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ILLUSTRATOR:

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AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
WORLD



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ASHLEY
The Divers Guild receptionist assigned to Akira. Infamously known as the "Mooching Witch" because she's always begging for things from Divers.

SCRAEL
A Long-Ears girl and resident of another world who was saved by Akira. Uses a martial art called Jinshu. She's strong.

AKIRA KUDO
A high schooler who can travel between Japan and another world. Known as the "Lone Porter" because of how he roams around the dungeon by himself.

ELDRID
A Tall girl and resident of another world who was saved by Akira. Proud of her tail. She's also strong.





**"Oh, careful!
I can almost see them!"**

**With that, the boy's gaze
shifted away from my eyes.**

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Floor One: Saving a Slave in a Dungeon

It all happened while I was leisurely hunting Blood Bats in the Gandakia Dungeon as usual.

“Everyone knows Flying types are weak against Electric moves,” I merrily joked to myself as I zapped the nimble, fanged bats flying toward me in the darkness.

Then, out of nowhere, a chorus of screams from farther down the floor reverberated along the stone walls.

Sounds like someone is getting attacked by a strong monster. I don't really want to put myself in danger, but if the monster is injured already, maybe I can score myself some EXP—I mean, go help them... Yeah, I'm still in good shape, so I might as well go for that easy EXP—er, go help those people in need.

And so, having assessed the situation and decided on my next course of action, I ventured deeper into the dungeon.

I usually spent my time picking off Blood Bats, so I hardly ever set foot in the floors beyond. This area of the Gandakia Dungeon, known as the Dark Corridors, was dreadfully damp and dreary. Coupled with its peculiar putrid stench, there weren't many places that could possibly be less pleasant. It was a well-known fact that the greatest obstacles for Divers venturing here weren't the monsters but the heinous odor and sticky floors, which only grew worse as you continued forward. In other words, I avoided this area for a reason, though it wasn't the first time I'd been here.

“Ugh... How can this place smell so nasty? It's so much worse than the area I usually stay in. This is supposed to be a fantasy world, for cryin' out loud.”

As my ideal image of the fantasy world came crashing down and my nose was just about ready to implode from the reeking stench, a dome-shaped area opened up ahead.

I turned the dial on the hiking lamp attached to my safari hat all the way up

and readjusted my safari jacket. I gave my staff, which was adorned with a souvenir amethyst from Oshamambe, Hokkaido, two good shakes, and I walked down a path illuminated by a pale light.



In the area ahead, which seemed to be the boss room of the Dark Corridors, a monster and a silver-haired girl were in the middle of a deadly battle.

“Yikes... Guess I goofed.”

I was somewhat regretting getting baited by the potential EXP as I took cover at the side of the passageway and observed the boss. It was one of the several boss-class monsters in the Dark Corridors: a four-armed and goat-headed absolute unit of a fiend with muscles on top of muscles, its colossal form enough to send bodybuilders running in fear. It swung a giant halberd fitting for a beast of its size.

Facing the hulking boss monster was a young girl who seemed to be around my age. Her long silver hair was bound in a big ponytail that curled at the end, almost like a squirrel’s tail. She’d stepped into combat with nothing but her fists for weapons and thin, tattered clothes for protection. In fact, her shredded clothes didn’t even cover the parts they should’ve been covering, though now wasn’t the time to be concerned about that. Among her characteristics, one immediately stood out: her ears were abnormally long compared to those of a human. The tips of her long, pointed ears extended downward, about fifteen centimeters in length.

“A Long-Ears...”

Here in the world of Do-Melta, the Long-Ears Tribe was a race said to be particularly favored by the goddess of beauty and war, Sapphia the Blue. The Long-Ears were blessed with gender-transcending beauty, physical and magical prowess, and intelligence—pretty much everything you could ask for. Basically, they were the top race of Do-Melta. But it wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows: they were so naturally well-off that the other races, especially humans, treated them with envy and jealousy. And with their breathtakingly good looks, they were, unfortunately, often targeted to be sold into slavery.

As I got a better look, I noticed the girl fighting before me had a collar around her neck and a ball and chain weighing her down. Judging by the fact that she’d been brought into the dungeon, she was likely a combat slave.

“So where’s her master?” I asked myself.

I scanned the room for the slave master, who would likely be even more of a pain to deal with than the boss, but I only saw bodies of fully equipped men and women sprawled across the stone pavement. I figured the screams I'd heard earlier had come from them. I could just picture their encounter with the massive beast and how their hopeless battle had come to an end. The Long-Ears girl must've been the last one standing thanks to her physical superiority.

Well, rest in peace and all that.

Anyway, as strong as the Long-Ears girl may be, she was clearly at a disadvantage. She couldn't utilize her full power because of the magical restraints on her, and the boss was wearing her down.

"It's not like I want to help her because she's a cute girl...or because I feel sorry for slaves or anything like that. It's the EXP. Yup, the whole reason I came here was so I could get a piece of that EXP," I told myself as I charged up my mana.

The boss was still completely focused on its opponent and paid no mind to anything outside of the room. Although light emanated from my magic, it wasn't noticeable thanks to the countless candles that conveniently lit up the boss room. All I had to do now was store up enough energy to unleash magic powerful enough to wipe out the enemy in one shot—and hope the girl would survive in the meantime.

Sorry if I don't make it in time, I thought and continued to focus on my task.

Suddenly, the boss hit the girl with a powerful blow, sending her flying through the air and crashing into a wall. The girl fell to the ground, face down and unmoving. The monster raised its enormous halberd overhead, then swung it down toward its victim.

But as one might expect, I made it just in the nick of time.

"Charge complete. Quaternary Magic: Ameithys Bolt!"

A magic circle expanded from the tip of my staff, where a giant sphere of lightning surrounded by flashes of electric tendrils emerged. The supercharged blast of energy sped directly toward the boss and blasted right through it, scorching it from inside out. Bolts of lightning continuously zapped the monster,

causing it to roar in pain until it eventually fell to the ground and crumbled away. All that remained were the monster's crystalline core stone, the Long-Ears girl, face down on the ground, and me.

"All right, level up—wait, what? This makes hunting Blood Bats look pointless..."

My eyes widened at the sheer amount of EXP I'd obtained from taking the boss down as I—Kudo Akira—walked toward the fallen girl.

§

I suddenly awakened from a languid slumber. It seemed I'd fallen asleep. In a daze, I tried to take in the situation.

I didn't recognize my surroundings. Looking around, I could tell I wasn't in the Dark Corridors of the Gandakia Dungeon but a hollow space at the edge of the Yellow Wall Vestiges on the floor just prior. Apparently, this was one of the safe areas on this floor. Driven into the ground around the area were many crystal stakes for warding off monsters. These stakes kept monsters at bay so one could sleep here without fear of being attacked.

A chill went down my spine at the realization that I'd fallen asleep on the job as a slave; not to mention, we were in the middle of a dungeon. I curled up and wrapped my arms around myself, then I noticed I was under a thick and ridiculously soft towel.

As I was mesmerized by the towel's softness, I detected someone's presence nearby. I glanced in the stranger's direction and saw a young boy boiling water with some sort of magical device.

"Oh, you're awake. Gimme a minute, I'm making some corn soup," said the boy with a smile.

I had no idea what this "corn soup" was, but the sound of an external voice began to clear the fog in my head.

"You should lay still for a while," continued the boy. "I've used up too much of my mana, so I couldn't heal you fully. I'm sure you're still pretty sore."

He was right. Pain still lingered throughout my body. I attributed it to the big

hit I'd taken from the boss monster, whose image was still etched into my memory.

"Where am I?" I asked. "I thought I was fighting the boss."

"The boss from the Dark Corridors had the honor of turning into my EXP. It's in a better place now," replied the boy.

"You beat it?"

"I was able to charge up my magic thanks to you drawing its attention. Easy one-shot," he explained with peculiar phrasing.

If I was to take his words at face value, he seemed to imply he was a mage and had saved me from danger.

"Oh, there's no need for hostility. Though, I guess I can't blame you for not trusting humans," he said.

"Shut it," I snapped. "Who are you? Did you help me so you can enslave me?"

I thrust my fist toward the strangely dressed boy's chin, and he began to panic and sputter like a coward.

"No, no, not at all! I just wanted the EXP. Honest! The thought of making you my slave has never even crossed my mind!"

"Really?" I asked hesitantly.

"Sorry, I did have some naughty thoughts about what it'd be like if you were my slave. Aha ha."

Having heard his confession, I wrapped my hands around his neck and began to squeeze silently.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Don't kill me! I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

The boy desperately screamed and flailed about.

Suddenly, a sharp pain from the lingering injury shot through my arm. Figuring I'd punished him enough for cracking a joke in bad taste, I let the boy go.

He gave me an accusatory look with teary eyes and said, "That was messed up... I did end up helping you, you know."

“I do thank you for that,” I replied.

“Oh, and another thing...” he added.

“What?”

“It might not be the best idea to move around too much in your...current position. I mean, I’m not complaining, but I’m guessing you won’t be too happy if—oh, careful! I can almost see them!”

With that, the boy’s gaze shifted away from my eyes.

That was when I realized the towel was sliding off of my body and revealing my bare skin, all the way down to my chest and crotch. The clothes I was wearing originally, which were of poor quality to begin with, had been shredded so badly that they were practically pieces of cloth hanging on by mere threads. I was pretty much completely naked.

I grabbed the towel back up and used it to cover myself.

“Did you look...?” I asked.

“Just a little bit, when I was carrying you here.”

My hands clenched into fists.

“I-I’m sorry! It wasn’t on purpose, I swear!” he said.

“I suppose I can’t blame you when I’m in this state,” I confessed, noting that the boy was still courteously looking away. “But more importantly...”

“Yes?”

“Where are they?” I asked.

The boy seemed to understand who I was talking about right away.

“Ah,”—his eyes turned deeper into the dungeon—“they’ve all passed away. It was already too late by the time I arrived. Judging from the state they were in, they must’ve gone straight to the afterlife. Oh, what’s the phrase they use here? They were ‘embraced by Ornyx the Black’?”

“I see...” I said half-heartedly.

I was rather relieved to hear my masters had died. Now, I didn’t have to worry

about fulfilling their vulgar demands, which had been my greatest fear since becoming a slave.

“Did they bring you here as a combat slave?” he asked.

I nodded. Indeed, I’d recently been brought to this town as a slave and had been purchased by that group of Divers. They’d demanded I fight in the dungeons until I’d grown accustomed to my restraints and had taken me deep into the Dark Corridors.

“That boss monster was clearly too much for them to handle,” I said.

“They must’ve gotten carried away just because you’re a Long-Ears,” replied the boy. “There are a lot of Divers out there who mistakenly think they’ve become more capable just because someone strong joins their team.”

“I suppose so.”

It sounded true enough. Those Divers had been under the illusion that they were unstoppable after acquiring a strong slave, and they’d failed to stay vigilant. Divers, as their names implied, made a living by diving into dungeons. Failure to stay cautious at all times was a rudimentary and critical mistake.

Even this strange-looking boy was staring at the path leading to the Dark Corridors with a cold look in his eyes. He seemed rather inept, but that was unmistakably the look of a true Diver. His eyes were hardened by battle—or, rather, there was a dryness in them that came from experience and repeated dives into dungeons.

In any case, there was still one thing bothering me.

“What do you intend to do with me?” I asked.

“Good question,” he said. “I am a mage, so what if I told you I’m going to force you into a slave contract with me?”

“I’ll rip you in half,” I shot back.

“I’m sorry it was only a joke I don’t know what came over me it just came spewing out please don’t hit me I’ll literally die if I get punched by one of the strongest races in Do-Melta!” he blurted out in a panic without pause.

I watched him in silence. First, he ran his mouth, then he groveled at my feet

while crying and apologizing.

A mage could easily put a slave in their place, so I couldn't understand what game he was playing here. Perhaps he was too much of a coward. It was hard to believe a coward like him could venture so deep into a dungeon all alone, but the fear he showed in response to my malice was clearly not an act.

As I remained stunned and confused, the boy suddenly raised his head as if a realization had hit him.

"Oh, that's right. The hot water is ready. Time for some corn soup!"

With that, he took a cup out of his bag, dumped some yellow powder into it, and poured the boiling water on top.

"What's that? Some medicine?" I asked.

"No. It's a warm drink."

He handed me the cup, and I leaned in for a whiff. An appetizing aroma had filled the air from the moment he'd added the hot water, and it was almost overwhelming now.

Saliva filled my mouth as if my body was desperate to have a taste. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember the last time I had had a proper meal. I'd only been given meager food ever since becoming a slave. I couldn't help but gulp audibly.

Looking into the cup, I saw what seemed to be bits of bread swimming in steaming yellow soup. The viscous liquid moved slowly as I tilted the cup to one side, and I couldn't help but imagine how rich and creamy it must taste. My self-restraint began to crumble, and the apprehension I had toward the drink this stranger had given me was quickly dissipating.

"Help yourself," he offered. "Don't worry, I didn't spike it or anything."

"Fine..."

With that, I took a sip...then made a noise that was a mixture of a surprised groan and an amazed cry.

"Ooh, nice reaction," said the boy.

The rich soup filled my mouth, followed by a savory sweetness, then pure bliss. Before I knew it, my cup was completely empty.

“Looks like you enjoyed the soup.”

“What is this?” I asked. “I’ve never had anything like this before.”

“It’s corn soup,” he explained, “a legendary drink that’s said to be created by Knorr, a god from another world, with the help of their people and gadgets. Corn soup and hot coffee are highly valued in the winter by many who commute to work or school by train.”

“Corn soup...”

The title of “legendary drink” sounded rather dramatic, but I didn’t doubt it for a second. It wasn’t at all unlikely that tales of such a delicious beverage would be passed down by the people. However, that did raise one question.

“Why would you give me something so valuable?” I asked.

“To be honest, I found these on sale yesterday. They were less than a hundred yen a box. What a steal, right?”

“You lied to me?”

“I-I’m sorry! Please lower your fist!” he pleaded. “Stop, stop! Here, let me refill your cup!”

With that, the boy poured more of the yellow powder into my cup and added some more hot water.

“This is delicious. I’m going to convert to Knorr’s religion,” I said.

“It’s part of the joke. Knorr isn’t actually a god.”

“You shouldn’t joke around about religion like that...uh...”

I was about to say his name, but then I realized I didn’t know what it was.

“I’m Kudo Akira,” said the boy, sensing my hesitation. “Kudo is my family name and Akira is my first name. I guess you’d say Akira Kudo here.”

“I’m...Scrael,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Scrael. Though I guess we’ll only be together until we get

out of here,” said Akira Kudo in his easygoing manner.

Something about him felt different from everyone else I’d met so far. People would always change their attitude and leer at me as soon as they found out I was a Long-Ears, but I didn’t sense such crudeness from him.

“Oh, and have some salted bread. You must be hungry, right?” he offered.

“Yeah,” I replied and tore into the bread as soon as he handed me some pieces. It was soft and tasty. Before I knew it, tears were rolling down my face. “It’s salty,” I said.

“Yup, sometimes you get one that has way too much salt on it,” he said, turning away from me as he made more soup.

“Thanks...” I breathed.

“No problem. Let’s get out of here once you’re ready. Yeah?”

I gave a small nod in response, then took another bite of the salty bread.

§

Having passed through the Yellow Wall Vestiges, which was around the middle level of the Gandakia Dungeon, we arrived at the Great Forest Ruins on the floor just inside the dungeon entrance.

Despite its name, the Great Forest Ruins wasn’t dense with bushes and trees like the other areas. There was a clear view through the groves here, and sunlight shone pleasantly through the leaves overhead. Unless you went deep into the forest, the ruins, or near a monster’s lair, there were relatively few monsters in this area. This was the perfect place for a leisurely stroll.

The girl I’d met in the Dark Corridors, where I usually farmed for EXP, was named Scrael. Long-Ears didn’t have surnames and only had a first name.

I couldn’t have her walking around in public wearing nothing but a towel like some exhibitionist, so I’d given her some of my spare clothes. Though, they were just some ordinary safari wear you could buy anywhere.

Her swaying silver ponytail reminded me more of a squirrel’s tail, and her ears moved with each stride as she walked beside me. Long-Ears were all beautiful, and Scrael was definitely no exception. She was a bit shorter than me, and

because she was so charming, if I were to give her a nickname, it'd be "Little Squirrel." Yet her breasts were anything but little. They bounced up and down with a savage weightiness to them, and they were far too provocative for an innocent young boy to handle. Honestly, I deserved a lot of praise for managing to simmer down when my head felt like boiling over. I'd also accept gifts as a reward, though I didn't have a wish list to order from.

Anyway, Scrael had been incredibly lucky. If the Divers who'd brought her here had just waited for her to break under her slave shackles instead of challenging the boss, she would've ended up being their plaything without ever meeting me. They could've worn her out by making her fight strong monsters, then they could've had their way with her.

That was probably why she'd been so distrusting of humans, and she'd been wary of me since the moment she'd woken up. But her hostility was now gone thanks to the blessing of the god Knorr and the salted bread from my local bakery, and she was actually starting to warm up to me.

Salt was a valuable commodity in this world, so any food with lots of salt on it was considered a luxury. Thanks to the salted bread, a little warmth had returned to Scrael's battered heart.

But seriously, I'd nearly wet my pants every time she'd glared at me with that murderous look in her eyes. I wished she wouldn't do that anymore because I didn't want to develop stomach ulcers when I wasn't even in my twenties yet.

"This white thing feels cold," said Scrael, curiously touching the white cloth stuck to her arm.

"That's a medicated patch," I explained. "If it's cool to the touch, it means it's working, so just leave it on for now."

"Is this some sort of magical medicine?"

"No, it's just a cheap pain reliever that costs around ten yen—I mean, an iron coin each. It eases up the pain, right?"

"I see..." said Scrael noncommittally.

"The adhesive will wear out if you peel it off, so try not to touch it."

“Got it.”

It seemed medicated patches were foreign to her, or maybe it was their adhesiveness that she found so fascinating. The closest thing they had in this world was a poultice made by heating theas, herbs of this world, which would then be applied to the wound and fastened with a bandage.

I would’ve given her a healing potion, which was one of the many miraculous items of this world, but I’d recently used up every single one I had. I’d used up most of my magic reserves fighting Blood Bats and the Four-Armed Goat, so I had to leave any noncritical injuries as is and save my energy for any fights we’d encounter on the way out of here. After all, field trips didn’t end until you got home, and adventures didn’t end until you returned to the main hall.

The medicated patch I’d thrown into my safari bag for this dive had ended up coming in handy. Once we left the dungeon, Scrael would just need to rest up or get healed by a mage.

We began to see more and more people around as we approached the exit. We were also getting more and more curious glances, but we continued walking, pretending not to notice. Still, we couldn’t help but hear the whispers.

“Is that a Long-Ears?”

“That kid’s parents must be loaded if he has a slave already.”

“The Long-Ears is damn cute though. I would’ve bought her myself if she was still for sale.”

“He’s really running her into the ground, by the looks of it. And I’ll bet he’s gonna give her some more exercise once they get home. Cruel bastard.”

No, you all have the wrong idea. Scrael is not my slave; I just happened to help her. I don’t deserve the insults or finger-pointing behind my back.

The walk through the Great Forest Ruins was somehow more arduous than defeating the boss, but I endured. Eventually, a staircase came into view.

“We’re here. Man, it feels like I’m coming home from a long, exhausting journey. Especially the walk home, and the walk home, and the walk home. I’m pooped.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Scrael. It seemed the whispers had taken a toll on her too.

We continued walking toward the Gandakia Dungeon Divers Guild building, which was built around the dungeon entrance.

The Gandakia Dungeon was in the Free City of Freida, the city that ran the Divers Guild. The guild provided support for adventurers and their various jobs in many ways: they acted as a vendor for materials and food obtained in the dungeon, leased and rented out weapons, offered guides, determined rankings for Divers of all power levels, and so forth.

Just as usual, I headed toward the usual receptionist at the usual window, except this time I was accompanied by Scrael. Because of the ranking system, we were assigned specific receptionists, and we had to report to the same person each time.

There was a long row of windows to accommodate the many Divers and teams in the guild. I walked up to a specific window, which happened to have no one waiting in line.

“Ashley! I’m back!” I called out as I waved from a distance.

The red-haired woman at the reception window, Ashley Poney, smiled and waved back.

“Welcome back, Kudo. How did you do? Did you make lots and lots of money?”

“About the same as usual,” I replied, and the money-mongering Ashley’s happy expression immediately changed into blatant discontent.

“Aww. I was going to ask you to buy me something if you scored big today. Lame.”

“Um, you probably shouldn’t be demanding money from your juniors,” I said.

“What are you talking about? Age has nothing to do with it. A man has a duty to pay for everythi— I mean, treat girls every once in a while. Remember that.”

“You almost said we should pay for everything, didn’t you?”

“Did I? Anyway, what did you do today?”

I sighed at Ashley's not-so-subtle attempt at changing the subject, then replied, "I was boring myself to sleep leveling off of Blood Bats in the Dark Corridor."

"You might be the only person who does that like it's no big deal," said Ashley with a look that was a mixture of astonishment and exasperation.

"There are plenty of other high-ranking Divers who hunt Blood Bats," I pointed out. "It's a really efficient leveling spot."

"But no one else does it solo!" she objected. Then she saw Scrael. "Wait...who's that girl who's way too cute to be hanging out with you?"

"Well, that was a casual verbal slap in the face. I have feelings too, you know."

"I mean, your face is so ordinary and plain. A Long-Ears girl is way out of your — Oh?"

Midway through her barrage of insults, Ashley noticed the collar around Scrael's neck.



“Oh no. You’ve gone down a dark and twisted path to adulthood. I know you don’t get any girls, but to think you’d stoop to such fiendish, evil, and inhuman methods—it breaks my heart.”

“Now hold on,” I objected. “She’s not my slave!”

“I know. I’m just kidding,” she said.

I could only imagine how sour my expression must’ve looked.

Ashley stuck her tongue out jokingly.

Of course she knew I hadn’t purchased a slave. We were required to check in at the receptionist’s window before and after diving into a dungeon, and there was no way I could’ve bought one while I was in there.

“I’ve actually seen her before. She’s the slave who was with the members of Kalanka’s Stars,” said Ashley before glancing at Scrael.

“The boss monster in the Dark Corridors, the Four-Armed Goat, killed them,” said Scrael.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. They were all wiped out by the time I arrived. Not that I feel any sympathy for them,” I confirmed.

“I see. I’ll have to report this later,” said Ashley. Then she asked Scrael, “So, what are you going to do now? Your owners are gone, but you still have your shackles.”

“I won’t go back to being a slave. Never.”

I turned around and saw that Scrael was trembling. Was it from anger? Or humiliation? Probably both. Just imagining a life of being toyed with and used by others sent a shiver up my spine.

“Let’s Dispel it then,” I said.

“Huh?”

“What?”

They both looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. They did know

what a Dispel was, of course.

As the name suggested, “Dispel” was a generic magic spell that nullified the effect of other magic. I’d been refraining from using it because the amount of mana required depended on the strength of the spell it was being used against, but there was no more need for me to reserve my energy now that we were out of the dungeon. I did technically need some mana to go home, but I could recover it by resting a bit, so that wouldn’t be an issue.

As I was warming up by clenching my hands repeatedly and rotating my shoulders, Scrael said, “You can’t remove a slave collar with Dispel.”

“She’s right,” agreed Ashley. “I hate to say this, but once a collar is put on you, it won’t ever come off.”

“Says who?” I said. “It’s just another magic spell that’s keeping it on, right?”

“Is it?” she asked.

“Wait, why are you talking like you know what you’re talking about when you have no idea? How embarrassing,” I said as I dramatically hugged my shoulders and gave her a judgmental stare.

Ashley began to panic and make excuses right away. “I mean... Everyone knows a slave’s collar can’t ever be removed! It even says so in the guild manual...”

“That’s not what I’ve heard,” I shot back.

“According to who?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“I’m just telling you what I’ve read in the Divers Guild Basic Information Manual,” replied Ashley.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Casting magic is the act of connecting the cause and effect to create extraordinary results. This collar is imbued with a magic that binds her. Since the fact that she’s bound by it exists, so too does its cause, its effect, the caster, the subject—and the line between them. If we can sever that line, there’s a chance we can eliminate the result.”

It was an unusually grand speech coming from me, but I was just retelling

what I'd learned from my sensei. It was because of my master that a high schooler in modern Japan like me could use magic better than many others in this world—yes, “because of,” not “thanks to.”

Scrael, who'd been quietly listening the entire time, was now watching me with a worried look.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked.

“Don't worry, I've got this,” I said. “I've been saving up my mana potions just for this occasion.”

With that, I reached into my Dimension Bag instead of my safari bag, grabbed a handful of mana potions, then chugged them all at once. In case it wasn't clear, mana potions recovered mana instead of health, unlike regular potions.

Glug glug glug.

“Ugh, gross. Man, I've never downed so many of these at once,” I said, trying and failing to stifle a burp.

“Whoa, whoa, those are high mana potions!” pointed out Ashley. “Those things are five gold coins a pop!”

It was totally on-brand for her to immediately recognize expensive things like that. She couldn't ignore the fact that I'd chugged four flasks at once, which were worth about two hundred thousand yen in total. I could feel all the liquid sloshing around in my stomach.

I put the empty flasks back into my Dimension Bag, placed my hands on Scrael's collar, then began to utter the incantations for Dispel. The collar was surrounded by a pale light, then it separated from her neck, falling to the ground with a clang.

“It worked...” she breathed.

“Boy, I'm glad I didn't just waste two hundred thousand yen,” I said. “That's a small fortune for a student like me.”

I let out a sigh of relief. I would've looked like a complete doofus if I'd failed after all that talk. Wasting those high mana potions would've hurt me mentally and financially. Though, I'd earned all that money from the dungeon, so I didn't

feel like it was real. I wouldn't have missed it all that much.

I glanced over to Scrael to find her staring at the collar on the ground with a blank expression.

Ashley said, "I'm impressed, but why didn't you do that earlier?"

"Gimme a break," I protested. "I barely had any mana left after taking down the boss monster and healing her wounds. I had no idea how much energy I'd need to cast Dispel. What if I passed out from exhaustion in the middle of the dungeon? Even now, I'm pretty much completely drained, and that's after downing four high mana potions!"

"Um, forget about the potions for now. Did you just say you took down the Four-Armed Goat? You didn't flee?" asked Ashley.

"Ah..."

Crap, I thought.

I'd let my mouth slip so hard you'd think it'd stepped on a banana peel.

"I'd love to hear more about that," said Ashley.

"No, I meant, like, it would've been nice if that happened..." I trailed off.

"Kudo..." she pressed.

"Fine. Yes, I did. I wouldn't have been able to bring her back otherwise." I caved in.

It should've been obvious. There'd been no way we could've just left without defeating that creature. Any attempt to flee would've been hopeless, considering how Scrael hadn't even tried to run despite being much more agile than me.

"I can't help but wonder," she went on, "what level are you now? I'd love to know."

"I'm level 33. Here's my EXP Card."

I handed her my EXP Card, which was a thin metallic plate that a god of this world had given me when I'd first arrived. It automatically listed my level and the number of monsters I'd defeated so far.

Ashley sighed. “You really should raise your rank by now. Do you realize how unusual it is that you’re level 33 and your rank is in the thirty thousand range?”

“I know, but it’s such a hassle.”

“You really are a strange one, Kudo.”

“Aw, shucks.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Yeah, but that was the only logical response there. I think I deserve some brownie points for setting up that punch line.”

Ashley let out another heavy sigh. She wasn’t subtle about it either.

I understood where she was coming from, but I could see myself getting dragged into unnecessary trouble if I raised my rank. I was too much of a chicken to deal with the jealousy and harassment that would surely follow. All I wanted to do was to enjoy my life as an adventurer here and level up in peace, not to deal with the harshness of this world.

“By the way,” I said to Ashley, “I know this is sudden, but would you mind registering her as a Diver?”

“Oh, sure. That’s probably a good idea. She’ll be a member of the guild as long as she’s registered, so it’ll be hard for anyone to try to enslave her again.”

Any registered Diver was considered to be under the guild’s jurisdiction and one of its human assets. We were necessary personnel who brought in valuable materials and core stones that were needed for monster wards. If anyone enslaved a guild member, they’d be picking a fight with the guild itself. After all, who wouldn’t be upset if someone claimed one of your assets as their own? No slaver would want to make an enemy out of an organization with so much money and power.

“Oh, and here’s the deposit for her registration,” I said.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“The Four-Armed Goat’s core stone.”

I handed Ashley the core stone I’d claimed from the boss monster.

Diver registrations took a lot of time and effort, so we had a duty to pay a temporary security deposit to prevent anyone from wasting a receptionist's time. Once Scrael began her career as a Diver, I'd get the deposit back.

Monster core stones were crystals found within monsters. Because of the unique mana inside them, they were quite valuable and could be used for trading. Core stones could ward off monsters, and the larger the size, the greater the effect. Though, they had no effect without special processing, so they ended up being deadweight in the dungeons.

"Well, I have to get back to studying for my exams, so I'll leave the rest to you."

With that, I turned on my heel and left. It was quite tragic, but studying was a student's duty, so I had to go home and hit the books.

As I attempted to dump everything on Ashley and skedaddle, I was stopped by a tug on my sleeve. I turned around and saw Scrael looking down at the floor with my sleeve clutched tight in her hand.

"Why did you help me? Why did you spend so much money on some slave like me?" she asked.

"I just happened to be in a position to help," I said. "I probably wouldn't have done it if I couldn't afford it."

"But—"

"There's nothing I love more than going into the dungeons. It would've left a bad aftertaste if I didn't do something. I did it for myself, so don't worry about it." I'd always considered any money I earned in this world to be play money anyway. But she still didn't seem convinced, so I went on, "Okay, how about this: you can earn money as a Diver and pay me back over time."

She finally let go of my sleeve.

As I walked away, I happened to look behind me at the guild's exit and saw her bowing her head deeply.

Floor Two: Chips at the Divers Guild and an Invitation

The explorers of the Gandakia Dungeon, located at the center of the world of Do-Melta, were known as “Divers.” They investigated, gathered items, and hunted monsters in the dungeon as their main duties. Supposedly, the name stemmed from their resemblance to scuba divers delving deep into the ocean when they descend into holes deeper and deeper underground. Those holes had since been turned into staircases, so we no longer got a glimpse of the name’s origin these days. Yet, the name seemed to have stuck, and dungeon explorers were still called Divers to this day.

The people back then had had no idea construction would be done around the dungeon’s entrance or that a whole building for providing support to Divers would be built here one day. This place had once been a hellish void from which monsters had spewed out endlessly, but now, it was a place of respite for adventurers.

Before me stretched a row of reception windows where Divers reported the results of their dives, and over two hundred tables could be seen in the excessively spacious dining room where Divers, weary from their latest adventures, could get meals. There were even facilities for laundry and bathing beyond the walkway next to the entrance where Divers could wash their dirty clothes and bodies. The guild provided everything we needed here, though it obviously couldn’t compare to the conveniences of modern Japan.

I sat at a table and stared blankly at the Divers passing by, mindlessly shoveling the deep-fried potato chips I’d brought from Japan into my mouth. Suddenly, a friend I’d made in this world sat down next to me. He was a sociable guy with fluffy blond hair and charming droopy eyes. A boy of my age, he wore his main weapon, a sword, at his side, several knives at his waist, and a distinctive shoulder pad on his right side. He was Miguel Hyde Junkers, a Diver who operated from the Gandakia Dungeon as his base of operations.

“Sup, Kudo. How’s business? You raking it in?” he asked.

“I’m doing all right—ugh, you reek! You’ve been drinking already, Miguel? It’s the middle of the day!”

“Damn right, I am. Nothin’ like a little drinking to start the day off right, yeah?” said the young drunkard like he was celebrating the New Year as he chuckled. He was clearly tipsy already, and this was before his dive, no less. “You want a drink too?”

He offered me a drink despite us being minors. That said, a legal drinking age wasn’t defined in Do-Melta. Water was also comparatively more expensive here, so most people opted for alcohol instead. Though, it seemed he’d already decided I’d be joining him, and he placed a mug full of Freida’s trademark pale-colored beer on the table.

“No, thank you,” I said.

“Still not much of a drinker, huh? Well, I’ll take some of whatever you’re snacking on.”

“Sure, but it’s rock-hard, so don’t hurt yourself,” I warned.

“Hurt myself?”

“Yeah, just be careful.”

I warned Miguel as he took some of my crunchy, deep-fried salt potato chips. The extra crunchy texture was what made them such a joy to eat. They were considered one of Japan’s finest culinary weapons since they could cut up the inside of your mouth if you weren’t careful. Many people had fallen victim to the sharp pieces that sometimes stabbed you between your teeth and gums or directly into a cold sore.

“What am I being careful about?” asked Miguel.

“They can stab you if you’re not paying attention,” I explained.

“Huh…” he said as he cracked a chip between his teeth. He chewed a few more times, with a satisfying crunch accompanying each bite. “Oh, that’s good.”

“Right?”

“It’s nice and salty, and I love the texture. This goes so well with beer. It’s a shame you don’t drink.”

“You can have it if you like it so much,” I said.

“Seriously?! Thanks, man.”

Miguel was all smiles as he dug into the chips and drank more of his beer.

Crunch, crunch.

“It really does have just the right level of saltiness. You always have the best snacks. Are you sure I can have all of these?” asked Miguel.

Crunch, crunch.

“Yeah, I have more,” I said as I pulled out a fresh bag of crunchy, deep-fried black pepper potato chips from my safari bag. I ripped the bag open, then bit into a chip with a crunch.

“Let me try those too,” said Miguel.

Crunch, crunch.

“Here you go.”

Crunch, crunch.

“Hey, is this black pepper? They really used black pepper just to season this thing?”

Crunch, crunch.

“Yup,” I said. “They don’t really use black pepper like this here, huh?”

Crunch, crunch.

“Of course not. These are some seriously extravagant chips.”

Crunch, crunch.

The preservation and aging methods for food in Do-Melta were far inferior to that of modern Japan. Despite being available for the general public, salt and spices were mainly used to preserve food for contingency stockpiling and to deodorize; as such, it was quite rare to see them used on snacks. Even in Japan, potato chips hadn’t been common until around the ’70s, and black pepper

flavor had come even later, so it wasn't all too surprising. Do-Melta's eating habits had to mature before its culinary preferences would develop, so potato chips may not be invented here for another few hundred years.

We were loudly crunching on some more of the chips, appreciating the snack makers like Calbee and KOIKE-YA, when Miguel suddenly said, "So, going back to what you said earlier: you said you're doing all right, but does that mean you've still been farming nearby?"

By "nearby," he must've meant the low-level floors.

"Pretty much, yeah," I lied.

"Come on, man. Don't you wanna make more money?"

"How many times do I need to tell you? I hate putting myself in danger. You can make pretty decent money just by weeding in the Great Forest Ruins near the entrance. I'm more than happy to just lay low and mind my own business," I said.

"Why do you always call collecting theas 'weeding'?"

"I mean, they're pretty much the same thing. You pull out weeds by the roots when you're gardening."

"You're kind of quirky, you know that?"

Crunch, crunch.

"Why do you care so much about my earnings, anyway?" I asked.

"Just making conversation," said Miguel as he waved his hand dismissively.

The way he'd brought up the subject so abruptly and forced the conversation back to it later made me suspect there was more to it, but I let it go for now.

"I'm doing fine, but what about you, Miguel? I'm guessing you're pretty well off considering your high rank."

"Of course. As of yesterday, my team's Diver Rank is 258."

Miguel flashed a satisfied grin.

Diver Ranks were assigned by the Divers Guild based on an adventurer's level and contributions to the guild. It went without saying that ranking 258th out of

nearly fifty thousand members made him one of the elites. It was strange to think this carefree youngster, red-faced from drinking so early in the day, was one of the top Divers in the guild.

“Wow, your rank went up again, huh?”

“Yup!”

“You’ve been working really hard lately. What gives?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s just that there’ve been a lot of capable newcomers lately. I gotta stay on my toes, you know?”

“I wouldn’t think you have much to worry about when you’re ranked so high.”

“You might think so because you’re just taking it easy, but every second counts when you’re competing at the top levels. If I let my guard down, someone will surpass me in no time.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds rough,” I said. “So, who’s been on the rise lately?”

“The first ones that come to mind would be Blessings of the Mystic Water. They have *two* blue mages on the team.”

“Oh, I’ve seen them around, the team with the twins in blue robes.”

“There’s also that solo Long-Ears who’s been rising up the ranks lately.”

“Ah, yeah. Right,” I said.

Miguel was likely talking about Scrael. Long-Ears rarely came down to human cities, so that was unlikely to be anyone else. It felt like just yesterday when I’d freed her from the shackles of slavery and registered her with the Divers Guild so no one could ever enslave her again. Because of that, she could now live here in the Free City of Freida. I ran into her pretty often, and she’d ask for corn soup and salted bread every time I saw her.

“By the way, Kudo, what’s your Diver Rank right now?” asked Miguel.

“Me? Let’s see... I’m 32,083rd.”

“What?! Your rank is so low!”

“Well, yeah. I’m still just a rookie. It hasn’t even been half a year since I came to Freida. That’s actually pretty high if you ask me,” I said.

“No, no, you can even get a higher starting rank at the receptionist’s discretion. You haven’t even gotten any serious injuries yet. Have you been applying to register your level?”

“Too much of a hassle. No thanks.”

“You *really* have no interest in that stuff, huh,” said Miguel with exasperation.

“There’s so much fun stuff to do here, so why should I be in a hurry to rank up?” I said. “I can enjoy some good dungeon food, go leveling, and impose item restrictions on myself to make things more challenging. It’s not like there are rank-based limits on how far we can go diving or anything.”

“I mean, you get a lot of benefits from increasing your ranks. Don’t you know that?”

“Yeah, I do. But you also have to take on tedious and dangerous missions in exchange. It’s like a quota that high-rankers have to meet. I’ll pass. I’m here to enjoy myself, not risk my life,” I said as I threw out both hands on the table and slumped down lazily.

“Why are you so quick to point out the negative side in everything?” sighed Miguel.

He washed down the chips in his mouth with a swig of the pale-colored beer, and his expression turned serious for a change.

“Hey, Kudo...why don’t you join our team?”

“Well, that came out of nowhere.”

“Not really, I’ve asked you to join a few times already.”

“Yeah, but...” I trailed off.

He was right. Miguel had invited me a few times since we’d become friends. I didn’t understand why he wanted a max-level coward like me to join him, but the look on his face was solemn like never before.

“You may dress weird, but you’re a mage, aren’t you?” he asked.

“What did you diss my outfit for? And I don’t know what makes you think so.”

“Don’t play dumb. I already know you’re a mage,” whispered Miguel.

I’d been pretty secretive about it and had barely told anyone, so I wasn’t sure where he’d gotten that info from. The potential suspects who came to mind were a certain veteran Diver friend, my sensei, and Instructor Seeker, but none of them seemed too likely.

“Out of curiosity, who told you that?” I asked.

“Ashley did. I’ve always wondered how you always go into the dungeon without any good weapons and come back safely with a bunch of loot. I knew something was up, so I begged her to tell me.”

“Isn’t that against the guild’s rules?”

“Not if no one knows about it,” he said.

“Hey everyone, we have a rule-breaking delinquent here!” I started, readying to raise my voice even more.

“You sure you wanna do that? I don’t mind, but you’ll get Ashley in trouble too.”

“That’s pretty scummy, Miguel,” I said flatly, but he just whistled and looked away. *This guy*. “So this is why you kept bringing up the money stuff,” I continued.

“That’s right.”

Miguel had masterfully roped me into this topic. Though it wasn’t that I was easy to manipulate or anything.

“Listen, Kudo. Our team is severely lacking in the mage department.”

“Well, that’s true with pretty much every team,” I retorted.

“That’s the thing! Why do you work solo knowing everyone needs mages on their team?”

“Because everyone’s so obsessed with going to dangerous places, and I don’t want to. I just like to relax and enjoy going on fantasy adventures.”

“Such a waste of talent—anyway, what kind of magic can you use? Fire? Water? It’d be nice if you could use wind magic...”

“Why are you talking as if I’m going to join your team?”

Crunch, crunch.

“I mean, I’ve already decided you’re joining,” said Miguel matter-of-factly.

Crunch, crunch.

“Well?” he pressed.

“Lightning,” I answered.

“What’s that?”

“Lightning is lightning. You don’t know what it is? Haven’t you ever seen a flash of light coming down from the sky on a stormy night?”

“Wait, are you talking about Ameithys’s Hammer?!”

“Is that what they call it here? Come to think of it, I’ve never seen lightning in this world.”

Maybe it was rare for lightning to strike here. Lightning was pretty common in the modern world, and most people had at least seen it in videos or on TV. It seemed the concept of and the word for “lightning” weren’t that widespread here.

“Ameithys’s Hammer, huh.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about it from my grandfather,” said Miguel. “He said you can see it somewhere on the edge of the world. It’s the wrath of Ameithys the Purple. Supposedly, an entire country had been wiped out by it.”

“Mine isn’t anything crazy like that. It’ll just give you a little shock,” I lied.

“Can you seriously use it? This...‘lightning’ thing? You’re not lying?”

“I’m super serious.”

With that, I conjured a spark of purple lightning with a snap of my fingers, destroying one of my potato chips. He seemed to finally be convinced.

“So, that makes you a purple mage...” he mused.

“I guess.”

“Don’t ‘I guess’ me. You’d be the first recognized purple mage in the world.”

“The first? No way. I’m sure there’s at least one out there somewhere.”

In the world of Do-Melta, there existed generic spells that could be used by any mage. Then there were fire, water, earth, and wind spells, elemental spells that could be used by those born with that particular blessing. Mages were categorized as red, blue, yellow, or green respectively depending on which of the four elements they could use.

“Kudo, join my team, man.”

“I dunno...”

“I won’t stop drinking until you agree to join me,” he threatened.

“How’s that even supposed to work?”

Miguel the drunkard suddenly began chugging his drink, and once his mug was empty, he persistently repeated, “Join my team... Join my teeeam...”

“You’re not going to back down, are you?” I asked.

“Damn right, I’m not. I originally invited you because of your survival rate in the dungeons, but now that I know you can cast some super crazy spells, I have to have you on my team. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“You say that, but...” I trailed off.

To be honest, I was tempted. Joining a team did have its merits, and I was honestly flattered that my friend wanted me so badly. On the other hand, there was a chance I’d be dragged into danger. I was more than happy just hunting Blood Bats in the area in front of the boss room of the Dark Corridors, and it was a good leveling spot. That was enough for a junkie who was hooked on the dopamine hits from leveling up, and there was other stuff I needed to take care of, so it was hard for me to accept the offer.

“Come on, man,” he insisted.

“I don’t know if I can...”

Miguel’s tone was playful, but he was unrelenting. As I considered how to get

him to back down, I remembered I had something just for an occasion like this.

“Miguel, you’re a big drinker, right?”

“Obviously,” he said. “If you take drinks away from me, women will be the only joy in my life.”

“Hee hee hee, then I have just the thing for ya, boss,” I said as I rubbed my hands together.

“That shady laugh and hand-rubbing gesture doesn’t suit you.”

“Just play along, will you?”

With that, I pulled a magic bottle out of the void and placed it on the table with a thud.

“That Dimension Bag sure is convenient,” said Miguel.

“Yeah, I feel like a millionaire whenever I use this thing.”

“So, what is this? I’ve never seen anything like it in Freida.”

“It’s the mythical brand-name liquor: Old Whisky. It’s made by Suntory, a god of alcohol from another world. You could even say it’s legendary. What do you say to backing down for today in exchange for this bottle?”

Miguel stroked the rounded black bottle with a red top fascinatedly.

“Oh? You speak of mythical liquors before me, he who’s drunk every type of alcohol in all of Freida? If it fails to impress my discerning tongue—you know the deal.”

He was implying I would have to join his team.

Seeing his cocky smile, I began to have second thoughts.

“Actually, maybe I should reconsider...” I said.

I’d helped myself to this bottle from my dad’s collection. It went without saying that I hadn’t tasted it myself. I had no idea what was considered good, and there was no guarantee my plan would work, so my confidence in Japanese quality began to wither. Maybe I should’ve brought a bottle of Macallan instead.

As I sat there second-guessing myself and feeling intimidated by Miguel's fearless smile, he brought out a cup and poured himself some whiskey.

"Don't backpedal on me now. I'm gonna have a taste, all right?"

"Ugh... Be careful, I hear whiskey is pretty strong," I said hesitantly.

"Who do you think I am? I'm the man who finished a bottle of Flame Hawk, Freida's strongest liquor, in one night!"

To be honest, I had no idea how impressive of a feat that was.

Miguel lifted his cup and took a whiff.

"It smells good. It has that sting of a strong drink."

He seemed to have suddenly become a whiskey critic. After enjoying the aroma for a moment, he brought the cup to his mouth.

"Gah! Wh-What?!"

I thought he'd choked on it for a second, but I was wrong. His eyes widened from shock, and he began swishing the whiskey around in his cup.

"This is so thick and sweet... It then hits you with a kick of alcoholic flavor at the end. I've never had anything like this."

He stared at the whiskey in complete awe. There were all sorts of alcohol in this world, but maybe none of them were like this one.

Suddenly, Miguel snapped out of his daze and grabbed my shoulders with even more enthusiasm than when he'd been trying to invite me to his team.

He said, "Kudo, you have to tell me where you got this!"

"Huh? Well, I kind of just took it from my dad..." I told him.

"Your dad? Is he super rich or something?"

"No, he's just an average white-collar businessman."

"A white what? Never heard of it."

Of course he hadn't. Such a profession existing in this world would completely ruin the fantasy. If I heard words like "company" or "corporate slave" here, I'd probably cry.

“Do you have any more of these?” pressed Miguel.

“This is all I have on me.”

“Then can you get more?! I’ll buy them off of you! What do you say?”

“Well...it’s not out of the question,” I said.

This bottle was my dad’s, but I could surely go to a nearby liquor store to find more. I couldn’t buy it as a minor, but I could probably find a way with the help of a little magic. I’d still purchase it, of course. Stealing was bad. The clerk wouldn’t know I was a minor, so they shouldn’t be responsible for breaking any laws.

However, Miguel misinterpreted my hesitation and said, “I guess not, huh... I get it,” before backing down.

Maybe I’d bring another bottle when the time was right.

“But man, this really was good,” he went on.

“You liked it?” I asked.

“I loved it. And since this is all that you have, I can’t even tell Reverie about it.”

Maybe Reverie was one of his drinking buddies. He seemed to be planning on keeping the whiskey for himself. He was pretty gluttonous when it came to alcohol—and women.

“It doesn’t go well with these snacks, though,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, I figured,” I agreed. “I think chips pair better with beer. Oh, and I hear that this drink is good on the rocks too.”

“Rocks?”

“It means putting big pieces of ice in it and letting them melt over time while you drink.”

“But that would water down the drink,” he protested.

“They say the flavor changes as the ice melts.”

“What, you haven’t tried it yourself?”

“Well, I’m a minor,” I pointed out.

“A miner?”

“Never mind... Just think of it like a custom from where I was born. I’m not allowed to drink yet because of my age.”

“Huh, I don’t really get it, but sure...” Then, Miguel called out, “Hey! Are there any mages that can use ice magic?”

A nearby blue mage lady made him some ice with a friendly smile. They then began chatting pleasantly, and he let her have a sip of the cup he’d just been drinking from. The men around him were staring daggers at him. I mean, he was totally grabbing handfuls of her boobs.

Damn it. I’m jealous. Explode and die. Burn in the fiery pits of hell.

I felt like my envy would kill me if I watched any longer, so I stared in another direction.

Suddenly, a familiar sight came into view: walking into the Divers Guild just now was a muscular figure who towered over other adults as if they were children. His hulking stature wasn’t the only thing that made him stand out among the crowd—the newcomer had a lion’s head between his shoulders.

“Oh, it’s Lion-Marú.”

That was the nickname I’d given this superveteran Diver, Dracarion Hueller. I mean, he looked just like the old-school live-action television series hero by the same name. The only thing different was the color of his fur, but that was the first thing I’d thought of when I’d first seen him. He still looked like he was ready to cut down evil with a katana.

I waved as soon as I noticed him, and he flashed a broad smile and raised a hand in response.

He walked over with heavy steps, and Miguel said to him, “Good to see you, boss man. Are you about to go on a dive?”

“That’s right. Ha ha ha!” he bellowed delightedly.

As usual, his laughter was ridiculously powerful. It was so loud that it sent shock waves that shook the cups and windows in the room. It was a boisterous

laugh befitting of his extremely high level.

Lion-Maru was friends with Miguel too. In fact, most people had at least heard of him. He was *the* man who could dive into the deepest depths of the Gandakia Dungeon. He had a reputation as the greatest hero of Freida, with the skills to match.

He drank some of the whiskey that Miguel had offered him and seemed rather satisfied by its taste. The drink seemed to be quite popular with the residents of this world.

Suddenly, Lion-Maru turned to me and grabbed my shoulders with his massive hands. He drew my face right up to his nose, and I let out a surprised “eek.” I couldn’t help but make a noise with his intense face so close to mine. He was actually a very kind and respectable person, but he had the face of a lion. I think it was fair to say anyone would be intimidated to stare at a lion’s face up close. Even more terrifying, he slowly opened his massive mouth, and the rows of sharp teeth grew closer.



“Kudo,” he said.

“Y-Y-Yes?! Please don’t eat me, sir!”

“Why would I eat you? Listen.”

“Y-Yes?”

I was trembling at the thought of being eaten, and Lion-Marú’s mouth curled up into a wide grin.

“I hear you helped someone lately. Helping others is good.”

He seemed to be talking about Scrael.

“Oh. Well, the thing is, I actually just wanted some EXP.”

“Don’t be so modest. You took care of her after rescuing her from the dungeon and made sure she could work as a Diver, didn’t you? Ashley told me everything,” he said as he slapped me on the back.

It hurt. Not only was he a superhigh-level Diver, but he was also a massive guy with huge bulging muscles. Of course it’d hurt; it’d probably leave a mark too. Also, that Ashley talked way too much.

“Well, you always tell me to do good,” I said finally.

“That’s right,” he said. “You remember what I told you when we first met. I’m glad.”

He then unleashed his booming laughter once again. I was happy for the compliment, but I wished he wouldn’t blast his laughter right next to my ears like that. I was afraid my eardrums were going to explode.

Lion-Marú wasn’t the only one who told me “Don’t be evil; do good.” The god whom I’d met just before coming to this world and my childhood friend, my hero, had said the same thing. When it came to Lion-Marú, he’d done so much for me that I felt like I had to do as he said.

He seemed to have said what he’d wanted to say, so he turned away and stomped on over to the receptionist window.

Miguel turned to me, looking rather surprised. “He never changes, does he? Anyway, you really must’ve gone out of your way to help that girl, huh?”

“Not really,” I said.

“Come on, the boss man hardly ever praises people like that.”

“Yeah...”

Maybe he was right. I had used up all of my mana potions and given up my valuable boss core stone for her. In this world, twenty gold coins were enough to comfortably support a household for two to three months. Perhaps what I’d done did deserve some praise.

As our conversation wound down, I realized we’d run out of chips—break time was over.

“Welp... I’ll be going now,” I said as I stood up.

I picked up my safari bag from the ground and shouldered it, then I placed my hat on my head.

“You’re going on a dive already?” asked Miguel.

“Yup. I’m starting to save up a good amount of money, so I wanna keep working at it.”

“Are you trying to buy something?”

“I guess you could say that. I want to eat some White Horn steak.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

Miguel seemed to have heard of it too, which wasn’t all too surprising. White Horn steak was a very famous dish that was only served in the luxury restaurant on the top floor of the Divers Guild. Divers would provide them with White Horn meat, which was one of the finest ingredients available in the dungeon, and they’d cook up the exquisite dish in the perfect environment. Its price tag was enough to make one’s eyes bulge out in disbelief, but I couldn’t forget its taste ever since I’d tried it.

I’ve tried expensive Wagyu beef before, but White Horn meat was a different type of delicacy. Wagyu beef was supreme for its fatty flavor, but White Horn meat was supreme for the flavor of its red meat. If I was to describe it, it was like the pinnacle of an “American-style” steak. It kind of reminded me of Japanese Brown beef or Japanese Shorthorn beef.

"I *will* eat it again. And this time, I'm gonna eat it in a really junk-foodish way."

"I've never seen you so ambitious. Well, it's good to have something to motivate you."

With that, he took a sip of his whiskey on the rocks. Its flavor seemed to have changed noticeably, and he was visibly surprised.

"Whoa, it tastes different now. It's smoother now that the ice has melted... It's not as concentrated but in a good way. This is new."

"Thanks for the review," I said. "So, will you let me go for today?"

"Only if you promise not to join other teams."

"Don't worry. If I end up joining a team, it would be because I had no other choice."

"Fine, you're off the hook for now. But you're gonna join my team someday."

"Sure, sure," I said.

My mage-obsessed Diver friend went back to sipping his whiskey in a good mood.

Floor Three: Black Pepper, Grated Garlic, and Soy Sauce on Steak

Today, I ran into Scrael. The Long-Ears girl who'd been making a name for herself in the Gandakia Dungeon lately had been wearing tattered and...revealing clothing when I'd first met her as a slave, but she was well put together now. Wearing a rather flattering lightweight blue tribal outfit with a wide sash that reminded me of traditional Japanese clothing, she had rugged bracers around each of her arms. It'd likely hurt if she hit someone with them—well, they'd probably crush the victim's skull and kill them. Her silver hair was well kept, and its tip curled up like a squirrel's tail. Her cheeks looked soft and supple, and she had cute little lips. Meanwhile, her trademark long ears were twitching like they had a life of their own. Despite her eyelids that were heavy as if she was perpetually sleepy, there was a quiet strength deep within her gaze.

"Akira," she said.

"Hey, Scrael. Been a while."

"Yeah. How have you been?"

"Same as usual. No complaints, really."

"That's good."

"So, how's life in Freida?" I asked.

"It's going fine. I eat, learn, and sleep. There's nothing to grow here unlike in the village, so I just hunt more and earn a living instead."

"Huh, you lived a similar lifestyle before coming here, then?"

"Yeah." Scrael nodded.

Long-Ears lived far from human civilization, so they were all about self-sufficiency. They'd work on their farms, hunt animals, forage for food, and raise livestock. But all of that had now been replaced with dungeon exploration for

Scrael.

“Don’t you want to go back to your village?” I asked. “It’s not like you have to live here just because you’re a registered Diver now.”

“It’s fine. I have a reason to be here.”

“What reason?”

“Nothing...” she said, then turned her nose away.

I wasn’t sure why my question had made her look away, but she’d always had a bit of a difficult personality. It wasn’t as if she hated me though—at least I didn’t think she did.

“Have you made any close friends yet?” I asked.

“Not really. I don’t care about that kind of thing,” she replied.

“But wouldn’t it be nice to have someone you can talk to?” I pressed, thinking it’d be good for her in the long term to have some friends and acquaintances here.

“It’s fine. I don’t trust humans for the most part anyway.”

“That’s kind of concerning too.”

Her distrust for humans seemed to run deep. Long-Ears’s hatred for humans was pretty well known. It went without saying that the slavery issue was the root of their antipathy, and Scrael was no exception. I mean, she’d gotten enslaved before, so it was far from surprising that she hated humans.

“I can get by in Freida as long as I listen to the guild staff,” said Scrael. “Well, I only interact with other Divers in Freida for the most part.”

“That’s true. I guess a lot of the humans you run into are pretty shady.”

“Yes. Especially the solicitors.”

“Right. I’ve seen mages getting harassed to join teams. I sure wouldn’t want to deal with that.”

“Don’t you get invitations too?” she asked.

“Not really. It’s because I’m usually dressed like this when I’m in Freida.”

“Is that why you’re dressed so strangely?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s strange...” I said.

She was right that my outfit was meant to disguise the fact that I was a mage since they all wore distinct robes.

Was my safari look really considered that weird here? Sure, clothes from my world were different from the fashion here, but there were plenty of people with unusual outfits or appearances in Do-Melta. I didn’t want people to think I was some sort of weirdo. That was unfair.

“Hey, Scrael—”

“Scrae,” she said.

“Hm?”

“I’d prefer it if you called me Scrae.”

“Oh, sure thing.”

She wanted me to call her by a nickname. Maybe it meant she trusted me to some degree. I called her by her nickname this time, and she nodded approvingly.

“So, are you going to the dungeon today, Scrae?” I asked.

“I just got back from a dive, and I was just relaxing here. How about you?”

“I’m about to go get some steak.”

“Steak? You’re getting food?”

“Yup. It’s been a while since I treated myself.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t mind going with you,” she said.

That was a weird way to phrase a request to tag along, but I let it slide.

“It’s going to be pretty expensive,” I warned.

I was planning to go to the luxury restaurant on the top floor, one of those places where you had to save up to dine in. Your wallet would take some heavy damage if you just decided to go there on a whim. It wasn’t some diner where you could just say “Let’s go have a bite there” with some friends.

“Pay for my meal,” she said.

“Huh? Well...paying for two people there would be a bit much for me...”

She was putting my gallantry to the test, but honestly, I wouldn't be able to pay for two. I'd just spent a lot of money recently, so doubling this expense could negatively affect my dungeon-exploring work in the future. But then...

“Just kidding,” she said. “I'll pay for myself.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“This should cover it,” she said, then showed me the pouch hanging at her waist.

She gestured to take a look inside, and I saw that it was stuffed with gold and silver coins.

“You're...pretty rich, huh?”

“Yup. I make lots of money,” said Scrael proudly with her chest puffed out.

Come to think of it, I'd been hearing about her using her Long-Ears abilities to quickly rise up the ranks. She was actually pretty well-known in Freida now as one of the up-and-coming talents. She was a solo Diver who'd traversed the middle floors of the dungeon and cleared countless missions from the Divers Guild without issues. Not to mention, she was a cute-looking hand-to-hand fighter. Of course she'd be famous.

Even now, she was the center of everyone's gaze, although they only watched from a distance. If she wasn't in a conversation with me right now, people would be swarming her with invitations to join their group. I caught glimpses of a few people impatiently waiting for me to stop talking to her.

“Oh, here,” said Scrael out of the blue.

She picked some gold and silver coins out of her bag, then handed me the bag that was still full of coins.

“What's this?” I asked.

“Some of the money I owe you. It might take a while, but I'll pay it off in full eventually.”

“Huh? When did I lend you money?”

“Don’t play dumb,” she said. “It’s for the high mana potion and core stone.”

“Oh, that? Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“You told me to pay you back.”

“I thought I told you that there’s no rush.”

“Just take it,” she insisted.

“What if I refuse?”

“I’m afraid you’ll be subject to unjustified and senseless violence.”

“That doesn’t sound very reasonable.”

Looking somewhat upset, Scrael forcefully pushed the bag of coins into my face. It seemed her pride wouldn’t allow her to stay indebted to me—it must be a characteristic of her noble race. Anyway, the metal coins were digging into my face, so I kind of wished she’d stop.

Meanwhile, I noticed her ears were twitching the whole time, and I couldn’t help but follow their movements with my eyes.

“Curious about my ears?” she asked.

“Um, well...yeah.”

“I don’t mind letting you touch them.”

“What? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Then don’t mind if I do...”

I took her up on her offer and touched her long ears.

“Anh...”

As I lightly squeezed the tip and cartilage, Scrael let out a steamy moan. Her eyes were closed, and it seemed like her ears were ticklish; though there was no way for me to tell what it was like. It felt a bit lewd to be honest, like I was touching her in a sensitive area.

“Th-That was something,” I said.

“They’re nothing special, but everyone wants to touch them for some reason.”

“Who knows why. Maybe because they’re different from ours?” I guessed. “You know, like how people want to touch the tails or ears of the Tails?”

“True. I’d like to touch them myself,” she agreed.

“They look so fluffy.”

“Yes, I’d love to touch their fluffy fur.”

We talked for a bit longer and decided to go eat steak together. Leaving the guild’s main hall, we walked onto the mysteriously powered elevator operated by ropes and cogs, then made our way to the top floor of the multifunction facility built atop the dungeon entrance.

The restaurant’s interior was dazzlingly bright, and it was a bit intimidating for a commoner like me. Still, I was a man on a mission. At that moment, I didn’t care how out of place I looked.

We were guided to a table, and we sat across from one another. A waiter immediately came to take our orders, so I ordered for both of us.

“We’ll have two White Horn steaks.”

A White Horn steak cost five gold coins, which was about fifty thousand Japanese yen—it was ludicrously expensive. One piece of it was worth the same as one of those superluxury items, like a dose of high potion capable of healing pretty much any wound, or a dose of high mana potion, which fully restored one’s mana and temporarily increased their maximum mana capacity. That was pretty scary to think about.

Soon, the waiter brought over two sizzling steaks on hot plates to our table.

“Whoa,” breathed Scrael.

“You’re gonna love this,” I said.

“I can’t wait,” she said excitedly, her eyes glued to the steaks. She seemed to be a gourmand herself.

And so, the steak I'd been longing for had arrived. It was seasoned with salt and came with a side of thick butter, mushrooms, and thinly sliced potatoes. We got some sauce to go with it too, but I wouldn't be needing any of that sauce today.

"Heh heh heh, my ambition will finally be fulfilled," I said to myself.

It was quite an insignificant ambition if I do say so myself.

Before digging into the steak, I reached into my bag and brought out several bottles.

Scrael looked over at me curiously.

"What's that?"

"Black pepper, grated garlic, and soy sauce," I said.

"I've heard of pepper and garlic, but what is this 'shoy sauce'?"

"Soy sauce," I corrected her.

Still seemingly confused, she tilted her head to one side, then the other.

Of course she hadn't heard of soy sauce. They had things resembling fish sauce in this world, but the super condiment known as soy sauce—Japan's pride and joy—didn't exist here.

The items I'd brought out of my bag were the three sacred treasures: a grinder bottle of black pepper, a kilogram of ground garlic, and five hundred milliliters of soy sauce. I would grind heaps of black pepper onto the piping-hot steak, dump a bunch of garlic on top, then pour some soy sauce over it. This was the junky way to eat the steak that I'd been craving. This was *the way* to enjoy steak. I might not be able to meet anyone for a whole day afterward, but there was no stopping me now.

As I was about to defile my steak, someone who appeared to be the manager here took notice and rudely interrupted me by offering a glass of water.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "We ask that you refrain from bringing your condiments here..."

"Scrae," I said without even looking up while working on my task. The thought

of being considerate was a long-forgotten concept at this point.

“Leave him alone,” Scrael warned the manager as she thrust her fist right under his chin.

The sheer murderous aggression emanating from Scrael nearly made him soil his pants right then and there.

“Y-Y-Yes, certainly! We can make an exception just this once, of course...” said the manager before fleeing in fear.

I felt bad for him, but he’d have to deal with it.

The scent of pepper and garlic filled the air, and the soy sauce unleashed a maddeningly appetizing aroma as it hit the hot plate. The sound and smell of that sizzle was downright dangerous.

Gulp.

Black pepper could be found in this world, but it wasn’t so common that you could use it in excess like this. Garlic wasn’t too difficult to get, but I couldn’t imagine it being used like this either. As for soy sauce—well, it needn’t be said.

“Heh... Heh heh heh heh... I did it. I finally did it!”

Some may consider this a culinary sacrilege—I’d completely changed the dish served by the restaurant, implying that I didn’t trust the chef’s skills—however, that didn’t mean I had no right to do so.

I looked up to find Scrael watching me impatiently.

“Um...um, um, um...” she mumbled.

“Do you want some too?” I offered, and she nodded so vigorously that she could’ve put a drummer’s headbanging skills to shame.

I handed her the three sacred treasures, and she slathered the condiments on her steak like I had.

Before I knew it, the overwhelming scent of soy sauce had drawn looks from the other guests around us. Sophistication and manners weren’t well-developed in this world yet. Fancy restaurants like this were all about how lavish of a meal you could have. Maybe we looked like we were rich beyond

imagination in these onlookers' eyes, considering our indiscriminate use of condiments.

"Time to eat," I said.

The steak was perfectly cooked medium rare. It was three-layered with a strip of red in the center surrounded by pink and a seared outer layer. Red juice flooded out as my knife sank into the three-centimeter-thick slab of meat. The umami juice, which was different from blood, flowed down onto the hot plate and released an indescribable aroma into the air.

I cut a bite-size piece of steak, smudged it around in the soy sauce and meat juice, and tossed it into my mouth.

"Mmh."

It was so delicious that I couldn't help but let out a strange stifled giggle.

Amazing. Simply amazing.

That was all my brain managed to squeeze out in its state of shock.

More juice erupted with each bite even after so much of it had leaked out already.

I was having trouble formulating words. Not that I had an impressive vocabulary to begin with.

"Wooooooooow!!!"

"Huh?"

Startled by the sudden outburst, I looked across the table to see Scrael's ears twitching. Her mind seemed to be completely blown by how amazing the food tasted. Apparently, my steak-eating method was quite a shock for her. Long-Ears were said to move their ears when they got emotional, and that sort of bouncy movement was apparently a sign of excitement.

After her moment of bliss, she quickly recomposed herself and continued digging into the steak.

"P-Pardon me! Where did you get such high-quality black pepper, garlic paste, and the sauce with that overwhelming scent?" the manager from earlier came

running from the back of the restaurant to ask.

“Ah, well, the thing is...I can’t tell you where it came from...”

Of course he had to know. He could hardly contain his excitement as he breathed hard through his nose.

I was a bit taken aback and found myself at a loss for words when Scrael said, “Akira! Akira! This is so good! It’s amazing!”

“It is, isn’t it? I don’t care what anyone else says. I think *this* is the best way to enjoy a steak.”

People may say I had an unsophisticated palate for eating like this, but humans loved eating “junk food” like this. It was unavoidable. There was nothing like high-calorie food when it came to satisfying your cravings.

“Shoy sauce. Shoy sauce!”

Scrael seemed to be a fan of the soy sauce. I watched as she poured some not only on her steak but on the mushrooms and potatoes as well.

“Scrael, try mixing in the butter there,” I suggested.

“Like this?”

“Yup. Now you’ve gotten yourself some butter soy sauce.”

“Mmph! Wah!”

A look of pleasant surprise crossed Scrael’s face as soon as she had a taste. It went without saying that mushrooms and potatoes with soy sauce and butter were simply delectable.

As we continued eating our food and telling each other how delicious it was, we heard something happening at the entrance.

“Welcome— Ah?!”

I heard what sounded like a scream, and I sensed an intense, wild aura that felt similar to malice. Surprised, I turned my gaze in its direction to find Lion-Marū heading directly toward me like a freight train.

“L-Lion-Marū?”

I felt a touch of uneasiness about his bloodshot eyes and uncharacteristic intensity when he roughly grabbed hold of me.

“Kudo...” he said.

“Eek?! Don’t eat me! I know this is a restaurant, but I’m not on the menu!”

“I told you: I have no interest in eating you,” he said. “How long is it going to take for you to get used to me?”

I doubted I’d ever get used to him. I mean, he had a lion’s head.

“Wh-What is it?” I asked. “You don’t seem like yourself today.”

“Ah. Well, I was nearby taking care of some things when that scent savagely grabbed my attention.”

“The smell brought you here?”

“Indeed,” he nodded. His muzzle twitched as his gaze turned to the bottles of condiments. “So this is the culprit.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Kudo, I’m begging you! Sell me these bottles! I’ll pay your asking price! Please!”

I nodded, though I was a bit intimidated by the request, which came out like a roar.

“Sure, of course. You’ve always been good to me. You can take them all.”

“Do you mean that?!” he asked.

“Wait,” said Scrael for some reason. We both turned to her, and she continued, “I’m going to order one more plate, so let me have a bit more.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I don’t mind at all,” said Lion-Maru gladly.

Scrael immediately ordered another steak, set aside some of the condiments on a separate plate, then handed the rest to him.

Lion-Maru sat down next to me.

“So these can elevate the steak to another level?” With that, he poured some soy sauce onto his finger and licked it. “Ah?! This flavor...”

“How is it?” I asked.

“It’s good.”

“Shoy sauce is tasty. It goes with anything,” added Scrael.

“Indeed, there’s a depth to its saltiness that’s unlike regular salt,” agreed Lion-Maru, purring contentedly.

Cats couldn’t have soy sauce because of its tremendous sodium content, but I figured he’d be fine. You couldn’t apply too much logic to these things in Do-Melta.

“I’d like to order some steaks! Five of them to start with! I ask that you bring them quickly!” Lion-Maru announced.

His ordering five plates at once was pretty crazy, but somehow, I wasn’t too surprised. How much was he planning to eat? They’d surely run out of stock before long.

The steaks were soon brought to our table, and Lion-Maru used a gratuitous amount of black pepper, grated garlic, and soy sauce to flavor one of them. Then, he stabbed it with a fork without cutting it into smaller pieces and took a big bite. He ripped off a chunk of the steak and began chewing—he even ate like a lion.

“Gaaaaaaaah! Such bliss! It’s an onslaught of flavor on my taste buds!” he shouted, his booming voice reverberating through the room. This method of seasoning was apparently quite a shock for him. “There isn’t the slightest hint of elegance to this way of dining, yet the steak is terribly delicious... It calls to the savageness within me!”

Scrael nodded along in agreement.

“Junk food” was unrefined and unhealthy, but that was part of its irresistible charm.

Lion-Maru turned his attention to his second steak and slathered the condiments onto the meat. He took a big bite and smiled happily.

I was glad to see him enjoying himself.

“Maybe I’ll try wasabi and soy sauce next,” I said to myself.

I thought I saw Scrael's eyes flash for a second from across the table, but maybe it was just my imagination.

Floor Four: No Pain, No Pleasure, I Guess...

The structure of the Gandakia Dungeon was a lot different than what I pictured in my head. People usually imagined a labyrinthine cave extending underground like an ant's nest, but the dungeons in Do-Melta were completely different.

Entering a dungeon was known as “diving” in Freida because the entrance led underground, but it wasn't that there was a sprawling labyrinth beneath the town. When you descended through the entrance in the main hall, there was a white, misty, mirrored surface that served as the boundary of the dungeon. Once you stepped through it, you entered the starting floor of the dungeon where monsters could appear.

It was said that long ago, the greatest god of this world had made it easier for humans to fight monsters by organizing their spawning points in Do-Melta by their levels and attaching these spaces to each other—that was why seeing an expanse of lush forest beneath a sunny sky ahead was possible even though you had just descended a flight of stairs underground. In other words, the god had made it more convenient so that we didn't have to travel back and forth on foot. This was characteristic of this god, who didn't like wasting unnecessary effort, and as a result, life was a lot easier for those who made a living from the dungeon.

Immediately after descending the stairs was the Great Forest Ruins. Most people could manage this area if they had experience in wildlife control or the military. Near the monster spawn area was another misty boundary leading to the next floor. Various regions were interconnected as such, and only the god of this world knew the number of floors out there and the power levels of the monsters within each floor.

Anyway, I was just minding my own business, weeding in the Great Forest Ruins at depth level 5 of the Gandakia Dungeon. I was picking away some theas while softly whispering a tune to the basics of thea collecting, “Pull 'em out

down to the roots, dust off the soil, and put 'em away," when it appeared before me.

"Huh?"

An oddly shaped shadow loomed over me, so I looked up in confusion only to find a hideous and terrifying face: it was an Orc. Their face was the scariest in the Gandakia Dungeon—it could spook even a ghost.

Wait...an Orc? What's it doing on such a low-level floor?

There was no time to even ask the question out loud.

"GRAAAAAAGH!!!" the Orc roared.

"AAAAAAAAGH!!!" I shrieked.

I'd been picking herbs in a place that was known to be relatively safe, so of course I was shocked by the sudden appearance of the Orc's horrifying mug. I thought I was going to wet my pants.

"Ugh!" I fell on the ground and got covered in mud. "Bwah! Ptui!" I was a complete mess, but unfortunately for me, the Orc wasn't done.

"GRAAAAAAGH!" it shouted.

"What?! Why? What's going on? Why's there an Orc here? It doesn't make any sense!"

"GRAAAAAAGH!" it screamed.

"AAAAAAAAGHHH!!! Get away from meee!"



The Orc chased after me with tremendous agility, and I ran for my life with tears welling in my eyes. I was half crying, of course, because it scared the crap out of me. My heart felt like it was about to burst out of my chest. I'd always been a chicken, so I couldn't help it. My heart was the size of a gnat, and it was made of glass. It was no exaggeration to say plebeians like me were destined to flee instinctively when startled.

"Damn it... Why's this happening? Is it a stray or something? Did it wander off all the way over here? You've gotta be kidding me!"

No amount of complaint would change the fact that the Orc was chasing after me. In its eyes, I was an enemy who had to be defeated. I personally hadn't done anything to warrant such animosity, but its will to kill all humans was embedded in its DNA.

Orcs were common monsters that roamed the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine at depth level 30. Although they were called "Orcs," they weren't the lecherous pig-nosed monstrosities that terrorized women in certain PC games these days but were more like those in *The Lord of the Rings*: they had hideous and terrifying faces, putrid breath like clouds of poison, muscle-bound bodies, and agile movements that didn't match their hulking frames. They were horribly scary creatures that could flatten humans in the blink of an eye with their giant clubs.

They were just common monsters in the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine, but they were obviously formidable opponents for Divers who hung out on the low-level floors. A rookie who ran into one of these would stand no chance. Orcs never appeared up here in the Great Forest Ruins, and they certainly didn't belong here.

"Calm down... Calm...down. I can handle this."

I was running at full speed while completely covered in mud. Although I hadn't shaken the Orc off of my tail, I'd managed to calm down and gather my thoughts. While I'd been startled at first, the opponent was obviously no match for someone who was level 33 like myself. The only reason I'd sprinted away in tears was because the Orc's face was so scary and not because I was afraid that I couldn't win.

Anyway, I was careful not to bite my tongue as I softly chanted the incantations.

“Tertiary Magic: Ameithys Orbit!”

I activated Ameithys Orbit, an elemental spell that dramatically increased the caster’s speed, and I zipped through the field like a flash of lightning, leaving sparks in my wake. I instantaneously reappeared behind the Orc, skidding to a halt as more sparks appeared beneath the soles of my shoes.

By the time the Orc noticed me, it was already too late.

“Secondary Magic: Ameithys Impact!”

I summoned a magic circle on the Orc’s defenseless back then slammed through it with a palm strike. Electricity and shock waves blasted through the Orc’s body from the point of impact, then a lightning bolt erupted and sent the creature flying into a tree. The Orc was completely still after slamming into the tree at the speed of a freight train.

Don’t move. Just stop being alive.

I’d blasted it with the full force of my electricity, so it really should’ve dropped dead.

I breathed heavily, feeling exhausted.

“Jeez!” I shouted. “This is the freakin’ Great Forest Ruins, a newbie zone! What’s an Orc from the Mine doing here?! You nearly gave me a heart attack, you idiot! You scared the crap outta me!”

I wrapped my arms around myself and threw a tantrum, then checked my EXP Card out of curiosity. The EXP Card was a mysterious metallic plate that quantified and recorded my EXP and the number of defeated monsters. It was only as big as a trading card, and its design was kind of stylish with a black border framing its edges.

Everyone in this world had received one of these EXP Cards from a god of Do-Melta when they’d been born. I had no idea how that worked since I’d never looked into it or asked the gods, but I’d received one and gotten a quick rundown on it when I’d first arrived.

It did sound like a system from a video game, and as the old god dude, Ameithys the Purple, had said, “Seeing definite numbers like this is better for motivation, isn’t it? We want you to defeat monsters to help sustain this world. Thought this would be the best way to do it.” He hadn’t seemed to be taking this very seriously.

Though, it was true; for a level-grinding junkie like me who loved seeing numbers go up, this sort of system was a great incentive. It didn’t seem to be much of a motivator for some residents of this world because they were already accustomed to it, though it did vary by person.

My card was updated right as I glanced at it, and the number of defeated monsters went up before my eyes.

“Well...that ended up increasing my EXP, so I guess all’s well that ends well. Heh heh.”

It gave me joy to see my numbers go up. It was kind of like watching my net worth increase, and who didn’t like that? Saying you hate cash was like saying you were scared of cake—no one was going to take you seriously.

In any case, I had a more pressing issue at hand: my clothes were a muddy mess, but that didn’t matter right now either.

“I hope that Orc didn’t hurt anyone...” I said worriedly as I looked around.

This was a relatively safe zone within the Gandakia Dungeon where beginners and low-level Divers hung out. If they encountered an Orc, they were a goner. Fortunately, I didn’t see any casualties when I went back to the place where I’d first found the Orc.

I decided to report this incident to the guild receptionist, and so, I carved off a piece of the Orc’s carcass. Then, I began moving toward the mirrorlike cloudy surface at the exit of the Great Forest Ruins to get to the receptionist’s window.

Along the way, I warned the people harvesting theas and having a good time in the low-level forest and showed them the Orc ear I’d cut off, then continued running as fast as I could.

When you were level 33, you could pretty much keep running at top speed for however long you wanted. I never would’ve imagined it’d be possible before

coming to Do-Melta. If I kept up my leveling, I could probably be an Olympic champion.

Do-Melta was a super irrational world where you could get stronger just by defeating monsters without ever touching weights or doing any cardio. Supposedly, the power of the opponents you defeated was funneled into you through the threads of causality, or something like that. Of course, you could get stronger through lifting weights or endurance training, but that didn't really help me as a mage. My master had told me that as a spellcaster, I just had to increase my mana and roid myself up with magic, and I was an idiot for asking—pretty mean, I know.

And so, I ran nonstop for nearly five kilometers without tiring and arrived at the Divers Guild's main hall. The excessively spacious hall was lively as ever. Since it was lunchtime, all of the tables, over two hundred in total, were completely full. People were enjoying themselves by drinking alcohol, forcing down bad-tasting food, agonizing over nasty herb soup, or throwing a party to celebrate a safe return from the dungeon.

"Ashley! I've got some crazy news!" I shouted as I approached the receptionist's window.

"Oh, Kudo," said Ashley, "what's wrong? I thought you just went in not too long ago—wait, why are you covered in mud?"

"Never mind that. What do you think of this?" With that, I placed my loot in front of Ashley.

"That's an Orc's ear, isn't it? What about it?"

"I just defeated this one in the Great Forest Ruins," I said.

"Are you...serious?"

"Dead serious. I wouldn't have one of these otherwise."

"Y-Yeah...I suppose you're right."

Ashley's face turned grim. The implications of such a monster appearing on the low-level floors were quite dire: the chances of Divers losing their lives would increase dramatically.

“Did you see any others or just this one?” she asked.

“Just this one,” I replied. “I’m guessing it just wandered off, but I thought I should report it. I warned people along the way too, just in case.”

“Thanks. It’s a good thing it was you who found it.”

“What do you mean? There’s nothing good about it. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.” I tried to express how badly the creature had startled me, but she didn’t seem to get it for some reason.

“Why would you be scared of it when you can beat it?” she asked.

“It isn’t a matter of whether or not I can beat it. Their faces are way too scary.”

With that, I did my best impression of an Orc face. When I’d first encountered an Orc, I’d been so scared that I’d let out a pathetic shriek. I knew I was too much of a scaredy-cat, but I hadn’t been able to stay calm. But it seemed I still wasn’t getting through to Ashley.

“Oh?” she said.

“You should try visiting the Mine once,” I suggested. “There’s a bunch of them roaming around. It’s really scary.”

“I’m not a Diver, so you know I can’t go into the dungeon. Anyway...”

Ashley reached over and rang a giant bell. An alarm so loud that it gave me a headache rang throughout the main hall.

“An Orc has been spotted in the Great Forest Ruins at depth level 5! Low-level Divers, please avoid entering the dungeon until the area is secured!”

And there, the case was settled. The guild worked efficiently, so high-rank Divers should quickly assemble to secure the danger zone.

“Hey, Kudo, do you think you could help with scouting—”

“I can’t right now,” I interrupted. “I have to clean off all this mud. It feels disgusting.”

“Right. I couldn’t ask you to go work in that state...” agreed Ashley before suggesting I go take a bath.

I made my way toward the washing and bathing area attached to the guild. It'd been built by the guild at the request of the Divers, and members would go there after returning from the dungeon to clean their loot and attire. A small amount of dirt could be cleaned off at the washing area, but a simple bathroom had also been built for those who were covered in blood or, like in my case, mud.

A divider separated the bathroom, a crude box-shaped room, from the area. It wasn't much better than the shower space at school, and it didn't offer much in terms of privacy. Of course, it didn't come with warm water, so it felt too cold for someone who'd grown up with modern conveniences like me. They'd converted a water spring so that water flowed down from above, but it was split into multiple showers, and so bathing in it was a bit difficult. I seriously questioned why anyone would call this junk a bathroom. All you could do here was to wait for a while until a bucket filled up and use it to rinse yourself while wiping your body with a piece of cloth.

Yet, I couldn't just go back to Japan looking like this. I had to at least do the bare minimum and get rid of the mud. It would've been one thing if I were a little kid who played in the mud, but I was a high schooler. The weather had been good lately, and there weren't any rivers or farmland near my house. If I went home covered in mud, there was a chance, albeit minuscule, that my parents would suspect I was being bullied. I didn't want to risk Hiro hearing something like that.

I was soaked through to my underwear, so it felt really nasty. I couldn't wait to change into a set of fresh clothes. Since I was covered in mud, I was careful not to get others dirty as I made my way toward the washing area. Suddenly, I heard a voice from behind.

"Akira."

I turned around to see Scrael standing there, her big silver ponytail wagging as usual. She stared at me with half-lidded eyes, looking rather sleepy.

"Oh, hey, Scrae. On the way out?" I asked.

"Just stopping by for a minute. More importantly, what happened to you?"

"Well, I got surprised by an Orc's face, and I tripped and fell."

“How did you get covered in mud from the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine?” she asked.

“That’s the thing,” I said. “It came all the way up to the Forest.”

“Is that what that alarm was about?”

“Yup. I was the one who ran into it, so I reported it to reception. And now I’m about to clean myself up.”

“Hm. I see,” said Scrae with an uninterested tone.

“Well, I’m off,” I said and continued toward the washing area.

But I still heard footsteps from behind. She was following me. So, I stepped aside and said, “After you,” but she made no move to walk past me. Since childhood, I’d simulated my countermeasures against Betobeto-san, the Japanese slime monster that trailed people who walked alone at night, so I thought I had it down perfectly, but it seemed I still had a lot to learn. Maybe this didn’t work unless you were walking on a footpath between rice fields at night or something, like in the legends.

I turned around, and Scrae was standing there, completely motionless.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’ll help,” she said.

“Help?”

“You won’t be able to clean yourself completely without help.”

“Well...I guess you’re right, but...”

It was true that I couldn’t easily clean myself up, but I didn’t think it warranted getting help. Why did she want to help me in the first place?

“I’m going with you,” she said definitively.

“Wh-Whoa!”

I was physically forced into the washing area with Scrae behind me.

The Divers Guild’s washing facility was pathetic indeed. It comprised rows of individual “rooms” that were basically just spaces with boards on four sides.

They weren't completely closed boxes either, so your head would poke out from the top if you were too tall, and your feet could be seen at the bottom. In my case, I wasn't all that tall, so you could only see my feet from outside. Not to mention, each of the rooms was pretty small, so you had to put your stuff in the corner to prevent them from getting wet. But in my case, I was able to put all my stuff away in my Dimension Bag.

"You...want to go in there together?" I asked.

"Yes." She nodded without hesitation.

There was hardly any room in there for two people, but her expression told me that she wasn't fazed by that one bit. Was she out of her mind? Maybe her head was spinning because she'd eaten some mystery porridge, which was one of the three most disgusting dishes in the dining hall, or she'd been hit with a beam from a Hypno Eye or something—no, Scrae looked just as she always was.

She gazed right at me with that blank stare of hers, then pushed me from behind, forcing me inside. I was at a loss for what to do.

"Um," I began.

"What's wrong? Strip," she ordered.

"Uh...miss? May I ask why you're taking your clothes off?" I asked.

"They'll get wet if I keep them on," she answered matter-of-factly.

"That's true, they'll get wet if—that's not what I mean!"

"Enough. Take off your clothes."

There seemed to be no room for arguing.

She proceeded to nonchalantly strip off her own clothes, and her beautiful bare skin came into view. Not to mention, she was quite voluminous in the right places for her slim frame. Her breasts and butt immediately seized my attention. My eyeballs were glued to them against my will, and I couldn't peel them away if I tried.

Gulp.

Those well-endowed breasts, that naughty place between her legs, that soft,

round butt—I couldn't. It was too much. I felt like the rational part of my brain was in danger of going on a permanent vacation.

I stared at her inappropriately for some while, and she shot me a reproachful look.

"Akira," she said.

"Huh? Ah! I-I'm sorry!"

"No need to apologize. Just turn around."

"Yes, ma'am!" I answered, then I stripped off my clothes as well.

Soon after, Scrael began wiping my back with a wet cloth. I wasn't sure what to make of it, to be honest. It almost felt like I was in one of those indecent establishments, which I was too young to enter. If she decided to charge me afterward, the bill would probably be so high that I'd go completely bankrupt. I'd probably end up being *her* slave.

"Done. Now turn around," she ordered.

"What?! But, uh, I really don't think I should be facing your way right now!"

"It's fine."

"I'm telling you; it most certainly won't be fine!"

"Shut up and turn around."

"Gah!"

Scrael grabbed me and made me face her by force. And, well, this meant I could see her naked, and vice versa.

She made a surprised noise and stared at me wide-eyed. Her face was how I'd imagine she'd look if she encountered an Asian elephant for the first time. She remained completely motionless as if someone had hit the pause button.

It went without saying that it was because I was in a rather...excited state.

"Um! You see, this is a physiological phenomenon that men can't really control..." I explained.

"I-I know! I get it!" she said in a fluster. "You don't have to say it out loud!"

“Yes! Well, so that’s what’s happening. So I’d appreciate it if you’d do your best to avoid touching it... I mean, it isn’t that I don’t want you to touch it, but —”

“Stop talking!”

“I’m sorry!”

Suddenly, I heard footsteps approaching.

“Someone’s coming!” I warned.

“Quiet!”

We started to panic and pressed our naked bodies against one another in the corner of the room, trying to stay quiet. It wasn’t as if we were doing anything wrong. There were other men and women who entered these rooms together to clean themselves up, but we just reacted this way in our confusion without thinking. I could feel her soft skin against mine, and I felt like my brain was about to explode.

The footsteps passed our room, and I heard the sound of the door to another room open.

“Are...we clear?” I breathed.

“Seems so...”

We finally calmed down—then realized...that a part of me was clinging to her.

Scrael made an unintelligible noise, and I quickly tried to explain myself again. “Well, you see—”

“Stop! Not another word or I’ll rip it off!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll shut up!”

She stepped away from me.

We managed to maintain our cool from there as we wiped ourselves down, put our clothes back on, and escaped from the bathing area. It went without saying why I felt like I was going to overheat even though I hadn’t taken a hot bath or anything.

Floor Five: My Sensei Is Inhuman?

Not much time had passed since I'd visited the dungeon after school, run into an Orc, and gone through that whole ordeal with Scrael. It was now evening, and I was walking down the main street by myself as Scrael left for a dive.

When I'd passed by the receptionist's window, Ashley had persistently asked me to go on patrol, but I'd given her a bunch of excuses on why I couldn't. I was here to have fun, and there was no way I was going to waste my time working patrol duty. I didn't mind helping people out in my free time as I focused on recreation, but eventually I wouldn't be able to bear it if all I did was focus on others. Also, I was still basking in the afterglow of those wonderful moments earlier, and I didn't want to ruin that either.

The main street leading to the Divers Guild and the dungeon entrance was as lively as ever. There were various food stalls on this bustling street, and at least a few of them were open pretty much throughout the day. It was very convenient for us Divers.

"Nope, absolutely not," I said to myself as I walked. "Why would I go patrol an area where monsters from depth level 30 plus could appear? This kind of work should be done by Divers who can easily smush these monsters with one hand, not me."

To be honest, I didn't want to fight high-level monsters without proper prep work. Preparation was the most important part of dungeon exploration, and there was no diving safely without it—there was nothing more foolish than a solo Diver heading into a dungeon without sufficient planning. This was my personal policy: one should only set foot into a dungeon after gathering a ton of items in Japan and Do-Melta beforehand.

Besides, I'd had a very nice day today, and I didn't want to overwrite the memories with episodes of me dealing with trouble.

Just thinking about the day's events filled me with a strange mixture of embarrassment and joy. I may have gotten lucky if I'd pushed it, but I couldn't

just do something like that in the heat of the moment. I was sure my smile right now was so wide that it would creep out the people around me.

“I’m really not sure about what I should do, though,” I thought out loud. “Maybe I’ll just go home for today.”

I’d been on the fence about it, but I decided that I should take this blissful feeling home with me. Today’s dive had already been ruined, and I could see myself getting dragged into trouble if I went again. That was how these things usually went.

With that in mind, I entered an alleyway and headed toward the statue of Ameithys the Purple, a transfer point to Japan.

Suddenly, I detected a dense magical aura and turned around very slowly to find my shadow—stretched out in the setting sun—moving on its own.

“Ugh...” I groaned reflexively.

The shadow began morphing into a silhouette of a woman. I could make out long, waist-length hair and a slender outline in the shadow. Gradually, some alluring curves formed on her body before the entire shape was enveloped in a black haze. Then, it rose.

I had a bad feeling about this. Well, it wasn’t just a feeling—something terrible always happened whenever this appeared before me.

“Why now...?” I muttered as my voice trembled.

One of the eyes on the hazy three-dimensional shadow glinted red, and a young girl’s voice said, “Hey, Akira, how’ve you been?”

“Who’s this ‘Akira’? I’m Kudo, a Good Samaritan of Freida... Heh heh.”

I rubbed my hands together as I tried to slide my way out of there, but it was no use.

“Did you really think you could lose me like that?” the black shadow asked, unimpressed. “I see you’re terribly easy to catch off guard.”

“Ugh... Why does it have to be today, Sensei?”

Yes, the shadow before me was the one who’d taught me magic way back

when I'd first arrived in Do-Melta. She was a black shadow with the voice of a young woman—more like a little girl—and I wasn't sure if she was a monster or some sort of demon. She was as strong as they come. Even though I hadn't seen her fight much, she was said to be one of the most powerful beings in Do-Melta, capable of defeating any monster in an instant. But unfortunately, there was more to her personality.

"So, what brings you here today?" I asked. "Here to bully me again? I don't wanna go to any floors where I'm underleveled again..."

"'Bully'? I resent that. I do what I do because I care about you. Hmm?"

"Liar. It's all for yourself."

The shadow's mouth split open in an amused smile.

"Why are you complaining about it now? I taught you the fundamentals of magic, and now you do my bidding. That was our deal."

"What deal? I never agreed to that!" I protested.

"But I *did* teach you how to use magic, didn't I?"

"Yes, but—wait, this is a fraud! Besides, I never thought you'd dump me into such a dangerous floor and force me to fight!"

"Perhaps. But if you feel that way, no one's forcing you to call me 'Sensei.'"

"Well...that is true, but..."

She was right. In exchange for teaching me magic, she wanted me to collect core stones from the deep floors for her. Sure, you could dismiss it by calling it a give-and-take relationship, but I'd always been forced to fight monsters far stronger than me, even some boss-class enemies. It was completely unfair and exploitative. But I had to admit, it was thanks to this method that I was pretty proficient at magic after only spending half a year in Do-Melta. I was grateful for that. I wouldn't have been able to enjoy life in this world nearly as much if it hadn't been for her. So maybe I didn't have the right to complain.

But that doesn't change the fact that I hate it.

I prioritized safety, so I avoided fighting opponents stronger than me. I was just a high schooler to begin with, and it wasn't as if I'd learned martial arts or

anything, nor was I courageous. I was no hero. I knew full well that I was just a normie with no mental or physical fortitude, and it was best to act within my own limitations. Long live the plebeians.

Sensei, appearing like the devil, laughed creepily—maybe she really was a demon.

“Akira. Don’t you think it’s rude to call someone a demon? Hmm?” she asked.

“Whaaat?! Do you know how to read minds, Sensei?”

“No, you just said it out loud.”

With that, she smacked my head with a chop of her hand.

“Ow!”

Her level was far higher than mine, so it seriously hurt.

“Um...by the way, out of curiosity...where do you plan on sending me today?” I asked.

“You’re going to the Night Soil Swamps today.”

“Gah! N-No way! I can’t handle the monsters there!” I protested, although I was mainly referring to their appearances and smell.

“You’re as cowardly as ever. You’ve learned a thing or two about fighting over the past six months or so, haven’t you? Man up a bit,” she whispered in my ear as she pressed her body against mine.

“Eek!”

“Why don’t you just rope someone into going with you? That drunkard who’s always hanging around you might be a good candidate,” she went on. “What do you say?”

“Uh...uhhh...”

Something resembling a tongue came out of her mouth and licked my cheek. Her seductive and erotic gesture sent a shiver down my spine, but her demonic whispers brought me back down to earth.

“M-Miguel is away with his team!” I managed to spurt out. “He said he’d be on a long dive two days ago, so he won’t even be available!”

“Then who else?”

“Uh...let’s see...”

I couldn’t think of anyone off the top of my head.

“You don’t have any friends, do you? What a sad little boy.”

“Excuse me! I *do* have friends!”

There’s Scrael, Miguel, my childhood friend Hiro, Kogano the ninja geek, and Okadome the occult fanatic. I wasn’t a complete loner or anything like that.

“Well, if no one’s going with you, you’ll have to go on this dive solo,” said Sensei.

“I still haven’t agreed to go—”

“Now, now, don’t be like that. If you manage to get the results I seek, I’ll teach you a new magic technique,” she said and chuckled to herself ominously.

It was hard to describe just how anxious her laugh made me. And yet...

“A new technique,” I muttered, intrigued.

“Well? What say you? Refuse, and I may never teach you anything again.”

I groaned, then nodded. I had no choice but to relent. I couldn’t pass on the offer of being taught a new technique.

Sensei had been clinging to me this entire time, and she suddenly made a confused noise as if she’d noticed something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Akira. I smell a woman on you.”

“Huh? Oh...”

I knew why, of course.

“Oh? Well, well, well. I didn’t realize that even a loser like you could get any,” she said.

“It’s not like that. She was kind of doing me a favor, and—”

“Sounds like an excuse to me.”

“How is that an excuse?!” I protested, but she ignored me.

“So, you did it?” she asked suggestively. “Gimme the details.”

“Why do you have to say it like that?!”

“*Lick*. Hmm. I don’t taste any woman on you, even though her scent is there. You didn’t go all the way, did you?”

“You can tell by taste?! And what do you mean by ‘all the way’?” I asked.

“I mean, you’re a limp dick who had the chance to *bleep* your *bleep* in her *bleep* but decided not to—”

“These are not things a lady should say!” I shouted.

Also, I felt like I should point out that I wasn’t a “limp dick” at all.

§

And that was what had happened before I’d gone back into the dungeon.

Squish, squish, squish, squish.

“Aaaaaaaaargh! They’re so freakin’ gross! This is so much worse than the Dark Corridors.”

I couldn’t help but scream as I looked at the mass of toxic-looking slimes writhing around before me.

Sensei and I had descended into the Night Soil Swamps, which was on dungeon route three, according to her instructions. At depth level 25, this place wasn’t as challenging as the Dark Corridors on route two, which was at depth level 30, but the environment here was just horrid. There were poisonous swamps all over the place, and they smelled absolutely awful. The place was littered with dead trees and vividly blue plants and flowers that looked like they’d poison you just by looking at them. Not to mention the Poison-type and grotesque-looking monsters that roamed the place—it really didn’t get much worse than this.

“Quit whining,” said Sensei. “I do understand those repulsive sludge creatures are nauseating to look at, but you need to put up with it.”

“I mean, yes, but come on, Sensei, let’s not do this,” I begged.

“Would you prefer to go somewhere else?”

“That’s it! That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear! Is there somewhere else we can go? Where? Where’s it?!”

“The Glacial Ram Mountains. We’ll get a core stone from an Ice Age Seal there,” she said, but I wasn’t sure if I’d heard her right.

“Um, could you repeat that again, please?”

“I said, ‘the Glacial Ram Mountains.’”

“Nooo way! Going to route four is already out of the question, but you want me to go into depth level 50?! Lion-Marun is pretty much the only person who can go that far! It’s barely been half a year since I’ve become a Diver! It’d be suicide!”

“You’re the one who said you want to go somewhere else,” she said pointedly.

“Well, yes, but that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?!”

“Don’t be like that,” she said as she pressed against my body from behind this time.

Did she think she could shut me up like this? Well, it worked. She may look like a shadow, but she was soft to the touch like a real woman. My crotch surely couldn’t tell the difference anyway. Sensei knew exactly what she was doing. She was really switching it up on me with the carrot and the stick today. I wished she’d just stick with the carrot; I just wanted a happy, easygoing life. Though, her methods seemed to be working because I was starting to feel like putting in some effort and showing her that I could be manly too.

I happened to glance off to the side and saw one of the sludge creatures wriggling around and transforming its body. It stretched out into a tube with a hole through its middle, and the wind in the dungeon blew through it, making an eerie, hollow sound.

Oooooo... Oooooo...

As soon as one of them started making the noise, the others around it mimicked it in response. A disturbing chorus soon filled the air of the Night Soil

Swamps.

“AAAAAAAAAAH! I hate this place!” I screamed.

Sensei’s seduction(?) was no match for how much this place creeped me out.

Seeing me freak out, Sensei said, “You really are hopeless.”

I assumed this meant she was going to cut me some slack. I felt as if a light was shining down from the heavens like angels were descending to show me mercy—but she was a hardcore sadist after all.

“Hey! There’s a tasty little snack full of mana right here! Come and get it!” she shouted at the sludge creatures.

“You’re evil!”

The sludge creatures hadn’t moved toward us no matter how loud I’d been until this point, but they reacted to Sensei’s call for some reason. Maybe she really was a monster—no, a demon. A sick, coldhearted demon.

“Good, now you have no choice but to fight,” she said.

“There’s nothing ‘good’ about this, you twisted sadist!” I shot back.

“How mean. I’m doing this for your own sake,” she said, pretending to cry.

It seemed I’d run out of options.

“Ugh... Fine, I’ll drag you into this with me.”

“Oh, I’m getting outta here.” With that, she retreated into my shadow and vanished.

“Damn youuuuuu!!!”

And so, I ended up having to use my lightning magic to wipe out all of the repulsive sludge creatures.

§

I managed to defeat all of the Pop Slimes that had come rushing at me because of Sensei. But in exchange, I’d paid a hefty price with my sanity. I was hugging my knees in a sitting position on a relatively safe rocky area, muttering incoherently to myself. I’d gone temporarily mad.

“Gross, gross, gross, gross, gross... Uuugh...”

“An adequate performance, I suppose,” said Sensei. “You’re far from a full-fledged mage if you can’t incinerate those pieces of filth in one fell swoop.”

“That’s big talk for someone who just now came out of hiding...”

“Don’t glare at me like that, my disciple. I’ll give you a reward once the objective is complete. A sexual one, mainly. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“R-Really?! I might! If you’re pretty, that is!”

“I can assure you that I am. It’s been said that my beauty could bring down entire countries.”

“Don’t you think that sounds a bit conceited?” I asked.

“Well, I’m sure you can tell it’s true, even when I’m in this form.”

With that, she moved closer to me as if to show off the curves of her body. For some reason, her shadowy hand reached out—toward my crotch.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” I shouted.

“Touching your member, of course.”

“Bah?! Stop that! Please, let go! Aaaaaaaaah?!”



I grabbed her shadowy hand and moved away, but she got some good squeezes in. How awful.

“Heh heh heh, that’s quite a package for a coward like yourself,” she laughed.

“You damned sadist,” I said, clutching my crotch, teary-eyed.

I felt like something important would be taken from me if I let my guard down in front of Sensei. Getting rid of it by my own will would be one thing, but as a man, I couldn’t just let her take it from me. I may be a loser, but I had my pride. I wouldn’t allow it.

Suddenly, Sensei looked away as if she’d noticed something.

“Here it comes—the main event,” she said.

“Ugh...”

A giant three-headed grotesque monster enshrouded in a poisonous mist had appeared. It didn’t seem to have a body as far as I could tell. The heads of a dragon, lion, and goat extended out from a massive poisonous bog, and parts of them were rotten or melted with bones partially visible. It was a Poison Chimera Zombie, the most difficult monster to kill here in the Night Soil Swamps. It wasn’t exceptionally strong or aggressive, but approaching it was difficult because of its sheer size and the poisonous fog and swamp surrounding it. Swordsmen couldn’t fight it head-on, and projectiles wouldn’t do much damage either because of its zombified body. You might think to burn it, but the moisture of the poisonous fog and swamp made fire arrows ineffective. You needed a mage to take them down, but only a small percentage of this world’s population were mages, and there were even fewer Divers among them. This made them extremely annoying for Divers to deal with. Even high-ranking teams found excuses to avoid fighting them.

When a Poison Chimera Zombie moved, the poisonous swamp its heads extended from moved with it. To make things worse, each of the heads was constantly spewing out poisonous fog, making it a nightmare to stand anywhere near it. Imagine roughly half of the Tokyo Dome, an area of about two and a half hectares, moving around—that might give you an idea of its massive scale. This monster was enormous.

Maybe it was an attempt from my subconscious mind to escape this reality, but a conversation with my childhood friend came to mind.

§

“Hiro. Hey, Hiro.”

“What’s up, Aki?”

“You know, when they combine powers and shoot a beam that takes down giant kaijus, how’s that supposed to work?”

“Basically, they just act like they’re combining everyone’s power together, but they’re really just firing a high-powered laser without doing anything special.”

“Come on, don’t say things like that,” I’d said. “You’re ruining the fantasy.”

“It’s true,” he’d said. “When you’re fighting a giant enemy, you have to take them down with enough firepower to vaporize them. That’s all there is to it.”

“That can’t be it. What happened to ‘friendship, effort, and victory’ like in manga?”

“There *is* effort involved, and they’re getting results, aren’t they? The friendship part might’ve gotten lost along the way, though.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, are you not getting along with your friends?” I’d asked.

“It’s not like that, but things have been a bit awkward lately.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything. I may not be able to do much, but I can at least listen.”

“Thanks, I will.”

§

Here I was, wondering how Hiro was doing at a time like this. I was the master of escapism.

I ended up having to defeat the monster like Sensei had said, but I had no friends or giant mechas to help me, so it went without saying that it was totally brutal. Basically, I just had to use a superpowerful attack.

To be honest, I felt like I was dying. Going down into the dungeon was tiring enough already, but I had to fight monsters on the way, defeat all the small fry around the target, defeat the target, then deal with the poisonous swamp and fog before I could retrieve the core stone. I was completely drained from all the running around during the fights and all the magic I'd used.

"So. Gross."

And the worst part of it all, the environment at the Night Soil Swamps was as bad as it got. Anyone who stayed here too long without preparing properly would end up feeling sick. If I was to describe the feeling, it was like motion sickness but several times worse. It was like someone chain-smoking next to you throughout the entirety of a long-distance bus ride, or like that moment before an airplane made its landing. I'd definitely have to buy a gas mask online if I were to come back here again. I'd have to scour the internet to find one that was military-grade.

I was starting to feel better now that we'd escaped to the Great Gale Wilds at depth level 15.

"What? Did the poisonous fog get you?" asked Sensei. "I told you to be careful."

"How was I supposed to 'be careful'? Humans need to breathe, you know!"

"Then stop breathing."

"I'd die!"

She chuckled.

Damned sadist.

Anyway, a brief rest seemed to have helped a bit. Luckily, this floor had good air circulation. We were in the wilds with sheer cliffs where gusts of wind constantly blew around, and it felt like heaven right now. It wasn't so bad if I thought of this place like a Grand Canyon with some monsters. It was a pretty scenic place overall, and if you went to the right spots, there were some amazing views—with monsters, though.

I stood there squinting and taking deep breaths between the gusts of red

sand, and Sensei finally spoke up.

“All right, I’ll bestow a new magic technique on you as promised.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about! What are you teaching me today?!” I asked eagerly.

“You perked up awfully fast. Weren’t you feeling sick just a second ago?”

“I can hold it in if I’m learning a new technique! This is one of the main reasons I’m here in the first place!”

“Well, I suppose I understand your excitement,” she chuckled.

This “new technique” she spoke of wasn’t just a new spell but more like a special way to utilize mana. Sensei had once told me that understanding generic spells was simple if I just studied them, while individual elemental magic spells could only be taught by other mages of that element, or I had to invent my own. So, since she’d already taught me everything I needed to know about generic spells, she’d only focus on teaching me such techniques moving forward.

“How many generic spells can you stack and maintain at once?” she asked.

“Six—maybe seven?”

“I see. Well, that should suffice.”

Unlike my lightning elemental magic, generic spells could be used by anyone. One of its examples was Dispel, which I’d used to remove Scrael’s slave collar. Stacking and maintaining spells referred to the act of stacking buffs, like in an RPG.

I could use multiple support spells at once: Power Surge, which buffed my physical capabilities, Fortitude, which strengthened my defense, Concentration, which improved my reaction speed, Celerity, which sped up my agility, and Serendipity, which enhanced the probability of events occurring in an area. Such spells were a crucial part of both solo and team dives.

Being able to stack three or four of these spells was considered exceptional, but of course, that wasn’t good enough for my sadist teacher. Under her training, I’d been forced to go through an insane regimen of constantly

upkeeping support spells. I'd seriously thought I was going to die. She truly was evil incarnate.

"You were just having rude thoughts about me, weren't you?" she asked.

"No, not at all. I wasn't calling you a demon in my mind. I swear I wasn't, so please stop. That hurts. Please, stop. I'm sorry!" I immediately bowed down before her in surrender as she extended her shady claws toward me.

"So, does today's lesson have to do with stacking spells again?" I asked.

"Close, but no. Today, you'll cast multiple elemental spells simultaneously."

"What? You can do that?"

"Yes. The principle is the same as stacking generic spells, but it puts more strain on the body. I'm sure you're not so stupid that I have to explain why it'd be useful. You must master this technique and make it your own. Understood?"

"I'll give it a try," I said.

"Good. Then..."

With that, Sensei stood before me, and she gestured for me to perform a certain act.

"Um..." I interrupted, "I've always wondered, do we really need to do that?"

"Of course. It's a ritual for when a mage learns a new technique from their master."

A staff-shaped shadow extended upward from Sensei's shadow, and I clacked my own staff against it.

"Now, let's begin," she said. "You'll once again take another step to reach a new height in magic."

This was what she always said after our ritual. It added some gravitas to the moment, and I honestly thought it sounded kind of cool. Maybe that was why I called her "Sensei" with respect, even though I didn't want to admit it.

And so, my training with Sensei continued until I was completely exhausted, as usual.

Floor Six: The Adventure Isn't Over Until You Get Back to the Main Hall

It'd happened on the way home from the Gandakia Dungeon's Floating Garden.

There I was, in the greatest peril of my life: I was facing a Great Boar, the miniboss of this floor. It wasn't all that agile, but it was oppressively strong due to its sheer size. Countless Divers had been flattened by its rolling-tackle attack, which crushed any poor soul who stood in its path with its full weight. Even if one managed to evade the tackle, they often end up being skewered by its two sharp, upward-pointing tusks.

I'd already defeated the boss of the Floating Garden, Storm Raider, but barely. It was just bad luck that I'd run into this miniboss when I was nearly depleted of mana and health.

"Damn it. I can't believe I'm about to lose to such a weak miniboss on a low-level floor."

As soon as I paused for a moment due to the pain in my leg, I was hit with a huge glob of white viscous fluid.

"Gah! Is that...?"

It was. I could see its huge junk and balls. It really had shot its..."juices" at me. The Great Boar was actually known to immobilize its enemies with its bodily fluids, but I'd had no idea it'd be *those* fluids.

I may be a Diver, but as a woman, I couldn't help but feel a sense of horror run through me. The head-piercing stench and stickiness made me tense up so badly that I couldn't move.

The Great Boar moved closer.

I'd never felt such a primal and debilitating fear of a monster before. I knew it wasn't going to do *that* to me, but the dreadful thought filled my head.

“N-No...”

The creature grew even closer.

I could usually take down a monster like this with ease, but it seemed so much more terrifying now. The fear was too much, and I closed my eyes.

“Don’t talk. You’ll bite your tongue,” said a voice from above.

“Wha—” I began to speak in confusion, but in the next moment...

“Ameithys Orbit!”

I opened my eyes, and a strange-looking boy was carrying me in his arms. He was around the same age as me, and he was wearing clothes that I’d never seen before. People usually wore armor or robes, but his outfit looked completely different from what was considered ordinary attire here.

The boy who’d appeared out of nowhere zipped around with blazing speed while still carrying me in his arms. I probably would’ve bitten my tongue off if I hadn’t kept my mouth shut like I’d been told. He put me down once we were a safe distance away, then he flew back toward the Great Boar again.

From there, he delivered a kick at lightning speed—then another, and another. The Great Boar ricocheted around comically like a bouncy ball. He then unleashed one final kick on the miniboss and skidded to a halt next to me. Seeing that the Great Boar was now moving sluggishly, he took the opportunity to channel his mana.

“Quaternary Magic: Ameithys Bolt!” he shouted.

“Whaaat?!”

A beam of light flashed down from the skies, piercing right through the Great Boar.

I’d never seen magic like this before, not to mention that it was a Quaternary Magic spell too. Only a small handful of people in the entire Divers Guild were capable of using such advanced magic.

The creepy pig miniboss soon stopped moving.

And so, this had been how I’d fallen in love for the first time.

I was on the way back from the dungeon. It hadn't been a very productive day so far, so I was roaming around and considering whether I should try to make a bit more money before heading home. I knew this wasn't the best idea and that I was being careless, but since I was already out of danger, I felt an urge to take on a little more risk.

I ended up going down into the Submerged City at depth level 18. As the name suggested, the majority of this floor was submerged in water. There was a small piece of land by the entrance, but beyond that was a huge body of water that went on and on. This place was pretty much a giant lake—or a sea, even—and there was an entire ancient city below the water. It was like a city that had sunk into the sea in some futuristic world; ruined buildings, fish, and aquatic plants were visible through the water surface.

The monsters here were quite quirky. They were basically giant versions of creatures you'd find in the modern world for the most part, so I felt a strange sense of familiarity about them. The area was like a twisted combination of the third and fourth worlds from the third title of a certain video game series featuring a plumber.

Oversized fish was just the tip of the iceberg; there were even fish with legs like Tanno from a certain series about a southern boy. If anyone tried to skip from rock to rock above water, a giant fish with fat lips like the kind you'd find in that game with a plumber would probably eat them whole.

The sharks were the craziest ones of them all. Time and space seemed to be distorted here, and sharks flew here. Yes, that was right. I knew it sounded crazy, but it was true. In this world, sharks could fly. I thought my brain was gonna explode trying to comprehend that.

Even on land, carnivorous plants that looked like they could swallow a human whole roamed around. I wanted to sit down with one for an hour and grill it with questions like "What happened to your roots?"—plants shouldn't be walking around like that.

At least there weren't any giant bugs, or giant bugs, or giant bugs. There weren't anything like hairy caterpillars, flies, or roaches. Spiders? Spiders

weren't really creepy when they were ridiculously big but instead fell under the "scary" or even "cool" category. Centipedes? Huge centipedes just looked incredibly dangerous—and scary.

As I continued walking around, I found a girl being approached by a giant pig. "Approached" may make it sound like I walked in on it confessing its love for her, but it wasn't like that—they weren't even the same species.

The creature was a monster known as a Giant Boar. It had a gray mountain of a body and two long fangs protruding from its lower jaw. Its fur wasn't so fluffy but more bristly. It was considered the midboss of this area. Though, the real boss here was a phenomenon and not a creature, so this pig was almost like the boss by default.

So, what had happened to the pig? Of course, I'd dealt with it with one of my few special moves. After hitting the creature with a series of Lightning Kicks, I'd launched a moderately powered Quaternary Magic and defeated it.

So, I saved the girl by chance. The girl was, well, very stunning. She had unruly long light-gold hair, and her slightly slanted eyes shone with a lively vibrance. If Scrael's stats were fully invested in "cuteness," this girl was a good balance of half "cuteness" and half "coolness." She could look stylish and refined or dress up to make herself adorable if she wanted.

Stuck in the ground next to her was what I assumed to be her weapon: a giant sword that seemed way oversized for her. It was big enough to be straight out of *Monster Hunter*, and it had quite a distinctive design.

Anyway, that Great Boar was the top ranker on the "Monsters female Divers hate" list. It immobilized its target using fluids that came out...of a certain body part, which sounded like something that you'd only find in certain types of books. They were incredibly dangerous monsters for women in particular, and sure enough, this girl had been immobilized with that very method.

Her expensive-looking armor, along with the red knight's garb worn underneath, was covered in the forbidden goo. Her hair and face were also drenched in the white, sloppy mess. I didn't really want to touch the stuff, to be honest, but I couldn't just leave her like this, so I quickly began wiping her down. Come to think of it, some of it'd already gotten on me while I'd been

carrying her earlier.

I'd use a towel and some water to clean her up, but I needed a bucket. Thanks to that "mud incident" before, I had a bunch of them ready in my Dimension Bag. I dumped a bucket of water on the girl's head, and she made a small whimper and shrank into herself. It seemed the water was cold.



I wiped, wiped, and wiped the fluids off the girl's face. This stuff reeked. It seemed it'd even gotten inside her armor. I removed the parts I could and splashed some water on it. I couldn't just reach into her clothes, so I opted to just rinse her off.

After I was done washing her, next came the dryer. I stuck the plug onto my body and discharged some electricity. Thanks to my training, I'd become a convenient source of electricity for appliances as long as I wasn't out of mana.

No, I'm not a human power generator. Though, I guess I kind of am.

The girl seemed to have calmed down by now, and she thanked me apologetically. "Th-Thank you."

"No problem," I said with a smile.

She still seemed pretty out of it.

I knew she'd wet herself, but I pretended not to notice. I'd been on the verge of doing the same thing myself when I'd encountered scary monsters, so I really was in no position to judge. I'd already dumped a bunch of water on her, so the truth had been obscured. No one would ever know.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Oh, yes..." She seemed hesitant to speak.

I couldn't blame her for being traumatized after going through such a disgusting experience with that beast. It was a stupid question from me.

"Turn around for me," I said.

The girl nodded and turned away from me.

I began casting a healing spell. She was in pretty bad shape with barely any health left. Her damaged armor and injuries couldn't have been from that Great Boar, so she'd likely been worn out in the deeper levels. It seemed like the ripped-up knight's garb was the boar's doing, though. I had to make sure I didn't stare at the ripped parts of her clothes. *Heh heh.*

"Here, drink this," I said.

"What is this?"

“An energy drink. It’ll help.”

For some reason, people of this world became very energetic whenever they had these drinks. I didn’t want to give them out too much because they were so effective, but I felt like I had to give her one. I did wonder what would happen if I gave her one of those super powerful Monster energy drinks that destroyed your kidney and liver when you drank too much of it.

The girl downed the drink, then blinked a few times looking surprised.

Now that she was cleaned up and I was able to observe her properly, I noticed she had animal ears that lay flat from the side of her head. She had a light-wheat-colored tail too. She had to be of Tails Tribe, one of the races of this world and descendants of Jayde the Green. Their physical prowess was slightly superior to that of a human, but they were said to be more prideful than other races. Life seemed to be restored to her hair again thanks to the thorough cleaning and drying.

Her ears and tail look so soft... Wait, they remind me of a golden retriever.

Realizing she had the characteristics of a breed I recognized warmed my heart for some reason. I didn’t know why, but fluffy, long-haired dogs were just so adorable.

“Wh-What are you starin’ at?” she asked nervously.

“Oh, it’s just that the fur on your tail looks so nice.”

Her eyes widened, and she made a happy sound. It seemed my offhanded comment had delighted her.

She leaned forward eagerly and said, “It’s nice, isn’t it?! Can you tell? I spend a lot of time taking care of it every day! My ears too!”

“Yes, I’m sure you do. They’re very pretty.”

“You really do get it!”

“Y-Yesh!” I sputtered.

She was leaning so far that our noses almost touched.

I then remembered that even though Tails had a reputation for being prideful,

the truth was actually more like they were very proud of their furry tails and soft ears. They placed high importance on their tails and ears, and they'd even interrupt a conversation with someone they'd just met to brag about the quality and luster of the fur on their tail. They could go on endlessly about how much time they spent on maintenance or the type of brush and oil they used, completely unprompted.

My compliment seemed to have pleased her greatly. She showed off her ears some more, and her tail was wagging like a windmill. She wouldn't stop boasting about them. Seriously, there was no end in sight. I felt like I'd spend the rest of the day listening to her talk about her ears and tail if I let her.

Eventually, I found an opening to speak and took it. "It's strange seeing you down here. You're a high-ranking Diver, aren't you? How did the boss here get the best of you?"

"Well, I hunted down the boss of the Floating Garden, and it was a close fight," she explained.

"Ah. And you unfortunately ran into this boss on the way back. Instructor Seeker definitely would have something to say about that."

Instructor Seeker had always told me to make sure I had energy reserved for the trip home. It wasn't like you automatically got transported back to your base after hunting down your target and clearing the quest, neither would a bunch of cats carry you out on a cart when you were defeated; you had to walk home on your own two feet. The adventure isn't over until you get back to the main hall.

Anyway, even though I didn't show it, I was pretty surprised by this girl. She'd delved into depth level 48 solo—which was already insane—but she'd even taken down the Storm Raider, the boss there, all by herself. She must've been really strong for someone who had to be around the same age as me, maybe even as strong as Hiro.

"I'm surprised you could tell I'm a high ranker," said the girl.

"The expensive-looking equipment was a dead giveaway."

"Oh, right."

Indeed, she was wearing some superpremium armor. Her entire set was made from a special ore that could only be found in the dungeon, and it'd easily cost at least two hundred gold coins. That was equivalent to about two million Japanese yen, which was way out of reach for a high schooler like me.

Armor was in high demand in this world, and it couldn't just be mass-produced. Equipment that had to be custom-made really cost an arm and a leg. The price was so crazy that your eyeballs would pop out like in cartoons when you saw the receipt. Though, it was hard to tell now with all the dirt caked on it.

Our conversation came to a lull, and the girl introduced herself.

"Oh, the name's Eldrid. I'm a swordswoman, obviously. My Diver Rank is 54, and I'm level 48."

"Whoa!" I exclaimed. "You're in the top one hundred?"

Not to mention, level 48 was crazy high. She was more than ten levels above me. And it was just insane that she'd gone solo diving at a depth level that was around the same as her level. She was an absolute beast. I decided to classify her in the same category as Lion-Marui in my mind.

"My name's Kudo Akira—or Akira Kudo. I'm a mage, as you saw earlier."

"I've never seen such magic! What was that?"

"Oh, I'm a purple mage."

"'Purple'?! The hell is that? I mean, I have never heard of that before," Eldrid corrected herself, her tone suddenly becoming softer. It seemed she was consciously being more polite now that she'd calmed down.

"Oh, don't worry," I said. "You can talk like you usually do."

"Um, right. Got it."

I decided to loosen up a bit too.

"I never knew purple mages were a thing. I do know there are mages out there other than the four main colors, though."

"Yeah, they're really out there," I said. "I personally know one, but I'd like to meet more of them too."

I wanted to meet these nontraditional mages and have conversations with them, assuming they weren't demons like Sensei.

We continued talking, then I glanced over at the Great Boar's corpse.

"What should we do about this monster?" I asked.

"You beat it, so it's yours."

"I can have it?"

"That thing nearly got me. It wouldn't be right for me to take it."

"Then don't mind if I do."

Great Boars were basically pigs in monster form. Even though they were hated by pretty much everyone, their meat was known for being ridiculously tasty. I decided I'd have it carved up at the guild and keep just the meat. It was a little burned, but the inner parts should still be raw.

No, I don't know about its other uses. Viagra? Don't ruin my appetite.

I stuffed the Great Boar's carcass into my Dimension Bag and said, "Okay, let's go. I'll walk you to the main hall."

"Thanks."

And so, I walked back with Eldrid.

§

I'd picked up my stuff, then safely made it back to the main hall with Kudo's help. I'd never even imagined I'd end up nearly dying on such an easy floor. I made a mental note to be more careful moving forward.

I told Kudo I wanted to thank him, but he said, "I made it a policy to not charge people my gazillion yen assistance fee." I didn't really understand what that meant, but I guessed he was telling me not to worry about it. That was nice of him, considering most people here were greedy and wouldn't hesitate to take your money.

Kudo went back into the dungeon after going out of his way to walk me to the washing area. I was really grateful for that.

I washed myself, then headed to the reception area. There, my receptionist

Maya was looking into a hand mirror and fixing her makeup. As soon as she noticed me, she finished up what she was doing and smiled.

“Welcome back, Eldrid. How did it go?” she asked.

“I beat the Storm Raider,” I said. “Told ya I would.”

“You soloed the boss of the Floating Garden! Very impressive.”

“I bet you’re pretty thrilled as my receptionist.”

“Totally! Thanks a bunch!” said Maya excitedly with a twinkle in her eye.

She was always friendly like this, but I didn’t have the strength to keep putting on a fake smile.

“You know, I’ve come to realize I still have a lot to learn, especially with what happened today...”

“Oh?”

“I barely avoided a disaster today on the way back. Pretty stupid of me.”

“Really?! You? That never happens!”

After making my shameful confession, I handed over the rare loot from the Storm Raider for the guild to purchase.

“Hey,” I said, “would you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it’s about a colleague.”

“Another Diver?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

This was about Kudo, of course. I felt like I should’ve thanked him before going our separate ways. I wanted to ask her if she knew anything about him, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Maya seemed to catch on to something. “Ohhh! Is it love?! Did you fall in love, Eldrid?!” she squealed.

It was then that I remembered just how much she loved talking about topics like this. There was at least one of these girls in every group—the ones who

loved talking about romance and gossip. She was usually fine to work with, but this side of her was a bit of a shame. Well, the receptionist on her right was the greedy type who sold private information and let violations slide, and the one on her left made excuses like she “is tired” or “doesn’t feel like it” to do only the bare minimum work. The number seven reception area was full of veterans who were...eccentric in their own ways.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” I said. “It’s not like that.”

“But I could tell by the look on your face.”

“You’re wrong,” I said bluntly.

I wanted to put an end to this nonsense right then and there, but I failed to wipe that grin off her face. A veteran receptionist like her wasn’t fazed by a bit of intimidation. *What a pain.*

“So, who’s your sweetheart?” she asked.

“I said it’s not like that, damn it!”

“Sure, sure. Then who’s the person you want to know about?”

“U-Um...his name’s Kudo.”

“Yes, yes, Kudo... Kudo... Wait, Kudo?” she paused, then called out to another receptionist next to her; if I remembered correctly, they called her the Mooching Witch. “Hey, Ashley, you’re assigned to him, aren’t you? That one easygoing boy?”

“Hmm? You mean Kudo? Yes, I am. Why do you ask?” said the other receptionist.

“Well, Eldrid says she fell in love with him!”

“The hell is wrong with you?! I didn’t fuckin’ say that!” I shouted, but Maya was unfazed.

“But just look at you. That’s the face of a girl in love,” she said.

I felt like my face was on fire.

“Really? Kudo? Well, that’s—hmm...” said the other receptionist, Ashley Poney, vaguely.

“Do you have his files?” asked Maya.

“I do, but you have to follow the regulations. You can’t just hand them to her.”

“I know, I know. Let’s see his rank... Whoa, it’s in the thirty thousands? You’re out of his league, girl.”

“What?! Thirty thousands?! *Him?*” I asked incredulously.

“Looks like it. He just registered half a year ago, so it looks like he’s just a rookie.”

“That’s impossible!”

“Oh?”

“There’s no way! He can use Quaternary Magic!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?” asked Maya, confused.

I couldn’t blame her. There was no way some beginner or random mage could use something as advanced as Quaternary Magic. It was the kind of magic that could decide the outcome of a war. He seemed to have been holding back when he’d used it on the Great Boar, but it should be incredibly destructive in its full power.

I glanced at Ashley Poney, who nodded awkwardly.

“Hey, Ashley! What’s going on here?! Why is his rank so low?” I demanded.

“Eek! I-It’s not like I broke any rules or anything! He’s the one who doesn’t want to rank up!”

“Huh? Oh, is that so? Sorry,” I apologized.

“I thought I was going to have a heart attack. This is your fault, Kudo...” muttered Ashley, teary-eyed.

I felt bad for jumping to conclusions and yelling at her.

“Hey, Ashley? So this guy can use Quaternary Magic—what level is he?” asked Maya.

“He’s level 33. He has some achievements under his belt too. He solo cleared

and defeated the bosses in the Dark Corridors and the Night Soil Swamps.”

“Bwah?! What? How have I not heard about this? Huuuh?!”

Maya was making funny noises in a state of complete confusion. I couldn’t blame her. She had to know about all the powerful Divers whether she was assigned to them or not.

“That’s impressive for a solo mage...” I said.

“Yes, it is, but...” said Ashley Poney with a smile, then held her head in her hands.

I immediately understood why. She must’ve been nagging at him to raise his rank for a while now without success.

Maya furrowed her brows. “His rank really shouldn’t be that low. With his abilities, he could easily be named and get famous. He belongs in the top two hundred, or even top one hundred.”

“I don’t know. He just goes to the dungeon for fun,” said Ashley.

“For fun?”

“He’s like my dad,” I mused.

My dad liked to go deep into the dungeon while going out for a walk. He’d made me go with him, which was why I’d ended up being this strong.

So, that’s the kind of guy he is.

“Hee hee. Kudo, huh? This is going to be interesting.” Ashley smiled.

“Hmm? Why’s that?” asked Maya.

“Well, there’s this girl whom he became friends with recently. I have a feeling this will develop into some spicy drama.”

“Oooh, really?!”

I heard not a word that the delinquent receptionists whispered.

Floor Seven: Can I Make Potions? No... Okay, I Lied; Yes, I Can

One day, I was at the receptionist's window before going on a dive, and Ashley began speaking to me in a wheedling tone. I immediately recognized that she wanted something from me again. I didn't really want to deal with her right now, so I put my poker face on.

"Hey, Kudo," she said.

"What is it, Ashley? If you want a brand-name bag, please ask someone else."

"No, that's not—"

"Some expensive clothes, then? Why don't you get a boyfriend and ask him? I'm sure it'd be easy for you to get a boyfriend or two. Or three. Or four."

"No, I—"

"No? Hmm, what else could you want... Some sort of accessory with a giant jewel on it?"

"Just listen to me, will you—wait...do I really seem that greedy to you?" she asked.

"I mean, yeah. You're pretty famous as the Mooching Witch of the receptionists. I don't think 'Mooching' rolls off the tongue very well, so I personally prefer 'Heartless.' It sounds cooler too—"

"Who the hell started calling me that, huh?! Come out! Come out right now! Dammit!" she roared.

Her pleasant tone from just a moment ago had completely flipped, and her face right now could probably send an Orc fleeing in terror. Even the receptionists on both sides of her window—the one who loved talking about romance and the one who always looked sleepy—conspicuously averted their eyes. It seemed Ashley's colleagues had started it, and I honestly couldn't blame them.

I waited for her to calm down and asked, “So, what did you want to ask me?”

“Anyway,” said Ashley, “you can make potions, can’t you?”

“No, why?”

“Don’t give me that.”

“Oh, come on. What makes you think I can make potions? I don’t even know what’s in those things,” I said, but my acting skills weren’t cutting it.

Immediately, a creepy smile spread across her face.

“Kudo? I’d love it if you’d answer my questions truthfully.”

“Yes, yes, I can make potions. Are you happy?”

“Why did you try to hide it?” she asked.

“Because I knew you’d ask me to make some if I confessed.”

“Well, I can see why you’d think that.”

I wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. Maybe she wasn’t going to ask me to make potions after all.

Potions were quite valuable in this world for a good reason: their ability to recover energy and heal wounds was so incredible that there was basically no need for surgeons. These mysterious drinks were just like those in video games.

According to my instructor, who’d taught me about all the strange things in Do-Melta, potions were the same as magic, and they “acted as a bridge between a wounded and a healed person.” If you went by that logic, you could pretty much use it to explain anything, but I’d accepted that weird things happen in this world and tried not to think too deeply about it.

Of course everyone would want items like that. Divers, especially, got hurt all the time, so there was no such thing as having too many potions. So, if people found out I could make them, it wasn’t hard to imagine they’d want not just one but several of them. The supply never met the demand for an item like this.

But making potions took time—time that I didn’t have to spend. I definitely wouldn’t be able to venture into the dungeon if I just sat around making them all day.

“So, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” continued Ashley.

“I won’t make any. I don’t have time,” I said.

“I don’t need you to make a lot of them. You know that gold potion you traded in before?”

“A gold potion? Oh, that.”

She was talking about a potion I’d made by mixing a regular potion (worth three silver coins) and an energy drink.

Sensei had taught me how to make potions at the same time she’d taught me healing magic, and there was a period where I’d been obsessed with potion-making. I’d made a bunch of them through trial and error and sold any surplus to the guild through Ashley for cheap, including the gold potion.

Energy drinks and modern medicine worked incredibly well for the people of this world as they’d been in Eldrid’s case. Similarly, the gold potion had been super effective. In fact, its effect could nearly compare to that of a high potion, which was worth five gold coins. However...

“I don’t understand how medicine I made with those weeds I pulled in the Great Forest Ruins could be so amazing,” I mused.

“They’re thea, not weeds,” corrected Ashley.

“It’s all the same,” I said. “You people here seem to think they’re sacred or something.”

“Thea is said to be bestowed to us by Torpaz the Yellow. It’s a miracle of this world. We don’t ‘think’ they’re sacred. They *are*.”

“Ah, so a god made them for us humans?”

“That’s right. You use them too, so you should be grateful. You’re on the same level as children who call the vegetables in salad ‘grass.’”

She had a point. I should appreciate that a god had put effort into making them for us, but they were still weeds to me, and she wasn’t going to convince me otherwise.

“So, back to the potion you traded in,” said Ashley. “It was so effective that a

bunch of people are asking for more.”

“How? I didn’t give you that many...”

“I split them up into smaller portions, and they still worked well enough even then.”

“Um...you haven’t told anyone I made them, have you?”

“No need to worry about that. If I had, you’d be in a lot of trouble already.”

“True.”

If it was as popular as she said, I would’ve been swarmed by Divers as well as merchants looking to resell them already.

“Are they really *that* popular?” I asked.

“I hear they work really well. Normal potions just heal you, but yours can supposedly temporarily enhance your abilities.”

“Ah.”

That must’ve been the effect of the energy drink I’d mixed in. I hoped the users understood that it was just a temporary doping effect, but I had a feeling they didn’t. Even in the modern world, there were a lot of people who didn’t realize those drinks only gave you a quick boost upfront along with a crash afterward.

“Here are some reviews from the users,” said Ashley.

“Reviews?” I asked, confused.

Ashley handed me several notes, and here was what they read: “I was able to beat a boss monster thanks to the gold potion I took before the fight. I’m truly grateful to whoever made it.”

“A gold potion saved my companion’s life. I can’t thank the potion maker enough. Thank you so, so much.”

“Ever since I started drinking gold potions, I wake up feeling refreshed and have been living a healthy lifestyle. I can’t imagine life without them now.”

“I got a girlfriend, and I now win whenever I gamble thanks to gold potions. Life is good now.”

“The morning after using a gold potion, I was able to take a massive dump. I feel so much better now that my long-standing issue has been resolved.”

I felt like these reviews got weirder as they went on.

“These look like reviews for some sketchy mail-order product... Some of these effects have nothing to do with my potion,” I pointed out.

“It’s just a feeling thing. There’s a lot more where these came from.”

As I wondered what that was even supposed to mean, Ashley dumped a stack of notepaper with user feedback written on them in front of me.

Just how many of these are there?

“Um, is it just me, or does the number of reviews and potions I gave you not add up? And what’s with the name ‘gold potion’?” I asked.

“I told you; I divided them up into smaller portions before selling them, and they still work really well. We had to call it something, so the guild master named it,” said Ashley.

“Their naming sense is questionable.”

“Agreed.”

I wondered just how many portions she’d split up the potions into. This was basically fraud.

“You know, word of your legendary potions has been going around among the high-rankers,” said Ashley. “Prices were soaring by the time the last batch was running out. The market value went all the way up to twenty gold coins... Hee hee...hee hee hee...”

Ashley laughed eerily at the thought of all that gold. She sure did love money.

“Twenty gold coins, huh...” I said to myself.

That was around four times the cost of the high mana potion I’d used when removing Scrael’s collar a while back. The recipe for mana potions was a well-kept secret, so I couldn’t make those myself.

“I mean, they say it doesn’t just heal your health and energy, but it boosts your durability too. I can understand why it costs so much,” said Ashley.

“Wait, aren’t there other potions that also come with buffing effects?” I asked.

“Of course not. Potions are for healing wounds. How do yours have those effects when they’re made from thea anyway?”

“Because I mixed in a bunch of stuff, I guess,” I said vaguely.

As I shrugged and averted my gaze, Ashley gave me an inviting sidelong glance and said, “Hey, why don’t you make a few more of those and let me handle them? What d’ya say?”

“Why do you sound like you’re trying to get me involved in a gambling scheme? What? Are you gonna tell me you’re going to tenfold my investment? You should talk to Instructor Seeker for that sort of thing.”

“Oh, don’t be like that; we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“You’re planning on selling them illicitly and pocketing the money, aren’t you?” I asked.

“N-N-No, of course not! Wh-What kind of person do you think I am?!” said Ashley, her eyes shifting from side to side and her tone turning several pitches too high.

“Could you be any more obvious?”

“Wellllll, I’d be looking forward to a bonus if they sell well, I guess,” she admitted.

“So it’s for your personal benefit.”

“Is that something wrong? Why can’t I benefit too, huh?!”

“Well, no, it isn’t wrong, but—”

“Then trade in some potions! Come on!” she demanded.

“I dunno...” I said.

It wasn’t as if I had plenty of them to trade in. In fact, I only had enough for my personal use. I didn’t really want to dump a bunch of them out into the market, to be honest.

“Oh man, I think I feel my tongue getting looser,” began Ashley. “I just might

let it slip to all sorts of people that you're a talented potion maker who we should work to the bone."

"Are you blackmailing me? You do realize you might never get a bonus thanks to my potions again if you expose my secret."

"I'm just kidding. Everyone knows how tight-lipped I am! Please, just do it to help me out!"

She was backtracking pretty hard there. Making potions would only be helping her wallet with no benefit in it for me. But it didn't seem like she was backing down. She stared intently, put her hands together as if in prayer, and pleaded with tear-filled eyes.

"Um, so can you help me with some reception work?" I asked.

"I won't stop not working until you say yes!"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Well, you should."

"Okay, fine—but only a little bit," I caved in.

"Yes! Thank you! I'll let the guild master know right away." With that, Ashley dashed to the backroom.

I sighed.

Guess she's putting off helping me for later... Well, at least she'll stop bugging me if I hand over just a couple potions.

I couldn't remember Ashley being so persistent like this about anything before. She hadn't been this tenacious even when I'd accidentally let her catch a glimpse of my clock or the photographs attached to my dungeon-diving notes. Maybe there was a reason behind it.

Eventually, Ashley returned looking rather content. She must've gotten a bonus approved for sealing the deal with me. I wouldn't even be surprised if she'd demanded one.

"Thank you, Kudo. The guild master was pleased."

"You also seem pretty pleased yourself," I pointed out.

“You bet I am!”

“But why would the guild master be so happy about some potions?”

“Unlike the previous one, this guild master prioritizes the safety of Divers over material quotas. They put a lot of importance in anything that can help Divers explore the dungeon safely, and it’s easy to see how effective the gold potion is in that regard.”

“So you’ve been pressured to get more potions, then,” I said.

“Yea—I mean, Kudo.”

“I figured as much.”

“Aha ha... Well, you guessed it,” she admitted. “The guild master has been getting hounded by other Divers and *really* wanted me to settle this.”

“I feel like I got a glimpse of the hardships of being part of an organization.”

“You’re not wrong. It’s actually a lot of work, you know?”

“Then could you work hard for me too?” I asked, making a praying gesture.

“Really...?” she said, sounding unimpressed.

I needed her help though, so she was gonna have to deal with it.

“Oh, here’s your potion-meister certification card, by the way,” she said.

Ashley handed me what looked like a license without a photo on it.

“Potion-meister? Is that an official position?”

“Of course. We can’t have someone causing problems by selling potions unregulated. Usually, a guild specializing in potions issues a brewing license, and people buy potions from meisters with those licenses so that they know their potion is safe and their source is trustworthy.”

“So why is the Divers Guild issuing this license?” I asked.

“Freida’s Potion Guild has been merged into the Divers Guild since people here just buy all their potions at our guild anyway.”

“Makes sense. The merger made it more convenient for everyone.”

I was curious about the power struggle between the two guilds. But it was

probably gonna be a long story and I wasn't *that* curious, so I decided not to ask.

Ashley pointed at the card she'd handed me. "This has been personally signed by the guild master, and it makes you a certified special-grade meister."

"Special-grade?"

"That's the highest rank."

"Wait, I have the highest rank? No way."

"But you're capable of making something that no one meister can dream of making," she said.

I mean, they couldn't get energy drinks like I could, so of course not. Though, there were other reasons why the rank didn't suit me.

"Like I mentioned earlier, I don't make my potions from scratch. I use the potions from the guild as a base," I pointed out.

"Really? But you mix the base with other stuff, right?"

"Well, I guess, but..." I trailed off.

I did measure the potions and energy drinks by the milliliter, so you could say I was mixing them with a proper method. And I did use magic to mix them since potions had a special property that prevented them from mixing with other substances, so it did take some actual work. Though, I was only able to do all this thanks to Sensei.

"Since you can do that properly, that makes you a bona fide meister. I think."

"You 'think'?"

"I mean, I'm an amateur when it comes to potions," said Ashley as she sighed deeply with an envious gaze. "Oh, I'd get rich so quickly if I could make them. Kudo, what do you say to being my sugar daddy?"

"It might be a tempting offer if you weren't just in it for the money. But I'm gonna have to decline."

"Come on; don't be stingy."

"That's why they call you the Mooching Witch, you know."

“I caaan’t heeeear yooou!” said Ashley with her hands over her ears.

“We can get into negotiations for the potion sales later. Looking forward to working with you!” she said.

“Sure, sure,” I said.

I waved her off nonchalantly, but I’d need to make sure I got what I wanted during the negotiations—not on the monetary side, but to ensure I could secure myself some time for dungeon diving.

And so, I became a potion-meister as of this day.

Floor Eight: Please Stop Harassing Me; That's a Crime

It was around half a year ago when I'd first arrived in Do-Melta. A friend in my class who was in the occult research club had wanted to research and collect data on urban legends, and since he hadn't had enough participants, he'd wanted me to help him with an experiment on entering another world. Surprisingly, one of those experiments had actually worked, and that had been how I'd become a Diver in the Free City of Freida.

There'd been several major events since: meeting the greatly admired Lion-Maru, learning everything there was to know about dungeon diving from the infamously hopeless dungeon guide Instructor Seeker, and meeting Sensei Reise, the sadistic mage who'd been once feared as the lord of fear over twenty years ago.

I hadn't been actively seeking to interact with others since then because I'd been busy with Sensei's requests, studying magic, and exploring dungeons to grind levels, so I didn't know many people in this world. I knew Miguel because his receptionist was next to mine, and I'd only met Scrael and Eldrid recently. Outside of these friends, my acquaintances included my receptionist Ashley, Sensei, Lion-Maru, and Instructor Seeker. There were a few others who I was familiar with, but we weren't all that close.

"Kudo Akira!"

I was sitting in the main hall as usual and vaguely thinking about how to make more friends in this world when I thought I heard someone calling my name. Maybe I was just imagining it? The voice didn't sound like anyone I knew.

"Hey, you hear me?!"

Whoever it was, they sounded rather upset about being ignored, but I'd learned in elementary school that I wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. I had no intention of turning around that easily.

“Hey!”

I spoke not a word.

“I said, ‘Hey!’”

There was silence.

“I’m talking to you...”

The voice sounded more and more lonely as I continued to ignore it. I was finally starting to feel sorry for whoever the speaker was, so I turned around. There, I saw a green-haired boy in a white robe holding a staff with a piece of jade embedded at the tip. He seemed to be around my age; he had beady eyes, and he had facial features that would put him in the “cute” category. He seemed like he’d be really popular with aggressive older women.

“Sorry, but do I know you?” I asked.

“How many times do I need to tell you?! I’m Ricky Rudiano! Ri-cky Ru-di-a-no!” The boy seethed.

“What do you mean? I don’t remember interacting with you before.”

“Not only have we already met, but we’ve also explored the dungeon together—several times! How do you not remember?!”

“Have we?” I asked, playing dumb.

This may have seemed cold, but I had a reason for not wanting to associate with him. The reason being...

“Kudo Akira! I challenge you to a magic duel!”

I remained silent again.

This happened every time we met. This boy Ricky, a green mage, saw me as a rival for some reason. I wasn’t interested in fighting him, so I’d been turning down his challenges, avoiding him, or simply running away from him, but it didn’t seem to deter him one bit. Could anyone really blame me for getting annoyed by him when he kept bugging me despite my blatant refusal to entertain his request? Surely, they’d understand why I was being so cold to him under these circumstances.

“Kudo Akira! Answer me!” he demanded.

“I’ve told you a million times: no, I don’t want to duel you,” I finally replied.

“Why?! A duel between mages is an excellent opportunity to test your own skills! This is your destiny! Why refuse?”

“Because I don’t like pain,” I said bluntly.

That was pretty much what it boiled down to. And yet...

“Stop messing around! You always lie and find some way to weasel out of it,” complained Ricky.

“I’m serious.”

“If that was true, you wouldn’t be enjoying dungeon diving as much as you do! Do you think I’m an idiot?!”

I was at a loss for words. I was being one hundred percent serious, but he wouldn’t believe me for some reason. First of all, I couldn’t understand why he equated dungeon diving to pain. As long as you prepared carefully, you could leave the dungeon completely unscathed. I could attest to this since I’d completed dives without using any magic and limiting myself to only using items and medicine. I liked playing with restrictions like that—oh, but I didn’t like being physically restricted in bondage. I wouldn’t say who, but I didn’t want a certain someone to do that to me ever again.

“Why are you so hung up on me, Ricky?” I asked.

“I’m aiming to be the greatest mage in Freida! And to do that, I have to defeat you first!”

Apparently, he’d set his sights on me as the first barrier on his path to becoming the greatest. Maybe I was just the right target for him as I was a novice as far as mages went, but I wished he would go bug someone else instead. There were a good number of mages in Freida, so he could just challenge one of the famous ones instead. I couldn’t understand why it had to be me.

“So duel me! I challenge you!” he said.

“I told you, I don’t want to,” I replied with a slack expression, my head resting

lazily on the table.

“Why are you always so unmotivated?!”

Ricky stomped the ground in frustration. He seemed pretty upset that this wasn't going the way he'd hoped, but things weren't going how I'd hoped either. It seemed this was going to be a test of endurance to see who'd cave in first.

Ricky wasn't a bad kid. In fact, he was a good guy, but he didn't know how to be flexible when things didn't work out. He was too stubborn. Seeing how he had no intention of relenting, I was stumped on what to do with him.

Suddenly, a familiar face appeared at the guild entrance. Dressed in her tribal outfit with a slit down the side was the Long-Ears girl Scrael, whom I'd rescued a while back. She seemed to have noticed me in my chair. Her ears perked up, then she nimbly walked over like a bouncing bunny.

“Hey, Akira. About to go for a dive?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. I was just thinking of farming some EXP,” I replied.

Scrael walked up next to me. “I see,” she said coolly. “I suppose I wouldn't mind going with you.”

As usual, she had an interesting way of asking to join me. She wasn't the most straightforward about these things.

“Let's go, then,” I said.

“Okay,” she said with a nod.

She wasn't such a contrarian this time for whatever reason.

Scrael reached out and held my hand.

“Um, why—” I started.

“Because I'm going with you.”

“But—”

“You don't want me to?” she asked as she pressed up closer and looked up at me.

“No, I do! It’s not a problem at all!”

“Good.”

“Um, right...” I mumbled with embarrassment.

Scrael finally seemed to notice Ricky. “Who’s that?” she asked.

“Some stranger.”

“I see.” Scrael nodded.

I stood up from my chair and picked up my bag. Ricky was frozen this entire time as if he couldn’t follow along with the conversation. Just as I tried to leave for the dungeon with Scrael, Ricky finally recovered.

“Heeey! Who are you calling a ‘stranger’?!” he said. “We were just talking a second ago!”

“Oh, that didn’t work?” I asked as I stuck my tongue out playfully.

“Of course not! How stupid do you think I am?!” he snapped.

It seemed that gesture only worked for diffusing situations when you’re a cute girl.

“You actually know him, Akira?” asked Scrael.

“I guess you could say that,” I replied.

“He’s a mage?”

“Yeah, a green mage.”

“A windcaster...” she muttered.

Green mages were practitioners of wind magic, blessed by Jayde the Green. Wind was a highly versatile element, and green mages were valued as highly as blue mages when it came to dungeon exploration. They were so useful you’d want one in every household.

“That reminds me,” I said, “Ricky, weren’t you recently bragging about graduating as the top student from some magic academy?”

“You mean he was a top graduate at Meruem Magic Academy?” asked Scrael.

“You know about it, Scrae?” I asked.

But instead, Ricky answered triumphantly, “Of course she does! Meruem Magic Academy is considered the best institution in the world for learning magic! Who *hasn’t* heard of it?”

“Huh,” I said apathetically as I picked my nose.

“What’s with that weak reaction?”

I mean, I didn’t really care. I couldn’t help it. I would’ve been impressed if he’d said he’d graduated from somewhere like the University of Tokyo. Since I wasn’t from this world, I didn’t really understand how great of a feat it was to graduate from this magic academy. Graduating at the top of his class did sound impressive, but still.

Scrael cocked her head curiously and asked, “Did something happen between you and this talented graduate?”

“I guess he challenged me to a duel once, and I beat him—or rather, repelled him.”

“Hmm,” she said curiously.

Maybe she was confused by my strange phrasing, but I didn’t know how else to explain it. I barely remembered my feud with him from when we’d first met. All I remembered from that time was that I’d been in an exhausted daze on the way home from one of Sensei’s lessons, and I’d suddenly heard something screaming and running at me from behind. I’d thought it’d been a monster or something, and I had used a self-defense spray for fending off weirdos at it and had run away. There’d been no time for me to worry about who or what had been coming at me. It hadn’t been my fault.

Anyway, things had been like this ever since. It was pretty absurd.

“Kudo Akira!” shouted Ricky. “I still don’t consider that encounter a loss! You pretended to flee so you could spring your trap on me!”

“Then just keep believing what you want. There’s no need for us to fight, right?” I asked.

“Well, I suppose that’s true...”

“Yup. Let’s just say I lost. We’ll be going now.”

“Okay, I underst— Wait, wait, wait! You thought you could smooth-talk your way out of this? Not so fast!”

“Dang it. He was just about to nod too,” I said.

“Quiet! Stop walking away!”

“No thanks. I wanna go dungeon diving, and Scrae’s waiting for me.”

“Then I’m going with you!”

“Really?”

And so, the three of us had decided to dive together.

§

When dungeon diving with multiple people, the team composition, or the roles of each individual and their positioning, was key. The vanguard had to be adept at close-quarters combat, and the role was usually handled by swordsmen or hand-to-hand fighters. This could also be a defensive role, where one had to hold enemies back from pushing back the front line; in such cases, this position was typically manned by heavily armed Divers with armor and large shields. Meanwhile, the rear guard’s role was usually to either support the vanguards or look out for danger. As the description suggested, they’d support the front line with projectile attacks using throwing weapons or a bow, or in the case of mages, they’d use offensive or generic spells to provide backup. The lookout could be considered the most important role, but our party didn’t have one, so I’d skip over it for now.

The composition of our three-man team was very simple: Scrael took the lead as the group’s fistfighter, and staying in the rear to back her up with offensive and support magic were the two mages, Ricky and I. Having two mages was a rare privilege for a team, and Scrael’s performance made it clear that she was no slouch herself.

Her opponents were Lizard Skins here in the Yellow Wall Vestiges at depth level 20 on dungeon route two. They looked just like the Lizardmen you’d find in manga, games, and anime. They stood around two meters tall, and they had long, sharp claws with serrated teeth. These were the aggressive kinds of monsters that attacked Divers on sight. They were bipedal creatures that were

dexterous with their hands, but they were rather simple creatures that didn't form communities or show any significant signs of intellect. They were definitely monsters though, considering they had core stones inside them.

Scrael took up what appeared to be a kung fu stance, then stepped around nimbly and rhythmically to evade a Lizard Skin's deadly claws. Despite being small, cute, and greatly outsized by her opponent, she avoided the attacks so effortlessly that she didn't seem to be in any danger at all.

Her expression was cool as a cucumber the entire time while the monster's breathing and screams grew rougher as it swung at empty air. I thought maybe the frustration was getting to it because its attacks were becoming more reckless over time. A careless attack left a combatant wide open, and Scrael wasn't one to let a mistake like that go unpunished. She swiftly stepped right up to the Lizard Skin and blasted its stomach with a palm strike.



An explosive impact shook the floor. The monster trembled, then fell to the ground.

“So that’s the Long-Ears martial art Jinshu,” said Ricky with a tinge of fear in his voice.

As he’d mentioned, Jinshu was a famous martial art used by Long-Ears. Supposedly, it was some supercrazy fighting method that somehow enhanced the user’s physical prowess. By shifting one’s center of gravity and elongating their muscles and bones, they could deliver an impact that penetrated and destroyed their target.

Scrael had once told me when we’d been on an adventure that the palm strike was called Efflux Wave, an attack that sent a powerful shock wave through the target at the moment of contact. It was basically like the Tsuhaiken technique used by a certain manga character with an iron fist. I could easily imagine my innards getting shattered after taking a direct hit from Scrael with one of those. Her moves were downright scary, and I’d never want to mess with her.

Scrael thrust a giant knife into the immobilized Lizard Skin and began carving out some materials and the core stone.

I watched her as she worked her way through the gruesome process and said, “That’s how a Long-Ears fights. You handled those depth-level-20 monsters like they were nothing.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ricky, “that’s why they’re known as the strongest race in Do-Melta.”

“The strongest, huh?”

“Well, the other races are strong too—including humans, of course!” he added as if his pride required him to do so.

There were various demihuman races in Do-Melta other than the Long-Ears. First, there were the Beast-Heads, who were blessed by Torpaz the Yellow. Lion-Maru was a Beast-Head, and the majority of them tended to have the heads of carnivores like lions, wolves, tigers, and bears. They were all bold and daring in nature, fighting monsters on the front lines since the old days, so they

were often featured in epics as heroes. Half-beasts were often antagonized in Earthly fantasy stories, but the people of Do-Melta didn't hold such prejudices. Beast-Heads were a symbol of valor in this world, and their wild appearances made them especially popular with kids as if they were superheroes.

Next, there were the Tails, a race blessed by Jayde the Green. They were demihumans with animal ears and tails, and they were usually the first thing people thought of when they heard "half-beast." Eldrid, the girl who I'd rescued a while back, was a Tails. They were said to be prideful and difficult free spirits, but they were mostly kindhearted people who liked to do things at their own pace. Though, their ears and tails were a sensitive subject.

And then, there were the Adorners. They were blessed by Ruvi the Red, and, along with the Long-Ears, they were said to be the top contender for the title of "the strongest race in Do-Melta." They looked exactly like humans, but their physical abilities were far superior. Their name came from their custom of wearing the hides of animals and monsters they'd defeated. Although they possessed incredible strength, they burned through their energy and got hungry very quickly. As such, they could often be found collapsed on the ground somewhere or stuffing their faces with food. Since their energy expenditure was so inefficient, they had to eat multiple meals a day just to sustain themselves. I'd shared my food and water with a hungry Adorner in the dungeon before, and couldn't help but imagine how inconvenient it must've been for them. Still, they were widely known for their amazing power, and there was usually at least one of them in every top Diver team.

Suddenly, Ricky tilted his head curiously and asked, "Wait a second, how did you know a Long-Ears anyway?"

"I helped her out in the dungeon a while back. She was brought in as a combat slave, but the rest of her team was already wiped out by the time I got there," I explained.

"That's some good timing—wait, why doesn't she have a collar on if she was a combat slave?"

"Oh, I Dispelled it."

"You *Dispelled* a slave collar?!"

“Yeah. Why?”

“You make it sound like it’s no big deal...” said Ricky, his expression a strange mixture of surprise and exasperation.

Come to think of it, I vaguely remembered Ashley saying a slave collar couldn’t be Dispelled. That was considered common knowledge, so it was no wonder the whatchamacallit magic academy graduate was surprised.

Ricky eventually recovered from his stunned silence, then put on a tough front, albeit far too late. “H-Humph! Not bad, I suppose! But I could probably do that if I tried, I think!”

“You don’t sound all that confident,” I said.

I’d proved it was possible, so I was pretty sure he could do it if he really put his mind to it.

“I used about four high mana potions to pull it off though,” I said.

“What?! For a stranger? Do you know how much those things cost?!”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t just leave her like that.”

“What are you? Some kind of saint?”

“Well, no, but...” I trailed off.

I remembered how pained she’d looked before I’d removed the collar. After seeing her like that, I couldn’t bring myself to just walk away without trying to help.

“Weren’t you concerned about wasting your money?” asked Ricky.

“I’d be lying if I said it didn’t cross my mind, but I pretty much think of my money here like virtual currency.”

“Huh?”

Ricky seemed to be having a hard time trying to figure out what I meant.

I pulled a gold coin out of my pocket and started fiddling with it. This coin was worth about ten thousand yen, but I couldn’t just conspicuously exchange it all in one go. It would’ve been extremely suspicious for a student to walk into a pawnshop with tons of gold coins. I didn’t have to be a psychic to know I’d get

the cops and my parents called on me, which was why I had some other ways to deal with that. Even if I had tons of coins on hand, my life was based in Japan, so they weren't doing me any good usually. The whole point of having money was to spend it. I suppose you could stare at it to make yourself feel better, but I wasn't about to do that. Scrael had been paying me back little by little, so I didn't feel like I'd lost anything by helping her.

Ricky finally seemed to recover from his confused daze. "Long-Ears are famous for hating humans, but it all makes sense now," he said.

"Yeah, I think she still sees other humans as enemies though," I said.

Although she was a member of the Divers Guild, I hadn't seen her go diving with other humans before. Whenever a human approached her, she always grew cautious and on edge like she was a second away from ripping their head off. I had a feeling Ricky hadn't fallen victim to her malice only because I was talking to him and he didn't invade her personal space. He was the kind of person to completely ignore things he had no interest in, and it seemed her wariness was eased by his apparent lack of interest in her.

We continued talking among ourselves, and Scrael eventually returned with the Lizard Skin's core stone and blood on her face.

"Sorry for leaving all the dirty work to you," I said.

"I don't mind. The monsters around here are all weak, and you should reserve your mana. It's common sense," she said pointedly.

She was right that we should reserve our mana, but it was a bold claim to say the enemies at depth level 20 were "weak."

"I knew I could count on you," I said.

"I'll punch a hole through a Four-Armed Goat too now that I don't have a slave collar on me."

"R-Really...?" I stammered.

Judging by the confident look on her face, she wasn't just bluffing. She hadn't been able to unleash her full power during her first encounter with the Four-Armed Goat because of the slave collar, and she must've been worn out from

consecutive battles before then. It was likely that she could indeed punch a hole through one of those goats now.

Long-Ears are scary.

“Ah, you’re so amazing, miss. Let me get you a drink!” I said.

“Why did you turn into her henchman all of a sudden?” said Ricky.

Scrael chugged the water I’d handed her, completely ignoring my exchange with Ricky.

“The safe point is close. We should rest soon,” I suggested.

“Rest sounds good,” agreed Scrael.

Ricky, of course, followed us toward the safe point.

This was the Yellow Wall Vestiges, depth level 20. The stone walls here were yellow as the name implied and were completely covered in ancient murals. It reminded me of exploring an Egyptian-themed underground labyrinth in a first-person RPG. The passages here were wide enough for Lizard Skins to hop around. There were statues of what looked like animals on the walls, and the perpetual light from the dimly glowing Do-Meltan ores was our light source. This place was like heaven compared to the Dark Corridors coming up ahead. It wasn’t too dark, and it didn’t reek like sewage. The monsters here weren’t particularly annoying to deal with, except for Hypno Eyes.

As we made our way farther into the dungeon, the number of monsters we countered fell drastically. Instead, we began to see more and more monster-warding crystal stakes along the way, which meant the safe point was near. We soon found a small room that was full of crystal stakes on the inside. The glow of refined core stones filled the room with a wondrous ambience. We’d arrived at the safe point, a place of respite for Divers weary from hunting monsters.

No one else was inside when we arrived. The Yellow Wall Vestiges was always full of midranked Divers farming for loot, but it seemed like they were all at the other safe points. As soon as we went inside, I spread out a picnic sheet on the ground so that we could stretch out and relax.

“Make sure you take your shoes off before getting on,” I said as I started

taking out some food from my Dimension Bag.

Ricky was a mage too, so he brought out some food from his Dimension Bag. Meanwhile, Scrael just stretched out her legs and went straight into relaxing mode. She wasn't bringing anything out herself, which could only mean one thing.

I saw right through her intentions, and sure enough, she scooted over to me and said, "Akira, Akira, I want some salted bread."

I was right: she was gonna coax me into giving her food. Not that I minded at all though.

"I don't have any salted bread today. Do you want something else?"

"That's fine."

I started digging through my Dimension Bag for some food. This magic was so incredibly useful; in fact, it was probably the biggest reason why mages were so highly valued in this world. Thanks to Dimension Bags, I could bring back everything I'd obtained in the dungeon completely unburdened. I didn't have to worry about carrying weight or having a porter with me. Not to mention, time was frozen within this alternate dimension, so raw food inside the bag didn't spoil. Though, I avoided leaving perishables in it for a long time just because it felt icky for some reason.

As a mage, I could go up to some random Divers and say, "Excuse me, I'm a mage. Would you mind if I join your group?" and they'd happily accept me right away. The heated competition over recruiting mages had actually been an issue lately, but that wasn't important right now.

I didn't have any salted bread, but I remembered I had some yakisoba-pan, which was stir-fried noodles stuffed in a hot dog bun, so I took one out of my bag.

"What are the brown squiggles between the bread?" asked Scrael.

"Those are the yakisoba of the yakisoba-pan. Don't call them 'brown squiggles,'" I replied.

"So you seasoned some small, thin tentacles?"

“Why do you insist on making it sound so unappetizing?”

“That’s what they look like. Fine, I’ll call them sea anemones with sauce—”

“Cut it out, will you?!” I said. I thought maybe noodles didn’t exist in this world, so I turned around to ask Ricky, “Do *you* know what this is?”

“Noodles, right? I’ve seen that before,” he replied.

“Good job, Ricky! You genius mage, you!”

“Y-Yeah?” Ricky smiled, looking rather happy and chuckling to himself about being called a genius.

He’s so easy.

Too bad he was a boy. I decided to pick on Scrael instead and turned to her with a mocking grin for not knowing what noodles were.

“See?” I said.

“I-I knew that! I was just pretending not to!” she said.

She was lying for sure: her face was beet red.

“Here you go,” I said as I tried to hand her the bread, but she opened her mouth wide.

“Ahhh...”

“Are you telling me to feed you?”

She nodded, not moving from her position sitting flat on the ground with her legs bent backward. I wasn’t about to argue, so I brought the yakisoba-pan up to her mouth.

“Om nom.”

“Will this suffice, ma’am?” I asked.

She nodded again, her long ears flapping up and down. I kind of felt like I was feeding an animal or something.

I was staring at her mindlessly when suddenly—“Hey! That’s my finger!”

“Om nom... Your finger shouldn’t have been in the way.”

"It's *my* fault?!"

Sure, I'd been blanking out, but there was no way she hadn't noticed.

"Aw, my finger's all sticky with spit and sauce," I said.

"Don't wipe it off like it's dirty," said Scrael.

That was a pretty unreasonable complaint if you ask me.

"Heh heh heh, then I'll lick my finger for an indirect kiss..." I said.

"That's seriously creepy," she retorted.

"Yes, I'm sorry."

She'd shot down my joke rather harshly, but I had to admit, it was a pretty creepy thing to say.

"So, was it good?" I asked.

"Yeah, it was deli— It was okay," she corrected herself.

She turned away, but she'd already partially admitted it was delicious. Not to mention, her ears had been moving around while she'd been eating, so she'd definitely enjoyed it. She could be a contrarian like that, but her mannerisms were ridiculously cute, so I let it slide.

"Why did you ask me to feed you, anyway?" I asked.

"I wanted to try it. It felt like you were nurturing me," she said.

"It did?"

"I hate to admit it, but I can kind of understand why humans want slaves now," she replied.

"*That's* why you made me feed you?!"

Scrael was nodding to herself when she seemed to realize something. "Wait a minute. Akira, do you have any shoy sauce?"

"'Shoy'? Oh, soy sauce? Why?" I asked.

"If you do, I want it. Name your price."

She leaned in even closer than when she'd been asking for the salted bread

earlier. She must've really liked it from the time we'd used it on the White Horn steaks.

"This is all I have on me right now. Is this okay?" I asked as I pulled out two bottles from my Dimension Bag.

"Shoy sauce! Shoy sauce!" she squealed, her eyes alight with joy as she held up a bottle high in each hand.



Which brands, you ask? Kikkoman and Yamasan.

“Thanks. I would like more when I run out,” said Scrael.

“All right, I’ll stash some more in my Dimension Bag later.”

That way, I could just give her more whenever I saw her.

“How much do you want, Akira?”

“Oh, those? Just give me four copper coins for the pair,” I said, but Scrael didn’t say anything in reply. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s so cheap. It makes no sense that it’s cheaper than salt.”

But bottled soy sauce really cost around that much at the supermarket.

Scrael tilted her head with a puzzled expression.

“Salt is even cheaper where I come from,” I said.

She looked even more confused.

The price difference between our regions was insane. Thank goodness for distribution technology, preservation technology, and mass production.

“Shoy sauce tastes good with butter,” Scrael went on.

“Be careful not to use too much—oh, you’re licking it already.”

“I’m taking my shoy sauce supplements,” she said as she licked the soy sauce she’d poured onto the back of her hand.

She sounded like a Japanese person who’d moved overseas or something. I had a feeling she’d really be into miso too. It seemed I’d failed to fix her pronunciation, and “shoy sauce” had stuck.

Ricky said, “You always bring such interesting food. That bun with noodles in it wasn’t just rations, was it?”

“Nope,” I said.

“You sure?”

“I mean, I’m out here dungeon diving. Why would I wanna eat something that’s not even good? I have other food in case of emergencies anyway. Oh, did

you want something to drink, Ricky? I have some Dr Pepper.”

I pulled a bottle of soda out of my Dimension Bag and showed it to him.

“What’s with the color? Is it wine? I think I’ll pass—”

“You know, this is a drink for intellectuals.”

“Give me that!”

It was easy to get a reaction out of Ricky. He was simple like that. I showed him how to open the plastic bottle, and he took a tentative sip.

“Hmm? It’s...sweet. Is it some sort of fruit juice? No. I can taste a mixture of many different flavors...”

“Well? What do you think?”

“It’s not bad. In fact, it’s really good,” he said, nodding approvingly.

Maybe it was true that only intellectuals could appreciate Dr Pepper’s flavor. I didn’t really get it since I was a normie and didn’t drink it much.

“I want some,” said Scrael.

“Sure,” said Ricky.

Scrael tried it out, then furrowed her brow.

“It’s sweet...but it tastes strange. Like thea.”

“Yeah, it’s not for everyone. Here, I have some Bireley’s for you.”

“Bireley’s?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, it’s the sweet orange water,” said Scrael.

The taste seemed to match the flavor she had in mind. This time, she started taking more gulps enthusiastically.

“Kudo Akira,” said Ricky, “I’ve always wondered, just where in the world are you from? You don’t live in Freida, do you?”

“Huh? Oh, Ricky, how do you know that? Are you so obsessed with dueling me that you’ve turned into a stalker? Even I’m a bit creeped out by how much

research you're doing about me."

"I think it's creepy too," added Scrael, and we both backed away from him. That was a nice follow-up by Scrael.

"Hey! No! Don't act like I'm some sort of weirdo! I'm only saying this because he always has things that aren't from around here!"

"Yeah, I know," I said.

"Yup," added Scrael.

"Then what was that for?! What's with you two?"

Scrael and Ricky sure were fun. They knew the assignment right away and played along with my joke. I never got tired of the people in this world.

Suddenly, Scrael said, "I'd like to know too. Where did you come from, Akira?"

"Hmm? Another world," I answered.

Ricky stared at me blankly. "Another world?"

Do-Melta was the "another world" from my perspective, but what I'd said wasn't wrong either.

Ricky looked skeptical, so I told him, "You don't believe me, do you? But think about it. We warp around to different places all the time. You can't deny that it's possible if you call yourself a Diver."

"Hmm..." pondered Ricky. He knew I had a point.

Here in the Gandakia Dungeon, the boundaries between floors were nebulous. Supposedly, in the ancient past, a god of this world had bundled monster-spawning locations and created this system to save us some traveling time. Therefore, whenever we stepped through those fog-shrouded mirrorlike surfaces, we were transferred to other regions in Do-Melta where monsters spawned. If one accepted that this was possible, they should be open to the idea that you could travel between worlds too.

"You're actually serious?" asked Ricky.

"Yup. What's the point in lying?"

“I suppose, but...”

“Then how did you get here?”

Scrael’s question took me back to the first time I’d arrived in Do-Melta.

“It started with testing out urban legends about traveling to other worlds,” I began. “What finally worked was a method that involved using an elevator. I, too, thought it was bogus before I even tried it, but in the end, I arrived here by coincidence.”

“An elevator? You mean like the one at the guild?” asked Scrael.

“Something like that. The technology used isn’t comparable, though.”

“That’s how you came to Freida?” asked Ricky.

“Technically, I was sent to where that old god dude was. That’s where he handed me this,” I said to him as I pulled from my pocket a metal plate, an item absolutely necessary for anyone living in this world.

“Your EXP Card...”

“The people in this world get one of these from a god when they’re born, right? That doesn’t happen in my world, so that dude Ameithys the Purple gave it to me directly.”

“Wait, he gave it to you *directly*?!”

“Yeah. I heard that doesn’t usually happen.”

“Of course not! Only a chosen few have ever spoken directly with a god!”

“Huh. So I hear,” I said indifferently in contrast to Ricky’s excitement. I still couldn’t quite understand what was so amazing about it.

Scrael grabbed a second yakisoba-pan and turned to me.

“Akira,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Say ‘ahhh.’”

“Whaaat?”

“Ahhh,” she repeated.

Maybe she was planning on feeding me. It seemed she wasn't going to take no for an answer.

"A-Ahhh..." I opened my mouth, unable to resist her demand.

The yakisoba-pan entered my mouth. She pushed it in with just the right amount of force so I could eat it comfortably.

I chewed.

Yup, that's a yakisoba-pan.

"Get a room, you two," complained Ricky.

"No one's forcing you to watch. You're the one who decided to follow us," I pointed out.

"Well, you're not wrong..."

I glanced at Scrael, and she was now digging into the yakisoba-pan.

"Now, where was I?" I asked.

"You were talking about meeting a god."

"I've met one too," said Scrael.

"Really?"

"Yeah. We Long-Ears were created by Lady Sapphia, and she visits our village sometimes. I'm sure it's the same way for the other races."

"I see," said Ricky. "Maybe everyone but us has that sort of opportunity."

"That's not how it is for humans?" I asked.

"No. I hear Ameithys the Purple and Ornyx the Black don't appear unless there's some major event or they want to mobilize all of the races to help the world for some reason."

"Huh. Maybe I'll ask about it next time," I muttered.

The others immediately shot me a dubious glance. Maybe it was because I'd said it so casually. I had to pass through the god's place whenever I came to this world, so I saw and greeted him every time. I even brought souvenirs for him, and we made small talk if he wasn't busy, so he just felt like some familiar old

dude from my neighborhood or something.

“But man...” I said.

“What is it?” asked Ricky.

“It’s just—it’s hard to see that old dude as some great being.”

It was hard to imagine. I understood that he was amazing, of course. He was the god who made it possible for me to travel between Earth and Do-Melta, and he’d granted me the ability to use magic. I really appreciated him for that...but he really looked like just some old dude, like a random person from my neighborhood.

He was a god, but he seemed kind of lazy. When I’d first met him, he was lying sideways on the ground reading a book, his head resting against his hand with his elbow on a pillow. Every time I saw him, he looked like a dad relaxing and watching TV on a weekend.

I was groaning, deep in thought, when Ricky asked, “If you really were sent here by a god, weren’t you given some sort of task? Like to help the world somehow or carry out some important mission?”

“Nope, nothing,” I said. “He told me, ‘It must be fate that brought you here, so I’ll make it so you can come back whenever you want. You should enjoy your stay.’ Then he said, ‘I’ll even give you a blessing and the ability to use magic. Pretty good deal, right? You can do whatever you want here, but don’t do anything evil. Go help others and do good instead, okay?’”

That was pretty much what he’d said, and he’d really talked like that. Why would a god task an average high schooler like me with some grand mission that affected the world, anyway? There were much better candidates for something like that: someone with a strong sense of justice and responsibility, like my childhood friend Hiro.

The god had even said, “You can take a girl home to your world too if you want. But don’t just decide to marry someone in the spur of the moment. Marriage is seriously hard work, like my wifey—oh, her name’s Ornyx, by the way...” and dragged on and on about his wife. I was happy for them and their healthy marriage, but listening to him go on about his love life had been rough.

Suddenly, Scrael knelt down in prayer.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I was just giving thanks to Ameithys the Purple.”

“What for?”

“...Don’t worry about it,” she said, then started lightly hitting me.

Why?

Afterward, we farmed some decent loot in the Dark Corridors ahead, then we went home. Our EXP gains weren’t very efficient with the three of us, but we got to enjoy a fun and safe run like we’d gone out on a picnic. I said this to them out loud, and they looked at me strangely.

Yeah, I guess I understand where they’re coming from.

Floor Nine: The Fate of Those Who Succumb to Horniness

It was an evening after I'd gone home from school. I was cheerfully heading toward the Divers Guild's building for another fun day of adventuring, farming EXP, and leveling up.

Stores lined both sides of the road as shopkeepers eagerly looked to sell their wares and Divers came up with excuses to haggle down the prices. Both sides seemed pretty heated, and I couldn't blame them since their livelihoods were on the line.

Freida was always full of life like this. It was so lively that the streets got blocked off whenever shops ran events. It wasn't uncommon for it to be so crowded that I had to go into alleys to make detours just to avoid the mobs, and today was one of those days.

"Man, not again... Someone needs to do something about this."

One of the major retailers was probably having a sale. It would've been a waste of effort to try and go through the crowd of customers going this way and that. This sort of thing happened all the time, so I wished the governors of Freida would invest in widening the road. But there wasn't any land to do that, so I knew it wasn't going to happen.

I sighed in frustration and walked into a side alley. The alleys of Freida were quiet and deserted unlike the bustling main street, and they were also dangerous places where shady characters hung out. Passing through such a place was basically hard mode for a coward like me. That was why I was constantly on high alert and keeping some generic spells active on myself at all times. Celerity allowed me to move quicker and run from scary people if needed, and Fortitude kept me safe if someone decided to punch me out of nowhere. People had tried to mess with me a few times in the past, but my escape rate was pretty much one hundred percent. But there were still some scary things that were unavoidable.

“By the way, Akira—”

“Ahhh! Don’t pop up out of nowhere like that, Sensei! You’re gonna give me a heart attack!”

I was walking around being as cautious as possible, but it wasn’t enough to prepare me for Sensei (her real name was Beitreise) appearing from my shadow. I didn’t know where or when she’d slipped into my shadow, but she suddenly popped out from my shadow, which was stretched out by the setting sun.

Sensei saw me clutching at my pounding chest and laughed. “How else am I supposed to appear? That’s like telling me not to appear at all.”

“I just want you to stop popping into view so suddenly. It freaks me out. Could you at least give me some sort of warning?”

“What am I, some sort of natural disaster?”

She was actually more like a ghost, but I kept that to myself.

Sensei seemed amused. She really loved messing with me. And I’d show her my revenge someday—though, I’d never say that out loud. I’d die if I did. She’d destroy every part of me, probably starting with my crotch.

Anyway, I couldn’t help but wonder what was up with her. She was a woman enshrouded in a shadowy haze from head to toe—a human one, probably. “Probably,” because she had a demonic personality, so I wasn’t actually sure if she really was human.

I had no idea what was beneath the haze. On occasion, I could see a glimpse of her slanted red eyes, slender contours, and beautiful skin. There was an obvious youthfulness and liveliness to her. She had a young-looking face, but I assumed she was older.

“Do you want more core stones again, Sensei?” I asked.

“That’s right. Don’t worry, this one will be easy. Okay?” she said in her coaxing voice and embraced me from behind.

Maybe she liked me? Or maybe she was bewitching me. Let’s be honest, it was probably the latter. I could only see this ending badly. My future was bleak.

“Um, why do you always get so touchy?”

“It’s just a treat,” she said.

“Huh?”

“You heard me.”

“You mean...for me?” I asked.

“What? No, obviously it’s a treat for me.”

“Oh.”

I thought she meant she was giving me a treat for my hard work, but apparently, that wasn’t it. Maybe she meant she was draining mana from me or something without me knowing. She occasionally rubbed her cheek against mine and lightly nibbled and sucked on my cheeks and neck, so maybe I was onto something. My mana was somewhat lower now.

“Well, if you think that was a treat for you, you must like it when I get touchy,” she chuckled.

“Ugh, I hate that I can’t deny it...”

“It feels good, doesn’t it? You like it, don’t you?”

“Please don’t make me quote Shinku from *Rozen Maiden*...”

Only girls were allowed to say that line. I couldn’t do it; it’d be too creepy.

More importantly, Sensei was pressing her body against mine. This was dangerous—especially for my crotch. I had to change the subject before I’d need to hunch over to hide something.

“Sensei, Sensei, why do you need me to go with you? Wouldn’t it be a lot easier to go into the dungeon and wipe out some monsters by yourself instead of dragging me there with you?”

Indeed, Sensei was strong. Very strong. I wasn’t sure what level she was, but she’d scoffed at a Flame Baron, a humanoid flame monster dressed like an aristocrat that appeared at depth level 30, and wiped it out in an instant. She’d even said, “The meager EXP from a hundred or even a thousand of these are not worth my time.” I would’ve gained at least ten levels from that, but if that

amount of EXP was insignificant to her, her level had to be crazy high. That was why I'd assumed there'd be no problem for her to go into the deeper floors alone, but...

"I would if I could, but I can't dive into the dungeon by myself," she said.

"Is something preventing you?"

"Something like that."

She left it at that, so I changed my approach.

"Um, Sensei? I know I've asked you before, but why do you want core stones so much? I heard they're only used for wards."

It was hard to believe she was making monster wards out of those core stones. She was so strong that she didn't need wards to keep monsters from approaching her. So what did she need them for?

"I have my reasons... I'll explain everything someday."

"You dodged the question again!" I complained.

But she only laughed sardonically without telling me anything. It would've helped with motivation if she'd at least told me why she needed those core stones, but she obviously had no intention of expanding further.

"So, what do you say?" she asked.

I didn't know why she bothered. She was going to force me to go anyway.

"Ah, ugh...I'm not feeling so well today..."

"Is that so? It seemed to me that you were on your merry way to the dungeon."

Damn, she saw my jaunty steps earlier. But I'm not giving up yet.

"Yeah, I was feeling fine just a second ago. It came out of nowhere. Owwww..."

"Oh? So this happened as soon as I told you I wanted core stones? Your body is so convenient."

"That sounds kind of erotic coming from you," I said.

"So, we'll need to get your convenient body back to normal. What do you

think we should do?”

“Wh-Who knows? I don’t think anything can be done.”

I hoped she’d let me off the hook. I didn’t want any trouble today. Well, not just today but ever.

Suddenly, a thought seemed to occur to her. “I know. Not only will I teach you a new technique today, but I’ll let you touch my boobs.”

“Huh?!”

What did she just say? Boobs? Her boobs? Boo—

“Your boobs, you say?!”

“Yes.”

“Y-Y-You mean, those things on girls’ chests? Those boobs, right?!”

“That’s right. I’m sure you’re already aware I have them too. I was pressing them against you earlier.”

Yes, I’d been able to feel something soft and squishy pressing right up against my back. And she was gonna let me touch them...

Gulp.

“Ha ha. Well? That would help you feel better, wouldn’t it? You have a ‘convenient body,’ after all.”

“Wh-Who knows?”

I tried to play it cool, but I was obviously shaken. I averted my gaze, and my eyes shifted around. I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t so thick-skinned that I could act normal after all that.

“This is your chance to touch them. You might never have an opportunity like this, you know?” she pressed.

“Uh... Uhhh...”

Sensei thrust her breasts at me. I couldn’t see them entirely because of the haze, but catching glimpses of the voluminous twin mounds behind the shifting haze activated some neurons in my brain.

“Say you’ll do it. Say it,” she demanded.

“S-Stop, Sensei! Stay back!” I shouted.

But she wasn’t listening. She was going to press her way through this with overwhelming force (her boobs), but as a man, I wasn’t gonna give in so easily. But did I end up going into the dungeon?

“I was powerless against boobs...”

Having taken up her offer, I was in the dungeon. In other words, I hadn’t been able to resist temptation; there was nothing I could’ve done. Surely, other guys would understand. You could call me a pervert if you wish, but there was no shame in a boy admitting he couldn’t overcome the allure of boobs. Expecting a high school boy to endure something like that was just ridiculous.

“So, what are we fighting today? I’m ready to take on anything. Bring it on!” I said.

“You seem awfully motivated now. You want to touch my boobs that badly?”

“Huh? Aha ha ha...”

I wished she’d stop touching on that subject. But of course, I didn’t want her to forget about the touching thing.

“Hmm, this approach is quite useful,” mused Sensei.

“Don’t assume I’m so easy to manipulate... I’d work my fingers to the bone.”

“You contradict yourself so quickly.”

I couldn’t help it. I was an honest guy, and I was honest about what I wanted.

Anyway, we were in the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus on route one at depth level 14. It was a hunting ground for low-to-mid-rank Divers around level 10 to 20, but it was also known as a sightseeing floor. There were several giant humanoid statues, over ten meters in height, lined up within the vast cave. It was almost like an underground mausoleum, and it was kind of overwhelming just being there. The next floor was a place on route one that you should avoid at all costs, but it wasn’t important right now.

My level was a bit higher than the Divers who usually hunted here, so this

place wasn't difficult for me. It was true that I could beat most of the monsters here without breaking a sweat, but that didn't mean I should let my guard down.

"So, Sensei—"

I was about to ask what today's target was again when Sensei glanced at the corner of the dark grotto.

"There it is," she said.

There before us was a Moss Stone, the monster that the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus was most known for. They looked like deformed gray statues—resembling the ones used to ward evil in Southeast Asia—standing on a pedestal with some green moss mixed into their bodies. They were usually disguised as regular old stone statues, but they changed back into their original color and started moving when someone approached, like some sort of trap. They had peculiar faces that looked like that of a middle-aged man and were commonly known by the nickname "Moss Face."

Moss Stones looked like your average statues at first glance, but they were as hard as refined iron and were quite robust. Warriors had to hit them over and over with a battle hammer or mace to take them down. They could even call for reinforcements, making them a huge pain to deal with.

"That?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Huh? Really?"

"Really. Easy, right?"

"Well, yes, but..." I trailed off.

That wasn't going to be any challenge at all, and it wasn't just because I was stronger than the recommended level here. Moss Stones, aka Moss Faces, were incredibly weak to magic. Despite their ironlike toughness, they could easily be cut into ribbons even with green magic, which was said to have relatively low firepower. All I had to do was to shoot it with a bit of lightning to break it into pieces. It was hard to say whether they were tough or fragile. Maybe they were

like crystals made of carbon or something like that.

I was confused because this was far too easy for a task coming from Sensei. She always insisted on making me fight strong opponents that were annoying to fight against. It was incredibly bizarre that she was making me fight a monster that was such a cakewalk for mages.

"It would be a worthy enemy if you weren't a mage," pointed out Sensei.

"True," I agreed.

It would've been a rough fight. More and more of them would join the fray unless I could destroy it quickly. I would've been very wary about entering this floor if I wasn't a mage.

"Are you dissatisfied with your opponent?" she asked.

"No, it's not that..."

"So it's too easy for you then. Maybe we should try imposing a restriction like you often do. You may only punch or kick. It won't be so easy then, will it?"

"I should've just shut up and done it," I said regretfully.

"It's not unbeatable if you strengthen yourself with some generic spells."

"But I'll look kind of dumb punching and kicking a statue."

"I'll watch you in amusement, thinking you look like an idiot. Idiot."

She's calling me an idiot already.

"That's mean," I said.

Although I'd complained, I could win even with this restriction in place. As long as I could buff myself with magic, this task would barely be difficult. But I knew she'd make it even more difficult if I opened my big mouth and told her I could do it with my eyes closed, so I acted like I wasn't all that confident. This was self-preservation, not cowardice; not that I'd care if it made me a coward though.

"Tertiary Magic: Ameithys Orbit!" I called out and activated my magic.

"Hmm?" said Sensei, probably because I hadn't used a generic spell.

Come to think of it, I'd never used this spell in front of her before. I'd only used Ameithys Orbit against an Orc and a Great Boar before. It was an elemental spell that was inspired by the generic spell Celerity, and it granted lightning speed and striking power when activated. It obviously required a lot more mana than Celerity, but it was immensely effective. The monsters I'd fought with so far had been unable to catch up to my speed. The only thing was that it made me so fast that my movements became linear and hard to control. It also wore out the soles of my feet like crazy, which meant it also wore out my wallet. Maybe this was the limit of magic. I still had a lot to learn in battle to perfect my magic.

Once I finished my incantation, lightning erupted from my body, illuminating the dim cave in an instant. I felt a steady surge of electricity running through my body, which told me the magic was fully in effect. I took one big leap backward to make room for a starting dash, then kicked the ground behind me and exploded forward.

“Lightning Kiiiiick!”



With a burst forward from a distance, I delivered a Rider Kick, inspired by a motorcycle-riding superhero, with my full body weight behind it at the Moss Face, landing a direct hit at lightning speed. I'd been forced to participate in hero kick practice sessions so many times as a kid that my form was perfect.

The Moss Face obviously had no hopes of evading my attack. This weird monster of the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus didn't notice me coming. It couldn't even move since it was still disguised as a statue, and it was sent flying into the rock wall.

After a short delay, I heard the sound of impact and broken pieces echoing back toward me from the darkness—it was dead. Though, it was hard to say whether Moss Faces were alive in the first place.

I jogged over to the scattered pieces of the Moss Face and picked up the core stone.

I turned back to Sensei and noticed she seemed unusually quiet. She stood there, speechless.

"How was that? That counts as fulfilling your restriction, right?" I asked.

If she'd wanted me to only use physical attacks in close quarters, that could've been considered a long-range attack because I'd flown at my target from a distance, but I'd defeated the target with a kick, so it should've been fine.

"Yes, you did well," said Sensei.

"All right!" I couldn't help but raise my voice in celebration.

It was rare for her to compliment me, and it made me happy to hear someone as strong as Sensei show me approval. I was used to barely getting passing marks.

"I was planning on teaching you a technique about this subject," she continued.

"This subject?"

"Melee combat. But it seems there's no need for that."

I wasn't so sure about that. I was curious to learn about melee combat techniques that could be used by mages.

"Akira, why did you decide to learn melee techniques without being told to?"

"Because fighting in close combat as a mage would be cool."

"Cool, huh."

"Yes. I think it's awesome when a long-range specialist runs straight into a crowd of enemies and takes them all out," I said.

"What a childish reason. But that's what motivated you to learn close combat?"

"I just fly at enemies with super speed and knock them away. To be honest, it's kind of iffy whether you can call what I did earlier close combat."

I only had two attack options when approaching enemies: use Ameithys Orbit and deliver a Lightning Kick or go up to the enemy and use Ameithys Impact as I had before. I usually made space between me and the enemy after landing a hit and didn't stand there and brawl, so I felt like that wasn't exactly what Sensei had had in mind.

"I don't agree with that," she said.

"You don't?"

"You created that magic and haven't even realized it yet?"

"Realize what?" I asked.

"The magic you just used is basically an extension of Celerity. You may lose some maneuverability, but you should be able to use it in different ways. Even with your piss-poor combat skills, you can knock out most enemies by simply hitting them like you did just now. Am I wrong?"

"Now that you mention it..."

Using Ameithys Orbit allowed me to move incredibly fast. It seemed Sensei was telling me to use it to stay close to the enemy and overwhelm them with blazing-fast moves. I'd have a great advantage over whoever I was fighting as long as I moved much quicker than them—unless I was up against a supertough

opponent. Still, I couldn't help but find this situation a bit odd.

"What is it?" asked Sensei.

"I just didn't think you'd find close combat important."

"Oh? But it goes without saying that a mage would be at a disadvantage if an opponent closes the distance. You don't need to be an expert melee fighter, but you need to know how to deal with it when it happens. Plus, a mage who can handle close combat will be effective in a man-to-man battle. You can really catch an enemy off guard if they don't see it coming."

"Sure, no one would expect a mage to know how to brawl, but I wouldn't fight against another person anyway."

"As you get stronger, it might no longer be up to you. Am I wrong?"

"Well...I'm sure more people would try to mess with me," I agreed.

"Yes, it's inevitable. You can never separate humans from their jealousy. Even a saint will be jealous sometimes. One who's completely devoid of jealousy wouldn't be human—but that's neither here nor there. As you get stronger, there'll be times when you'll put your power on display, and you'll become a target of envy for anyone who bears witness. And I'm telling you now: when that happens, you'll be dragged into the kind of trouble I know you hate to deal with."

"I'd love to know what to do in that situation for future reference!"

"It's simple. Kill them," she said bluntly.

Yup, so simple. Just gotta kill 'em. Dead men tell no tales, and that's—

I said nothing.

"What's wrong? You're awfully quiet," said Sensei.

"Um, Sensei? Wouldn't murder be a bit too much?"

"You think so? It's the quickest solution."

"I can't just kill someone. I think that would be just a tad bit inhumane," I argued.

"Humanity means nothing in a world like this."

“How did you end up with that conclusion?”

“If someone messes with me, it’ll annoy me. If I get annoyed, I’ll kill them. The end.”

That was some terrifying logic.

“Sensei, let’s think of a more peaceful solution,” I suggested.

“Then just put them out of commission. That way, you should be left guilt-free.”

“Uh, what I’m trying to say is that let’s take a step back from the violence stuff. Please.”

My tearful plea fell on deaf ears. Sensei was seriously inhumane. She didn’t intend to consider any option other than beating someone to death—or near death.

“However, dangers that all mages will face someday aren’t limited to situations where you’ll need close combat,” said Sensei.

“Oh, we’re just going to move on, then?”

“Yes.” She wasn’t going to budge on this, so there was no point in pushing it.

“So...what are the other dangers you speak of?” I asked.

“Other mages.”

“As in mages who’re higher level than me? Are you saying there’s no avoiding them, so I should have some way to turn the tables?”

“That too, but underhanded tactics to get you out of those situations are your specialty. You can figure that out on your own,” she said.

“Well, I’d run away if that happened.”

“Very on-brand of you.”

“I don’t have the will to kill anyone yet,” I said.

“Then let me ask you this: what will you do when you’re forced to?”

“I’ll think about that when the time comes. It’s not as if I need to know the answer right now. I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“You just don’t have a care in the world, do you?”

“So, what are you actually talking about?” I asked.

“I’m talking about your response when you’re outnumbered by mages,” said Sensei. “Let’s say they surrounded you and shot spells at you all at once; what would you do?”

“I’d use a defensive spell, like some sort of barrier or shield.”

“Then what?”

“After that?”

“Yes. Think about the next steps after defending yourself. What would you do?”

“After using a defensive spell—” I’d just turtle up until they stopped attacking me. “Oh.”

“Now you see the problem. If you focus on defense, you’ll just get bombarded with magic until you’re dead.”

She was right. Since I’d be facing multiple mages, they could continuously attack and pin me down by staggering their attacks. I’d be fine if my mana was greater than their total combined mana, but that would be impossible. As soon as I became the defender, they’d whittle me down with a barrage of magic without giving me a chance to escape.

“What I’m about to teach you is one of the ways to break out of a situation like that. You’ll need to use it to escape, not fight back.”

“Amazing, Sensei! Please teach me!”

“Look at you. You’re all for it as soon as I mention a way of escaping danger.”

“Because that’s so much better. It’s much safer than trying to hurt others.”

“You don’t want to hurt other humans? Such a coward.”

“You already know I’m a coward. So, what’s this technique?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Sensei. “But first...”

“Oh, right.”

Realizing what she was about to do, I backed away from her. Then, she raised her staff and hit my extended shadow with a clack. I'd already gotten used to this routine.

"The magic I'm about to teach you is called Force Esoterica," she explained.

"Force Esoterica..."

"Yes. It's a technique where you compress mana internally, then release it in a single burst, blotting out any magic the opponent uses."

"I'm not quite sure I get it. So you can use it to nullify an opponent's magic?" I asked.

"A valid question. I may have made it sound overly dramatic, but you're basically hitting magic released by an opponent with a blast of mana, breaking its chain of causality. You know how when magic clashes with magic, they get nullified? It's the same concept."

It sounded to me like the end result would be no different than hitting them with magic, but oh well.

"I see. So by hitting them with raw mana, I can save the hassle of casting a magic spell, freeing me time to go right into my next move," I said.

"Exactly. You could even use it to knock your enemy away. Though, that wouldn't work if the opponent's magic outclasses yours."

"It would probably be an autoloss in that situation anyway."

"You're right. Anyway, let's begin."

"Huh?"

Before I knew it, dark masses of power floated all around Sensei; I didn't even see her cast her magic. The globs of shadowy mana were a different kind of black than the rest of the cave. They were like eyeless sockets, so deep that they could suck in anyone who gazed into them.

No. Now's not the time for distractions.

I had to release the mana within me all at once before she attacked, or I'd get seriously injured. Suddenly, I saw Sensei's lips curl into a smile beneath the

black mist.

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

The masses of black magic came rushing toward me, and I immediately unleashed my mana. The blast of mana I shot out so desperately somehow managed to nullify Sensei’s magic.

“Y-You could’ve given me a warning...”

“What do you mean? I *did* warn you.”

“But you could’ve gone easy on me! Are you trying to kill me, you crazy sadist?!”

“Shouldn’t you be preparing for the next wave? You have a lot to learn if you really thought I’d let you off the hook after one time.”

“W-Wait! Stop!”

Sensei grinned.

“Nope.”

“You’re heartless! You’re a devil!”

“Better watch out. You won’t get to touch my boobs if you die.”

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

The monster fight wasn’t so bad, but Sensei’s training was pure hell. The real lesson here: life wasn’t easy. As for whether or not she let me touch her boobs afterward, well, that wasn’t for me to say. But Sensei was a woman of her word; that was all there was to say. Thank you.

Floor Ten: Revenge Is a Dish Best Served Braised

I was at the dining hall in the Divers Guild located in the Free City of Freida in the world of Do-Melta. Why, you ask? To get a quick bite. I wasn't about to eat the puke they called food from the food hall, of course; I'd brought my own.

Today's meal was a dish made with meat from a monster I'd fought a little while ago—well, it was basically pork. It'd come from that creature from the Submerged City at depth level 18, the monster hated by all women: the Great Boar. I'd used its meat to make supertender and delicious rafute, or Okinawan-style braised pork.

The crazy part was that I'd made it all by myself—which was a lie. My mom had helped me. I was just your average high schooler who wasn't all that into cooking. Braised dishes like this were a bit too much work for me. The only recipes I could follow involved only instant ramen, microwaves, and soaking ingredients in plastic food containers; or they had to be the easy kinds taught by a certain influencer who drank as he sprinkled chemical seasoning, and the dishes had to have "Devil's" or "Supreme" in their names. After trying a few times, I'd eventually been able to make the dish by myself. All I'd had to do was to not mess up the amount of seasoning, heat, and cooking time. I'd had plenty of ingredients, so I'd gone a bit overboard and made too much. Needless to say, my mom had scolded me for clogging up the entire fridge.

How did it taste, you ask? My family loved it. When they'd asked what kind of pork it was, I'd avoided telling them the truth and given them a random brand name instead. It'd come from a boss monster, which basically made it a brand name in Do-Melta. It tasted delicious in any case.

Anyway, that was why I had to get rid of these rafute quickly. I'd given half of them to my neighbor and childhood friend Hiro, but I still had plenty of stock. Just as I took my food out of its wrapping and got ready to eat, I heard a voice calling out to me.

"K-Kudo?"

“Oh, hi Eldrid!”

Standing before me was Eldrid, a Tails with flat light-gold animal ears and a fluffy tail of the same color. She was a high-ranking Diver whom I just so happened to have helped when she'd been in trouble in the dungeon. When I'd shown up, she'd been in a rather scandalous situation, covered in body fluids and completely immobilized. Then, I'd swooped in and gallantly saved her, which was extremely rare and uncharacteristic of me. And that was how we'd met. That monster, by the way, had already become a part of this lovely rafute meal.

Eldrid's attire was very casual today. She'd been completely armored the last time I'd seen her, but the only heavy thing she was carrying now was her giant sword. She wore a sleeveless red knight's garb, so her pretty armpits and the sides of her womanly mounds were visible. I was also very much curious about what was going on behind that apron thing covering her lower half. It fluttered around precariously, so I hoped she was wearing tights or something underneath.

For some reason, Eldrid was being fidgety and awkward. She seemed like the aggressive, gung ho type, but maybe she was shier than she seemed. You really couldn't judge a book by its cover.

“Are you heading to the dungeon?” she asked.

“Yup, right after I finish eating. Did you just get back from a dive?”

“Yeah. It wasn't all that productive though.”

I then realized she had barely anything on her for someone who just got back from the dungeon.

“Where's your stuff?” I asked.

“Once you get to a certain rank, you can use a service that delivers your luggage back for you.”

“Huh, I didn't know that.”

“But I need to have this on me at all times,” she said as she flashed her canine teeth and partially drew the giant sword on her back by its hilt.

It made sense that she'd want to have her weapon on hand in Freida, which wasn't exactly the safest place in the world. Though, a high-ranker like Eldrid could probably take care of herself with just her fists.

By the way, I found it quite adorable how her abilities contrasted with her drooping animal ears and wagging tail.

"Where are you gonna go?"

"The forest; to do some weeding."

"'Weeding'?"

"Picking thea. I could use some myself too," I answered.

"Wait, you can make potions?"

"Yeah—oh! Keep that between you and me, okay?"

"I see. I guess people would swarm you with requests to make potions for them, and not to mention, you're a mage. I'm sure those people looking to recruit near the guild entrance won't leave you alone."

"Yeah...I don't like dealing with them."

"I understand." Eldrid agreed not to tell anyone.

Despite her boisterous demeanor, her earnestness and amiability shined through, and I felt like I could trust her.

Back to my food. Since I'd been going into the dungeon, I'd been having light meals like this before dinnertime lately. I had to, or I wouldn't last. I wasn't an Adorner, but I'd end up on the ground starving if I didn't.

When I'd arrived at the dining hall earlier, I'd immediately asked the lady in charge to reheat the braised pork for me. It had a nice, appetizing luster to it, somewhere between fox-brown and amber. I'd really outdone myself on this one. There were all sorts of benefits to leveling up, like improved memory and being able to eat delicious food like this.

Steam rose as I undid the piping-hot wrapping, and the fragrant aroma with a hint of sweetness filled my nostrils.

Suddenly, I noticed Eldrid's eyes were locked on my food, and I could see a

little drop of drool hanging from the corner of her mouth. Maybe she was hungry from her dive. She was like a puppy. Just then, her stomach growled. She quickly tried to hide her stomach with her hands, looking flustered.

“Oh, that wasn’t, um...”

“It’s all right,” I told her. “Everyone gets hungry after a dive. Would you like some?”

“What? Uh...are you sure?”

“Yup, I have more than enough.”

I pulled another storage container filled with the braised pork out of my Dimension Bag. I just had to reheat another portion for myself. There was no need for her to worry.

I offered her the heaping pile of rafute.

“Then...don’t mind if I do.”

“Please,” I insisted and handed her a pair of fork and knife.

Eldrid brought the pork to her mouth with the fork. She chewed two, no, three times, then her animal ears and tail stood straight up.

“This is so good!”



That was a nice reaction.

“It’s even better when you sandwich it like this,” I said as I put some of it between pieces of bread.

She bit into the sandwich, which was filled with a thick sauce.

“It’s so syrupy!” she said dreamily, seemingly really mind-blown. “It’s delicious...” she continued in a cute voice, sounding as if she was intoxicated.

She looked like she was melting herself and that the bones in her body had dissolved away.

Eldrid continued eating more of the braised pork while her ears moved around and her tail wagged the entire time. It was easy to tell how a Tail was feeling because they physically expressed their emotions. She was quite literally like a puppy with a slab of meat.

“This is that Great Boar from the other day,” I told her.

“Huh, this thing? Then this is like a form of revenge,” she said and chomped on a piece of rafute with her tiny mouth.

I thought she’d rip the meat apart with a huge bite like a lion, but her revenge was a lot cuter than I’d expected. Maybe you could say she was taking her time picking her enemy apart, one nibble at a time.

“I really didn’t expect that thing to taste this amazing. I’m impressed,” said Eldrid.

“They taste good to start with. You just need to follow a few extra steps while cooking to make it even better.”

“But cooking seems so hard...”

“It’s easier than you’d think. As long as you have the ingredients, you just need to follow the recipe and use the right amount of heat,” I told her.

They used a specialized stove for cooking in Do-Melta, so you couldn’t make dishes here the same way as I did in my world. Therefore, to cook anything here, you’d have to first make sure things like the cookware would even work. Besides that, you should make sure to follow the recipe religiously and measure

all the portions correctly since being careless about measurements was the main reason food didn't turn out well. Trying to be cute by adding a secret ingredient was a quick way to destroy the balance of a dish.

"That was amazing. Thanks," said Eldrid.

"I'm glad you liked it."

Eldrid seemed to remember something. "Oh, Kudo, I still need to thank you for helping me that one time."

"I'm telling you: don't worry about it."

"It would bother me if I don't repay you somehow. I'll always feel indebted to you until I do," she insisted.

"Ah, you don't want that to negatively affect our friendship, huh?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Okay, then let's go dungeon diving together. You can help me then, and we'll call it even. Maybe we can go to the Evernight Meadows."

"Great! You can count on me. I go there sometimes too," she said as she thumped her chest with a fist; though, it was less of a thump and more of a squish.

"Oh! There's something I wanna ask," I said.

"What is it?"

"Can you say 'soy sauce'?"

"What's that? Well, I guess... 'Soy sauce'? Is that right?"

"Perfect. But...hmm. Yeah, that's the normal way to say it."

"What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. My friend calls it 'shoy sauce' for some reason, so I was curious."

"I just said it the way you did."

I had no idea what was up with that. Maybe that was specific to Scrael's race? This was a mystery.

Extra Floor: A Certain Potion-Meister's Battle

One day, the potion-meister Melmel Lamel was making potions and taking care of her sick mother as usual.

"Here's today's medicine, mom," said Melmel.

"I'm sorry to be such a burden."

"You're not. It's okay." Melmel smiled, trying to reassure her mother.

They went through the same interaction every day. One would look apologetic, and the other would force a smile. Their roles had reversed some time ago, but this ritual had continued.

Melmel opened the curtains to let the sunlight in.

Her mother, on the other hand, coughed painfully with a heavy cough that came from deep within her lungs rather than her throat. Such an awful cough. Her lungs had been bad for a long time now. Perhaps this was the price of raising a child as a single mother; if so, it was far too harsh.

The Lamels had been a family of potion-meisters for generations and had been sharing the miracles of their potion-making techniques to those in need in accordance with Torpaz the Yellow's teachings. It was said that thea had come to be in this world thanks to the mercy of Torpaz the Yellow. The practice of teaching others how to make potions had started with Torpaz passing down potion refinement methods to those with magical backgrounds to spread the blessings of potions to as many people as possible. Melmel's mother had followed those teachings, and so did she.

"Potions must be made correctly, with your whole heart and soul, for the benefit of those who will use them." This was the backbone of the Lamels' beliefs, and they'd all followed it religiously. But no matter how much they followed those teachings, they were never rewarded. The potions made by the Lamels, which were made correctly with painstaking effort, had been pushed aside by mass-produced potions since Melmel's grandmother's generation.

Their household had been on a steady decline, with the situation worsening dramatically in her mother's generation. Now, her proud family potions were treated no differently than any other mass-produced product. Not only that, but they were also being squeezed out of the market by the production volume of the major workshops, and the number of their clients had dwindled. It went without saying that no matter how valuable their potions were, there was no way to earn money with them without customers.

Melmel finished making her potions and took care of her mother's needs. However, her work was far from done. She still had to go collect the payments her clients owed—a daunting task.

"I'm heading out," she announced.

"Be careful... The world has been a dangerous place lately."

"Don't worry, Mom. Just stay in bed and relax," said Melmel.

But her mother sat up.

"Mel..."

"Yes?"

"As long as you work hard, you'll be rewarded someday. Things may be difficult now, but it'll get better as long as you persevere. So let's hang in there, okay?"

"Do you think so? Do you really believe things will get better?"

"I do. Our god is watching over our world."

"Yeah... Well, I'm going now."

"Take care."

"Okay," said Melmel, faking another smile to reassure her mother.

Resting wouldn't make her mother any better, but it was all they could do.

Work hard, huh... she thought. "What good is that going to do?"

No matter how much effort she'd put into improving the quality of her potions, nothing had changed. In fact, things were trending worse. Look what had happened to her mother, the very person who preached hard work—she'd

even sacrificed sleep to work as hard as she could. After all of their hard work and endurance, this was the situation they'd ended up in.

Mom...

At the very least, she wanted her mother to get better. She wouldn't ask for the world or an easy life; all she wanted was for her mother, who'd worked her fingers to the bone her whole life, to get some proper treatment and be saved.

"If only I could charge more..."

Her potions weren't exactly cheap, but they weren't pricey either. The market price used to be higher, and there'd been room for negotiations depending on the quality of the product, but a change in policy of their major buyer, the Divers Guild, had changed everything. It all had begun to go downhill when the Freida Divers Guild had decided that potions sold at the guild would be discounted and standardized to make them more accessible for Divers. On one hand, small private workshops like Melmel's weren't harmed too badly by the discounted potion prices alone. This was because the Divers Guild had been considerate enough to subsidize these stores so that the potion-meisters wouldn't have to bear the burden of the price change themselves. But on the other hand, the standardization of prices had dealt an unexpectedly heavy blow to private workshops like hers. The policy certainly had made potion prices in Freida more uniform, but this also meant that no matter how high quality she made her potions, their value didn't—and couldn't—increase. This had led to the mass bankruptcy of small workshops that made quality potions.

The fixed prices for potions sold to Divers had shifted the focus of the competition from quality to quantity. The business partners of small individual workshops had started to get pressured by large workshops that could mass-produce potions.

The wholesale potion shops Melmel had worked with had also been competing to find the best purchasing options. They had to procure large quantities of potions from finite sources, or it could spell death for their businesses. Taking advantage of this situation, major production workshops had given these shop owners an ultimatum: stop buying from competing workshops, and in return, these major workshops would prioritize their potion

supply; otherwise, they'd get none.

It was only natural that potion stores without a key trading partner like an authorized retailer had no choice but to obey, leaving small-time potion workshops to face bankruptcy. As a result, most small workshops had already been forced out of business, and surely more would follow. Of course, Melmel's family business was in danger as well. They'd once had many wholesalers working with them, but they now had but two. It'd become obvious that if they couldn't wholesale their potions, they wouldn't be able to make ends meet.

"What good is hard work going to do?"

No matter how much effort she put in, it wouldn't stop the monopolization by major workshops. No matter how high quality she made her potions, the Divers Guild, which had brought this situation upon them, wouldn't do anything to help. Her mother claimed their god was watching, but it wasn't true: their god was busy maintaining the world and had no time to look after individuals. Working hard and hoping someone would eventually extend a helping hand wasn't going to change anything in the slightest.

Melmel eventually arrived at the first wholesale store, and a tired-looking middle-aged woman emerged.

"I'm here to collect the payment," said Melmel.

"Oh, Mel. Here's the payment for this month."

"Thank you," she said as she accepted the money.

The woman looked at her with a fatigued expression.

"Mel."

"Yes?"

"I really hate to say this, but..."

"What?"

The woman's face was laden with guilt. This couldn't be good. Melmel knew that face all too well. Every time a client made that face, they always said the same thing.

“I’m sorry, Mel, but I’ll have to stop doing business with your workshop starting today.”

Sure enough, it’d happened.

“Y-You can’t, Deima! If I can’t sell my potions to you anymore, my workshop will—”

“I know. But we’re running a business here too. If we can’t stock enough potions, we won’t be able to keep the lights on,” said Deima grimly.

“But...why so suddenly?”

“Someone from Irnes Workshop told us they’re going to cut us off if we keep working with you.”

“Irnes Workshop again...”

Irnes Workshop was a large-scale potion-making workshop that had been rapidly expanding in Freida lately. They’d headhunted craftsmen from various other workshops to form their foundation for mass-producing potions and increasing their hold over the market. They’d also been using high-pressure tactics to seize wholesalers from smaller workshops and crush the competition as the woman had just mentioned.

“You still have it good since you’re doing business with a guild-sanctioned store. Make sure you never let go of that one,” said Deima.

“Right...”

Melmel couldn’t bring herself to beg the woman to reconsider. Even if they continued working with each other, her competitor would surely use all sorts of underhanded tactics to intervene.

Her steps were terribly heavy after losing one of her last remaining wholesalers. If this trend continued, she wouldn’t be able to support her family at all.

Although potions were valuable and in constant demand, switching up her business clients for individual customers would be a different story. Divers were used to the discounted rates offset by the guild, so they wouldn’t buy from her. On the other hand, unlike Divers, the general public didn’t get subsidies, so

they'd have to pay the original price tags if they wanted her potions, making them out of reach for most. There were rich clients she could sell to, but since they relied on their own house meisters, doctors, or skilled mages, they wouldn't be interested. Selling potions was nearly impossible without shops.

Losing her other client would mean she wouldn't have any steady income. In that case, she'd not only have no money to keep her workshop running, but she wouldn't be able to pay for her mother's medicine also. The thought of such a future weighed heavy on her mind.

"It's hopeless..."

Melmel was terribly downcast in stark contrast to the bustling street. The cheerful voices and joyful shouts that livened up the place were like nails scraping a chalkboard to her. The street was so crowded that she couldn't get through, which gave her even more reason to slip into a quieter street. She didn't have to immerse herself in that ear-grating noise anymore.

However, this proved to be a bad idea.

"Ah..."

She'd been walking in a daze and hadn't been paying attention to where she'd been going. She'd set foot deep into the back alleys of the Free City of Freida, a dangerous place where even battle-hardened Divers hesitated to enter.

"Once you set foot into the back alleys, which leads to the center of Freida, you can never leave." Those were the words of a renowned Diver from long ago. In a way, it was painfully ironic that although Freida housed a monster-infested dungeon, the center of the city was the most dangerous place there. This was due to the Free City of Freida's unique origins. It'd originally been a small fortified city; through years of expansion, it'd grown to a size that rivaled other countries thanks to the prestige of the gods and the development of the Divers Guild. However, the accompanying heavy population influx and poorly planned development had made the city terribly cluttered and convoluted. The original fortifications and castle had been left as is in the center of the city while more and more buildings had been constructed as the city continuously expanded. This had pushed the hustle and bustle outward along with the city's administration and major institutions. At some point, the center of Freida had

become a slum, and the darkness of the heart of the city deepened as the outer parts of the city continued to develop.

The chaos beyond the alleys of Freida was known as Kaoloon, a danger zone where urban law meant nothing. It was a place beyond the reach of sunlight, the eyes of the government, and even the eyes of the gods.

Even from this dimly lit alleyway, the castle, faded and blackened with corrosion, could be seen towering in the center of worn-out apartments of mortar, concrete, and hard sandstone. It was said that no one from the outside had ever entered the building, which was always glowing with an eerie purple aura. The old city beyond was like a maze, which was why it was said that no one could leave once they'd entered. In other words, no one had ever gone into the deepest parts of the city.

And of course, the rabble accumulated there like lees in wine. Rumors said that one would only encounter a few thugs and rough-looking individuals near the outer and middle parts, and the truly dangerous ones were deeper inside. No respectable citizen of Freida would go beyond the invisible boundary line. Going even halfway in would be putting one's life at risk.

"I-I need to get out of here," said Melmel, her voice trembling.

"What's the hurry?" said a voice out of nowhere.

"Ah!"

She jumped at the sound of a stranger's voice from behind. She turned fearfully to find two large men in worn leather armor standing over her. Certainly they weren't talking to her out of kindness and concern, and their leering faces did little to hide the vulgar thoughts running through their minds. Their unkempt hair clearly hadn't been washed in some time, and they looked like the very definition of the word "suspicious." Perhaps they were failed Divers who'd decided to live in the back alleys.

She had to do something, or she'd surely be abducted. Melmel couldn't believe this was happening when her mother had just warned her to be careful earlier that day.

As she took a step back, one of the men said, "Whoa, whoa. Why are you so

scared? All we did was talk to you.”

She remained silent.

The other man began laughing crudely. “Ha ha ha! Looks like she doesn’t wanna talk to you though.”

“Pfft, bitches from the outside think they’re so much better than us,” cursed the first man.

“Hey, why don’t you play with us? Just for a little bit,” said the other man while inching closer, a creepy smile on his face.

He almost grabbed her by the arm, so she pulled her arm away.

“N-No!” shouted Melmel.

“Oh, come on. Now that you’re here, I’ll teach you a nice long lesson on the rules of this place. Heh heh heh.”

The men moved closer.

She knew she had to run, but they were blocking the way she’d come in from. It was clear that they’d have their way with her unless she acted fast. That thought sent a chill down her spine. She couldn’t let that happen. Just imagining these strange men touching her horrified her. For a moment, she considered making a run for it deeper into the city.

“Where are you gonna go? Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going deeper inside. Ha ha, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. They’re not even gonna leave your bones intact if a frail-looking girl like you goes in there.”

“And that’s just if they decide to eat you. Well, whatever happens, you sure aren’t coming outta there in one piece.”

She could get her limbs cut off and turned into a plaything. She could get a collar put on her and sold into slavery. She could get cut up alive and turned into ingredients for medicine. She could become monster food. The men howled in laughter as they put the terrible scenarios in her head, leaving her completely petrified.

“You’ll be much safer with us, yeah?”

“What...?” said Melmel.

As the man beckoned her over, her eyes drifted toward the darkness ahead. There, she saw many glowing red dots. It didn't take long for her to realize they were eyes, though she couldn't tell what creatures they belonged to. It didn't seem like they were animals or monsters. Was she being targeted? There were enemies to her front and back. There was nowhere to go. She couldn't imagine a future where she'd get out of there alive.

Melmel thought about what to do, but nothing came to mind. She could try to resist, but her magic was specialized in potion-making and was too weak to fight back against the failed Divers or whatever was lurking in the shadows.

Maybe it's time to give up.

Words suddenly echoed in her head, urging her to give in. As soon as she recognized those words, all of her strength seemed to leave her body. There was no point in working hard to keep on living. That major workshop would soon take away all of her clients. She wouldn't have money to upkeep her workshop nor pay for living expenses. She wouldn't be able to afford her mother's medical expenses. It was over. Even if she managed to get out of this place alive, she couldn't imagine a future where she could continue her life in Freida.

Seeing her fall silent, one of the men asked, “Oh, giving up? Yeah, not like you have any other choice.”

“Heh heh. Well then, let's get right to it.”

The two men slowly approached Melmel, taking their time as if they were enjoying it.

Suddenly, the red lights that had been in front of her disappeared, and footsteps could be heard from the deep end of the shadows. Just as she thought whatever was in the darkness was going after her too, she heard a voice.

“Ah, sorry about that. Did I keep you waiting?” said a young boy as he stepped out of the shadows.

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Ah?”

Melmel and the two men were unable to hide their confusion. He was just an ordinary-looking boy. He had brownish curly hair that was loosely cropped, and he had a soft, gentle smile that made him seem rather childlike. He was just a bit taller than Melmel, perhaps a bit shorter than most boys his age. He was wearing a strange outfit she'd never seen before and carrying a large bag on his back. Perhaps he was a Diver. Or he could've been a porter, someone whose job was to carry materials and core stones gained in the dungeon, though he didn't give off that sort of impression. If he was a resident of this place, he certainly didn't have the characteristic dangerous look that the others had. He really did seem like an ordinary boy you could find anywhere.

The boy was looking straight at Melmel and waving at her as if they were a couple at a meeting spot. There wasn't anyone else around, so he had to be talking to her. She may have imagined it, but he looked a bit pale.

“Who the hell're you?” growled one of the men.

The boy touched his fingers together, looking uncomfortable.

“Um...I'm here to meet up with my girlfriend.”

“My ass. Who'd meet up at a place like this?”

“Well, things were starting to get a bit too routine, so we wanted to change things up. We thought this place would be a bit more exciting, so...hee hee.”

“This one's playing with us. She doesn't need a scrawny little punk like you.”

“Heh, you can watch if you want, as long as you keep your damn mouth shut.”

“Ah, I'm actually not into that sort of thing,” said the boy. “That NTR stuff isn't really for me, you see...”

“Then scram.”

“Umm, do I really have to leave?”

“Did I fuckin' stutter? Leave, asshole!”

“Eek!”

The boy recoiled at the man's shout. The kind-looking young man must have mustered his courage to try to help her, but these failed Divers were far bigger than him, and they were armed. The boy had no weapon on him and only carried his large bag. He had a rather slim build, and he didn't seem like the type to get into fights. He stood no chance.

"Run..." said Melmel.

"Nah, I can't do that."

Melmel didn't want to drag him into this mess for her mistake, but the boy refused. Even though he was clearly afraid, for some reason, he seemed...untroubled? Detached? He looked like he wasn't sure what to do. And perhaps he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him because he definitely looked pale.

Suddenly, one of the men drew his sword.

"This is your last warning, kid. Leave before I cut you."

"Like I said, I can't do that."

"Then what? You wanna get cut down?"

"Oh, no thank you. I hate pain," said the boy matter-of-factly.

"You're starting to piss me off."

"I'm not trying to," said the boy as he reached into his sleeve and pulled something out. "I really don't like threatening people, but...what do you think of this?"

"A magic staff?!"

"He's a mage!"

"Technically, yeah."

Magic staves basically served as mana regulators for mages. Mages didn't emit mana at a stable rate, and their output could fluctuate due to their emotions. However, when they channeled mana through magic staves, the unstable mana was converted into the appropriate wavelength so it could be used in spells. It was said that the size of the gemstone at the tip of the staff

affected the amount of mana that could be converted in this way.

“H-He’s bluffing! This little shrimp couldn’t be a mage!”

“That doesn’t make any sense. You’re much less likely to find a huge, buff mage. I mean, I’m sure they exist, but they’d probably be the minority,” said the boy, slightly taken aback.

The men were clearly shaken at the sight of the staff.

“So, what are you going to do?” continued the boy. “I don’t really want to use elemental magic against people, but if you really wanna do this, we can. Just know that I can’t really pull my punches with my magic, so I can’t guarantee your safety.”

Mana began to fill the air around the boy, and it was an immense power that Melmel had never sensed before. As a meister, she’d dabbled in some magic, but this was on a completely different level. He must’ve been a mind-bogglingly high-level mage. He couldn’t have been much older than her, but saying his power rivaled that of an aged court mage was no exaggeration.

“Ah! Aaah...”

“Ugh...”

The two failed Divers had already lost their will to fight. They were rotten, but they were still Divers, and they knew all too well just how terrifying a high-level mage could be. Anyone but the most hardened of fighters would be unable to bear the dense swirl of mana that filled the place.

It’s so powerful...and without a hint of malice either.

Mages infused mana with malice when using it for intimidation, filling the area around the target with a manifestation of hostility. The mental shock and damage this could inflict on someone was quite severe. Of course, the effectiveness varied greatly depending on the amount and quality of the user’s mana, and a high-level mage could even cause their target to faint using just this method.

“O-Okay...we get it! We’re sorry, all right?!”

“W-We won’t mess with her again! Please, let us go!”

The boy stood at an angle. His eyes glowed purple while magical marks appeared on his neck. His fear from earlier seemed to have completely vanished. Partially immersed in the gloom of the back alley, he now had a brooding air about him befitting of a mage.

The men fell to their knees and groveled, their foreheads rubbing against the ground. The boy maintained his heightened mana as he gestured with his head for them to get lost, and they fled for their lives on the verge of tears.

Melmel watched the boy from behind, and he softly said, "They didn't have to be so scared. I was probably more scared than they were."

"What...?"

"Just look at my legs," he said as he pointed at his trembling knees. He looked up to reveal tears welling up in his eyes.

Was he really that afraid of those men? He couldn't be.

"So, are you okay?" asked the boy.

She couldn't help but find it funny that he'd ask her that in such a state.

"Um, yes. Thanks to you."

"Why are you here, anyway?" he asked.

"I was heading to the Divers Guild, but I couldn't get through the crowd."

"Ah, same here," replied the boy, "except I was on the way back from the guild. Oh, you can get out safely if you go that way. I just came from there myself."

"But that way goes deeper into the back alley."

"Don't worry, you can take a right, and it'll get you out of here. It's safe."

The advice came from the one who'd just saved her, so she decided she'd trust him.

"Thank you, for everything."

Suddenly, the boy peered into her face and stared wordlessly.

"Can I...help you?" asked Melmel.

“Oh, it’s just...you’re feeling down, aren’t you?”

“Well...”

She felt her heart jump. It seemed her anxiety toward the future was showing on her face.

The boy then slid his magic staff out of his sleeve again.

“Since I’m here, let me use some magic on you as well.”

“Huh? What magic?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not some attack or curse. It’ll raise your spirits.”

With that, he began chanting an incantation.

“Bravado,” he said, calling out the name of a generic spell she’d never heard before.

“Ah...”

All of a sudden, Melmel was filled with the gentle warmth of mana from head to toe, and a sense of fulfillment filled her heart. The anxiety toward the future that had been plaguing her heart now felt completely inconsequential.

How can this be?

Was it some sort of strengthening spell? No, her physical abilities were unchanged, and she didn’t feel any boost to her mana. It was just that her mind had returned to its natural healthy state. When was the last time she’d felt like this? Perhaps it was back when she’d created her first potion, when she’d still been full of hope.

“Just like how you need energy to move your body, you need fun and happiness to keep your spirits up. We mages can lift your spirits with a cheat power called magic. Though, it’s actually giving you courage, if we’re being technical,” said the boy with a mischievous grin.

“Why did you do that for me?” asked Melmel.

“Hmm? Well, you looked like you were on the verge of death already. You had the face of a middle-aged office worker who was getting ready to jump in front of a train because he just got fired from his job. It was hard to tell if you

were still alive, to be honest.”

Melmel didn't understand his analogy, but she must've looked absolutely dreadful.

The boy continued, “Things tend to find a way of working out, as long as you keep your spirits up.”

“Do you...really think so?”

“Sure do. Even if you're in a hopeless situation where you're surrounded by corpses and thinking about how you'll end up like them soon, you can get by if you just hang in there. We must've met today for a reason. Why don't you keep trying for a bit longer? Just as long as my magic holds up.”

Seeing his face made her want to hang in there if only for a little bit.

“Okay. I will.”

“Good. Take care now,” said the boy kindly.

Melmel decided to point out the thing that had been on her mind the entire time, “This may be rude of me to say, but...you look rather pale yourself.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. Don't worry about it, I'm fine.”

“Okay...”

She'd thought it was because he was shaken by the men intimidating him, but it seemed that wasn't the case. As the boy was leaving, she distinctly heard him gagging as he mumbled “Okama... Okama... Uuugh.”

In any case, Melmel was relieved to know she could finally leave the back alley safely. As she began walking in the direction the boy had pointed out to her earlier, she realized something.

What's that smell? Is something...burning?

She grimaced, wondering if something was burning nearby. Perhaps a building was on fire. She cocked her head, then scanned her surroundings. Just then, she saw something rolling around near the wall of a building. She strained her eyes in the darkness and looked closer.

“Huh?!”

There, in a corner of the dark back alley was a human being rolling on the ground in a curled-up position. Parts of their clothes were singed, smoke still rising from the burns. And it wasn't just one person. Bodies littered the ground all along the street that the boy had pointed out for her. Many of them were human, but not all. There were beasts she'd never seen before and even monsters that could be found in the dungeon, all convulsing on the ground with thin plumes of smoke rising from their bodies.

Who could've done this? There was only one answer. This was the path that boy had come from.

A chill ran down her spine as the realization dawned on her.

Suddenly, she heard some voices.

"The Lone Porter is here."

"Don't touch the witch's disciple, or you'll get the hammer."

"Hold your breath; don't make a peep. Otherwise, you'll end up just like Obses Ord."

"Don't be fooled by his friendly face. His eyes are as cold as ice."

The voice echoed eerily. Perhaps someone was still lurking nearby, but no one showed themselves. Melmel couldn't even sense anyone's presence. She looked around and above her, but there was nothing, nothing but buildings blackened by soot and a narrow view of the sky. She stood there, puzzled, as the shadows in the back alley cried repeatedly with trembling voices as if they were afraid of someone.

Leaving the back alleys, Melmel Lamel the potion-meister finally arrived at The Bloody Blood of the Goddesses, a potion shop on the second floor of the Divers Guild. She'd always thought it was a strange name. There was a long line of Divers here seeking rare potions, but she had more important things to worry about now. Not only did she have to collect the payment, but she had another important task to do.

I need to sell more potions here to make up for the amount Deima won't be buying anymore.

Indeed, she had to compensate for the business partner she'd just lost. If she failed to increase her business's trading volume, her family would be rendered homeless—or worse, they may end up hanging themselves. All she could do was pray that the major workshop hadn't spread its influence here already.

She entered the shop. Hoping against hope, she saw a cheerful clerk interacting with someone at the counter.

Noticing her approach, the clerk, full of smiles, greeted, "Oh, Lamel! Hi there!"

Then, the other person turned around, and Melmel froze.

"Well, well, if it isn't the young lady from that desolate potion workshop."

"Y-You're...from Irnes Workshop."

The man who'd been speaking to the noisy clerk was a salesman from the major potion workshop. Perhaps he was here to collect a payment just like herself. Melmel remained motionless, and the salesman flashed a smile that was wicked in a different way than those of the failed Divers she'd run into at the back alley.

"Are you here to collect payments as well? Or are you here to sell your potions? I'm sure business must be rough. It must be difficult to find anyone willing to purchase boring potions made in a workshop run by a little girl like you."

He had some nerve to say that when he was the one forcing her business partners to stop working with her.

"E-Excuse me, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't cause any trouble in the store," said the usually noisy clerk, looking rather troubled.

The store manager noticed the three of them talking and emerged from the back of the shop.

"Oh my, what's thiiiis? Having a fun little chat, are we? You don't mind if I join, do you?"

A large dark-skinned man—no, an okama—barged into the conversation while making unnecessary wriggling movements. They were the manager of The

Bloody Blood of the Goddesses.

The salesman saw the store manager and flinched, his expression turning pale, but he quickly recovered and stood up straight. The manager's way of talking, along with their appearance, was quite a lot to take in for him.

"Come on, Manager, we didn't call for you! Please don't appear unless we summon you!" said the clerk.

"Buuut, isn't this a bit too much for you to handle?"

"Well, I guess you're right..."

"See?"

It seemed the manager knew the noisy clerk would be in over her head with the salesman. They gestured for the clerk to get behind them and stood in front of Melmel and the salesman.

The manager was huge. Standing before the two, they were quite overwhelming, and that had nothing to do with them being an okama. The salesman was a bit taller than the average man, and the manager was at least a head taller than him. Not to mention, they had a chest that was unusually thick, arms like tree trunks, thighs as thick as a woman's hips, and hips bulging with muscles.

"I thought we still have some time until our next payment to Irnes Workshop?" said the manager.

The salesman was clearly taken aback by the manager's sheer size, but he cleared his throat and confronted him. "I'm actually here today to discuss a certain matter with you."

"Ohhh? And what might that be?" asked the manager, wriggling around constantly.

The salesman pushed his glasses up as he said, "I-It's concerning our potion sales. I'm here to request that you increase our transaction volume."

"I can't agree to that so easily. We're a guild-authorized store, so we have a set trade volume quota."

The trade volume quota resulted from an arrangement that stipulated the

amount of potions that an authorized store could handle. Every workshop wanted to do business with stores authorized by the Divers Guild because of their strong foundations. But if these stores agreed to increase their trade volume with every workshop that asked, it'd cut into the sales of other potion shops. This wouldn't be healthy for the market as a whole, so these stores limited the amount of potions they handled.

"That's why I'm asking you to cut out other workshops and give their quota to us."

"Ohhh?"

"We'll make it worth your while, of course. If you agree to increase our trade volume, we'll give you priority for our highest-quality potions. We'll even do the same for our high potions. This would be far more beneficial for you than continuing to do business with that little girl over there. What do you say?"

Melmel was shocked to see that the salesman was bold enough to try and run her out of business right in front of her face. She couldn't take much more of this and was about to speak up just when the manager replied to the proposal.

"We don't do sleazy business like that in my store."

"I'd think even a guild-authorized shop would have difficulty stocking potions consistently..."

"Yes, and that's exactly why we take good care of our business partners. Potions are made by people, not workshops," said the manager, waving the man away as if to say that this conversation was over.

Gale Huomottio, the manager of The Bloody Blood of the Goddesses, was once a dungeon vendor who'd traded with Divers in the dungeon. He was a kindhearted soul and not someone who could be toyed with. He couldn't be manipulated with underhanded business tactics—even if he was a dark-skinned okama with way too much makeup on.

"Siding with that little girl's workshop isn't going to—"

"Enough!" yelled Gale, cutting off the salesman.

"Ugh..."

The salesman was reluctant to give up but was silenced by Gale's sharp gaze.

The air felt cold from all the tension, but the frigidness dissipated all at once when Gale said, "Sooo, you're here to collect your payment, right, Mel? Wait right here. I'll get it for you in just a jiffy!"

It was time. If she didn't speak up now, she wouldn't get another opportunity again. She had to secure more sales, or she'd be doomed.

"Um, excuse me!" she shouted as Gale turned to leave.

"Hmm?"

"I'm here to collect the payment, yes, but I'm also here with a request!"

"Oh? What is it?"

"Please use more of your trade quota to do business with my workshop!"

Gale, the clerk, and the salesman all looked shocked.

Then the salesman shot her a contemptuous look and said, "Hah! Such a shameless little girl. How would this shop benefit in any way by increasing their trade volume with you?"

"Well..."

He was right, there was no benefit for them. There was nothing special about the potions she made. All she did was adhere to the proper amounts of each ingredient and fine-tune the mana being used.

"That's what I thought," he pressed. "There's no reason for them to buy more of your wares if they don't get anything out of it! Think before you talk, you idiot!"

The salesman was relentless, taking Melmel's silence as a sign of weakness. Was she just going to take this from a man who worked for a workshop that only cared about quantity? How was she going to get through this if she couldn't even deal with such petty malice?

"It'll raise your spirits." A voice echoed in her mind.

That's right... she thought.

She'd just remembered the mysterious spell that boy had cast on her. All it

did was raise one's spirits, but it'd given her the power to be brave, which was what she needed more than anything else. It'd granted her the strength to raise her voice even in this trying situation. She knew she now had the courage inside her to stand up and face adversity.

"What? Do you have nothing to say? Are you ashamed because you finally realized what a fool you are?" the man went on.

"Y..."

"Hmm? If you have something to say, just—"

"You be quiet and stay out of this!" shouted Melmel sharply.

"Huh?!"

The salesman hadn't expected to be yelled at, and he found himself at a loss for words at her intensity.

Now was her chance.

"Please! Increase your trade volume with my workshop!" she said, bowing her head to Gale.

Gale gave her a stiff expression.

"As I just told that sleazebag over there, that's not a request I can fulfill so easily."

"I understand, but I must still ask that you consider it!" she said with her head still bowed. "I promise you: I'll continue to make the best potions I can! I know this is shameless of me, but please... Please!"

If her request was denied, it'd be over for her—no, she was going to make it work no matter what. She wouldn't raise her head or even move from her spot until Gale agreed, neither did she care if she was causing a scene. Such was her resolve as she waited for a response.

Suddenly, Gale started laughing.

"Okay. That's enough joking around."

"Huh?" she said, unable to understand which part of their exchange was a joke.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

“R-Really? You’ll increase our trade volume?”

“That’s right.”

“Ahhh...” she breathed.

She thought she was dreaming, but Gale had definitely agreed to increase their trade volume. A wave of joy and relief suddenly came over her. Her knees went weak, and she lowered herself onto the ground.

“Oh, are you all right, dear?” asked Gale, looking concerned.

“Y-Yes. I’m sorry...” apologized Melmel, her voice trembling.

Meanwhile, the salesman had something to say about all of this. “What’s the meaning of this?! Why would you increase your trade volume with that brat’s workshop?”

“Because I want to. Why else?”

“And how would that benefit your shop?”

“Not everything is all about profits, you know. It’s like I said earlier: potions are made by people, not workshops.”

Gale was known for being a kind soul, but it wouldn’t make sense for them to increase the trade volume with Melmel’s workshop solely out of benevolence. They were a businessman, after all. That kindness had to be in anticipation of some sort of returns down the line, but what did they see in her workshop?

“Gale...”

“I was actually just thinking that I wanted to stock more of your potions.”

“What...? What do you—”

“Let me show you something,” said Gale, then they went to the back of the store.

Melmel was unsure what was going on, and Gale returned shortly with a bag. They brought it over and took something out of it.

“This,” they said.

“Is that...?” said Melmel.

“It can’t be...” breathed the salesman.

“Yes, a gold potion. It’s the talk of the town right now.”

Gale had brought out a bottle containing golden fluid: the potion that Divers throughout Freida were going mad over. Even a small amount of it was extraordinarily effective. Not only did its healing power rival that of a high potion, but it also recovered fatigue and boosted one’s physical abilities as if they were buffed by a generic spell, which was completely unheard of. It did come with a side effect of extreme fatigue if overused, but its efficacy was more than enough to overshadow that downside. After all, it wasn’t just an excellent healing item, but it also allowed the user to boost their abilities without relying on a mage. Used strategically, it was by far the most powerful tool one could bring into a dungeon.

Having no idea what this monumental potion had to do with her, Melmel gave Gale a puzzled look.

“Supposedly, your potion was needed to make them,” explained Gale.

“Needed? Why?” she asked.

“He said the gold potion was made by mixing your potion with something else.”

“What?”

She couldn’t hide her confusion. That was impossible.

The salesman understood this as well, and he shouted, “That’s ridiculous! There’s no way that’s true!”

“Ohhh? Why’s that?” asked Gale.

“What kind of question is that? We’re talking about a potion that’s already complete!”

“Hmm?”

It seemed Gale wasn’t quite catching on. After all, he was a merchant chosen by the guild, not a potion specialist. He didn’t understand the fine details of

potion-making.

“Gale,” said Mermel. “Once a potion is made, anything you add to it won’t mix properly.”

Potions were known as miracles brought on by Torpaz. But in fact, they were actually medicines created with his magic, which meant the chains of causality were connected upon their completion, and the events were fixed then. In other words, the end products had achieved their completed forms and couldn’t be changed any further. That was why nothing else could be mixed in. If mixing something in turned them into something else, that would mean they’d never been in their completed forms in the first place. But this was paradoxical: if potions were complete upon creation, potions that could have other ingredients mixed into them wouldn’t be considered potions, and it’d imply that Mermel had put poorly made products out into the market.

Hearing this, Gale adopted a thoughtful stance.

“Ahhh... Come to think of it, he did mention something like that. He said that normally, you can’t mix potions with anything else, so he supposedly had used magic to modify it. Since a complete potion can’t be mixed, he’s reverted it back into an incomplete form first. That’s what I was told, anyway. I’m not a mage, so I have no idea how it works.”

“R-Revert it?!” said the man from Irnes Workshop, shocked.

“Wait...could that be true?” wondered Mermel.

To revert a potion back into an incomplete form made sense in theory, but a complete item should be impossible to change. She couldn’t even begin to understand how it could’ve been done.

“Is it *that* impressive?” asked Gale.

“The very idea is unprecedented. I’m not convinced such techniques even exist.” replied Mermel.

“I heard it has something to do with the junction between cause and effect, something about the fundamentals of magic,” recalled Gale.

“The fundamentals of magic—ah!” Mermel seemed to have realized

something.

“Oh? Did you figure something out?”

“The process of completing the potion—the chains of causality were linked with magic, so it can be undone with magic. Which means...”

It may have been possible.

Melmel continued, “But I don’t know if it’s possible to alter it like that while keeping the original effects...”

“You know, I also heard that your potions are near perfect. Supposedly, it’s because the ingredients are perfectly measured out in the right portions and that magic is cast on it so precisely. Using magic to revert a poorly made potion wouldn’t even turn it back into its base ingredients, I heard,” said Gale, giving the salesman the side-eye.

He seemed to have gotten the message.

“Are you implying our products are of poor quality?” he asked.

“That would be my guess. The person who made it said he tried all sorts of potions, but it only worked with hers. Maybe your workshop is so focused on quantity that it’s been cutting corners. Am I wrong?”

“Ugh...”

“He said that about my potions...?” asked Melmel.

“Yes. I’ve been told your ratios for all ingredients are spot on. The work of a true artisan, yours are. Your perfect potions are exactly the same every time.”

“I see... It must be because I always make them properly.”

Every workshop had added some sort of alteration to their original recipe since they’d wanted to add their own twist that would be passed down for generations. The Lamel family’s potion recipe, on the other hand, hadn’t changed at all since it’d been taught by Torpaz himself, which was a result of them protecting tradition with diligence and stubbornness.

Melmel had never expected to receive recognition like this. Nobody would’ve commended her for her potions under normal circumstances, but strangely, her

potions were now highly regarded because they were used as an ingredient for someone else's potion.

Suddenly, Gale's expression was all business. "Mel, I want you to keep making quality potions like you've been. We'll buy everything you have, and we'll pay five times the price of a regular potion. What do you say?"

"F-Five times? I..." said Melmel, clearly conflicted about whether she could really charge that much.

"It's fine, this price was agreed upon in a meeting with the guild, with your circumstances in mind."

"But are you sure? What about the share for the meister who makes the gold potions?"

"The other meister said it's okay because he'll be getting priority for your potions, and he's getting paid well enough. I wouldn't worry about it. He's not doing this to make a business out of it, and he doesn't seem to think it's a big deal. Why don't you just take advantage of it?"

"I don't know how I'd feel about that..." She was hesitant, thinking she was the only one truly benefiting from this.

"Heh heh heh. The other meister feels the same as you do. He said it wouldn't feel right to make a bunch of money using your potions."

Melmel was starting to think it really may be okay to accept the deal.

"He must be really selfless," she said.

"Oh, no. He doesn't even try to hide his selfishness. He was adamant about setting aside some potions for personal use and only making small batches of potions because he wanted to go dungeon diving."

"Wait...dungeon diving? Is this person a Diver?"

"That's what I've been told."

"He's one of our regulars here," said the shop clerk, who was apparently an acquaintance of this meister. "He's not exactly the type of person you'd picture when you hear the word 'Diver,' though. Oh, is that person from the workshop that makes poor-quality potions still around?"

“Humph. I’ll see myself out!” spat the salesman, then left.

The clerk smiled. “Ha, good riddance. Right, Manager?”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t be so blatant.”

“Okay, I’ll keep that in mind!” said the clerk, but she was beaming with satisfaction.

“Well, I have to admit that did feel good,” said Gale. “I’m sure it was even more satisfying for you, Mel.”

“Y-Yes...”

She did feel that the salesman had gotten what he deserved, but he’d pretty much escaped her mind halfway through the conversation. As a potion-meister running a workshop herself, she was far more interested in another thing.

“You’re curious about this, aren’t you?” said Gale, and he picked up a bottle of gold potion.

“I am. Would you mind if I have a sip?”

“Sure, you did make its base ingredient, after all.”

Gale poured out a portion into a measuring cup and handed it to Melmel.

She took a sip.

Her eyes widened in surprise as the potion soon took effect. She wasn’t injured or fatigued, so she didn’t experience its healing properties, but she still very much felt its other effects, which had taken the entire world by storm. She felt her body fill with vigor, and she could sense the events around her with more clarity. A surge of power had come flowing through her body as if she’d just leveled up. The potion’s effects were tremendous and truly unprecedented.

“It’s surprising, isn’t it? I’ve tried some of it myself, and I couldn’t believe how effective it was. So, what do you think? Can you make it?”

Melmel remained silent.

“Mel?”

“This isn’t a potion. It’s some other type of medicine.”

“What?”

“I don’t think I can make this even if I had the recipe. You would need to be an advanced mage with an extraordinary amount of mana to make something like this.”

Something told her that this drink wasn’t a potion. It seemed to require a potion made with theas as its ingredient, but it was something completely different.

Gale didn’t understand what she was getting at, so he asked, “You say it’s not a potion. What do you mean?”

“It really isn’t. Um, how do I say this...”

The potion had been completely transformed as if it’d turned into a different medicine while maintaining the potion’s effects. She was having difficulty explaining it, but she could say with certainty that it wasn’t a potion. A potion filled its user with warmth akin to benevolence, but this medicine not only maintained that effect but also had an intense stimulation mixed in it. It was as if it’d awakened and drawn the power sleeping within her. The meister who’d made this potion must’ve been a talented high-level mage, but the thought of someone altering Torpaz’s art of potion-making to create something else entirely wasn’t only shocking but downright scary.

“What level is this meister?” asked Melmel.

“I haven’t asked. You think it’s high?” replied Gale.

“I...think so.”

She groaned, deep in thought and struggling to find a clear answer.

Gale sensed that it was starting to get awkward and said, “Oh, I forgot that I still need to pay you. I’ll go get it now.”

They went to the back of the store, and Melmel heard their deep voice shouting “Aaargh! Where are you?! Come on out!” but she was still too shocked by the medicine to hear him.

The clerk then said to her, “I’m happy for you, Melmel.”

“For what?” she asked, her mind still somewhere else.

“You were so preoccupied with the gold potion that you forgot, didn’t you? I mean the agreement.”

“Oh...”

Indeed, Gale had agreed to increase the amount of potions he’d buy from her—and at a much higher price.

Seeing the realization on her face, the clerk smiled again. “Now, allow me to say it again: I’m happy for you!”

“Thank you. Now...”

She could now fix up her struggling workshop business. She could now get her mother the treatment she needed.

“Mom...”

Perhaps her mother was right, and their god truly was watching over them.

Floor Eleven: The Miracle Potion—Summon the Dark-Skinned Okama!

Some time ago, I'd agreed to sell to the Divers Guild some of the gold potions I'd made as part of my magic studies. High-quality potions were the lifeline for both dungeon-diving Divers and the Divers Guild that supported them. They wanted me to sell them those potions and weren't taking no for an answer. I'd negotiated the terms with Ashley, and we'd decided that I'd regularly deliver some gold potions to the potion shop run by the guild. And so, I was on the way to drop off the goods at their official shop on the second floor.

As I approached the shop, I found a long line of people waiting to get inside. Divers lined up here every day to stock up on high-quality potions and mana potions in preparation for their next dive, and it kind of reminded me of a certain apple-based electronics shop on the day before a new release. I was used to the sight by now, so it wasn't a surprise by any means.

Mana potions, especially high-quality ones, tended to sell out quicker than healing potions, and some people even sat in line for days in anticipation of new stock. And yet, the situation was supposedly already much better here than in other regions since there were more stores selling potions in Freida than in any other major city thanks to the Divers Guild.

I glanced at the long line of Divers as I walked right into the store. They were just waiting for a restock, so there was no reason for me to feel bad about skipping ahead.

"Welcome to the guild-approved potion shop, The Bloody Blood of the Goddesses! Are you here for normal potions or premium potions? Though, we actually just ran out of our regular potions! Tee-hee!" said a blonde clerk with a ponytail as I walked into the poorly named store.

She squinted her eyes into a >< shape as she shouted "I'm sorry!" but she didn't sound apologetic at all because of her over-the-top energy and cheerfulness. She was pretty loud, to be honest.

“Oh, wait. It’s you, Kudo! Here for some regular potions again? You should stock up on some premium ones once in a while!”

“Those are way too expensive for me, so I’ll have to pass.”

“Ah, but the regular ones are all sold out like I mentioned earlier. The Divers waiting for a restock in front of the store wiped them out—the potions didn’t stand a chance!” she said energetically.

“Are all those people outside waiting for mana potions?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“You still don’t stock a lot of potions, I see.”

“Our supply never seems to catch up to the Divers’ demand. Anyone who wants a steady supply would need to pay for the pricey ones or hire a personal potion-meister.”

“Right,” I said. My conversations with this clerk were usually as casual as they got. “By the way, do you take preorders for potions here?”

“No, we don’t. We’d get complaints from other Divers if we did. You’d have to line up just like everyone else!”

“Ah, that’s a shame. There’s something I really need to get my hands on.”

“If it’s pricey, I could grant you the privilege of talking to the manager about it. Would you like me to summon him?”

“Oh, but I just need regular potions.”

One of the reasons I’d come here today was to get some potions to use as a base for my gold potions. It took far too much time and effort to make potions from scratch, but I didn’t need a particularly expensive potion to make it work.

Wait, why did she say she’d “summon” the manager? Are they some kind of a familiar that requires a summoning ritual to be called out?

The clerk tilted her head cutely and asked, “Hold on. So you just need some *regular* potions?”

“Yup. Potions are different depending on who makes them, right?”

“I heard they are, but can you really tell?” said the clerk, looking rather

confused.

Indeed, potions didn't vary much in terms of effects, but since each atelier used different ratios for their ingredients, certain potions were better for mixing than others.

"There's actually a pretty big difference," I said.

"Whose potion are you talking about, by the way?"

"Um, her name's Melmel, I think?"

"Meister Melmel Lamel's potions? Yes, we do carry those here."

"Then can you set some aside for me next time? I'd like to buy them."

"I just told you—"

"Here," I said, handing her the certification card I'd received from Ashley.

"Huh?" The clerk looked at the card. "Wh-What?! A special-grade meister?!"

"Sh! Quiet! Someone's gonna hear you!" I said, quickly covering her mouth with my hands. I waited a minute for her to calm down, then let go.

"Wh-Why do you have a special-grade certification card?!" she asked, eyes wide with wonder.

"This is why."

I showed her the goods I'd prepared, and her eyes bulged with even greater shock.

"A g-g-gold potion! No way! Are you telling me *you're* the one who made those?! That's amazing! Seriously!" she said as she held the bottle up to the ceiling, staring at it intently. "So this is the super potion that heals all wounds and illnesses and boosts your physical abilities! All of Freida has been talking about it! Oh my goodness, I can't believe it! A real gold potion!"

She was getting a little too excited about it.

And those rumors seemed to be getting a bit out of hand. It wasn't *that* amazing.

"I've been making these with Melmel's potions as a base, and I was asked by

the guild to make more and sell them the potions.”

“So that’s why you want to preorder potions.”

“Yup,” I nodded.

The clerk furrowed her brows. “Let me see... I can’t make that call, so would you mind if I summoned the manager?”

“Please do.”

“Very well! Then I’ll sacrifice you and the gold potion as tributes to summon the manager! Behold and marvel! Come forth, shining dark manager!”

“What are you, some sort of duelist?”

The clerk called out the manager like how a CEO from a certain card game anime usually did, then a giant silhouette appeared from the back of the store.

“Ohhh? What is it?”

“Ah?!”

Out came a giant dark-skinned okama. Seeing me shudder and back away, he winked at me. Maybe I really was gonna get sacrificed as a tribute; maybe he’d hit me with a Burst Stream of Whatchamacallit.

Suddenly, the clerk called out, “Manager! I’ve got something to tell you!”

“Oh, of course, honey.”

The clerk leaned in to talk to the manager, who was wriggling unnecessarily the entire time.

“I see,” they said. “So you need Meister Melmel Lamel’s potions to make those miracle potions.”

“That’s right,” I said. “The Guild also wants me to choose any potion shop to wholesale them to.”

“And you chose us? Well, thank youuu!”

Stop talking like that, and stop wriggling faster and faster. Please.

“Does it have to be Melmel’s potions?” asked the clerk.

“Yeah, I can’t get it to stabilize with other potions. Melmel’s ones are the only

ones made with such precision and care.”

“Why don’t you open your own workshop and make your potions from scratch?” asked the manager.

“I could, but then it’d take up all the time I could be spending in the dungeon otherwise. It’s much easier for me to just buy the potions, especially when you consider the time and money it’d take to set everything up.”

I’d need forty hours in a day if I was to be a student, Diver, *and* potion-meister. Making potions took an extraordinary amount of time and concentration.

“Please double or triple the price for anything that will be used for making gold potions. I don’t mind if I get a lower cut as long as Melmel gets more profit,” I said, and they both looked shocked.

“Huh? What? You’re fine with getting a smaller cut of the profits?” asked the clerk.

“Yes. As I said earlier, I’m only making potions because the guild asked me to, and it doesn’t feel right making money off of something someone else made.”

I really would feel guilty raking in money when I was simply mixing potions with energy drinks.

“You’re basically purchasing like any other legitimate business,” pointed out the manager.

“I’ll be benefiting enough from this arrangement anyway.”

“How so?” asked the clerk, but the manager seemed to get it.

“Ah, I see,” he said. “You want to pool up your own stock.”

“Yes. It’ll be easy for me to secure my own stock if I can get her potions on a regular basis. What do you say? Will you wholesale my gold potions for me?”

“Sure, honey. How about we split it this way? We get thirty percent, you get twenty, and Melmel gets fifty.”

Considering the gold potion’s current market price, the retail price would be at least seven to ten gold coins per bottle. A gold coin was worth around ten

thousand Japanese yen, so a twenty percent cut per bottle would be more than enough. I felt like it might even be too much, considering an energy drink was only a few hundred yen per bottle.

“Let’s go with that,” I said.

“Good! Nooow, come with me to the back room, so we can talk about this in detail,” said the manager.

“What? Uh, I don’t know...”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t bite!”

I stared in silence. I couldn’t help but feel like I was in danger. I glanced over to the clerk, and she averted her eyes.

With an awkward smile, she said, “W-Well...it was supposed to be a Tribute Summon...”

I had a bad feeling about this, but I had to go in there to close the deal. Of course, I muttered some incantations and activated the generic spell Celerity just in case.

Epilogue

Today, I'd been at the Divers Guild since morning, which was quite rare for me. As a student, I was usually at school this time of day, being subject to the mental labor they call "studying," so I couldn't be here unless I ditched class. This was one of those days when I didn't need to go to class; it was Sunday, everyone's favorite day of the week.

As I considered whether to start the day off with a chill dungeon dive or to kill some time here, I heard a familiar voice from behind.

"Akira?"

I turned around to find Scrael standing there.

"Oh, hey, Scrae."

"Didn't expect to see you here. You usually aren't here until the afternoon."

"I don't have classes today."

"You're such a hard worker. Not only do you study every day, but you come to the guild every day too."

"I don't really consider myself a hard worker," I said.

"Really? Most Divers spend three days of the week not doing anything."

I was the kind of underachieving high school student who came here for recreation since the early morning instead of studying or participating in club activities. Being called a hard worker when other students were working their butts off just didn't feel right.

"Where are you diving today?" asked Scrael.

"Haven't decided yet. I was gonna figure that out later."

"Huh."

"Where are *you* planning to go?"

"I *was* going to go to the Night Soil Swamps."

“I see.”

That would be a rough dive; the whole environment there was difficult to deal with. That place was a wasteland full of colorful yet deadly looking plants and trees, green and purple poisonous swamps, bottomless brown swamps, and bubbling cheese-yellow swamps capable of melting you down to the bone. It was a place more hellish than hell itself, where the environment was even more dangerous than the monsters that resided there.

Such thoughts were running through my mind when I realized there was something strange about Scrael’s phrasing.

She did a cute little hop and moved her face next to mine.

“I want to visit your world if you don’t mind,” she said.

“Hmm? Visit my world?” I repeated, and she nodded.

“I’ve always been curious about it.”

“I did mention it before, huh.”

“Well? Can I?”

“I don’t mind at all, and God—Ameithys, that is—has said it’s fine too. But we’d need to do a lot of prep work.”

“What do we need to do?”

“To get some clothes, for one thing. Though, I guess you could wear mine until we buy something for you over there.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And next, we’d need to hide your ears.”

“My ears?”

“Yup. There are only humans in my world, so people will be spooked if they see someone with long ears.”

“What should I do?”

“You could wear a hoodie or a hat. Or maybe we should cover it up with magic. We can ask God for advice.”

I was sure he'd have some sort of solution, so I decided to let him handle it.

"Also, you have to promise not to pick a fight with everyone," I warned.

Scrael puffed out her cheeks, looking a bit annoyed. "I don't go around fighting everyone."

"What I mean is that there are only humans in my world like I mentioned earlier. Simply directing your malice at someone could knock them unconscious, and the police would come after us. In fact, Hiro would probably have to get involved if that happened."

"Really?"

"Yup. Just keep in mind that people might give you rude stares, so you'll have to be careful."

And so, Scrael and I made a stop at God's place before we went on our way to modern Japan.

Afterword

I never thought this story would become a book! To be honest, I was completely shocked when I got the offer to publish this work as a book.

Hello, I am Hitsuji Gamei. I had written out this work on Shosetsuka ni Naro just for fun without thinking much about how to write or structure it as a novel, so I didn't think it would be published like this. This book is definitely not for everyone: it is full of internet slang and jokes that are hard to understand, and it's not structured to be punchy or full of peaks. That is generally not the kind of story you want in a novel.

That is why I had never imagined a book would be made out of this, but it happened thanks to an editor from GC Novels reaching out to me. They had been reading this series even before they had read my other series, *The Magician Who Rose from Failure*, published at GC Novels (editor's note: first six volumes now available on JNC!), and I could not be more grateful.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank GCN Bunko, my editor K, illustrator Karei, Ouraidou K. K., and all of the readers who have been supporting me.

Bonus Short Story

Give Me Chocolate!

Divers who'd completed a dive in the dungeon had an obligation to stop by the receptionist's window to make a report. This was so that the guild could keep track of the Divers' safety, as well as their achievements and paces of progress. Divers were the main source of the guild's income, and there'd obviously be no Divers Guild without them. The Guild recommended the appropriate floors for each Diver, which were also reflected in their rankings. So any Diver who went home without reporting to their receptionists would get thoroughly scolded and have their ranking reduced. Though, everyone knew to report after a dive these days, so I hadn't heard of this being an issue.

I'd just finished up a dive myself, and I went to the receptionist's window to put in a report.

With a gentle expression, Ashley greeted me and said, "Hi, Kudo. Thanks for working hard on your dives every day."

"Oh, no," I said, "I do it for fun, so I don't think of it as work at all."

"The only people who actually enjoy dungeon diving are you and Dracarion," she pointed out.

"That can't be true. It's actually a lot of fun once you get used to it. Why don't you give it a try?"

"You act like this is some casual hobby anyone can pick up."

"I mean, I picked it up as a hobby without really thinking about it."

"I think you're a special case," said Ashley.

But there was nothing special about me. Even a coward like me could make it this far. All it took was a lot of caution, just like how if you became overleveled killing a bunch of Slimes near the first town, the next area would become super easy.

“So,” Ashley asked, “where’s my souvenir?”

“Huh? I didn’t bring one.”

“Whaaat?”

“Please don’t ‘Whaaat?’ me. How many times do I have to ask you not to mooch off of someone younger than you?”

Ashley suddenly started throwing a tantrum like a kid in a grocery store. “I’ve been super busy lately! I want a reward, okay?!”

“Why are you telling me this...?” I said in exasperation.

Ashley was far from what I pictured when I thought of older women. She had the attitude of a child doing a sit-in protest to demand candy.

I waited for a little bit, but there seemed to be no end in sight to Ashley’s little tantrum. She must’ve been really stressed out lately. I let out a resigned sigh, then dug around in my Dimension Bag like a certain cat-type robot from the future. I didn’t actually need to dig around to find what I needed, but it added to the theatrics.

“Okay, fine...” I said.

“Yay! Thanks, Kudo!”

“But in return, I’m counting on you to take care of things like rankings and levels for me.”

“Yes, of course! I’ve got you covered!” said Ashley.

I was concerned that a receptionist could be so easily bribed, but I wasn’t going to complain.

I took out a snack for her. It was one of the leftovers from the offerings I’d brought for God. Apparently, he liked Japanese snacks that weren’t too sweet, so he was more into manju than chocolate, which wasn’t exactly the fanciest of offerings. I could really relate to him for this reason, and he really felt like a friendly neighbor.

“Please take this chocolate and calm down,” I said.

“Huh? What’s that?”

“It’s a snack from where I live.”

“The wrapper looks so fancy,” she pointed out.

“It just *looks* fancy. It’s a lot more affordable than you’d think.”

Ashley peeled off the wrapper and opened the box. The inside was divided into little compartments, with various types of chocolate in each of them.

“Wow, it’s like a jewelry box!”

She was right. Though, that description felt kind of overused these days thanks to a certain Japanese celebrity food reporter who’d popularized that term.

“They smell so sweet. Can I eat them?” she asked.

I nodded, and Ashley tossed a piece of chocolate in her mouth. She chewed, then her face lit up with surprise.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She nodded her head vigorously. She ate another one, and her expression melted into a loose smile. She was in bliss. I mean, nothing beat chocolate when you were craving something sweet.

After Ashley enjoyed the chocolates for a while, she exclaimed, “What’s with these things? They’re so good!”

“I’m glad you enjoy them.”

“Is this what aristocrats eat or something like that?”

“I’ve heard that was the case a long time ago, but even kids can buy them these days. Though, these are a little fancier because they were supposed to be gifts.”

“I can have all of these? Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, enjoy.”

“Really? No takebacks!”

“Yes, really,” I assured Ashley as she closed the box and quickly put it away. “Oh, and they’ll melt if they get warm, so you should put them away in a

cupboard somewhere.”

“Got it, thanks,” said Ashley, then she gave me a dubious expression. “But seriously, where do you come from?”

“That’s a secret,” I told her, though I had a feeling she had an idea already.



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After-School Dungeon Diver: Level Grinding in Another World Volume 1

by Hitsuji Gamei

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