pizza, possibly out of boredom.

Presumably, she was referring to the first Yuika I met, who immediately started attacking me with black hole bullets.

It was all a bit confusing, so I thought I'd refer to the first Yuika as Yuika Number 1, the berserk fighter Yuika as Yuika Number 2, and this edgelord Yuika as Yuika Number 3.

"What happened? Did my comrade Foilunis try to jump your bones, as they say?"

"As if a denizen of darkness like myself would ever do such a perverse thing!"

I thought Ban was trying to tease me, but for some reason, Yuika Number 3 turned bright red and flailed indignantly.

"See, this is why we call you the Iron Maiden, because you'll always be a virgin, girlie."

"D-do not say such filthy things! A Japanese maiden such as myself must always be chaste!"

Wait, I thought iron maiden was the name of a torture device.

"Ban, Yoroi, don't tease the child."

Mukuro scolded the pair of them.

Based on my impression so far, I was surprised he wasn't joining in to tease her, too—oh, right, he was supposed to be Yuika's guardian.

Since Yuika Number 1 had destroyed her garden home, Mukuro's mummy subordinates were currently rebuilding it in her freshly remade world.

"I am no child! And you're the ones who stupidly drilled it into the new

Yuika's head that Heroes are dangerous, which is why she panicked when she saw Kuro's title in the first place!"

"‘Stupidly,’ my ass. The Heroes who’ve found us before were all—Wait. Did you say she panicked when she saw Kuro’s title?"

"That’s what I heard."

Mukuro and Yoroi slowly stood up.

The air around us seemed to chill.

I guess they had pretty negative associations with the Hero title.

"Wait, I say. Kuro is my friend and a guest of the Eternal Night Castle. Know that if you intend him harm, you make an enemy of my entire clan."

I was expecting the progenitor vampire to join Mukuro and Yoroi in turning hostile toward me, but he actually stood between us to defend me instead.

Maybe it was just his sense of dignity as a noble, but I was a little flattered anyway.

"Oh-ho-ho, you’ve gone batty at last, Ban."

"If you’re going to side with the puppets of that stupid goddess Parion, you’re going down, too."

From the sound of things, the pair specifically hated Heroes who had been summoned with Parion’s magic. *In that case...*

"Stop!"

I stepped in front of Ban to dispel the misunderstanding.

"Stay back, Kuro," the vampire warned me. "Yoroi is one story, but Mukuro is far beyond what anyone could handle at level fifty."

He must’ve seen Kuro’s official level with the “Analyze” skill.

"‘Yoroi is one story’? Thanks a lot."

Yoroi didn’t seem too happy about that.

"Oh, please. Forget Mukuro—this guy could even crush me at the height of my power without breaking a sweat."

“““What?!”””

At Yuika Number 3’s statement, the others stared at me in shock.

I guess she was able to see that I was actually level 311.

“You’re telling me he could crush you even when you reached the limits of individual strength?”

“Don’t tell me—are you a god?!”

Yoroi didn’t seem entirely convinced, but Mukuro grew even more furious.

“No, no. Foilunis?”

“Kuro is a human, all right. His name and skills are falsified, but his race is not.”

Yuika Number 3 backed me up.

“And while we’re at it, I’m not a Hero who was summoned by Parion, either.”

I still didn’t know how I’d actually come to this world, but that was one thing I could say for sure.

After all, I hadn’t gotten the Hero title until after I defeated a greater demon in the labyrinth that formed under Seiryuu City.

“Then who the hell summoned this Hero?”

“I didn’t get the Hero title until after I arrived in this world. I still have my memories from Japan, but I don’t know if I’m a transference or a transmigration. All I know is that I suddenly woke up in a wasteland with some kind of Unique Skills.”

The whole god-killing and Meteor Shower situations weren’t relevant right now, so I left them out.

Fortunately, once they understood that I wasn’t a summoned Hero, Mukuro’s and Yoroi’s rage subsided.

“So you’re a self-made Hero, eh? Sorry, Kuro.”

“Our bad, bro.”

Mukuro and Yoroi apologized.

It looked like the worst of the danger had passed.

“Every damn Hero of Parion who’s come down to the Lower Stratum has always tried to wipe out both of us,” Yoroi explained.

I remembered that at the west guild before the floormaster battle, I’d heard Sebelkeya mention demon lords called the Bone Lord, the Abyss Blood Lord, and the Steel Lord, which Secretary Ushana objected were fictional.

There must have been some Heroes who took those stories seriously and came to defeat them.

“Not that I blame ‘em when we look like this, I guess.”

“Speak for yourself! Why, in spite of these adorable looks of mine, those blasted Heroes all scream ‘Goblin Demon Lord!’ and attack me with Unique Skills blazing as soon as they see my horns.”

“Well, that seems inevitable, since Parion’s Heroes can see your title, Comrade Foilunis,” Ban gently reminded Yuika.

When Yuika’s personality changed, all her skills except for her Unique Skills changed, too, along with her level and even titles. In this form, her titles were particularly sinister.

With my “Analyze” skill, all I could see was the **Hermit** title that Yuika Number 1 also had, but my AR display revealed a much longer list.

Just to name a few of the major ones, there was the **True Hero** title I’d gotten when I defeated a demon lord and the **Goblin Demon Lord** title Yuika herself mentioned, as well as titles like **Little Ogre Princess**, **Conqueror of Individual Limits**, and **The Last Goblin Child**.

That final one seemed pretty heavy, but it wasn’t the sort of thing I should ask about out of curiosity, so I pretended I hadn’t seen it.

“Are you a demon lord, Foilunis?”

“Pardon? Oh, you mean the Goblin Demon Lord thing? Well, I didn’t overuse my Unique Skills, break my soul vessel, and turn into a demon lord, if that’s what you mean. I simply defeated some foolish Heroes, knights, and noble armies who came to attack me to make themselves famous. Then certain folks

began referring to me as such, and somehow I ended up acquiring it as a title.”

She’d gained other titles like Little Ogre Princess in the same way.

Incidentally, she said she wasn’t the same Goblin Demon Lord that Aaze had mentioned. Her expression was a little sad when it came up, so maybe that person was once a friend or relative of hers.

“This crazy chick even beat down a demon lord.”

Yoroi patted Yuika Number 3 on the head.

“Cut it out! Thanks to that stupid demon lord, I got stuck with the True Hero title for a while.”

“That’s pretty amazing, though, isn’t it?”

Thinking back on our fight against the elder root, I could definitely believe that she’d bested a demon lord.

“I used to be level ninety-nine, so a level-eighty demon lord was no threat.”

Despite her claim, Yuika Number 3 looked pleased with herself.

“Yoroi said you ‘reached the limits of individual strength’—does that have anything to do with being level ninety-nine?”

I’d been curious about this for a while.

“Indeed, I acquired the Conqueror of Individual Limits title when I reached level ninety-nine.”

According to Yuika Number 3 herself, her level didn’t go up again after that, even when she earned several times the amount of experience points it took to get from level 98 to 99, so it was safe to assume that level 99 was the limit, at least for races like goblins.

“Huh? But you’re only level fifty-two now. Do you have some skill or equipment to disguise it?”

“No, I really am level fifty-two at this point in time.”

“Levels can go down?”

I was curious if it was like an old PC game sequel I once saw, where your level

could go down if you slacked off too much.

“Don’t be absurd! When a new version of myself is born, my level goes down by about a third.”

This was apparently thanks to a Unique Skill called Soul Refresh.

When a new personality took over, she lost her skills and titles and such, but the new personality could reacquire old skills at a cost of less skill points than before. Of course, the new personality could set this up herself.

When one of the old personalities acquired control from the main one, her skills and titles would revert, but the older the personality, the harder it was to regain the original level.

“Speaking of levels, you said something very interesting earlier...eh, Yuika?”

Mukuro stared at Yuika Number 3 piercingly. He was probably referring to her statement that I could’ve defeated her in her prime.

“Erm...”

“What level is this guy exactly?”

Yuika hesitated, but Mukuro kept pressing the question.

“Kuro’s level is...”

Yuika glanced at me questioningly, and I shook my head.

“...a secret.”

It looked like she was willing to keep my level to herself.

“Well, that’s an answer in itself... Wait a minute. When you came to our place before, you said Doghead had already been defeated. So the Hero you were referring to was you...?”

I nodded when Mukuro turned toward me.

“I didn’t know that fanatic had been revived, but if he’s already been vanquished, there’s no issue.”

“Crow had a proper appreciation of the aesthetic of darkness, but his obsessive abhorrence of the gods was his weakness. When he and Mukuro got

to talking about them, the complaints would never end, as I recall.”

The progenitor vampire and Yuika Number 3 didn’t seem too bothered that I’d beaten Doghead.

Well, I got the impression that he had been defeated and revived plenty of times before, so maybe it wasn’t that rare of a situation.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho, never thought I’d see the day that a Hero’d beat old Doghead.”

“No kidding. He must be at least level one hundred and twenty, maybe even something as crazy as level one hundred and fifty.”

Sorry, it’s more than double that.

“I don’t see a problem. Kuro doesn’t seem like he’d turn against us. Besides, we are quite stubborn ourselves. If we were to flee, not even the gods could catch up with us.”

Ban the progenitor vampire gave me his seal of approval.

We hadn’t even known each other for a full day yet. How could he already trust me so fully?

“When one lives as long as I have, one learns how to judge a person’s character.”

Noticing my gaze, the vampire lord flipped his hair and winked at me.

I wished he wouldn’t, since the vampiresses all shot me jealous gazes.

At any rate...

“I’m Satou.”

I removed my disguise and turned back into Satou.

Since they were trusting me, I thought I should trust them in return.

“Damn, you’re young...”

“Is that your real name? From Japan?”

“My real name is Suzuki. But Satou was my name when I arrived here, so at this point, it might be more like my real name, I guess.”

“Pah, Kuro is just fine as Kuro.”

"Yeah, names don't mean nothin' anyway."

Oh, right, I guess Mukuro and Yoroi aren't their real names, either.

"That is not what I meant," said Ban. "Kuro, my handmaidens return to the surface at the end of their employment. I do not believe they would willfully say anything to harm my friends, but the fewer who know your name, the better. When you come to my castle, please do so in the name and form of Kuro."

But the senior handmaiden has already seen me?

"If you are thinking of Frederica, fear not. She has expressed the wish to be buried at the Eternal Night Castle, and even if she was to leave my service, I can guarantee she would not speak of you."

Noticing my glance at her, the vampire lord reassured me.

"All right. Then I guess I'll keep going as Kuro in the labyrinth's Lower Stratum."

I bowed my head to the others.

Once we ran out of pizza, there was talk of a sushi party or a shogi tournament, but it was just about dawn by then, so I took my leave of the castle for the time being.

"Just a moment. My newer self wishes to take over."

With that, Yuika Number 3 closed her eyes. When she opened them, her face had changed again.

"Erm, I'm terribly sorry for losing my cool earlier."

Yuika Number 1 kneeled on the ground and apologized.

The effect of a pretty girl putting herself in such a position was overwhelming. Even though she was apologizing to me, I felt like the bad guy in this situation.

"No, it's all right; Number 3 already apologized."

I patted her shoulder gently and helped her to her feet.

"...Number 3?"

Oops, I guess she wouldn't know what I mean.

“The one who calls herself Foilunis la Bellefille, the Dark La Princess.”

“Aah! The original generation!”

I guess Yuika Number 3 called Yuika Number 1 “the first generation.”

“She’s the one who stopped me, then, isn’t she? I realized that you weren’t attacking me, and yet, I was so frightened that I couldn’t stop myself.”

The various Yuikas were able to communicate in dreams, so they could share information to a certain degree.

“Oh, hey, Kuro...”

As Yuika Number 1 and I wrapped up our conversation, I started to say my good-byes, but this time Mukuro wanted to talk to me.

“If the gods ever start chasing you aboveground, we’ll help ya out. But otherwise, don’t come down here too often.”

“C’mon, really? You rotten jerk.”

As Yoroi grumbled, Mukuro smacked his helmet.

“I’m not trying to be mean. But miasma collects underground. It’s not good for folks with living flesh.”

Oh, right. When the miasma had been really thick in Labyrinth City, a lot of people got miasma poisoning.

Using my “Miasma Vision” to check, I saw that it was even thicker down here.

“There’s a lot of it in my territory. Unless you got a Unique Skill like Yuika’s that can change miasma into magic power, it’s just too dangerous.”

“Good point. New handmaidens at our castle are evacuated to a purified room until they develop skills to resist miasma.”

That must be the room where Zena and the slave girls were being kept.

“Oh-ho-ho, we need miasma to live, so we can’t just go purifying it.”

So I couldn’t simply amplify my spirit light or purify it with Holy Stones.

“Kuro, despite what Mukuro says, the Eternal Night Castle shall never turn away a friend. You are welcome to visit at any time.”

He just wants me to come play shogi with him, doesn't he?

"The miasma's thick at my place, too. But if you're gonna have some tasty food, call me anytime. Semery and I will come on over."

"I guess I might show up, too, if there's sushi. Wouldn't mind playing shogi with someone besides these morons, either."

"Oh-ho-ho-ho, nobody likes a *tsundere* old geezer, pal."

"Shaddup!"

Mukuro and Yoroi started bickering, but I ignored them and turned back to Yuika Number 1 and Ban.

"Ah, I'll put the first generation back in charge..."

Yuika's expression changed back to Yuika Number 3.

"Why, how kind of thee," Number 3 said, affecting an old-timey tone for some reason. "At present, I shall be imposing on my brethren Ban's castle for a while. When next we meet, you shall likely see my quieter self, but please be friendly to her."

"Sure. I'll bring some presents and stuff."

As they'd mentioned at the pizza party, Yuika was going to be living in the progenitor's castle until her house was rebuilt. She didn't want to stay with Mukuro or Yoroi out of fear of ghosts, apparently.

I would think vampires would be equally spooky, but there were plenty of normal people here, so it probably felt more comfortable.

So as to avoid being a freeloader, she was going to use her Unique Skills to create the perfect space for growing tomatoes.

I wouldn't mind having a space like that myself. I was sure she would make me one if I asked, but since I didn't want to be a pest, I figured I could bring it up to her in the future when we became better friends.

"Please do not forget my wine, too, Kuro."

"Lessau's Lifeblood, right? If I can't find any, I'll go straight to the source."

I smiled at the vampire and left the friendly reincarnations of the labyrinth's

Lower Stratum behind.

Epilogue

Satou here. Sometimes, when you're looking for something that you just can't seem to track down, a friend might come along and hand it to you out of nowhere. Personal connections really are important.

“Welcome home, master.”

“Mrrr. Morning.”

When I came back to the mansion, Mia and Arisa were there to greet me.

Tama and Pochi were helping in the fields, Liza and Nana were doing a morning jog around the perimeter of Labyrinth City, Lulu was in the kitchen with Miss Miteruna and the maids, and Karina and company were still asleep.

“Now, now, Mia. Master was investigating the Lower Stratum of the—”

“Perfume.”

Arisa started to defend me, but when Mia interrupted, they both started sniffing around my robes.

“I smell a few different things. Wait...”

Her eyes widened, and she shoved her face into my robes again.

“Enough.”

As Arisa kept rooting around in my robes, Mia bopped her on the head.

“Sorry, sorry. So what's up, master? You wouldn't tell us you were going into the labyrinth and then head off and cheat, now, would you?”

“I swear on my good vibes with Miss Aaze that I did no such thing.”

“Mm...mrrr.”

Mia started to smile but then realized something about what I'd said and puffed up her cheeks.

Kids were so confusing.

“So did you meet a woman in the labyrinth or what?”

“It’s a bit of a long story, so I’ll tell you after breakfast. For now, let’s just say the reincarnations in the labyrinth Lower Stratum were more or less friendly.”

“More or less?”

“Well, I got the feeling that if they thought I was an enemy, they’d kick me to the curb right away.”

After all, Mukuro especially was the type of person who even picked a fight with gods.



“Knock-knock, master.”

After breakfast, I called Arisa to the study alone.

“What about everyone else?”

“Well, there’s something I need to talk about with you specifically.”

“Is it Unique Skills?”

I nodded. “It might take a while, but I’ll tell you everything I learned.”

Reincarnations like Arisa were granted Divine Rights in the form of God Fragments from the gods so that they could use Unique Skills.

These God Fragments were contained in the soul vessel, but if one used Unique Skills past their limits, the soul vessel could be damaged. If it broke beyond automatic repair, then the reincarnation would turn into a demon lord.

And if one attempted to remove God Fragments, it would tear up the soul and lead to death or possibly even total destruction of the spirit.

Next, I touched on a few important points.

First, there was generally no danger as long as one obeyed the limits of Unique Skills with a restricted number of uses.

Second, if one was in a poor mental or physical state, the danger of using Unique Skills would increase.

Third, one-hit-kill or limit-breaking Unique Skills like Arisa's Over Boost were extremely dangerous, and if used incorrectly, they could even destroy the soul vessel in one go and turn the host into a demon lord.

Arisa listened intently, then broke into a smile.

"Okay, gotcha. Actually, before I was reborn, a god did warn me not to use them too much."

"Really? They actually warned you?"

"Uh-huh. And they even gave me a blessing in hopes I would have a happy and fulfilling life."

I had suspected that it might have been an evil god that reincarnated Arisa, but maybe I was wrong?

Or maybe...the evil god was depicted in legends as a thoughtless villain that created demons and monsters and antagonized other races, but maybe those stories were twisted by the other gods.

For instance, it might have been something else that created demons and monsters, or else they might have a more important role than any of us realized...

"Also...uh, master?"

"Ah, sorry. I got lost in some pointless thoughts."

I didn't have enough information about all this, so I decided to put it aside.

"Like what?"

"Like...what purpose were demons and monsters created for? Things like that."

"Huh, that's pretty interesting. Hey, since we're going to the royal capital soon, maybe we could try asking some royal scholars or investigating in the library at the royal castle."

Our actual business there was only the kingdom meeting, plus auctions and sightseeing in the capital, but it would probably be even more fun if we included some scholarly research, too.

“Good idea. Next time I see the viceroy’s wife, I’ll ask her to write a letter of introduction to the royal academy for us.”

As for the royal castle’s library, I could either ask the king next time I visited as Nanashi the Hero or have the Echigoya senior staff submit an official request as Kuro or something.

“Oh, this is a bit off topic, but...”

I took something out of my Item Box and gave it to Arisa.

“What a cute brooch!”

“It’s a gift from the other reincarnations called a soul shell garland. They said it’ll protect your soul vessel.”

I explained the mechanics and monitoring features of the soul shell garland to Arisa and gave her an elixir along with it, a high-quality one I’d previously produced in the village of Bolenan.

“Keep this in your Item Box, please.”

“Are you sure? I thought you said you only managed to make one?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. One of the ingredients partway through takes a lot of time to get, so I can’t make any more right away, but I should be able to mass-produce them in three months or so.”

“All right, then, if you insist... Thank you, master.”

Arisa placed a very light kiss on my cheek.

Turning bright red, she mumbled for me to put it on her and held it out. I fixed it to her chest.

“Hee-hee, how’s it look?”

“Looks great,” I confirmed.

“I’m gonna show the others!” she declared and rushed out of the room.

Since she left the door wide open, I could hear her bragging to everyone in the living room.

I guess I’ll be making more brooches tonight, huh?

◆
“Young master, you have a guest.”

Shortly after Arisa left to show everyone the soul shell garland, the head maid Miss Miteruna entered my study instead.

Based on my radar, the guest appeared to be Zena.

“She called herself Lady Marienteil. Do you know her?”

“Yes, she’s a dear friend of mine. She must have some urgent business.”

Since she wasn’t on the list of expected visitors, Miss Miteruna looked doubtful.

In a world without phones, it was standard practice to send a letter in advance to announce any visits to a noble’s home.

“Is she in the study?”

“I’m terribly sorry, sir. Since she was dressed like a soldier, I asked her to wait by the gate.”

“That’s fine. I’ll go let her in, if you wouldn’t mind preparing some tea?”

“Y-yes, of course.”

Miteruna seemed surprised that I was going to the gate.

This might be the first time I had gone to greet a visitor all the way at the gate myself, I guess.

“Satou!”

When she saw me approaching, Zena looked relieved.

Just as Miteruna had mentioned, today Zena was wearing her Labyrinth City Celivera’s Elite Training Corps uniform.

Our plans for today weren’t until noon, but maybe something urgent had come up.

“Good morning, Zena.”

“Ah, I’m sorry to arrive so early.”

As I opened the iron gate, Zena’s head whipped up so fast, I practically heard

a zooming sound.

“It’s perfectly fine. Please come in.”

Even after I said that, she made no move to enter.

Um...?

For some reason, she looked nervous.

“S-Satou...”

Zena looked at me seriously.

Between the dampness of her eyes and the slightly red tint to her cheeks, she almost reminded me of a high school girl who was about to confess to her crush.

The strangely bittersweet atmosphere made me feel a bit sheepish.

“I have something to tell you, Satou.”

“Yes?”

Zena clenched her fists to steady her nerves and looked up at me.

After a moment of silence, she finally spoke.

“Satou, the truth is, I...”



Afterword

Hello, I'm Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 14 of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

This is my first publication in four months.

Volume 12 came out last December, the *EX* volume came out in January, and Volume 13 came out in March, so it feels like it's been a while after that fast-paced release schedule. However, up until Volume 11, my standard schedule was one volume every four months, so it's actually more like I've returned to normal.

The anime has finished airing, but you can still watch it on streaming services and such, so please check it out if you haven't seen it yet.

I think there are four Blu-ray volumes out so far, so pick those up, too, if you're interested.

The Blu-rays also come with a special *Death March* side story that's a total of about 210 pages (with twenty-five to twenty-six pages per volume).

It's a story about Zena and Satou's party coming to modern Japan, the world of Ichirou Suzuki (Satou), so our fantasy-world friends have all kinds of misadventures in the real world.

I set the story in some sightseeing areas of Tokyo, so it might even be fun to follow the path of Satou and company in the real world, too.

Now that we've talked about the anime a bit, I'd like to discuss the highlights of this volume.

As I'm sure you noticed right away from the cover illustration, Zena finally reappears in the main story for the first time since the end of Volume 2, way back in Seiryuu City twelve volumes ago! Well, she was sort of a secondary

heroine in the anime, and there have been stories about her at the end of the last two volumes, so it might not actually feel like it's been all that long. But still, Zena is one of my favorite characters, so I'm happy to finally be able to write her again.

Since we've been reunited with an old friend, I was tempted to just fill the whole volume with heartwarming everyday scenes, but that wouldn't do.

Why? Because the Dogheaded Demon Lord who Satou defeated in the previous volume said all sorts of foreboding things.

For those of you who are thinking, *As if I'd remember something I read four whole months ago!* let me summarize: There are God Fragments inside reincarnations like Arisa, and those God Fragments can potentially turn someone into a demon lord.

That's right—God Fragments are the purple lights that appear after a demon lord's been defeated. The ones who say nasty things and can be defeated only with a divine sword.

The web version of Satou didn't seem too worried about that, but apparently the print novel Satou is very concerned.

Along with his reunion with Zena, we'll also see how far Satou is willing to go for Arisa.

And I won't get into details in case you haven't read the story yet, but there's a new scene near the end where Satou teams up with a certain character to fight a powerful opponent, so if you're a reader of the web novel who's thinking about quitting partway through because the plot seems similar, you'll definitely end up regretting it. Please be sure to read all the way to the end.

I don't want to write any spoilers, so we'll wrap up discussion about the current volume here.

Before the special thanks, I do have a brief announcement.

Volume 7 of Ayamegumu's comic adaptation of *Death March*, as well as Akira Segami's comic *Princess Arisa's Parallel World Struggle Diary*, will be released next month. Since they're not coming out on the same day as the novel this time around, don't forget to pick them up, too.

The former adapts the climax of the magic potion quest from the latter half of the novel Volume 3, and the latter is an adaptation of the Arisa side story from *Death March EX*.

Both of them are heartwarming and wonderful, so please do take a look.

You'll even get to see characters who weren't illustrated in the original novel, so you get an extra bang for your buck.

Finally, the usual thanks!

The direction and rewriting advice from my editors A and I made all sorts of scenes more readable and improved the overall pace of the story immensely. It was an enormous help to have them point out places that might be unclear to the readers. I hope I can continue to rely on your help and advice for a long time to come.

As always, I can never thank Shri enough for always providing wonderful illustrations that bring so much color and life to the world of *Death March*.

As I write this, I've seen only the rough sketches for the cover and designs for the new characters, but they're so great that I can hardly wait to see the finished product. I'm sure it's going to end up being even better than what I'm picturing. Honestly, the author might be more excited for a book's release than anyone else.

And of course, I want to extend my thanks to the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone else who was involved in the publication, advertising, sale, and multimedia adaptations of this book.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all goes out to you, the readers!

Thanks so much for reading all the way to the end!

Let's meet again in the next volume: the departure from the Labyrinth City arc!

Hiro Ainana

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