

HITSUJI

GAMEI

ILLUSTRATOR:

KAREI

3



AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
WORLD

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AUTHOR:
HITSUJI GAMEI
ILLUSTRATOR:
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AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

**LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
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DRACARION HUELLER

A high-level Beast-Head Diver whom Akira calls Lion-Maru. Free-spirited, bighearted, and caring, but his face is scary. He's strong too.

KUDO AKIRA

A high schooler who can travel between Japan and another world. A mage with a rare affinity for purple magic. He's at that age where he's very interested in all things erotic.

CARBUNCLE

A creature that happens to follow Akira around. Loves Akira's mana and Churu cat treats.

ASHLEY

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

SCRAEL

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



"I-Is it
really you?"

! ?

"Yes. It is.
Who else would I be?"

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Prologue: An Encounter, or More like a Meeting in the Name of “Encounter”

I had a magic mentor.

It'd all started back then, a few days after I'd learned how to teleport to Do-Melta.

I happened on Lion-Maru as I walked around town. As I was making small talk with him, thanking him for the other day, Instructor Seeker caught me off guard when he suddenly emerged from what seemed to be a gambling den.

Then, I was suddenly kidnapped—yes, kidnapped. There was no “Hello there, good weather, isn't it?” It was just “You're a mage, aren't you? That's an interesting element you got!”

“Ahhh! I'm being abducted! It's an abduction of a minor!!!” I screamed, but Sensei used those black band things she always had around her to drag me into the back alley.

I had no idea what was happening at the time and thought my adventure was about to end abruptly, but I ended up safe—well, maybe not exactly “safe.”

To cut to the chase, Sensei told me to help her help others (namely herself), and she'd teach me magic in exchange. I then became her disciple, not that I had much of a say in the matter.

She was just a strange person with those shadows—or rather, that black haze—and those wriggling bands around her all the time, so I didn't actually know what she looked like. I'd been able to tell she was a young woman by her voice, but that was about all I knew about her other than the fact that she was an overpowered mage with a demonic personality.

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“Whoa, it's actually here.”

That was the first thing I'd said as I discovered the new route.

Before my eyes was a Misty Border that connected floors. As an aside, “Misty Border” actually wasn’t its official name. It looked like a perfectly clear and serene water surface with some sort of mist or fog around it. It had an oval contour, and my reflection in it appeared hazy. Because of that, I had the urge to say “Mirror, mirror on the wall,” but it didn’t talk back, of course. It didn’t look like a warp zone at all, so I hadn’t been able to tell that you were supposed to teleport using it at first. These were always connected to a next floor, but I couldn’t tell whether one would lead to a known route or a completely unknown one until I stepped through it. Though, it was more than unexpected to find a secret route here in the Great Forest Ruins.

“See?” said the very person who’d brought me here, a smug smile on her face. She was my aforementioned magic mentor, Beitreise Zuiventria herself.

After teleporting into Do-Melta, I’d been wandering around Freida and thinking about what to do for the day when Sensei had suddenly told me she wanted some core stones and brought me here—or more like dragged me here by force. Sad.

I mean, I had to admit I’d been curious when she’d told me there was a floor I didn’t know about, but it went without saying that she would’ve dragged me here whether I’d agreed or not. I just had to make that clear.

She’d told me that this new floor came after the newbie area, the Great Forest Ruins. Connected floors typically had fairly close expected level requirements, so the difficulty shouldn’t spike up a lot. That’d been why I’d assumed the place to be relatively safe and allowed myself to be brought here without resistance. But the difficulty of the path leading here was concerning. If the severity of the path here was meant to keep low-level Divers from entering a high-difficulty area, there was a chance that things were going to get dicey.

“Man, I didn’t think it actually existed,” I said.

“Of course it does. I said so, didn’t I?” said Sensei.

“But the guild has no record of this route. It’s only natural to be skeptical, don’t you think? Besides, you could’ve been lying just so you could drag me out here.”

“Oh? When have I ever lied to take you somewhere?” asked Sensei.

“Hey! Don’t think I’ll agree with you just because you said that with a smug look on your face! You lie to me all the time! You’ve done that thirty-seven times, to be exact!”

“That’s not very manly of you to be keeping tally like that,” said Sensei. “You need to stop being so petty if you want to get any girls.”

“Of course I’ve been keeping tally! I end up nearly dying every time I go out with youuu!” I shouted at Sensei, who was laughing at me under her shadowy mass.

But my protests fell on deaf ears, of course. She was surely plotting how to bully me next. What a terrifying person she was. She truly was a demon.

“I’m impressed that you take such a leap of imagination and accuse me of being a bully and a demon when I haven’t even said anything,” said Sensei.

“Sensei! Reading my mind is unfair! It’s cheating! It’s the work of evil spirits!” I complained.

“You literally just said it out loud. You really can’t keep your thoughts from leaking out of your mouth, can you?”

“What?! But I’m sure my mouth was closed!”

“It was wide open. And I don’t know what this ‘evil spirits’ nonsense is, but I do know you meant it as an insult,” said Sensei.

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

Sensei wrapped me up with her bands and started swinging me around.

After I’d been subjected to this brand-new punishment for some time, she said, “Come, it’s time to go.”

“O-Okay...”

I *was* kind of looking forward to seeing this new floor, so I followed Sensei as she began walking. There was a very big possibility that no one knew about this floor besides me and Sensei, so I couldn’t help but feel excited. Though, when I considered everything that it’d taken for me to get here, the positives were about even with the negatives.

Floor Twenty-Two: I Am Kidnapped by Sensei Today, Again

I walked straight into my own reflection on the border. As my vision cleared, I found what seemed to be a meadow and a natural forest. That might have sounded a lot like the Great Forest Ruins, but this place looked completely different, mainly in the colors.

“The ground is super colorful,” I said.

Indeed, this whole place was full of color as if paint of various colors had been splattered all over the ground. There would’ve been nothing wrong with that if we were talking about a field full of flowers or something, but it was more like the soil and weeds were colorful here. The soil I could understand, but the color of the weeds made them look like they’d been genetically mutated by some sort of negative energy. The colors here were more subdued compared to those of the Night Soil Swamps, so they weren’t quite as alarming, but they did make me uneasy.

The surrounding trees were kind of weird too—or more like really weird: their colors and shapes were unusual to say the least. It felt more like I’d stepped into a fancy picture book rather than a fantasy world, and the unnatural feeling of it all reminded me of a certain wonderland or a place through the looking glass.

The sky was pretty in contrast to this bizarre landscape, beautiful even. The blue expanse above was as clear as it got, and just watching it put my mind at ease. The ground? I didn’t even want to look at it.

“This is the new floor I discovered,” said Sensei.

“It’s real after all,” I said. “It’s still hard to believe that no one has found it so far though.”

“That’s because this place was just created— No, that isn’t quite right. Maybe saying that it was recently connected to the Gandakia Dungeon would be more

accurate.”

“That can happen?” I asked.

“Yes, some places where monsters continuously spawn end up getting connected to the dungeon. That’s what I’ve heard anyway.”

“Ah, I think I’ve heard that God connects these areas to the dungeon because of the mass outbreaks of monsters there.”

“The gods turn them into new floors whenever certain conditions are met,” explained Sensei.

“So this place must be in pretty bad shape if it was recently linked,” I said.

“It’s come to the point where monsters stopped getting culled naturally. So I’d say it is, as you put it, ‘in pretty bad shape.’”

I felt like I’d touched upon an important part of the mechanisms that governed this world. I found these talks about things like the origins of dungeons quite interesting.

“So, what should we call this place?” I asked.

“Let’s see... Why don’t we tentatively call it the Paradise Hot Springs?”

“Wait, there are hot springs here?” I asked.

“Yes. Not around here, but there are plenty of them if we go a bit further,” said Sensei cheerily.

There was some pride in her expression, maybe because she’d discovered hot springs. Digging up a hot spring would indeed be quite impressive and was something worth bragging about. One might wonder why I wasn’t happy about this. Well, perhaps the reason I didn’t start showering her with praises was because I’d become a Diver and was sensing danger with every fiber of my being.

“H-Hot springs, huh...? They’re safe, right?” I asked hesitantly.

“Hmm? Why wouldn’t they be? What? You don’t like bathing?” said Sensei.

“N-No, I like baths and hot springs. What I meant was, well, the thing is...” I trailed off, trembling in fear.

The presence of hot springs suggested there could be volcanic gas spewing out here. This floor was in its natural state untouched by human hands, meaning it hadn't been properly maintained like hot spring resorts in Japan. I could picture a hellish landscape where everything was boiling over. Maybe that was why all the trees and weeds here were so colorful. It made sense if they were all affected by the minerals in the area; even the soil here was messed up. This sort of thing never happened in Japan, but this world was a scary place.

"What are you so afraid of, Akira?" asked Sensei.

"W-Well, I mean, this place could be like the Night Soil Swamps, right? With toxic gas everywhere?"

"Oh, *that's* what you're worried about?"

"Don't just wave it off like it's nothing! This is a life-and-death matter!" I protested.

"It's fine. The air's hardly toxic here."

"Are you sure you aren't just speaking from your point of view as a high-level Diver with massive resistances to everything?" I asked.

"Well, I *am* speaking from my own standards, so I can't deny that. But this is a good opportunity to find out with you here."

"Sensei, I'm not a canary in a coal mine for detecting toxic gases. It'd be really great if you could treat me like a human being," I complained.

"Hey, you have a pretty high level yourself. You should believe in yourself more."

"I can't! I'm my own worst critic!" I screamed, but Sensei was laughing in her shadowy mass as usual.

I wasn't sure, but I was probably, maybe, *possibly* going to be fine. My level was pretty high as Sensei had pointed out, and it was unlikely that I'd just instantly drop dead. If I entered some dangerous place, I'd probably feel it before it was too late. I really was a canary in a coal mine. How awful.

I had to believe I'd be okay. Sensei did usually look out for me in her own way, and she'd likely help me if I was in real trouble. Otherwise, I would've been sent

to the afterlife already. Though, I'd been going back and forth to God's place, which kind of felt like the afterlife.

Just in case, I pulled out from my Dimension Bag the air analyzer I'd bought online. I didn't want to die from breathing in toxic gas or suffocating after all. I had to look after myself.

"So, you wanted to hunt monsters for their core stones, right?" I asked.

"Yes, we're hunting Zant Bears," she replied.

"'Zant Bears'? I don't like the sound of that. Are you sure I'll be okay? I can just picture some giant crazy bear popping out at me to say hello."

"They're nothing to worry about. Relax."

"You're speaking from your perspective again, aren't you?" I asked.

"I told you: you'll be fine. What? You can't trust me?"

"It isn't a matter of trust! This is important, so please answer me! Yes or no?" I insisted.

Sensei's tone grew serious for a change. "There will be times when you suddenly find yourself in a battle with an unknown opponent. You won't always be given the luxury of choice. Am I wrong?"

She was right. Whenever I set foot into a new floor, each battle was a potential fight for dear life.

"Is that why you purposely put me in this situation?" I asked.

"Exactly."

"You didn't just make that up right now, did you?"

"I'm impressed you figured it out. You have a knack for reading minds, you know?"

"I don't need to read minds to know that!" I shouted.

Sensei had turned the mind-reading bit around on me.

She continued to toy with me for some time, then pointed at something out of nowhere.

“Looks like we found our target,” she said.

“Where?” I asked as I trained my gaze toward the direction her finger was pointing.

There stood a giant monster with what seemed to be needles growing out of its back like a porcupine. I felt this extreme sense of familiarity: it was pretty much a Pokémon, a Sandslash to be specific, but it was like a bigger, burlier version of one. Its back was densely packed with long quills, and the rest of its body was completely covered with what looked like dragon scales standing on end. I could probably grate a daikon radish on it really easily.

I couldn’t help but wonder how this thing was supposed to be a bear. There wasn’t even a hint of any bearlike qualities to it. I wanted to grill whoever had named it for an hour or so.

The Zant Bear stomped around with its mouth open, its gnarly fangs on full display. It was clearly wandering around looking for food, and I had a feeling this thing would be happy to snack on me as soon as we met.

“Goodbye,” I said as I immediately spun on my heel.

No way. I’m not fighting that thing.

“Come on now, you’re turning back after coming all the way here?” asked Sensei.

“Just look at the size of that thing!” I exclaimed. “It’d be one thing if it was the size of an Orc from the Mine, but it’s even bigger than that!”

“You’ve beaten bigger and stronger things before,” she pointed out.

“That may be true, but still! Big things are scary!”

Plain and simple, they were intimidating. Being big and heavy was a huge advantage in any fight. Sure, I might have defeated giant monstrosities like the Poison Chimera Zombie, but that was a different kind of scary. Those creatures that looked like they were from an RPG didn’t feel real, but the Zant Bear looked like an actual creature, and that terrified me.

“You’re going to defeat that thing today,” said Sensei.

“Well, I’ve been thinking that maybe it’d be better if *you* took it down

instead,” I replied.

“I could, but where’s the fun in that? It wouldn’t serve as training for you either.”

“But I’m not really looking for that kind of fun, you know? And I’m not really a ‘training’ person.”

“What about all that time you spend leveling up day in and day out? You train in the Dark Corridors all the time,” she pointed out.

“I don’t really consider that training. It’s more like a task of sorts,” I said.

“You know, you won’t become truly strong simply by raising your level.”

“Sure, but—”

“So you should go fight. In fact, I’m telling you to. Go. Right now.”

I had no rebuttal. Simply increasing one’s strength didn’t make one skilled at combat. What I was doing was akin to spending all my time killing weak little slimes that appeared around a certain castle. That wouldn’t teach me any practical know-how.

Still, I really didn’t want to fight that thing head-on.

“I know!” I said, an idea coming to me. “Sensei! I don’t have to fight it face-to-face, do I?”

“No, you don’t. That’s not a mage’s preferred method of fighting anyway.”

“Ha ha ha! Then in that case, I’ll do it! I’ll take it down!”

“You changed your tune pretty quickly when you realized you’re at an advantage.”

“Say what you will! Bravery is a positive trait in a fight!”

“That would be a lot more convincing if you didn’t say it from behind me,” said Sensei.

I took up position in the rear and prepared for battle. I probably didn’t need to point out that I’d been speaking in a lower volume and hiding in the shade of a tree so the monster wouldn’t hear me.

“You really are pathetic, you know that?” asked Sensei.

“Hey, be quiet! If I win, that’s all that matters!”

“Fine, whatever. Do your thing.”

I began casting my spell. “Secondary Magic: Ameithys Spike!”

I cast a lightning attack with my purple magic. Lightning spikes emerged from a magic circle that appeared in the air; then they flew, in sync with the movement of my hand, at the Zant Bear. My magic reached my target—but it was completely ineffective.

The monster had noticed my attack coming and defended by turning its back. I’d had no idea its spiked back could be used like that. Sparks flew from the Zant Bear’s back, and my attack hadn’t even left a single scorch mark.

“No way...” I said in disbelief.

“Just so you know, a measly Secondary Magic attack isn’t going to work against it,” said Sensei.

“Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?!” I complained. “Wait, just how difficult is this place? How can monsters this powerful be on a floor right after the Forest?!”

“Hell if I know. If you ask me, that monster isn’t much different from any other,” said Sensei.

“Will you please stop using yourself as the baseline? Wait... Is that why you said it’s okay for me to attack from back here? Is it because I’ll be forced into a head-on battle either way?!”

“Damn, you noticed.”

“You fiend! How could you deceive someone as pure and as innocent as me? You’re so cruel to toy with me like that!”

“Stop talking like that; it’s creepy. Sheesh...”

It really wasn’t the time to be fooling around with Sensei like this. The Zant Bear now knew of our presence and had begun striding toward us as if it’d found its next meal.

It wasn't as if I'd held back. The spell I'd just cast was enough to take down most monsters, and if not, the target usually ended up immobilized or maimed. I mean, it was lightning, after all. It could defeat the majority of monsters at depth levels 15 through 20, so the monsters on this floor were obviously stronger.

As far as I could tell, Zant Bears were standard monsters on this floor instead of bosses. The depth level of the Paradise Hot Springs was probably around 20 to 30. The perilous path through the Forest to get here was indeed a sort of safety net to keep low-level Divers from accidentally setting foot in here. Nothing about this place screamed "paradise." If anything, the words "hellish" or "demonic" would've been more apt for the name.

"Looks like your opponent noticed you. How will you defeat it?" asked Sensei.

"I mean, I don't have much of a choice other than magic."

That really was my only option. My punches and kicks had gotten stronger thanks to my leveling up, but I didn't have nearly enough skills in that department to use them in combat. Besides, when fighting a monster for the first time, facing it head-on wasn't the best idea.

There were all sorts of monsters out there, ranging from those that were super strong physically to powerful spellcasters. I didn't have life points like in video games, so one slipup could mean the end for me. Just think of the despair you feel when your first attack ends up being wasted because of the opposing Pokémon's Ability. It makes you wanna scream.

It was common knowledge among Divers that you should never fight monsters in the dungeon without any information. I normally used the info in the Monster Book (Temporary Name) in the main hall as a reference when going into battles, but there were no records of this one, so I had to figure things out as I went.

I still had mana left and more powerful spells up my sleeve, so I was still fine. It was far too early to give up.

I set my sights on the Zant Bear and switched my mind from normal mode to dungeon mode.

Imagination was key in situations like these. I had to use the monster's appearance to try to figure out and predict its attack methods. For example, those sharp claws might easily slice through logs, and it could probably launch those quills on its back at me. On the other hand, it could also do something that I couldn't even imagine. I had to make moves assuming that the monster could do anything I could think of. It could even curl up into a ball like an armadillo and roll at me.

Just as the thought had come to me, the Zant Bear actually jumped, curled up into a ball, then quickly spun like the wheel of a car.

"Oh?" said Sensei curiously.

"Oh crap!"

As the words left my mouth, the rolling Zant Bear zoomed, with breakneck speed, past the spot where I'd been standing. It'd left behind a deep groove in a straight line like a wheel track from a heavy vehicle.

"Whaaat?! That was too close! I figured it was gonna do that!"

The monster had rolled at me as I'd guessed. It ran over trees without stopping and even changed directions and turned around.

It eventually unrolled itself, then leaped at me in its original form.

It swiped at me with its razor-sharp claws.

"Ugh!" I grunted.

I managed to block with my staff, but the impact sent me flying backward and rolling on the ground. I broke my fall, but the impact was so hard that it left my back aching.

I heard Sensei call to me, "What's wrong? You need to fight like you mean it. Or are you giving up already?"

"Not yet!"

"Heh, I like the look you get on your face whenever you're cornered," she said.

"Now's not the time for that, you sadist!"

I turned my attention to the Zant Bear again.

This really wasn't going to be an easy fight. The monster was strong, and since I didn't have any effective strategies against it, I had to defeat it purely with my fighting prowess. It was fast and strong, and low-grade spells were ineffective against it. This meant I should consider using the environment to my advantage. If there were rocks around, I could direct the monster to make it punch or run into them. Those were the types of methods I could use to buy myself an opening to cast spells, but there were no big rocks around here. The trees were pretty sparse too, and using them to gain any distance would be difficult, but as a mage, I needed to make space between myself and the enemy.

The Zant Bear roared. It was loud, ear-piercingly loud. I endured the pain in my eardrums and began circling the monster. It turned slowly because of its size, but it wasn't as if I could easily take its back either.

I moved in closer and kicked it, but it blocked with its scaly arm. It was completely unharmed.

It returned the favor with a swipe of its claws, which I evaded by ducking under.

It didn't try to kick me with its short legs, but it did try to step on me. Its leg moved forward, but I rolled to the side to avoid it.

I rose to my feet and gained some more distance.

So far, so good. Its attacks were predictable so far. "So far" was the key term here. There hadn't been any absurd attacks that would instantly spell game over for me.

That howling was pretty annoying though. It caused me to tense up whenever it caught me off guard, stopping me in place. I wondered whether I should shut its mouth first, but such an attempt would only leave me open to attacks; simply going for the kill instead would be better. The best solution would be to take it down with a single shot to its vitals.

I decided to use Ameithys Orbit to boost my speed and get as much space between us as possible.

"Tertiary Magic: Ameithys Orbit."

I activated the spell as soon as the idea came to mind. My Lightning Kick was powerful when boosted by the buff, but it'd leave me wide open if I didn't defeat the enemy in one hit, so that was out of the question. I had to move while constantly keeping an escape plan in mind.

Just as I glanced back at the Zant Bear, I realized it'd turned its back on me.

"Wait a minute..."

The attack I'd imagined earlier came to mind, and I immediately took cover. I heard the intermittent sound of countless quills zipping overhead. Just how many of those things were on its back, anyway? The seemingly infinite quills didn't match the number of them on its back. Judging by the trees getting knocked down, these quills were incredibly powerful. It was almost as if the Zant Bear were shooting at me with a machine gun.

I lifted my head and caught the Zant Bear curling up again. It was going to try and run me over.

It bounced into the air, then made a beeline for me. I fired my Tertiary Magic at it, but its back covered so much of its surface area that my spell bounced right off. I jumped aside again to dodge.

This rolling attack was quite dangerous because of its incredible speed. I also had to be aware that it was destroying the surrounding environment each time.

Come to think of it, this monster couldn't see me while it was rolling at me. That was my chance to strike. It'd shoot quills at me if I got too far away, so I had to maintain a certain distance and wait for it to do its rolling tackle.

"Secondary Magic: Ameithys Spike!"

My target was myself—well, the space directly below me, to be precise. I was unaffected by my spell, and instead, the ground below me exploded. My footing crumbled, leaving behind a large trap hole.

I planned to drop the Zant Bear into the hole. With its massive size, it wouldn't be able to crawl back out easily.

Once I'd climbed out of the hole, I began taking the shortest trajectory needed to avoid the incoming attack.

The Zant Bear jumped into the air once again, and just when I thought it would execute its rolling attack again, it landed without curling into a ball and immediately turned its back toward me.

“What the— A feint?!” I cried out, caught off guard by the rare mind trick by a monster.

This was bad. I was already on my way to dodge the attack, and I couldn’t turn back now. The terrain here wasn’t ideal for taking cover either.

“Gaaaaaah! Not todayyy!”

I moved like my life depended on it—it did—and I somehow managed to escape from the quills’ line of fire. If I’d been hit, my body would’ve been blown to pieces.

The Zant Bear took this opportunity to curl up and roll at me. It wasn’t heading toward the trap hole, but this was my only shot.

“Secondary Magic: Ameithys Spike!”

I shot the spell at a point along the rolling attack’s trajectory and gouged a chunk out of the ground. The monster rolled into the divot there, and the impact changed its course. It headed directly toward the trap hole I’d made earlier, then fell right into it.

Nice shot.

Now I just needed to fire magic into that spot. I needed some time to prepare my spell, but the Zant Bear was having difficulty climbing out. It could jump, and I saw its claws peeking out of the hole from time to time, but its own weight prevented it from gaining much height. It tried holding on to the rim to pull itself up, but again, it was too heavy. It’d have to dig out part of the rim to escape, but that would take time.

Checkmate.

After some time, my incantations were complete.

“Quaternary Magic: Ameithys Prison!”



A giant electric cage spread out spherically, then formed a hemispherical cover over the hole the monster had fallen into. There was an intense purple light, and the sounds of an electrical burst and the Zant Bear's screams could be heard. Lights flickered in my eyes for some time, then the electric cage vanished.

I cautiously peered into the hole, but the Zant Bear had been killed by the powerful offensive spell. It remained completely motionless.

"Whew... I did it."

I jumped down into the hole, stepped on the ground a few times as was tradition whenever I defeated an opponent with lightning, then cut the monster open for its core stone. It was pretty huge, indicating that the Zant Bear had been a strong monster after all.

Sensei peeked into the hole from above.

"Well done," she said.

"I pulled it off somehow. It's been a while since I've had such a tough fight," I said.

"You say that, but you haven't sustained any serious injuries."

"One hit could've ended my life, so I couldn't afford to get hurt. I'm just mentally exhausted, so is my brain physically."

"You did seem to be thinking a lot," she pointed out.

"I'm sure you could've just blasted it with one spell," I said.

"Of course," she said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. She was so strong that it was scary. "But that Zant Bear had some interesting attacks. I didn't expect it to curl into a ball and attack."

"Wait, it didn't do that when you fought it?" I asked.

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

"I see. Then I guess it's a good thing you got to this time. That way, it won't catch you off guard next time—though you probably wouldn't even let it attack you in the first place."

Come to think of it, she'd just defeat it in one shot as previously mentioned.

Sensei fell silent.

"Sensei?" I asked.

"You— I could be wrong, but did you figure out that it could do that rolling attack before it even curled up into a ball?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, I did think of that possibility. I thought it might shoot its quills at me and that it'd be dangerous if it did a rolling tackle attack."

"I thought so," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I think I'm getting close to the heart of a certain matter. It seems I was right about bringing you along today."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"It's still only a hunch. I can't say anything carelessly just yet."

"Humph," I pouted, and Sensei chuckled.

"Anyway, I have one word of advice: it may be better not to imagine things like that moving forward," she said.

"But I think it's important to imagine all sorts of situations in battle. That's how I just won this one," I protested.

"That's true, but, hmm...how do I put this? Just don't do it against monsters with few recorded encounters or not known by many others."

"Huh? I'm not sure I understand, but are you saying I should avoid doing that with monsters in floors no one has been to, like today?"

"Yes, exactly. This is especially true for you since you're from another world. You tend to imagine things that residents of this world would never think of. That could end up costing you your life," she warned.

Which means...

"Do you mean to tell me...that's why that monster attacked that way?" I asked.

“I’m just saying it’s a possibility. Take it with a grain of salt.”

“But you still think I should refrain from letting my imagination run wild, right?”

“Yes, you should. You emerged victorious today, but your extensive imagination may not necessarily be a boon next time.”

She spoke in a serious tone, and that meant I must listen. However, this was quite the restriction. It was impossible to know what an opponent would do when fighting them for the first time, so it was normal to try and predict their next move. This was especially true with monsters in a floor I’d entered for the first time, so I really had to use my brain. Putting a restriction on that would make things that much harder.

Judging from what I’d been told, it didn’t seem like monsters had some psychic ability to read my mind or anything. If they could do that, they should’ve been much more effective in battle.

What did this all mean? And why was this restriction only on monsters that people hadn’t encountered before? I couldn’t understand why the line was drawn there.

I eventually crawled out of the hole and handed Sensei the core stone.

“Here you go,” I said.

“Thanks, I appreciate the help,” she said, then tossed it into her Dimension Bag. Then...

“Okay, on to the next,” she said.

“Huh? But we finished our objective. Don’t you think we should head home for today?” I asked.

“Whoa, now. You want to go home already?”

“Well, I’m kind of tired. And my body feels heavy. Boy, I sure wanna go home right now.”

I put my languidness aura on full power and made my desire to leave front and center, but Sensei didn’t seem to care. In fact, a smile spread over her face as if she’d taken it as a challenge.

“Perfect,” she said.

“Uh...Sensei? What do you mean by that?”

“Well, think about it. What do we have here?” she asked.

“Here? The only things here are hot springs— Oh!”

“We’re here, so we might as well go for a dip.”

Indeed, a thrilling bath time was about to begin.

I followed Sensei as I was told and ended up at a river. In contrast to the trees, ground, and weeds, which were colorful eyesores, the water was beautiful here, seemingly untainted by any minerals or whatever was affecting the landscape. It was so clear that it could’ve been chosen as one of the Three Free-Flowing Rivers in Japan or as one of Japan’s One Hundred Remarkable Waters. I could probably drink straight out of that river, though I wasn’t going to.

I also noticed there was a thin, misty fog hanging in the air, perhaps from the humidity.

“It’s foggy here, huh?” I said.

“Hmm? Well, I guess you could call it a fog,” said Sensei.

“You ‘guess’? Wait, is this...”

I touched the fog, then realized it was warm.

“Is this steam?” I asked.

“That’s right. We’re getting closer to the hot springs.”

“Wow. On the one hand, I’m excited about soaking in a hot spring, but on the other hand, I’m also nervous about the possibility of breathing in toxic gas. Aha ha,” I said dryly, unable to stop thinking about the gas. The highlight had probably gone out of my eyes just now.

“You’re looking forward to soaking in a hot spring?” asked Sensei.

“Yes, I love hot springs. I’m pretty stoked about that part,” I said.

“Don’t lie. You’re just happy about going in there with me.”

“Th-Th-That’s not entirely untrue!”

I mean, I was going to bathe with a woman. Any high school boy’s excitement would go through the roof in this situation.

We approached the hot springs. They were actually pretty normal looking, and they weren’t pits of hell like I’d imagined. On the riverbank, these little pools appeared to be filled, and they were surrounded by only rocks. I would’ve hesitated to go in if the water sat upon dirt, but the rocks made them look much more sanitary. These were the quintessential natural open-air hot springs.

This setup was rather convenient because if the springs were too hot, we could just add cold water from the river. Now we just needed to stem the inflow of hot water and clear an area for us to get in.

“Are there any harmful gases? And does the water have any negative effects on the human body?” I asked.

“No and no, I think. I was fine when I went in last time,” replied Sensei.

“Again, are you sure that’s not just because your level... You know the rest.”

“You really don’t want to believe anything I say, do you?”

“That’s because of how you usually act. You should think about what it’s like to be teased by you all the time,” I said.

“But you listen to me when it comes to combat,” she pointed out.

“You have my full trust on that specific subject.”

Indeed, Sensei was a legitimate mentor. She just happened to do demonic things. I completely trusted her in the combat department—in fact, I practically worshipped her teachings.

I used the rocks in the area to quickly make a bathing space. I could easily carry bigger boulders thanks to my high level, so I was grateful for that. If I got a part-time job as a mover, I could probably handle everything myself, though people would probably be surprised to see me doing all the heavy lifting.

“The water’s not too hot,” I said. “I think it’ll be just right if we add just a little bit of river water.”

“Make sure you get the temperature perfect. If it’s even slightly too hot, you’re getting punished,” said Sensei.

“Huh?!”

“Don’t ‘Huh?!’ me. You can do it, can’t you? Just adjust the temperature to what you think is just right.”

“But you’re going to punish me if I get it wrong?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“That’s awful.”

Sensei reclined back and looked down on me like the sadistic demon she was. I shuddered, appalled that she could say *such* an immoral thing as if it were nothing.

Then, I used the river water to adjust the temperature, getting the heat to the perfect level where it was neither too hot nor too cold. It was a job well done if I do say so myself.

“It’s ready,” I said.

“Then let’s get in,” said Sensei.

“R-Right,” I said nervously.

Why did she seem so unperturbed anyway? She couldn’t have been more than three or four years older than me. Maybe she was, well, experienced in that department.

I removed my clothes and folded them on my backpack.

Come to think of it, it wasn’t as if we were gonna see anything, so there was probably no reason to be nervous. It was a bit of a shame though. Or more like a huge shame.

I decided to just enjoy the hot spring for now.

I put a towel on my head, as was customary at bathhouses and hot springs, then dipped my foot into the water. I then lowered myself until my shoulders entered the water. It felt amazing. All my troubles seemed to have melted away.

“Ah... I love hot springs...” I breathed dreamily.

As I was getting some well-needed rejuvenation, I heard a strange sound.

“Mew.”

I looked around to find an unfamiliar creature poking its face out of a bush. It was a small animal with emerald green fur, its body about twenty to twenty-five centimeters in length. The thing that immediately drew my eyes was the colorless gemstone embedded in its forehead. The gem glittered as it caught sunlight, looking almost like a big diamond. The creature had beady black eyes and big furry ears, and it had a dewlap around its throat like a female rabbit. Its legs weren't that long but not particularly short either. The fur on its paws was white, making it look like it was wearing socks. It reminded me of cats with white sock patterns on their white paws. Its slender three-pronged tail was quite distinctive too.

It was quite the fantastic creature. The hot springs by the riverbank made this place feel like Japan, but this creature immediately reminded me that I was in a fantasy world.

The adorable creature didn't seem hostile, and it seemed different from monsters. It didn't even try to hiss at me or anything.

“Hmm, will it come closer if I beckon?” I wondered aloud.

I motioned for it to come closer, and it walked over curiously.

The creature sat down in front of me, so I began patting its head. It narrowed its eyes happily and showed no signs of wanting to flee. It was quite friendly.

“What if I rub you here?” I said and gave it some light scratches next to its ear.

“Mew, mew,” it cried, seeming to enjoy it.

“Then how about here?”

“Mew!”

“Oh, guess not.”

I'd tried to rub it under the chin, but it'd shaken its head in protest.

I went back to rubbing its head. The creature seemed to prefer that, and it

settled down on the rock.

It was quite adorable. In the dungeon, I could only do this kind of thing with the Chorus Seals, so it was a rare opportunity to get this sort of comfort. Then, suddenly...

Chomp.

“Whaaat?”

The mysterious creature had put my finger into its mouth and didn’t seem like it was going to let go. It felt like it was sucking on it too. It was kind of cute.

As I was dealing with this otherworldly creature, I heard water splashing from behind. Sensei seemed to have joined me in the hot spring.



“Oh? A Carbuncle. Quite a rare find,” she said.

“What is it? Some sort of wild animal that lives on this floor?”

“Something like that. It’s like a crossbreed of a monster.”

“It’s part monster? But it doesn’t feel evil,” I said.

“Not every monster is necessarily bad. Some are harmless,” explained Sensei.

“Huh.”

I’d had no idea this little one was classified as a monster. I was pretty surprised to hear such mixed breeds existed.

“This...Carbuncle, was it? Is it that rare?” I asked.

“Supposedly. In the old days, they were overhunted for the gemstones on their forehead.”

“That’s terrible...”

“There’s no need to pity it. More often than not, the hunters ended up losing,” she said.

“Really? They’re *that* strong?”

“Carbuncles can absorb their opponent’s magical power,” explained Sensei.

“That sounds crazy powerful.”

“Not only that, but they multiply the power of whatever element they absorb and shoot it back at their targets too,” she went on.

“Murderous little critters, aren’t they?”

That sounded pretty scary. If you shot a low-grade spell at them, they’d return a higher-grade spell back at you. They were basically the natural predators for mages.

I grimaced, then Sensei said as if to reassure me, “Well, they’re pretty much harmless house pets as long as you don’t try to hurt them.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

That meant it was just a cute animal sucking on my finger.

Wait... Does that mean...

“Um, Sensei? Is it doing what I think it’s doing?” I asked.

“Yeah, it must be sucking your mana. Your mana is of very high quality after all.”

“It’s sucking my mana?! But you just said it’s harmless!”

“Well, it’s harmless to me... You know the rest,” she said.

“How many times do we have to go through this conversation?!”

I tried to pull my finger out of its mouth, but the Carbuncle latched on to my hand with its front legs. It was pretty strong. I couldn’t pull my finger free.

“L-Lemme go!”

“Meeewww!”

Its grip only grew stronger. It was holding on for dear life for some reason. Why did it want to suck my mana so badly?

Our power struggle went on for some time longer, then Sensei said, “Whatever amount it drains from you is going to be minuscule by your standards. Just let it drink its fill.”

“Fine. But how do you know my mana is high quality? Is it something that you know intuitively once you get to your level?” I asked.

“Because I suck your mana once in a while too.”

“Oh, okay. I guess I don’t get a say in the matter...”

It was pretty messed up if you asked me.

As we talked, I noticed the gemstone on the Carbuncle’s forehead had begun turning purple. It must’ve gotten the color from my mana. As a purple mage blessed by the old man Ameithys, perhaps my mana was purple as well.

The Carbuncle eventually seemed satisfied and released my finger. It then rubbed its face on my hand as if to show appreciation.

It was pretty adorable. I felt like forgiving it right then and there. Cute is justice; cool is justice. The definition of justice was all over the place.

Finally released from the Carbuncle's grasp, I turned toward Sensei, then...

"Ah-wah?!"

A weird noise escaped my mouth.

Before my eyes was an unbelievable beauty. She was an older woman, perhaps three or four years older than me. She had long black hair, pale skin, and an absolutely gorgeous face. Not to mention, she was soaking in the water completely naked. No matter where I looked, her body was simply oozing the charm of a mature woman. Her breasts looked full and heavy, yet they floated on the water, which seemed almost contradictory to their nature. So big.

She was gracefully running her fingers through her hair with her legs crossed, fully enjoying the comforting hot spring.

My brain struggled to process what I was seeing.

"What's with the stupid face, Akira?" she asked.

"Well, I, uh... Huuuh?! U-Um! Miss beautiful lady, who, might I ask, are you?" I stammered.

"Uh, I'm me?"

"S-Sensei's voice is coming from the beautiful lady!"

I was in a state of complete confusion.

Sensei shot me an annoyed look. "You really don't want to accept that this is what I look like, do you?"

"I'd be thrilled if it's really you, but I can't deny the possibility that this could be some sort of magic or illusion, or I'm daydreaming or something," I said.

"Oh? Want me to wake you up, then?"

Sensei swam toward me, then tilted my chin up with a finger.

"I-Is it really you?" I asked.

"Yes. It is. Who else would I be?"

I couldn't believe it. I'd had a feeling she'd be pretty—but not this pretty. I was kind of awestruck, to be honest.

As I took in the situation, Sensei's gaze moved downward. I probably didn't need to specify what she was looking at.

"Oh. You act surprised, but it looks like you're happy to see me," she said.

"I-I'm a guy! It's kind of, you know, out of my control!"

"What is?" she asked, inching her body closer to mine.

Her prominent bits were getting close enough to touch me. Things were starting to get dicey.

"S-Sensei?! Please don't come any closer! I mean, it's not that I don't want you to, but the pressure is too much! 'What kind of pressure?' you might ask, but I don't know if I should be saying it out loud!" I blurted out.

"Pressure from what? Go ahead and say it," she said.

"U-Um...your boobs."

"That's what I thought."

Squish.

"Waaaaaaaaah!!!"

Sensei showed off—or rather, made me feel—her boobs by pressing them against my chest. The way they felt against my skin was just shocking. Mind-boggling. They felt like incredibly high performance cushions being squished against me, yet conversely, they'd collided with me like they were some really heavy objects. I felt like I'd experienced a contradictory matter firsthand. Their volume, area, and softness were out of this world. Boobs really were amazing.

"Ah. Aaah. Wah. Aaah. Eeeah. Eeeah..." I bumbled.

"What? Is this too much for your brain to handle?" asked Sensei.

"W-W-Well! I mean! This is too much stimulation for an ordinary high school boy!"

"Fine, fine. I'll back off, so calm down already," said Sensei with a grin on her face.

I missed them already. I felt an emptiness akin to what I felt after watching the last episode of an anime I loved. I knew she'd just been messing with me,

but I couldn't shake the terrible sense of loss.

Sensei held the Carbuncle in her arms as she moved away, and the creature remained there without putting up resistance. She settled back into the spot she'd been in earlier, and she soaked herself in the water again straightaway, placing her head on a rock and crossing her legs. Her pale legs poking out of the water were somehow incredibly seductive.

She grinned at me as if she was enjoying my restlessness. This woman was definitely doing it on purpose. Knowing she had me in the palm of her hand was kind of frustrating.

Sensei stroked the Carbuncle's head and said, "There, there."

"Mew," it said.

"Let's see... I'm gonna name you Mittens," she said, dubbing it one of the most common names for cats with that fur pattern.

"So, this is probably your original form?" I asked.

"Yes, it is," she confirmed.

"Why did you change back to this form?" I asked.

"It's thanks to an effect of these hot springs."

"What kind of effect? I thought hot springs are just supposed to rejuvenate your body."

"What are you going on about? Don't you know hot springs have magical benefits?"

We seemed to have a difference in understanding. I had no idea what she meant by that.

"Wait, is that common knowledge in this world?" I asked.

"Yes. And judging by your question, I suppose that isn't the case in yours."

"In my world, they heal wounds and illnesses. I guess our hot springs are different."

"We have potions and magic to take care of the healing department, after all," said Sensei.

I wasn't sure that explained it, but it wasn't all too strange considering magic existed in this world. Though, it did remind me of those crazy springs from a certain manga set in China that turned you into a woman or a panda.

"So you're saying that you returned to your original form thanks to those magical benefits?" I asked.

"Yes. The water here suppresses the elements of whomever soaks in it," she explained.

"It suppresses their elements?"

"That's right," Sensei said with a nod, but I still didn't understand how that made her turn back into this form.

"And this is what I usually use in place of these hot springs," she said as she pulled the Zant Bear core stone from her Dimension Bag.

"Core stones?" I asked.

"Yes. Core stones have various uses besides just warding off monsters. With these, I'll be able to do something about this state I'm in."

"I see," I said. "We've already gathered a great number of them. Is it still not enough?"

"No. I need more," she said.

I'd taken down all sorts of monsters, including some big ones, but apparently, it still wasn't enough.

"But how does that work?" I asked. "I don't see how warding off monsters and fixing your condition are related in any way."

I couldn't draw the connections between the core stone's ability to emit some sort of wave that monsters disliked, the elemental suppressing effect of this water, and how Sensei returned to her original form. I understood that core stones had various uses, but there was nothing consistent about those things. Besides, I didn't even know what this "state" she was in was, so I couldn't even begin to understand in the first place.

I told Sensei this, but she only brushed me off by saying she'd explain eventually.

She let out a deep sigh. "It'd be best if I could go get them myself."

"Oh, but you don't have enough mana, right?"

"What, you knew?" she asked.

"Well, I've been training under you all this time. Of course I knew."

Sensei had been in a state of mana deficiency. She of course made sure she had some mana reserve available whenever she went for a dive, but she didn't have enough to go around blasting magic left and right. As a result, she'd refrained from using any high-power spells.

The rare occasions when she'd used magic were when I'd been in serious danger, a monster I couldn't beat had appeared, or she'd simply wanted to blow off some steam. She'd sometimes say "I'm gonna kill that monster" out of the blue. Her bloodlust was extreme and instantaneous.

So that was why she'd been dragging me into the dungeon and making me fight monsters of her choice.

As I was mulling over my thoughts, Sensei suddenly got up and sat down next to me. She moved in until we were shoulder to shoulder.

Her expression turned grave as she said, "I want to return to my original self. I can't even go out in public like this."

She'd never been vulnerable with me before. She seemed to be pouring her heart out to me, and I didn't doubt those were her genuine feelings. She couldn't live a normal life in her state, and people could mistake her for a monster and chase her around if she went out in public. She must've lived in a constant state of unease.

Those few words made me realize just how heavy of a burden this situation was for her. She'd always looked this way since I'd first met her. She must've been diving in the dungeon and making me hunt core stones so much because she wanted to be normal again. I'd vaguely understood this, which was why I'd been going in the dungeon with her all this time.

"I'll help," I said. "I'll do whatever I can for you, Sensei."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "You'll keep getting dragged into danger, you

know.”

“You trained me. I can handle it.”

“You never act tough like this,” she pointed out.

“I can man up when push really comes to shove.”

“That doesn’t really suit you,” she said.

I couldn’t say I disagreed. I felt like I’d really been putting on a tough front when I’d said it out loud.

“Thanks,” said Sensei softly then.

“Huh? Did you say something?” I asked.

“No, nothing,” she said, then she showed me her trademark wry smile.

Sensei always looked out for me in her own way, so I wanted to help her in any way I could.

Sensei leaned on me without saying a word. We stayed there for some time.

“So, um...” I said, “I’ll do what I can to help, but I was wondering if you could, you know...”

“Oh? You want something in return? Well, I don’t mind.”

“Th-Then, if you please...”

Just as I was about to make my request, Sensei suddenly moved in front of me, went down on all fours, and pointed her butt toward me.

Two mounds behind her peeked out of the water. They were shapely, supple, smooth, beautiful, and dangerously tempting.

“Huh? Sensei, wh-what are you doing?” I stammered in confusion.

I had no idea what was happening. Why was Sensei doing this?

“Oh, don’t give me that. You want to have *bleep* with me, right?” she asked.

“Whaaat?! Ahhh! *Bleep*?!”

“Yes, *bleep*, what a man and woman do when they get naked. *Bleep*,” she repeated.

“That’s not what I was gonna ask for!”

“Hmm? Is it not? I totally thought that’s what you wanted.”

“No, it isn’t! I’m not that much of a scumbag!” I exclaimed.

“What, so you don’t wanna have *bleep* with me?” she asked.

“Do you have to say it so directly?!”

“Come on, what’s wrong? Bring it,” she said, shaking her butt at me provocatively. The movement made a certain body part of hers—the feminine one, or whatever you wanted to call it—fully visible.

This was bad. The rational part of my brain was barely holding on. It felt like it was about to boil over and become vaporized.

“Listen! It isn’t that I don’t want to do that sort of thing with you. It’s just that I haven’t mentally prepared myself, and I think if I’m to do that sort of thing with a woman, we should go through the proper steps first or something like that!” I quickly blurted out in a state of confusion.

Sensei burst out laughing and said, “You’re such a wuss.”

“I can’t help it, okay?!”

“At this rate, you’ll keep missing your chance and eventually wilt away.”

“That’s not true! Probably! Maybe! Possibly!”

“Okay, okay, cool it,” she chuckled, then she returned to her earlier position.

I wondered if I’d blown an incredibly rare opportunity—no, I couldn’t have done it. Doing something like that because of the mood at the moment definitely would’ve been a bad idea for both of us.

Sensei sat shoulder to shoulder with me again, and she moved her face closer.

“So, what were you going to ask of me?” she asked.

“Well, I was hoping you could ease up on me with your training,” I said.

“No can do. That wouldn’t be training then, would it?”

“I thought you’d say that.”

I’d seen it coming, but it was a cruel and merciless answer. The grueling magic

training from hell would continue. It was clear that she had no intention of changing her training style whatsoever.

All life had probably left my eyes at that moment. *Training is scary.*

“Hey,” said Sensei.

“Yes?”

“So you’re gonna help me?”

She hugged me. I’ll say it again. *She hugged me.* Her beautiful face was right in front of mine, a dreamy look in her eyes.

“I— Y-Y-Yes, I will! I’ll do my utmost best to help you with anything you need!” I shouted in a fluster, and Sensei’s expression transformed into an unsettling grin.

I realized I’d made a mistake, but it was too late.

“I have your word, Akira,” she said. “Now, where should we go next? How about the Floating Garden? Hunting a Storm Raider sounds like fun, doesn’t it?”

“S-Storm Raider?! There’s no way! My level isn’t high enough!” I protested.

“That floor is only a bit tougher than the Evernight Meadows. You can handle it,” she said.

“No, I can’t! In fact, I haven’t even had a proper fight with the monsters in the Evernight Meadows! What makes you think I can fight a boss on a high-depth-level floor? It’s impossible!”

“But you diiid just say ‘I’ll put my life on the line for my beloved Sensei.’”

“Hellooo?! You added some excess words to my statement! Don’t fabricate the truth, please!” I complained.

“Same thing,” she argued.

“Not the same! I take it back! Let’s pretend I never said anything!”

“Nope. A man can’t take back his word,” she said.

“Noooooooooooo! You cheated! Using seduction is completely unfairrrr!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, but it wasn’t going to change anything.

Sensei had outsmarted and screwed me. Any dirty-minded folks thinking that “It’s your fault for not screwing her first” can keep your mouths shut.

Afterward, I spent some time relaxing in the hot spring with Sensei, returned from the dungeon, then headed to the receptionist’s window.

Once there, Ashley greeted me as usual. “Welcome back, Kudo. Hope you had a nice dive.”

“I’m back, Ashley!” I said.

She seemed to have sensed something from my attitude. “Oh? You’re in a good mood. Something good happened in there?”

“You could say that! There were some embarrassing yet happy and thrilling moments!”

“Huh? In a dungeon? I thought it was something related to monsters,” she said, confused.

“Well, there was that too.”

I remembered the monster-related incidents and felt dejected. There’d been the Zant Bear fight and the commitment Sensei had trapped me into making. I didn’t want to go to the high-depth-level floors like the Floating Garden yet.

“Ashley, I have something I want to ask of you,” I said.

“A request? For me?”

“Yes. Will you hear me out?”

“Oh? Kudo, you never listened to my requests, but you want me to listen to yours? That’s awful. You’re going to make girls cry,” she said.

“Now hold on, you asked for things way more often than I did, and I’m pretty sure I listened whenever I needed to.”

“That’s true,” she agreed.

I stared at her. This woman was going to tease me too? Everyone was so awful today.

“So, what is it?” she asked.

“Well, it’s this little critter right here,” I said.

I gave my backpack a little shake, and the Carbuncle sitting on it peeked out from over my hat.

“Mew,” it said.

“Huh?” said Ashley, her eyes as round as saucers.

“It kind of...followed me from the dungeon,” I said.

As I’d been walking back from today’s adventure with Sensei, I’d felt a presence behind us. I’d turned around and found the Carbuncle following us. I’d figured it’d just happened to be walking in the same direction as us and ignored it, but when it’d trailed us all the way to the Misty Border, I’d figured it’d wanted to go with me, so I’d put it on top of my backpack.

“Cu...” said Ashley.

“‘Cu’?”

“C-Cute!” she squealed.

“Isn’t it?”

The Carbuncle was visually perfect, as if it’d put all of its stats into cuteness.

Ashley was head over heels for it. She reached out both of her hands, eyes shining with unbridled excitement.

“Can I touch it? Lemme touch it! You don’t mind, do you?!”

“I think it’s okay,” I said, then I asked the Carbuncle. “Right?”

“Mew,” it said, so I placed it on the receptionist’s window.

Ashley began patting its head right away.

“Whoa. So soft...”

“Mew, mew.”

The Carbuncle seemed to enjoy it. It was probably friendly with everyone and enjoyed being petted.

After a while, Ashley asked, “So, what was your request?”

“I wanted to ask if it’s okay for me to bring this little one with me. Is that allowed?” I asked.

“It should be fine. It shouldn’t be an animal under protection either... Nope, it’s not. You’re good,” she said.

I finished my postdive report, then went home with the Carbuncle.

On the way home, I stopped by the transit point known as God’s Place (named by me) and asked if it was okay to bring the Carbuncle home.

And he said, “Oh, sure. That’s totally fine.”

I guess he didn’t care about exporting alien species. Though, I suppose I was kind of an alien species myself.

Floor Twenty-Three: Each Species Has Different Tastes in Food

A hero's statue stood in front of the Divers Guild. It didn't depict the strong, gallant man in a cape and shining armor most people imagined when they heard the word "hero," but instead, it was a bronze statue of a middle-aged man in leather armor with a hatchet in his hand, looking as if he was going for a walk in the forest. Supposedly, the statue had been modeled after a legendary man who'd set the record for the deepest dungeon progress a long time ago.

The guild staff members back then must've used this man and his achievements as symbols to attract people, show off the guild's authority, and raise money. He'd been basically their star attraction, so they could've exaggerated his looks to make him look better. It'd been pretty inconsiderate of them. Of course, his achievements might have been groundbreaking at the time, but Lion-Maru had surpassed him by now.

Just like the statues of the gods at the plaza, the bronze hero's statue was often used as a meeting spot. Since this one was right in front of the guild, it was the preferred meetup spot for Divers. There was a messenger stall nearby where you could leave messages for others, but I'd never used it myself.

I'd arrived at the Divers Guild as usual today and noticed Scrael standing in front of the hero's statue. She, a martial artist, was wearing a blue Asian-style tribal outfit. The tips of her long, curled hair were dancing around, and her pointed ears, which were longer than those of elves I'd seen in manga, were twitching.

Surprisingly, she was having a conversation with someone—actually, I guess there was nothing really surprising about her talking to someone. It was a rare sight though, so I got curious and moved closer. I walked right up to her, of course, instead of sneaking around and creeping up on her.

The person Scrael was talking to was wearing a sand-resistant cloak with a hood covering their eyes, so their face was completely hidden. *How suspicious.*

Leaning to one side, the stranger also kept glancing around. Whoever it was, they were super sketchy.

I furrowed my brows, then, as I was about to say hi to Scrael...

“Eek?!”

The hooded figure shot me a murderous glare, and I couldn’t help but let out a pathetic squeal. My legs trembled like a newborn calf’s, and everything from my waist down felt weak.

“Don’t glare at me like that...” I whined as I crawled toward the hero’s statue for support.

Was it my fault? Had I been wrong to approach them? I didn’t think what I’d done warranted such a murderous look. It was scary. Real scary. The people in this world seemed to know how to direct their malice at others somehow. What were they? Manga characters? Someone was going to make me pee my pants one of these days. The lower half of my body would just die, and it’d be horrible all around.

As I clung to the hero’s statue, Scrael finally took notice of me and gave the hooded figure a couple taps on their shoulder.

“It’s okay,” she said.

“It is?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. This is my friend.”

“Friend? Oh,” said the hooded figure.

Their malice, like daggers in me, suddenly dispersed.

They then walked up to me and said, “Sorry. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, sure. Nice to meet you too,” I said uncertainly.

Judging by their voice, the stranger seemed to be a girl. Her speech was a bit imperfect like Scrael’s. Which meant...

“You’re Scrae’s friend. Are you like her?” I asked.

“Yes. She’s an emissary of the village who connects us with the outside world. This is how I contact my village,” explained Scrael.

“Ah.”

This world didn't have phones, so it made sense that there were occupations related to relaying information. Judging by that warm welcome from earlier, maybe they were talking about something private.

“Am I interrupting something?” I asked.

“It's fine. We just finished talking,” said Scrael.

“I see.”

Scrael suddenly turned to her friend and said, “Oh yeah, Mei.”

I wondered what she was up to, then she pulled from her bag a bottle of soy sauce I'd given her. It was half empty. I'd given it to her a long time ago, so she must've been using it sparingly.

She showed the soy sauce to her emissary friend.

“Here,” she said.

Her friend stared at her questioningly.

“It's shoy sauce. Lick it,” she said.

The emissary was confused, but she poured a bit of the soy sauce onto the back of her hand and licked it.

“‘Shoy sauce’?” she asked.

“Yes, shoy sauce,” confirmed Scrael.

“Shoy sauce...”

They continued repeating “shoy sauce” to each other, and they looked kind of happy too. And so, another soy sauce lover was born. Or maybe it was more accurate to say another member had joined the Church of Shoy Sauce. Perhaps every Long-Ears loved that stuff.

Seeing how they loved it so much, I considered looking up a soy sauce recipe online and translating it for them. Soybeans existed in this world, so maybe they could make it here too.

Scrael explained how to use soy sauce to her friend and gave her the rest of

the bottle. The emissary happily thanked her and left. Seeing her with a bounce in her step gave me a heartwarming feeling as a Japanese person.

“I thought it was just you, but Long-Ears folks don’t speak the language perfectly, huh?” I said.

“Mine is considered pretty good compared to others. My friends are even worse,” she replied.

“Oh, I see. I guess it’s a linguistic issue, huh.”

I’d never thought about it because I was fluent in this world’s languages thanks to the automatic translation and reading abilities God had given me, but there must’ve been a wide variety of languages here.

“The languages of Do-Melta have a lot in common, but you should know that the East and West are different for the most part,” said Scrael.

“I see. Does that mean you’re...?”

“I’m from a village in the East.”

Freida was located a bit northwest of the center of the continent, so it was considered a part of the West.

“Come to think of it, you’ve never told me about the time you arrived here,” I said.

Scrael had come to Freida as a slave, and I’d never touched upon why she’d ended up that way.

“I left my village to come to the West,” said Scrael.

“You were planning on coming to Freida in the first place?” I asked.

“Yes. Freida has the best commerce and resources.”

“Like core stones and resources from the dungeon.”

“But the most important one is information,” said Scrael.

“Ah, right.”

It wasn’t a stretch to say Freida was the most prosperous city in the central region—no, the entire continent. You could obtain most things from anywhere

in the continent if you looked around a bit, and information went around organically because there were so many people here.

“I let my guard down during my travels. A worker at an inn drugged me,” Scrael went on.

“What?! A worker did?” I exclaimed in shock.

Scrael nodded gravely. It must’ve been a terrible memory for her. It was scary to think anyone would do that in a business where trust was key. This world was a cruel place.

“That’s terrifying,” I said.

“It’s okay. My friends destroyed them,” said Scrael.

“That’s even more terrifying.”

The other races were close-knit, so it wasn’t surprising to hear they wouldn’t let something like that pass. I could just picture Scrael reporting the incident to that emissary girl after she’d been freed, then her Long-Ears friends surrounding the inn and laying waste to it.

“After I got drugged, I was sold to Freida right away,” explained Scrael.

“And luckily, we ran into each other.”

I’d always wondered how someone as skilled as Scrael could’ve been caught by slavers, but it all made sense now. There was nothing she could’ve done against getting drugged at an inn.

“Akira. Are you going for a dive?” asked Scrael.

“Yeah, I was just about to head out,” I replied.

“If you want me to dive with you, I wouldn’t mind going,” she said with a self-satisfied look.

She always used this kind of phrasing instead of being straightforward and asking if she could join. I usually nodded and said yes, but I was feeling somewhat mischievous today.

“Oh, that’s okay, then. I’ll go alone today,” I said.

“Okay, then— Wait, what?” she said, caught off guard by my nonstandard

reply. She looked around restlessly and said, “Huh? What? Huh?”

“Anyway, I’ll see ya around,” I said, turning away and leaving her in her confusion.

Flustered, Scrael called out, “W-Wait!”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“W-Well, like I was saying, I-I wouldn’t mind going with you, so...”

“You don’t have to go out of your way to join me. You want to do things at your own pace, I’m sure,” I said.

“I...”

“I wouldn’t want to trouble you or get in your way,” I added.

“I-It’s no trouble...”

“But you’d be changing your original plans, right? Pffft!”

“Ah!”

I thought I was playing it cool, but I couldn’t hold in my laughter. Realizing I’d been messing with her, Scrael began flailing her arms, her cheeks puffed out like a squirrel’s.

“Meanie, meanie, meanie, meanie!” she complained.

“You know, if you want to go with me, you should just say so,” I said. “I never say no unless there’s something I need to do, right?”

“That’s true, but...”

But what? Why doesn’t she want to say it? Why is she so stubborn about it?

“So, what do you wanna do?” I asked.

“I’m going with you!”

Scrael grabbed me by the wrist and began pulling me around. I was ten or so levels above her, but I couldn’t resist at all. Maybe it was the difference between a mage and a warrior, or maybe it was the inherent difference between our races.

And that hurts. A lot.

As an aside, after this incident, Scrael's invitations changed from "I wouldn't mind diving with you" to "I'll dive with you." She still couldn't just ask to join me normally. What a tsundere.

§

Whenever I went diving with Scrael, she took out all the pesky monsters in the low-level floors. It was standard for mages to preserve their mana as their mana reserves allowed teams the flexibility to heal wounds or escape from dungeons when things went south. This was pretty much common sense for Divers, and most teams with mages followed this principle. Though, this did make some mages cocky. I never ended up in such dire situations when I went diving with Scrael though.

Whenever Scrael went to the dungeon, she was mainly searching for core stones and other resources that could be gained there so that she could send them to her village. Her job was an important one. She had to be skilled and dedicated to pull it off, and she needed to be well trusted by her peers to earn such a role in the first place. Considering that, I suspected Scrael was a rather important figure in her village.

Just like me, Scrael also wanted to level up; she wanted to get stronger. She typically leveled up at the Submerged City and the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine on route four. I was impressed that she'd been leveling up in a smoldering hot place like the Mine; I could never. It was like choosing to exercise in a sauna. She was just asking to get heatstroke.

Scrael was fighting in the Great Forest Ruins at depth level 5, sunlight coming down on her through the trees above. Her opponent was a Walker Rabbit, the token weakling of the Gandakia Dungeon. Walker Rabbits were wild animals that looked like giant versions of a certain bipedal rabbit named Peter. One thing to note was that they were wild animals, which were not to be confused with monsters. Some mistakenly assumed every organism in the dungeon was a monster, but normal creatures like these could also be found there, although rarely. I suppose giant walking rabbits were anything but normal, but still.

Walker Rabbits looked like cute stuffed animals from afar, but their sizes made them intimidating up close. Their big black eyes, which looked like

endless voids, were kind of scary too. I really couldn't tell what they were thinking, so they gave me an inexplicable sense of fear. I'd been pretty traumatized by them when I'd first encountered them, and I'd seriously shouted "Run, Mr. McGregor!" They didn't scare me anymore though.

These strange creatures were usually docile. They traveled in groups and typically sat around in their territory eating grass. Yet sometimes, they'd stand in our way for some reason. They didn't really attack us, but they did try to start trouble. Maybe it was their way of playing, but they'd come up to us and slap us with their short arms. It didn't hurt at all, and they'd get bored and leave after a while. I had no idea what they were trying to accomplish, and their behavior was one of the great dungeon mysteries. Speaking of mysteries in the dungeon, there were the actual legendary Dungeon Phantasmata, but that would be a story for another time.

There were signs all around the Great Forest Ruins that read "Walker Rabbits appear here," "Walker Rabbits will follow you around, but don't mind them," "When observing Walker Rabbits, be sure to keep your distance," and "Please don't kill the Walker Rabbits." These rabbits seemed to be a protected species in Do-Melta, but it was kind of unreasonable to expect people to ignore them when they messed with people. The rabbits didn't actually cause any real harm, but still.

The Walker Rabbit standing before us was sticking its stubby arms out and waving them around in a fighting stance. Divers called it Rabbit Kenpo, but I'd never seen it being effective even once. Scrael stood before the rabbit, hopping around with some quick footwork. It was hard to tell which one was the rabbit here.

It was Rabbit Kenpo versus the Long-Ears' super martial art, Jinshu. And the Long-Ears emerged victorious. Scrael's palm strike landed directly on the rabbit's round belly, the blow so heavy I could feel it from where I stood. The Walker Rabbit fell to the ground with a squeal, its eyes turned into a >< shape. Although they had incredibly poor attack power, they were surprisingly tough. Their furs were said to deflect swords, and there had even been a time when hunter groups had appeared for their pelts. Scrael's Jinshu strike had delivered an attack straight to the creature's innards, yet it only ended up losing

consciousness. It proved just how resilient these rabbits were, though I was sure Scrael had been holding back.

As Scrael stepped away, the rabbit's peers appeared out of nowhere, grabbed their fallen friend, and went waddling away. They really were strange creatures.

"Those rabbits would be cute if they were smaller," uttered Scrael.

I had to agree. *Do small rabbits even exist in this world?*

"Your martial arts are amazing," I said.

Proudly puffing out her chest, Scrael said, "Lady Sapphia invented it for us. Of course it's amazing."

"Huh."

Sapphia the Blue was a Do-Meltan deity who claimed Long-Ears as her kin, and she was also known as the goddess of war. As an aside, she was sometimes referred to as the Blue Sister, though she was generally called Sapphia the Blue.

"Do you wanna try it?" suggested Scrael out of the blue.

"Huh? Hmm, well, if you're offering, I guess I'll give it a try."

"Okay, then copy what I do," said Scrael, then she began showing me Jinshu movement patterns.

I imitated her movements and asked, "Like this?"

"Your arms should be more like this. Don't put your feet flat on the ground, use the balls of your feet for movement."

This martial art seemed to use hopping movements to throw the opponent off.

As I made such observations, Scrael suddenly switched from her agile hopping movements to pressing her foot flat on the ground.

"Once you're three steps away from the opponent, stop using the balls of your feet and, instead, use your heels to move," she said as she demonstrated.

I attempted to imitate her and said, "I'm having trouble transitioning smoothly."

“That’s normal. It’ll feel more natural with practice.”

It was difficult to transition my weight distribution while consciously imagining the movement, and so was keeping track of my distance to the target. This obviously wasn’t something I’d be able to master overnight.

“Once you switch your footwork, you move your arms and legs together. Imagine your wrists and ankles being tied together with a string,” Scrael went on.

“Like this, right?” I said.

I moved my arms and legs in unison, and I could tell how awkward it was. I’d learned to not move my same-side arms and legs together during marches in preschool and elementary school, so relearning that movement now wasn’t going to be easy. With the heel footwork, it felt less like I was diving toward the target and more like I was trying to go for a tackle. Not to mention, the stomping motion was hard too.

Afterward, I tried going through all the movements back-to-back and asked, “How was that?”

“Hmm... Do you want my honest opinion?” asked Scrael.

“Yeah.”

I had minuscule hope that I’d done a pretty good job, but Scrael maintained her usual cold expression and hit me with the merciless truth.



“That was crap. You’re not cut out for this. Worse than a roly-poly. You should die and reincarnate before trying again. It’ll be quicker that way,” she said.

“That’s mean!”

“You told me to be honest,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but still...”

Verbally destroying me like that really hadn’t been necessary. I fell to my hands and knees and hung my head. Even Sensei complimented me more than this. And calling me worse than a roly-poly was surprisingly hurtful. She’d put me on the same level as those guards we’d run into in the main hall a while ago.

“I just can’t lie,” said Scrael.

“That’s a lie right there!”

She stubbornly put up a front all the time, so she was in no position to say that.

Scrael smiled wryly. That was an unusual expression for sure.

“This is what you get for earlier,” she said.

“Ugh...”

She’d been holding a grudge for my messing with her earlier. She was in a much better mood now that she’d gotten even with me.

“It’s true that you’re not cut out for this though,” she said.

“You didn’t need to be *that* honest! You could’ve been less direct and said I was so-so or something!”

“Well, I can’t—”

“I get it already!”

Then, after taking some time to go over the movements with me, she said, “Okay, on to the next part.”

“Th-There’s more?” I asked.

“This part is important. No whining.”

“Okay,” I said listlessly.

Scrael took up a stance with her palm facing outward.

“First, you focus your jinchi,” she explained.

“My what?” I asked.

“Jinchi. A force different from magic that acts on the human body.”

“That doesn’t tell me much...”

I had no idea what she was talking about. Where would such a power come from anyway? Was it some mysterious energy only Long-Ears possessed?

“You’re over level 30, so you should know. As people level up, power that’s different from what you get from muscles builds up inside them. That is what we call ‘jinchi,’” said Scrael.

“As we level up? Oh! Wait a minute!”

Her explanation immediately rang a bell. This “jinchi” was what caused our physical abilities to improve upon leveling up. It was a supernatural phenomenon that somehow made us mightier without gaining muscles. It was the reason I’d somehow become so much stronger than before I’d started leveling, even with my noodle arms. When I flexed my arm, it felt like it was enveloped in power, and this invisible aid grew in efficacy as my level grew.

This was the first time I’d found out this energy could be utilized in fighting techniques. I felt like I’d just learned a secret trick in a video game. I was ecstatic.

“First, you charge your arm with power,” said Scrael.

“Right.”

“You feel jinchi flowing into your arm?”

“Uh-huh.”

Whoa! I’ve never thought about this before, but I can control this energy with conscious thought. This is amazing.

“Then you hold on to that energy,” she went on.

“Yeah.”

“You stomp the ground, thrust your arm forward at the same time, and fire your charged jinchi forward using the opposing reaction from the stomp. When you fire, imagine you’re shooting it *through* the target in front of you. And make sure you vocalize at the same time. Brace your core and yell out ‘Ha!’ like it’s exploding out of your stomach.”

I was caught off guard by the long-winded explanation, but I took it in and did as I was told.

“Ha!”

I gave it a shot, but I couldn’t tell if anything had come out. It would’ve been easier if it’d resembled a Hadou-something-ken or a Kamehame-something-ha.

I looked over at Scrael, and she narrowed her eyes without saying anything.

“Well?” I asked.

“You might be somewhat good, just a little bit,” she said.

“What? Really? Yes!”

“Don’t let it get to your head,” she said. “You’re just a bit skilled at controlling your energy because you’re a mage. You’re still crap at this overall.”

“Teacher, I learn better with compliments,” I said.

“Too bad. I have a strict teaching style.”

“Aw...”

“That was a basic Jinshu move called Efflux Wave. You change your footwork and weight distribution three steps before entering the opponent’s attack range, then you use the float step to set up your stance to throw your entire body weight at the opponent with the momentum gained with a spring step. Once you learn to float step well, you’ll be able to strike with your entire body enhanced with jinchi, not just with your arms. After the final step, just do as I explained earlier. When you get decent at this, humans will look like nothing more than thin pieces of paper,” said Scrael.

“That’s a scary way to look at humans,” I pointed out.

“Yep. And this is...”

Scrael casually ignored my fearful expression and demonstrated a powerful backfist strike. The movement made a thunderous noise as if her hand had exploded.

“Thunderous Backfist,” said Scrael.

“Whaaat...”

I was so freaked that I fell onto my butt. It’d scared the crap out of me. Not to mention, a tree several meters away from her fist had split open and fallen to the ground. The attack had been extraordinarily powerful, and it’d made the joy from the earlier compliment seem incredibly trivial.

I crawled around, having lost my ability to stand for the second time today.

Scrael shot me a look. “Why are you so shocked? You can do far more incredible things than this.”

“Anyone would be surprised by a sudden loud noise and impact like that.”

“You’re weird,” she said.

“How dare you!”

I raised my fist in protest while crawling around, but I was far from intimidating. How tragic.

“Practice,” said Scrael.

“Huh, so you attained Jinshu by practicing this?”

“Practice it,” she repeated.

“Wait...me?”

“Yes. Practice every day. Otherwise, there was no point in me teaching you.”

“Okay...”

There was an intimidating air about her, so I had no choice but to agree.

I was suddenly reminded of my childhood when my friend, who’d aspired to be a hero, had made me do all sorts of weird stuff in the name of his so-called training. The silver lining was that my hero-kick form was absolutely impeccable

thanks to that experience. It'd ended up being used in my Lightning Kicks, so you never knew what would happen in life.

"A thousand days of training to develop; ten thousand days of training to polish," I said.

"What's that?" asked Scrael.

"My childhood friend used to say that all the time. It's from...*The Book of Five Rings*, I think it's called? It means the only way to master a technique is to practice it every day. There are no shortcuts."

"I like that," said Scrael, nodding her head.

If she liked that phrase, that meant she had the potential to become a hero. For me, it just brought back trauma.

"Your Efflux Wave will get a passing grade once it can pass through five people. Aim for that for now," she said.

"F-Five people?"

"After that, do it on a rock wall. Then try it on metal. Once you can do that, you can fight any enemy no matter how good their armor is."

I stared at her. I felt like I was being taught some outrageous killing arts. It was kind of scary. No wonder she'd been so sure she could blast through a Four-Armed Goat.

"Man, Long-Ears are strong, huh?" I said.

It was my honest opinion as someone who'd been hanging out with Scrael all this time. It was incredible that she could manipulate her energy like fa jin from Chinese martial arts.

"But I don't know if we're the strongest," said Scrael.

"Oh?"

"Humans aren't that strong, but the other races are."

"Ah."

She was right about that. Each race had unique characteristics and was strong in its own way. I'd seen it firsthand during my many dungeon dives. It did seem

a bit harsh to say humans weren't that strong though. I mean, Miguel was strong.

"Adorners are on a different level," Scrael added. "Beast-Heads are strong too, of course, but their strength is in their survival abilities and valor."

Beast-Heads were also popular. Everyone loved them, probably because they looked so wild and cool.

"Do Beast-Heads look cool to other races too?" I asked.

"Children admire them. I don't know what Adorners think of them though."

"Huh. Was there a specific event or something that made them popular?"

"Yes. There's a famous tale from the end of the last century, back when the gods first started creating their kins. It's about Beast-Heads defeating monsters. Five heroes chosen among Beast-Heads, known as Beast Lion, Beast Ursus, Beast Wolf, Beast Tiger, and Beast Hawk, fought the monsters for seven days and seven nights and won. They say it's thanks to them that we're all able to live on this continent now."

"So it's a grand tale about reclaiming the continent for the people. But they sound like a sentai team," I noted.

They were basically this world's Zyuohger or Gaoranger.

Wait, what's with Beast Ursus? Shouldn't it be Beast Bear? My automatic translation function needs to get it together.

Hold on... Did I just hear that right?

"Wait...you said this was back when the gods started making their kins, but they defeated the monsters at the end of the last century?" I asked.

"That's how the story goes. Everyone thinks it was weird, but we don't question it," she said.

"I wonder if the gods would tell us?"

"Who knows. The elder has asked before, but he said he didn't get an answer," said Scrael, tilting her head to the left and right.

This world seemed to have its secrets.

“Anyway, what were we talking about again?” I asked.

“How Adorners get hungry easily.”

“Oh, right. I’ve seen that happen too. They’re always hungry,” I agreed.

Adorners listlessly lying around at safe points was a common sight in dungeons. Just the other day, Miguel had mentioned a similar story about how he’d saved Reverie (from hunger). I always wondered if there wasn’t anything they could do about that.

Wait... Were we really talking about how Adorners get hungry?

§

“I mean, I did say they were a common sight...”

We’d stopped by a safe point after our earlier conversation, and sure enough, we’d found an Adorner there. But instead of being hungry, this one was whining about something. Maybe he was in his rebellious phase.

“I will *not* drink it! I’d rather die than drink a potion!” he screamed.

“Just drink it! You’re really gonna die if you don’t!”

“I can’t! I can’t do it!”

“Don’t say that! Please! All you have to do is drink it!”

“I’ll die if I drink it all!”

A male Adorner and a female human were causing a scene at the safe point. They kind of looked like a couple, so I kind of wanted them to explode. But the man was injured, and this seemed to be an emergency, so I decided to talk to them.

I approached the woman, who seemed like the only one who could carry a normal conversation at the moment.

“Excuse me, what’s going on here?” I asked.

“O-Oh, he’s badly hurt, but he’s refusing to drink a potion,” said the woman concernedly.

Huh?

“Uh...why is that?” I asked.

“Well...”

As the woman hesitated, Scrael said with a serious expression, “Because potions are bitter. Adorners can’t do bitter.”

“Huh?”

“They can’t drink bitter stuff.”

“Come on, potions aren’t *that* bitter,” I said.

“Adorners are very sensitive to bitterness. Their bodies reject it and just spit it back out,” explained Scrael.

“Why?”

“Because Lady Ruvi hates bitter things.”

“They’re influenced by their god’s preferences in flavor?”

I had to pity Adorners. They were forced to hate bitterness just because their goddess did.

I looked over at the woman and asked, “Um, is that true?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Y-Yes...” the man confirmed.

So he really couldn’t ingest anything bitter. That reminded me of how Reverie really hadn’t wanted the potion I’d tried to give her; it must’ve been because she was an Adorner too. It was such an absurd reason to refuse a potion. I almost wanted to just leave them here, though I couldn’t quite do that considering how dire the situation was. As a mage, I decided to offer help.

“Um, would you like me to heal you with magic?” I asked.

“You’re a mage?!” The woman’s voice was a mixture of surprise and joy. She met eyes with the man, letting out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness...”

“Thank goodness. I won’t have to drink a potion,” said the man.

“*That’s* what you’re relieved about?!” I blurted out.

I examined the man’s wounds and cast a healing spell on him. Once the

treatment was done, the man's adrenaline seemed to have worn off, and he got some rest.

Relieved, the woman clung to his chest, and the Adorner patted her head, pathetically mumbling "I'm so glad I didn't have to drink a potion..." It was a bizarre sight.

I turned around and noticed Scrael had been staring at them.

She approached me and said, "Akira."

"Yeah?" I said.

"If you want to pat my head, you can."

"Pardon?"

"I said, if you want to pat my head, you can," she repeated.

"Are you...asking me to pat your head?" I asked.

"N-No!"

What does she want, then?

"Well, no, I don't particularly want to..." I said.

"Why would you say that?!" said Scrael angrily.

That could only mean one thing.

"Scrae, do you want me to pat your head?" I asked again.

"I-It's not like that," she said and turned away.

What the heck?

"Then we're good, right?" I asked.

"Humph."

She puffed out her cheeks, upset.

As we were done going back and forth, the Adorner man said to me, "My girlfriend is cuter, okay?!"

"Huh?"

I didn't know what'd come over him, but he seemed to have mistaken Scrael

for my girlfriend. I wished that were the case, but sadly, she wasn't.

As I struggled to come up with a response, Scrael grabbed my safari shirt collar and pulled my face up to hers.

"Akira," she said.

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

Scrael glared at me, the air about her demanding I say something back. I felt like I had to do something quickly, or she was going to tighten the grip on my collar until I went night night.

But what am I supposed to say?

"U-Um...Scrael is cute too?" I said.

She bopped me twice like a kid throwing a tantrum.

"Wrong answer," she said.

"Huh? Then what?"

So she didn't want me to just say she was cute. I still had no idea what I was supposed to say.

"Scrael is cute and pretty?" I tried again.

"No, wrong."

Bop. Bop. Bop. I got an extra bop this time.

"Then what else should I say, miss?" I asked.

"Forget it!" she said, then she puffed up again and turned away.

I never figured out what I was supposed to say after all.

What did she want from me?

The couple gave me disappointed looks as if to say "You just don't get it." It kind of ticked me off.

If you know the answer, just tell me! You owe me that much for healing you. Don't make me collect payment.

Anyway, the couple ended up heading back to the main hall. They were all

over each other like they were going to have a whole bunch of *bleep* later. I wished they'd just explode already.

Meanwhile, Scrael was still cross with me even after the Diver couple had left. I didn't get what part of that exchange could've been so upsetting, but I had to do something about it.

"Hey, Scrae," I called to her.

She ignored me. She really was still in a bad mood.

I decided to switch up my tactic.

"Scrae, should we eat something?" I asked.

She still said nothing but moved closer to me anyway.

That was easy. She couldn't resist an offer of food.

I watched Scrael approach me with that unfriendly expression and brought out a cassette stove and a piece of metal mesh from my Dimension Bag. Then I brought out the star of the show: a pack of hard square white food.

"What are these?" asked Scrael.

"These are one of Japan's finest culinary weapons: mochi," I explained.

"Culinary weapon?"

"Yep. Every year, during a certain time of year, these white demons get stuck in people's throats and impede their breathing, choking them to death."

"What?"

Scrael turned pale as if she'd just touched upon an extraterrestrial horror, and she fearfully poked the hard mochi with a fork.

"Just kidding," I said. "You can eat them normally. You just have to chew well."

There should be no problem as long as they were properly prepared. I couldn't help but get nervous whenever old people ate mochi on TV during New Years. Lately, they made mochi that had been cut up into small pieces, so it was probably fine, but there'd been some casualties this year too.

I turned on the cassette stove and placed the mochi on the mesh. Before long, the mochi were cooked by the fire and began to puff up.

“They’re white Pop Slimes...” said Scrael.

“Please don’t make those sorts of comparisons,” I said.

I had to admit, I could see the resemblance, but why did people here always have some gruesome comparisons? It was strange how it didn’t ruin their appetite.

“Akira, do we use shoy sauce on these?” she asked.

This girl wanted to put soy sauce on everything. I mean, soy sauce on mochi wasn’t wrong. In fact, they paired perfectly.

“Yeah, but we first need to wrap them with roasted seaweed,” I said.

“Shoy sauce!”

I wrapped a piece of mochi with seaweed, poured soy sauce on it, and placed it on Scrael’s paper plate.

She immediately chomped on it and stretched it out, as was tradition.



“What do you think?” I asked.

“Mmm, tastes like happiness...” she said dreamily.

I was glad to see her mood seemed to have completely brightened.

She continued, “The texture is funny. It’s...sticky?”

“More like chewy. Where I come from, we call this texture ‘mochi-mochi.’ That’s where it got its name,” I explained.

“It’s called mochi because it’s mochi-mochi?” asked Scrael.

“Yep. Mochi-mochi,” I said.

“Mochi-mochi.”

Scrael repeated the word to herself as she continued eating.

I started working on the next one, then a thought came to me.

“Scrae, I know you love soy sauce, but what about fish sauce? Don’t you have it in this world too?” I asked.

“Yes, but it smells too fishy. We, Long-Ears, don’t like that stuff. But shoy sauce doesn’t smell bad, so we like it.”

“Your Long-Ears friend seemed to like it too,” I said, recalling how she’d seemed to enjoy licking the soy sauce. Then, an idea hit me. “Hey, how about I put together some documents on how to make your own?”

“I’d love that!” said Scrael with extreme interest.

“We might not be able to make it well though. It takes a lot of people to make it,” I said.

“We can send the files to my village. I’m sure my people will figure it out.”

“You’re just gonna put it all on them, huh,” I said, then I realized there was something I had to confirm. “I’ll have to make sure God is okay with it first, though I’m sure he will be.”

God was surprisingly open-minded about me bringing technology into this world, so it should be fine as long as I ran it by him.

“That’s fine, I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

And so, Scrael was cheerful for the rest of the day.

I'd be notified later that they'd succeeded in making Do-Meltan shoy sauce, but that was a story for another time.

Floor Twenty-Four: To the Dungeon with Lion-Maru

This might have been the first time I'd seen someone blow away multiple monsters along with the surrounding rocks. I mean, it would've been a different story if he'd used magic. I'd used high-grade spells to do it myself, and my demonic mentor Beitreise had blown things up with super-high-level spells plenty of times. But I'd just witnessed him accomplishing the feat with a sword—against powerful monsters no less. And I meant very powerful; I didn't even know what level they'd been. They'd had the trifecta of being extremely big, strong, and scary. I'd never seen anything like them, yet they'd been blown away and wiped out like nothing.

“What's wrong, Kudo? That was hardly a challenge.”

The smiling speaker, the one responsible for sending those monsters flying, was Freida's hero Dracarion Hueller, aka Lion-Maru. He was likely the strongest Diver in all of Freida. A massive man, he stood at two meters tall with a maned lion head upon his shoulders, holding a giant sword that looked like it could slay dragons. To be honest, he was probably the strongest warrior in all of Do-Melta. The way he casually blew powerful monsters away and laughed like it was the easiest thing in the world reminded me of overpowered characters in video games. He was strong enough to solo every bad guy out there. It didn't make any sense. He was like a *Disgaea* character who'd appeared in a *Dragon Quest* world as is and gone around inflicting several extra digits worth of damage compared to everyone else. He could hit the damage limit just by using a standard attack.

“Hardly a challenge? Says you!” I said.

“Ha ha ha! You've got a point there! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“It's not funny!” I shouted.

I was hysterical because there were nothing but superstrong monsters where we were. The depth level here at the Ruined Undercity was a staggering 46, and the recommended level here was obviously far higher than mine. I was below

the recommended level at the Evernight Meadows at depth level 40, but I could still dive there by hiding or fleeing from danger. Not here. It was impossible. This place was so insane that I wouldn't be able to escape from any monster here no matter what item or magic I used. I really shouldn't have been here.

This floor gave me the shivers in a way different from the floors known for their horror elements. There were weird, asymmetrical monsters all over this place that could hardly even be called living creatures or be compared to animals or insects. Also, did I mention how huge every monster here was? They were enormous. This place was teeming with Poison-Chimera-Zombie-sized monstrosities, which should give you an idea of how nasty this place was. They were like...Godzillas. Okay, maybe not that big, but those kinds of titanic creatures could be found here—in droves. A mere human stood no chance here. I felt like crying out for Hiro to save me, though I wasn't sure if even *he* could handle this place.

“Whoo! A Four-Armed Goat? Ha ha, I remember beating one of those cute little things! Aha ha ha!” I squealed.

“Kudo, snap out of it. Another enemy is approaching,” warned Lion-Maru.

“Noooooooo! Get away! Get away from meee! Aaaaaaaaah!!!”

I couldn't take it anymore, and I desperately fired off a bunch of spells at the enemy. Even Tertiary Magic barely seemed to bother them. White smoke rose from where my spells had impacted them, but they left not even a scorch mark to show for it. It made no sense how such creatures could exist.

But even more ludicrous was the way Lion-Maru had sent them flying with a swing of his colossal sword. It'd been absolutely insane. He was pretty much on Sensei's level. I'd gone on a dive or two with him when we'd first met, and I'd gotten a glimpse of his extraordinary power back then when he'd blown monsters away simply by roaring at them. I realized now that he was really dialing things back for me. The level gap between us was just far too wide.

“Listen, Kudo,” he said, “back when I went to defeat the Demon Lord...”

He'd sometimes go on about his heroic tales about encountering giant flying bugs or undead skeleton mages.

“If you think these monsters are nothing, just how strong was the Demon Lord?!” I said. “They’d have to be so powerful they could easily destroy the world!”

“Yes, it was a crazy battle. Crazy indeed...”

“This isn’t the time for reminiscing!” I shouted.

My voice echoed through the floor, but it was quickly drowned out by the screeches and roars from monsters and some other strange noises.

There was literally nothing I could do here. I hadn’t realized how different things would be fifteen depth levels deeper than my usual floors. I’d been taking the Gandakia Dungeon way too lightly. I’d seriously learned my lesson.

I told Lion-Maru that, and he said, “No, Akira, you shouldn’t assume this floor is like the others. It’s only classified as depth level 46 because there’s virtually no information on it. But actually—”

“Ahhh! Get me outta here! The guild really needs to do its job! What if a Diver accidentally wanders in here?!”

“A normal Diver won’t be able to get here in the first place,” he explained. “You remember how we got here, don’t you? No one can set foot in here unless they defeat that thing in the Visceral Cave.”

“Aaaaaah! Noooooo! Please don’t make me remember thaaat!”

Just hearing it mentioned brought back memories that made me want to vomit. Lion-Maru was talking about the boss monster that resided in the depths of the Visceral Cave. It’d been an abomination with an appearance as disgusting as it’d been strong. Anyone with working eyes and a normal sense of beauty would be vulnerable to its insanity-inducing hideousness. One look and you’d be done for, just like staring into Medusa’s stony gaze.

Attempting to preserve my composure, I let my mind go blank and continuously fired off magic. My attacks were ineffective, of course, but I needed to put up *some* sort of a fight.

“Yep, this is pointless,” I said. “No way. I can’t handle them.”

“Indeed. If you intend to hurt them, you’ll at least need to use Quaternary or

Quinary Magic,” said Lion-Marú.

That was a lie. I’d already tried them earlier.

“Um...how many hits would I need to land to take even one of them down?” I asked.

“At least three or four, I’d say.”

“If anyone used Quaternary Magic that many times, they’d run out of mana and shrivel up!” I protested.

“You think so? But my friends could do that without breaking a sweat,” he said.

“Well, they must’ve given up their humanity, then! Are you sure they aren’t demons?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha! Of course not!”

If I attempted that, I’d become bone dry. My mana capacity was considered pretty high too. How could someone have that much mana? Were they some sort of mana demon?

“Aaaaaaaaah! I’m gonna diie! Mom! Help meeeeeee!” I screamed. I’d never cried out for my mom before, but I couldn’t help it.

I’d ended up in this situation in the first place because Lion-Marú had told me he’d show me something interesting, so I should follow him, and I’d made the terrible mistake of following him joyfully and excitedly. He’d been in an unusually good mood, purring like an engine as he’d approached me. Lion-Marú had always been good to me, so I’d had no reason to say no. I should’ve known something had been off from the beginning, but I hadn’t suspected a thing being the naive Diver I was.

I’d only started to realize this dive was going to be trouble after we’d walked through the Great Forest Ruins.

§

Back then, I’d been wondering which route Lion-Marú would take us on, and to my surprise, he’d chosen route three. I’d sensed danger, danger, and more danger. When we’d teleported into the next floor through the Misty Border, I’d

found myself standing in the Great Gale Wilds.

And in the wilds, the lion who brought me there shot a great gale out of his mouth.

“ROOOOOOAAAR!!!”

He blew away the monsters with a single roar.



No, “blew away” wasn’t exactly right. It was more like he’d fired some sort of sound wave, shock wave, vibration, or whatever it was from his mouth, which had turned into some sort of tornado attack that had crashed into the monsters, instantly disintegrating them. Yep. That was actually what had happened. It made no sense to me either.

It made me wonder if he really was a lion. Maybe he was some other creature in part, like a dragon, a dragon, or *a dragon*. The name Dracarion did sound pretty dragonish.

“Whaaat...” I said nonsensically, staring blankly at the scene that had just unfolded.

Was I okay? To be honest, my brain had overloaded and burst a while ago, so everything was all fine and dandy. Nothing ever made sense whenever I went on adventures with Lion-Maru anyway.

Either way, there was absolutely nothing I could contribute on this lower floor, and we continued deeper into the dungeon.

Next up was the infamous poison floor, the Night Soil Swamps on route three at depth level 25. With its disgustingly garish deep purple, this floor was toxic not only for the body but the eyes too. And don’t get me started on the stench; there was a chemical smell that couldn’t be healthy to breathe in, and the entire place was filled with a pungent odor that reminded me of sulfur or rotten eggs. Everything here was poisonous too. This place was so hellish that it made the Paradise Hot Springs look like heaven.

Yet Lion-Maru had grabbed a monster on this floor and ripped it apart with his bare hands. The poor victim had been a Pop Slime, a resident of the Swamps that I hated looking at because of its grotesque appearance.

He’d grabbed one with both hands, roared “Graaaaaaaaaah!” and twisted until it’d ripped in two.

“Um...that thing is poisonous, you know,” I pointed out calmly.

“Oh? Is it? It doesn’t affect me at all, so I thought everyone else was just being too cautious,” he said.

“You really shouldn’t think of yourself as the standard. Seriously. Your power is beyond comprehension. You’re literally Freida’s hero.”

“Ha ha ha! Stop kidding around, Kudo. Here, hold it. It’s fine,” he said.

“I’m *not* kidding! Wait, get that thing away from me!”

Lion-Maru brought it closer to me with a smile, and I ran away from him as fast as I could. I mean, dangerous-smelling bubbles were coming out of the Pop Slime. If I’d breathed in the fumes, I probably would’ve died instantly. I had zero trust in his reasoning that I’d be fine just because he was unharmed. I was sure he was just like Sensei in the sense that her ridiculously high level trumped everything. I had no intention of being the canary in this coal mine. Come to think of it, why was I always being put in this kind of situation lately?

What’s more, I’d been screaming nonstop since we’d come to this floor. I felt like my throat would die on me before my mana would.

§

Afterward, we’d arrived at the Night Soil Swamps’ exit. I’d like to take this moment to recall everything leading up to the Visceral Cave. Thinking back, that had been where everything had turned absolutely bonkers and completely out of my control.

I’d never gone further than the Night Soil Swamps, so everything beyond this point was new to me. I’d had no idea this was how I’d get there. And after holding an internal meeting in my head, my brain cells unanimously agreed that I never wanted to come here again.

It went without saying that I’d felt like garbage in the Night Soil Swamps, and I still did. I’d usually turn back at this point and get some fresh air at the Great Gale Wilds, but since I couldn’t do that, I felt terrible as we pressed on.

Pain. Sad.

I stood in front of the misty mirror surface for the third time today, trembling in fear.

“Excuse me, but I’m not really feeling all that great right now,” I said.

“Kudo, if you have the energy to complain, that means you’re still fine,” said

Lion-Marū.

“No, no, I really should deal with this sort of thing as soon as I start to feel symptoms. Otherwise, it could get worse—”

“Sickness and health start from the mind. Be strong,” he said as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

It was reassuring to see him so relaxed before an unknown floor, but it really wasn’t helping right now.

“Ew. Are you one of those people who think you can just power through anything with willpower alone?” I said.

“Ha ha ha!” he laughed.

This was bad. Sensei knowingly put me through hell, but Lion-Marū legitimately didn’t see the issue here. He could see the state I was in, but he wasn’t *really* looking. I mean, he was right that I wasn’t dying or anything, but he wasn’t putting my mental aspect into account.

“Kudo, you’re the type who gets quiet when you’re truly cornered. As long as you’re talking, you’ve still got room to go. And you still have more than half of your health and mana left, don’t you?” he said.

I stared at him.

Never mind, he really does see through me.

Thinking about it, I started to realize maybe he was right. I really did talk less when things truly got bad, though that was usually just because I was too preoccupied to speak.

“Now, let’s go,” he said.

“Please don’t grab me by the scruff of my neck like that! Aaaaaah!”

I strengthened my resolve and stepped forward—or more like I was dragged along by force.

“Uh...where are we?” was the first thing I asked after entering the new floor.

“This is the Visceral Cave at depth level 40,” said Lion-Marū.

“Seriously?!”

He lit his lantern, and I turned on my light. The sight before us didn't just bewilder me; it made me shudder.

I came to realize why this place was called the Visceral Cave—it was literally full of viscera. Wherever I pointed my light, I saw pink mucous membranes like we were inside some sort of internal organ.

I stepped around with the soles of my shoes. The feeling underfoot was soft and organic, and with each step came a squishy, wet noise. Whenever I lifted my foot, stringy mucus stretched from the ground to my shoe.

Nope.

That was my first thought. I just couldn't.

We weren't even inside the dungeon anymore. We were in some giant creature's stomach. I could even feel its warmth, and I had a feeling we'd get digested if we went deeper.

"I'd like to say bye-bye here for today," I said to Lion-Maru. "Like, poof."

"Kudo, today's adventure is just beginning. Why would we turn back now?" he asked as he grabbed my shoulder and smiled.

It seemed he wasn't going to let me cast my magic to get the heck outta here. It was a pretty useful generic spell.

"Um, by the way, out of curiosity," I asked hesitantly, "what sorts of monsters can be found here?"

"Ah, you'll see soon enough," he said.

"What?"

As I followed him fearfully, I saw a shadow around the corner of a mucous membrane wall. I really wished I hadn't.

"Uh...I can't do this anymore," I said. "Forget levels and all that. That thing's very existence is breaking through my mental limits with a drill."

The thing that had shown up around the corner was a white creature that looked like a segmented worm—actually, there was no point in beating about the bush. It was a colossal parasite. Just picture a giant tapeworm. The monster

was big enough to put chapter 120 of a certain manga about a hellish teacher to shame. It was disgusting. Absolutely revolting. I wished I could think of a better word to describe how absolutely horrid it was.

“Yes, I get it. That thing is indeed disgusting,” said Lion-Marú.

He was so calm about it that I wanted to yell “Do you really?!”

“But Kudo, we must overcome it if we’re to get out of here.”

“That sounds cool and all, but I really don’t think we necessarily have to keep going,” I said. “Sure, I might possibly consider putting in the effort if the world was in danger or something, but that’s not the case here.”

“But this is why we’re here today. No problem though, I’ll take care of it. You’re in good hands,” he said.

“I mean, I couldn’t be in better hands, but still.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

That wasn’t the issue here. Seriously, I wasn’t worried about making it home alive. None of it would matter if I ended up going mad. That would be the end for me anyway.

“Still, that doesn’t mean you don’t need to pay attention. Kudo, here it comes,” he said.

“Huh? What’s coming? Wha—”

It was a miracle that I’d been able to react in time. I’d sensed something flying toward me and dodged to the side just in the nick of time. I immediately heard a splat on the ground behind me and, a moment later, a sizzling noise. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw some sort of viscous fluid making the organ’s mucous membrane sizzle.

I had no idea where that thing had come from.

Scary.

“Th-That came at us so fast...” I breathed.

“Indeed,” said Lion-Marú. “Quite impressive of you to have dodged it on instinct alone. You have potential.”

“Oh, thank you—I mean, now’s not the time for that! Was that this monster’s standard attack?”

“Yes. And here comes more. Rapid-fire this time,” he warned.

“Wha— Aaaaaaaaah!”

The mysterious parasite monster rapidly fired mucus from what appeared to be its proboscis.

I could’ve cast defensive spells to protect myself, but I was too busy screaming and dodging for my brain to even reach that conclusion. To be honest, I would’ve been dead if not for Sensei’s training. I still wasn’t going to thank her though. Her boobies? I was always thankful for those—in fact, they were worthy of worship.

I continued dodging the parasite monster’s mucus attacks, and Lion-Maru eventually cleaved it with his giant sword. It probably would’ve continued to attack us if he’d just cut it in two, but he’d obliterated the thing and turned it to dust.

Also, the thing lurking in the depths of this floor was crazy. Words could hardly describe how nasty it was. It basically looked like a giant clump of those squiggly things inside sunfish. I’d rather leave it at that since just thinking about it made me want to throw up. This thing was strong too. While each individual was small, it wasn’t considered a colony of smaller creatures but a single entity combined. It was firing those squiggly things at outrageous velocities in all directions, and I could imagine if one of them hit me, it’d dig into my body and devour me from the inside. And so, I just defended myself with magic the entire time.

Lion-Maru dealt with each of the projectiles by cutting them down with his sword or knocking them away with his roar. Not one of them had managed to touch his body. He was pretty amazing.

“Kudo! I trust you’re still alive?” he asked.

“N-No, I’m dead... I died mentally about ten times already,” I said.

“Good!”

There's nothing "good" about it. Won't he put my mental state into consideration for once?

I then realized the parasite boss monster had become smaller from launching the things that had once been its body.

"You might be able to beat it like this if you keep fending it off!" I called out.

"If only it were that simple, Kudo," he said.

He was right. The boss monster puffed up and returned to its full-sized wriggly glory.

As despair began to sink in...

"RAAAAAARGH!"

"Aaaaaahhh!" I screamed, my eardrums nearly bursting from Lion-Marú's thundering roar.

I temporarily lost my hearing, and the next moment, he charged forward, swinging his massive sword. Yeah, I'd definitely seen him swing, and the boss monster turned to dust and vanished.

Once I got my hearing back, I asked, "Wh-What was that move?"

"That was my Raaaaaargh Crusher," he said.

What kind of name is that? I mean, he did literally shout that, but he actually used his sword to attack.

"That move is the one and only technique that dealt a critical blow to the Demon Lord," he said, then he went on retelling his heroic tale.

I didn't mind listening because his accomplishments were just that impressive, but I really didn't want to stay here much longer.

"Ah, Kudo, what should we do with the core stone? Do you want it?" he asked.

"Oh, no thank you," I said. "I don't wanna touch that thing."

There was no way I was doing that. It looked slimy.

"You don't want it because you don't want to touch it? You're a strange one,"

he said.

“Look who’s talking!” I shot back.

“Ha ha ha!” he laughed out loud.

I couldn’t believe he was so unfazed after fighting that disgusting thing—well, I guess I could since he was all-powerful and all.

§

So yeah, that had been the grand adventure I’d gone through on the way to our destination. Afterward, we’d wiped out the monsters in the Ruined Undercity—correction: Lion-Maru had wiped them out for me.

This place, the Ruined Undercity, was underground in a seemingly endless cave. The length, width, and depth of this place were all kilometers long and impossible to measure. I could hardly see the ceiling, but the crystalline ores embedded in the rock face emitted a faint glow, providing decent enough visibility.

This place was big enough to fit an entire city, and sure enough, it contained what seemed to be an entire city. I had a good view of the cityscape and the buildings below from our vantage point atop a cliff.

“Is that a city?” I couldn’t help but ask.

My confusion came from just how different its architectural style was from Freida’s. The somewhat modern, unobtrusive, and simple structures were reminiscent of a city in the near future you’d find in a science fiction title. The other thing that had caught my attention was how dilapidated the place was. There were crumbled buildings with their framework exposed. Rubble piles were strewn all over the place, and there were absolutely no signs of life. It hadn’t just been abandoned for a few decades but far longer.

“Yes, this is a city. Or maybe it’d be more accurate to say it *was* one,” said Lion-Maru.

“You knew this place?” I asked.

“Not really. It’s been like this since the first time I saw it.”

“Could it be that the monsters from earlier did this?”

“That would be my guess,” he said.

I continued asking questions as we descended the cliff, but most of Lion-Marú’s replies were conjectures with words like “probably” and “likely.” Someone definitely knew the answers though: those who’d created this world.

“Have the gods said anything about it?” I asked.

“Who knows. They don’t answer questions about this even when asked. I suppose they want us to find out for ourselves. They’re not fond of spoon-feeding us all the answers.”

“I see,” I said.

I guess it’d be no fun if they told us everything we wanted to know.

“I don’t know why, but places like these are kind of exciting. This might be considered bad taste though,” I said.

“I find it exciting too,” Lion-Marú agreed. “I can’t help but wonder what happened here and what kind of people once lived here.”

“My imagination runs wild once I start thinking about it.”

“Ha ha ha, exactly.”

Sights like these were very interesting in an archaeological sense, though I did feel bad for the people who’d been wiped out.

As I mulled over such thoughts, Lion-Marú suddenly said, “By the way, Kudo, you aren’t from this world, are you?”

“No, I’m—” I said, then I realized. “Wait, have I told you before?”

“As I thought.”

“Whaaat?! You baited me?”

“I was already sure of it, but yes,” he said.

“You were? Since when?” I asked.

“Since the first time I met you. You suddenly showed up in Freida wearing that strange getup, and you were abnormally surprised by my appearance.”

“Oh.”

He was right. I'd met him when I'd originally arrived in Do-Melta. It'd been my first time visiting another world, and as I'd peeked into the Divers Guild with my heart racing, he'd spoken to me. I still remembered how shocked I'd been. I mean, he had a freaking lion head between his shoulders, and it'd moved toward me with its mouth wide open. What was I supposed to have done? *Not* scream "Please don't eat meee!"? He must've thought my reaction had been odd because no one from Do-Melta would've been as terrified as I'd been.

"Besides, you haven't been doing a good job of hiding it," he went on. "Though I suppose you've been fooled by my seemingly nonchalant attitude."

"Ack, I didn't take you for such a tactician."

It turned out Lion-Maru was one of those shrewd types who only pretended to be clueless. And he was pretty much invincible in battle. It wasn't fair.

"How did you end up here, Kudo?" he asked.

"Uh...I was messing around in an elevator, and the next thing I knew, I was at God's place," I said.

"Hmm."

"And when I first met God, he said to me, 'You're from another world, aren't you? You free right now? If you are, why don't you check out the world I manage? It's pretty fun. If you agree to go now, I'll give you my divine blessings and make it so you can use magic. Well? Interested? You are, right?'" That was a rough translation. "He was pretty insistent, and there aren't supernatural powers like magic in my world, so I just followed him without question. Then he gave me my EXP Card."

"And you ended up getting teleported to Freida."

"That's right."

"He didn't ask anything of you?" Lion-Maru asked.

"Nothing in particular. He just told me to go have fun."

"I see," he said, nodding to himself.

"Do you think I'm doing it right?" I asked. "I've heard that people in this world are usually tasked with something important whenever they interact with the

gods.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” he said.

“Really?”

“I’m sure you can do whatever you wish for the most part. As long as you do whatever comes natural to you, it should benefit him in some way. Besides, he isn’t the type of god to force things upon others.”

That much was certain. God had really just gone with the flow from the time I’d first met him. He was kind of like me in that sense. He’d ask me if he actually wanted me to do something in particular, so there was probably no need for me to worry.

“You’ve met God too? Ameithys, I mean,” I asked.

“Not as often as you do, but I’ve met him a few times, yes.”

I’d heard the other races were frequently visited by the god who’d created their race, but Lion-Maru was likely a special case since he was the hero who’d defeated the Demon Lord and all.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Why did you bring me here today?”

“I just wanted you to know that our world has places like these,” he said. “There are many places in Do-Melta that are still full of mysteries like this one. If possible, I want you to think about what they could look like.”

““Think about it’?”

“Don’t worry, there’s no need to think too deeply about it. Just shelve it in your mind for now and remember it every once in a while,” said Lion-Maru with a bare-fanged smile. Just like all Beast-Heads, his fangs became visible whenever he grinned.

“Now, let’s go home,” he said.

“Yes, let’s go— Ah!”

As soon as the words left my mouth, a realization hit me: we’d have to go back through that disgusting floor again on the way back.

Yeah, I don’t want to come back here for the foreseeable future.

Extra Floor: Receptionist Ashley Poney's Workday

The guild receptionist at window number seven, Ashley Poney, had been a staff member of the guild since she'd been sixteen, making her a veteran of six years. Six years might not sound like much, but the turnover rate at the guild wasn't exactly low, so it was considered to be on the longer side.

The issues with this job lay with the amount of work that had to be done and the stress caused by the need to maintain so many interpersonal relationships. The same was true of the duties handled by the behind-the-scenes staff. Still, receptionists had far more responsibilities on their plates. On top of acting as intermediaries with representatives from other industries, such as appraisers, receptionists had to manage and report the progress of their assigned Divers. As part of their job, they monitored their Divers' levels and physical conditions to recommend the appropriate dungeon floors to dive in. They were also responsible for submitting requests to raise or lower Diver ranks depending on the results of their dives. In addition, receptionists were expected to remember the faces of newcomers and up-and-coming Divers and maintain communications with them despite most Divers working day-to-day and progress reports typically being made vaguely and monotonously. Another important task receptionists handled was assigning dungeon missions to Divers as necessary; if the guild required an item from the dungeon, or if monsters overspawned and needed to be hunted, receptionists were to assign capable Divers to handle the quests.

However, there were some Divers—or rather, one—who found this system all tedious and absolutely refused to take part in it. He was known to be somewhat problematic as no amount of convincing seemed to sway him.

Typically, Divers voluntarily prioritized dungeon missions. Because the guild gave special rewards for taking them on, they were more lucrative than simply hunting materials like core stones and selling them. And if these quests were issued by external parties, they could lead to business connections for the Divers too. They also had a great impact on rank increases, so they were greatly

beneficial and highly sought after.

The Divers standing before Ashley now were no exception. The group consisted of a young male swordsman, a female armored shield bearer, a scout specializing in exploration and sentry duty, a male martial artist, and a hired male porter. They unfortunately didn't have a mage among them, but these Divers had recently differentiated themselves from rookies, showing promising prospects. They were still just a step above novices and had much to learn, but they were beginning to get used to dungeon diving and finding their footing. They were hot-blooded and full of ambition, which also blinded them to danger at times and made them prone to taking on more risks than they could handle. It seemed this could be one of those times.

"So, you wanna take on this dungeon mission," said Ashley.

"Yep! Get us all set up, will ya?" said the swordsman, who was the leader of the group, with a cheerful smile.

He was younger than Ashley, yet he spoke to her as if they were peers. This was quite common among Divers. It wasn't as if they looked down on her, but they were typically the rowdy types with too much energy to spare.

The rest of his group were also highly motivated, their eyes full of life—or so it seemed on the surface.

This was why being a receptionist demanded acute observational skills. The two things she had to check here were their facial expressions and whether they were injured or not. Divers' physical conditions always showed on their faces. Their eyelids would begin to droop if they were fatigued, and they'd turn pale when they weren't feeling well. When they hadn't been eating properly, there'd also be changes in their complexions, and their expressions would turn dark. And if they were injured, it'd always show in their demeanors in some way; their movements would be unbalanced without them realizing it as they'd subconsciously compensate for their injury.

Ashley considered those who exhibited many of these warning signs as "at risk." Divers got wiped out in the dungeon when too many of these risk factors piled up. Once they got to a point where those factors couldn't be overlooked, something disastrous would happen to them seven times out of ten. Ashley had

personally known far too many Divers who'd met their untimely end this way.

She gave instructions to each of the team members, making them move around in various ways to get a good look at their faces.

"Nope," she said. "I can't allow you to take on this mission."

"What?! Why?"

"The shield bearer Illay is injured, isn't she? Dakat isn't looking so good either. You haven't been eating well, have you?" said Ashley.

"Th-This is nothing!" protested Illay.

"I always skip breakfast," said Dakat.

"Uh-huh."

Ashley looked them in their eyes, but they awkwardly averted their gazes.

The swordsman then stepped in and said, "It's true that Illay is injured and Dakat hasn't eaten, but they said they're fine. How about—"

"No. When someone isn't feeling well or doesn't have a way to deal with their ailment, they aren't allowed to accept quests that might be appropriate for their skill level otherwise," said Ashley.

This was her own personal rule, though she didn't feel the need to mention that.

"But if we don't do this dungeon mission, we might fail the next rank assessment!" said the swordsman.

"Ah," said Ashley, remembering that this group hadn't taken on many missions this month.

Monthly ranking assessments determined the rankings on the chart posted in the guild central hall, and the listed order changed based on the number of points each Diver gained. One's points were calculated considering various factors such as the number of times a Diver had completed dungeon missions, those missions' grades, the number of bosses they'd defeated, whether they'd sold rare dungeon resources to the guild, and their receptionist's impression of them. Divers were highly competitive, so the ranking fluctuated dramatically

with each update. If one got complacent, they'd easily be surpassed by lower-ranking teams.

Everyone was eager to raise, or at least maintain, their ranks, which was why this group was so adamant about taking on the dungeon mission request. However, the mission they were requesting was at the Submerged City at depth level 18. Their levels averaged around 15, so it was an adequate mission for them but only if they were fully healthy. If they tried it with members who were injured or in poor condition, they would be marching straight to their deaths.

"Please! I'm begging you!" pleaded the swordsman, bowing his head.

The rest of his group followed suit. They really didn't want their rank lowered. Divers benefited greatly from having high ranks, which gave perks such as priority in purchasing supplies and free access to certain facilities within Freida. Dropping in rank meant losing those benefits, so it was no wonder they were so desperate.

Ashley was at a loss as the team refused to listen to her warnings; then she noticed something at the dungeon entrance.

She exhaled and said, "I see. Then let me ask you something: do you wanna end up like that?"

"Like what?"

Ashley responded to the young man's question by directing their gazes toward the dungeon entrance.

They gasped.



A Diver's cruelly devoured remains, loaded onto a cart, were being brought out of the dungeon by their teammates. It was hard not to look away. The body was in such terrible shape that one couldn't help but hope they wouldn't end up like it.

Typically, at least one corpse was brought out like that every day, and roughly once every three days, an entire team was wiped out. The world of dungeon exploration was cruel indeed.

"I'm pretty sure that corpse ended up that way fighting a Krossular Flytrap in the Submerged City. Makes you think, doesn't it?" said Ashley.

"Ugh..."

The team couldn't help but hesitate at the gruesome sight. Some looked away while others turned pale at the brutality of it all. They, too, were seeing themselves in the corpse's shoes.

"Look," Ashley went on, "I really don't want you to dive when your teammates aren't in good physical condition especially since you've been making progress through the floors at a good pace."

"B-But we need to meet our quota," said the leader tentatively.

"Is that more important than your own lives?"

"Well..."

The young man was having trouble deciding.

Ashley couldn't remember how many times she'd wished all Divers could properly weigh their options between meeting their quotas and tending to their injuries. In that sense, perhaps that boy deserved praise—speaking of which, that boy had just walked into the guild.

Carrying a giant bag, he was wearing a belted light-brown outfit, a big hat, and a pair of high-quality boots. Here in the Divers Guild, and perhaps anywhere in Freida, his outfit made him stick out like a sore thumb.

His name was Kudo Akira, and he was a young mage who'd shown up in Freida about half a year ago. Quotas meant nothing to him. In fact, he didn't care about them in the slightest, and instead, he seemed to find them rather

bothersome.

He passed by the remains as they were being carried away, and he moved to line up at the receptionist's window, looking completely nonplussed.

Ashley stared at him.

He'd always been this way since she'd first met him. Any normal person would be shocked and disturbed at the sight of such a gruesome corpse, and perhaps they'd even hesitate to set foot in the dungeon again. But for some reason, this boy walked by such mangled corpses as if they didn't faze him in the slightest. This was true even when the body was carried away right next to him.

At first, Ashley had thought he purposely avoided looking at them, but that wasn't the case. He sometimes took up a strange stance to give a silent prayer, so it wasn't as if he hadn't seen the bodies.

He usually gets scared by everything, so why?

Kudo Akira was awfully timid. He was so easily scared that Ashley couldn't help but wonder why he'd become a Diver. He hated monsters with scary faces or any wraith-type monsters, and he never set foot in floors with monsters stronger than him. She'd even seen him get spooked with tears in his eyes from seeing a Diver with a scary face, yet he went dungeon diving. According to him, it was because leveling was fun, there were nice views in the dungeon, and good food could be obtained there, all despite the fact that he was putting his life at risk.

Normally, Divers went into the dungeon to make a living, to explore the deeper floors to hit it big, or for honor. They didn't just face monsters—they also struggled with the fear of death and injuries, as well as the uncertainty of whether they'd have food and a place to sleep the next day. Accordingly, no one went leveling just for fun. Divers fought monsters out of necessity, and they leveled up as a result of their hardships and triumphs. No one living a normal life needed to go out of their way to level up, and one wouldn't even need to get to level 10 unless they were a soldier or their occupation involved fighting.

But for some reason, this boy had a desire to level up; he wanted to be unnecessarily strong. As a result, he'd ended up becoming a level 34 mage,

astonishingly. There were perhaps twenty people at a similar level as he was in the entire world. The headmaster of Meruem Magic Academy, who was thirty-eight years old, was level 40, which went to show just how abnormal Kudo Akira was.

In Freida, only Ra Falco, Esmeralda, and Mara Papiyas were mages over level 35. Yet that boy, who'd been in Freida for only six or so months, was somehow in their league. What kind of recklessness had it taken for him to become that strong in such a short period? His personality seemed strangely at odds with his skill level, but he was capable of defeating bosses such as the Four-Armed Goat and the Poison Chimera Zombie. No, it wasn't just strange. Perhaps there was something wrong with him as a human being. It was as if he had some screws in his head loose— "Ashley," said the team leader, interrupting her train of thought.

"Listen, I can't let you accept this mission. I understand you all have quotas to meet, but none of that will matter if you end up dead. That's my final answer," said Ashley.

The young man hung his head, visibly dejected.

"Don't worry," she went on. "Even if your ranks go down a little bit, it isn't like the environment will change much. I know you want to get ahead of others, but it'd all be for nothing if you died."

"But you don't know if we're gonna die!" he protested.

"You're right. Maybe you'll be fine this time. But what about next time? Or the time after that? If you keep diving so recklessly, you'll absolutely get yourselves killed one day. Do you know how many times I've seen it happen just like this?"

"Ugh..."

"Trust me. Just bear it for today and go somewhere like the Great Forest Ruins or the Misty Hills. Just make a little bit of money for now and live to fight another day. I'm not saying this to be mean, I just want you all to be safe."

There was silence, then he nodded slowly.

"Okay..."

“Good. I’ll give you credit where credit is due for having the sense to stop here,” said Ashley.

It was important to know when to stop, and that was an absolutely crucial quality for Divers.

The group walked away, and Kudo Akira was up next.

“Hi, Ashley. I’m here again,” he said with a smile.

It was quite uncommon for someone to smile from the bottom of their heart like he did when visiting the dungeon.

“Kudo, you’ve been diving pretty much every day lately. Don’t you ever get bored of it?” she asked.

“Not at all. I love adventuring,” he said.

“Then don’t you get tired?”

“I’m usually fine as long as I get a night’s rest.”

Perhaps his toughness was due to his high level. She’d heard that once a person got to his level, they grew fatigued slower, and they recovered much faster. Supposedly, those over level 30 could stay awake for two to three nights after getting a full night’s sleep. Ashley was beyond envious. If she had such an ability, she would’ve used it to power through the pileup of paperwork she still had to do.

“Where are you going today?” she asked.

“I...actually haven’t decided yet. The weather doesn’t look so good today, so I think I’ll go pick some weeds in the Forest.”

“Okay, then. Take care. Be sure to bring me something.”

“What? Are you going to mooch off me again? Come on,” he complained with his cheeks puffed out, but he still gave Ashley a friendly wave as he walked away.

It was such a short, casual exchange that it made her question the severe warning she’d had to give the previous team. Normally, she would’ve taken more care to check his physical condition and give warnings as needed, but it

would've been completely pointless with him. Although he'd sounded careless in his response, his dive plans were so intricate that there was no room for her to give any input.

As Ashley watched Kudo Akira enter the dungeon, her colleague said to her, "Oh?"

"What is it, Nem?" asked Ashley.

"Well, I was just talking to Maya," said Nem.

Maya, her other colleague, who'd left her seat to talk to Nem, said with a grim expression, "Listen, Ashley, Nem wants to ask you something about that boy you were just talking to."

"Yep," said Nem. "I see him around sometimes, but he seems, like, too careless, ya know? I feel like he's gonna slip up somewhere. He could end up dying or something if you don't keep an eye on him."

She was speaking from her perspective as a receptionist. It would've been an accurate assessment at first glance, but Kudo Akira required more than a cursory look to properly measure up.

"Don't worry, he'll just go farm EXP and come back as if nothing happened, as usual," replied Ashley. Then she turned to Maya and said, "Haven't I already told you about him, Maya?"

"Yeah, and I told Nem what you told me, but there are some things that can't be said because of regulations. So I thought it'd be better if you could explain directly," said Maya.

"Shouldn't you stop him, *Ashlay*?" asked Nem.

"It's fine. Besides, nothing I say would get through to him anyway. I gave up after trying for two months when I first met him."

Indeed, she'd already tried to change his ways more times than she could count.

"Don't go solo."

"Diving every day is reckless."

“Join a team.”

“Do dungeon mission requests.”

“Increase your rank.”

She hadn't given those words of advice just because she'd wanted to improve her own reputation as a receptionist. Joining a team would automatically increase his chances of survival, and by contributing to the guild by completing dungeon missions, he would've been guaranteed a living if he ever got sick or injured, and he'd even occasionally be provided with potions. And of course, if he increased his rank, he'd receive various benefits at a higher priority. However, her words had fallen on deaf ears, and he'd been completely content with being solely responsible if he ended up dead.

It was true that no one would be held responsible for a Diver's injury or death in the dungeon, but a receptionist tried to prevent such things if possible. They had to.

“You sure about that?” asked Nem.

“Yes, he'll be okay. He never goes anywhere that he can't handle at his level anyway,” said Ashley.

“But he's solo.”

“Yeah, I know. He refuses to join a team.”

It wasn't as if Kudo Akira couldn't get along with others. He likely just didn't want to trouble others. He'd once told Ashley his schedule was rather inflexible and that he could only dive in the afternoon for most of the week. He had pretty much no desire to seek out a team because he didn't want to inconvenience others with his situation. Although, Ashley thought he could work as a dungeon mercenary or plan specific days to go on dives with teammates.

Suddenly, Maya gave her a stern look. “I have to agree that going alone is risky. He may be a strong Diver, but you should make sure he's safe. I'm sure you do feel the same way.”

“Well, yeah,” admitted Ashley.

“Ashley, if you feel strongly about this, you should invoke the Iron Hand,” said Maya.

Receptionists could exercise executive power to forcibly put restrictions on their assigned Diver. This meant they could make a Diver accept dungeon missions or join an appropriate team, if they so wished, to protect the Diver or for the guild’s best interests. It was because of this power that Divers respected receptionists and treated them as their equals.

“I have no intention of invoking the Iron Hand. I’ve already decided to stay out of his way as much as possible,” said Ashley.

She knew invoking it on Kudo Akira wasn’t necessary. Or rather, that thought was overshadowed by her concerns about what would happen if she *did* invoke it. What if he stopped coming to Freida as a result? That was entirely possible considering his free-spirited personality. He was only here to enjoy himself rather than to make a living, and she didn’t intend to hinder him. That was why she’d been ignoring some of the requests from the higher-ups, such as the ones to use him to secure a steady acquisition of Poison Chimera Zombie core stones, which came from a monster no one wanted to or was capable of defeating; to use him to mass-farm grapenuts and pearl beans, which were highly nutritious, delicious, and sought-after by the rich; and to have him submit his documents containing detailed illustrations and notes about the monsters and floors in the dungeon. If Kudo Akira agreed to those things, he could single-handedly resolve many issues the guild had been struggling with for many years.

Regarding the gold potion incident from a while back, she’d been strongly urged to finalize the negotiations, so there’d been nothing she could’ve done about it. The guild’s hand had been forced by the demand from high-ranking Divers. Matters involving the survival rate of Divers were extremely sensitive subjects.

By agreeing to the guild’s requests, he could’ve easily climbed to the 300s, or even the 200s, in rank. He seemed to want to keep these things quiet, but people would notice sooner or later.

He might not have realized it, but the Lone Porter, one of the Dungeon

Phantasmata that had been rumored on the street, likely referred to him. It was a legend about a savior who walked the dungeon with a bag on his back, healing the wounded with magic, providing food and water, and helping others with strange trinkets and knowledge. Throughout the ages, the Lone Porter had been compared to fairies and gnomes, and they were said to be wandering the dungeon. In fact, several Divers had claimed to have been saved by him, so Ashley was sure he was the Lone Porter. The time he'd saved Scrael was just one of the many examples.

Perhaps that had been why the middle-class Divers had furiously protested back then after the incident at the hall with the guards of the kingdom's second princess. It'd been quite a chaotic ordeal, and the royal family had nearly been banned from the guild because of that. Ashley had been surprised to find out just how much influence that boy had.

Yet he barely got any offers to join teams, which was likely because of the Dungeon Phantasma regarding him. Some Divers treated him like he'd vanish if they talked to him or tried to get him to join their team. It was as if he were a creature from a fairy tale that would leave them if they ever found out his true identity. Divers were typically a superstitious bunch, particularly when it came to someone who could save them. Gods used to vanish like this in the old days and had mostly stopped appearing because humans had gotten greedy, so there was an unspoken agreement between Divers to be careful about such matters.

Ashley thought there was some truth to their line of thinking. Kudo Akira was here to have fun, and if he ever became restricted from having fun, he'd likely stop visiting.

There were those who hadn't heard the rumors or had known him since before those rumors had begun circulating, but otherwise, he had quite a few secret fans mainly among the middle-class Divers, who tended to be the main demographic to benefit from his help.

"Anyway, Maya," said Ashley, "unrelated, but Tempest—Ricky Rudiano, that is—is assigned to you, right?"

"Huh? Yeah, he is," said Maya.

“I heard he’s a very talented mage. How strong is he?”

Maya folded her arms and smiled proudly. “Listen up. Ricky is a green mage, level 26. *Twenty-six!* Not to mention, he graduated at the top of his class at Meruem Magic Academy. And just the other day, he defeated a Flame Baron in the Mine *by himself!* And that’s how he got the nickname ‘Tempest’!”

“Woow,” said Nem. She sounded rather listless, but this was her actual surprised reaction.

“Amazing, right? And I’m his receptionist!” boasted Maya.

“That’s nothing for *you* to brag about,” Nem pointed out.

“Aha ha... True. But Ricky is pretty impressive, don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

He really was. Not only was his level impressive, but someone soloing a miniboss like a Flame Baron wasn’t something that was heard often. In fact, only a few people could pull off such a feat, even among mages.

“But compared to your Diver...” said Maya with an awkward smile.

Indeed, comparing Ricky Rudiano to an extreme outlier like Kudo Akira just wasn’t fair.

Kudo Akira had often complained that it was a pain dealing with him, but they seemed to get along quite well. Ashley had heard they’d been diving together, and she’d even seen them hanging out and bantering with each other.

In any case, Ricky’s skill level was what was generally considered excellent for a mage.

“What’s up, Maya?” a voice called out.

Ashley looked in its direction to find a young man standing there. He had short blond hair, droopy eyes, and a well-shaped nose. He was the Diver Maya was assigned to: Miguel Hyde Junkers.

He casually waved his hand.

Only seventeen years old, Miguel was the head of Bacchus Hawks. He was an expert in combat and leadership skills, and he’d conquered a wide variety of

areas in the four dungeon routes with his extensive know-how.

He approached the receptionists with a friendly smile.

“Oh, if it isn’t Miguel,” said Maya. “What is it? Did something happen?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m off today, so I thought I’d come say hi.”

“Are you here to invite me on a date? Reverie’s gonna tie you up again.”

“Ha ha, then I’ll gladly accept my fate,” he said.

He’d always been a diligent young man. He often visited friends and people he worked with to build up relationships of trust. This made him unlike most Divers in a sense, but it was also the reason his reputation wasn’t poor despite his indiscretions with women.

He was, of course, an exceptional Diver as well. His team only had four members including himself, yet they’d secured an ultrahigh rank of 258. They’d been getting nonstop invites from the teams above them, and the teams below them had been constantly trying to join them.

“Oh, that’s right, Ashley,” said Miguel.

“Hmm? What is it?” asked Ashley.

Miguel’s expression flipped from flirtatious to serious as he said, “It’s regarding the thing you asked me about last time.”

He was referring to a previous conversation about Kudo Akira.

“Oh, yes. How did it go?” asked Ashley.

“Good. He was receptive to the idea, and we made an agreement for him to join.”

“What?! Are you serious? He agreed?”

“Yeah,” said Miguel.

Ashley couldn’t believe that stubborn boy would agree to join a team.

“But he wants me to wait,” continued Miguel. “Said he has some things to take care of first.”

“I see. Well, there’s nothing we can do about that,” said Ashley. Regardless,

she was relieved.

Exploring the dungeon with high-rankers came with risks as one would be diving into high-depth-level floors; though however dangerous it might be, it'd still be far better than going solo as a mage. Kudo's dives should gain more stability, and then he'd be able to fight even more bosses.

Maya eavesdropped as Ashley and Miguel conversed, then she approached them to join the conversation. "Oh? Ohhh? What's this? What are you two talking about?"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Miguel. "Ashley just asked me to invite someone to my team."

"Who?" asked Maya.

"The boy we were just talking about," replied Ashley.

"Wait, you mean Kudo?" asked Maya.

"Yep," said Ashley.

Nem looked at her with a confused expression. She clearly hadn't expected Kudo Akira to be on Miguel's level. Indeed, no one would guess he was strong by looking at his appearance and demeanor alone.

"Actually, I've been trying to invite him to my team since even before Ashley asked me to," said Miguel. "Then she saw how often we've been hanging out and asked me to get serious about recruiting him."

"You sure it'll be fine?" asked Nem.

"Oh, don't worry. I've already introduced him to the other members, and we've gone on a dive together."

"Really? Didn't expect that."

"Yeah, we just happened to run into each other in the dungeon," said Miguel. Then he turned to Ashley and said, "But man, I can't believe you didn't tell us about his level."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," said Ashley.

"You knew about it too, Maya?" he asked.

“I just found out recently. I never even knew a Diver could be as unassuming as he is.”

“Ha ha, I know what you mean,” laughed Miguel.

“Plus, I thought you’d get to know the *real* him better if you didn’t know his level,” said Ashley.

“You know he isn’t the type to reveal his true self. He was as carefree as usual.”

“So, how did it go?”

“I’ve always wanted him to join, and now I feel even more strongly about it. In fact, there’s no way I’m letting some other team take him. The rest of my team likes him too,” said Miguel.

“You’re serious about this, huh?” asked Ashley.

“Yeah. A mage that skilled will be useful anywhere, whether he takes up a support role or fights at the front line,” he said. “Ashley, do you know how many generic spells he can use at once? *Six!* That’s excluding spell slots for elemental magic. If he joins us, he could support everyone on my team all by himself *and* use elemental spells on top of that. It’s unbelievable.”

“He must be desirable with that kind of repertoire.”

“Very. Any team would want him just for his level alone. There’s no other free mage with a level as high as his,” replied Miguel.

“Pretty much, except Mara Papiyas,” Ashley pointed out.

“Oh, that’s right. Well, that isn’t the main reason I want him on my team though.”

“It isn’t?”

“Ashley, do you know *how* he goes diving?” asked Miguel. “He barely uses any magic until he gets to his destination. If he does, he only uses one or two spells, tops.”

“Huh? What? What do you mean?”

“I meant exactly what I said. He avoided combat for the most part during our

dive, and he only defeated some Hypno Eyes on the way. He avoided the Golems completely by observing their patrol routes. Then he just found Blood Bats and farmed a bunch of them,” he explained.

“I’ve known how intricate his dive plans are, but wow.”

“Dives never go that smoothly even for high-rank Divers.”

Ashley had had no idea. She now understood how that boy had been leveling up so quickly and how he’d been able to return with a hundred-percent survival rate despite diving practically every day. Preserving mana in the lower floors would allow him to allocate that mana for farming EXP deeper in the dungeon. She’d wondered how he’d been able to hunt Blood Bats all by himself, and it all made sense at last.

Nem asked, “Hey, is it true he’s been hunting Blood Bats solo?”

“Yes, it is,” said Ashley.

“All by himself? Well, I suppose it’s possible when his level is that high,” said Maya.

According to Divers’ reports, dozens of Blood Bats would quickly swarm them once they encountered even a single one. Escaping the bats was difficult once they locked onto a target, and there weren’t a lot of methods to safely hunt Blood Bats in the dark, narrow stone corridors either. Mages also had no means of driving them away on their own, hence, they were known to be impossible for a mage to handle solo.

The aftermath of a Diver being killed by Blood Bats was gruesome indeed. Ashley and her colleagues had seen countless bodies, dried out and wrinkled like a prune, being carried out. That was why they’d always warned Divers of the dangers of Blood Bats whenever they decided to venture into the Dark Corridors.

Nem was clearly having trouble believing it, while Maya seemed to be reconsidering her evaluation of the young boy, groaning to herself with a pensive expression.

“Hi, Ashley,” a carefree voice said from the dungeon entrance.

The topic of their conversation, Kudo Akira, had coincidentally returned at this moment. It hadn't been long since he'd left, so the group wondered what had happened.

"Did something happen, Kudo?" asked Ashley.

"Oh, no, I just forgot something. I'm gonna go buy it and be right back."

"You don't have a care in the world, do you?" said Ashley with a sigh, astonished by his constant happy-go-lucky attitude.

"Yo," said Miguel to Kudo Akira.

"Oh, hey, Miguel. You about to go for a dive?"

"Nah, just going around saying hi. Regular greetings are key to maintaining good relationships," said Miguel.

"You're always so meticulous about this stuff."

The two boys went on talking about nothing of importance. It was hard to believe they were both high-level Divers.

Ashley felt like she was about to get a headache.

"Oh, since you're here," said Kudo Akira. "About that liquor you requested the other day—"

"You got it?!"

"Yep. Four silver coins for two bottles, okay?"

"All right! Kudo! You're the best, man!"

"Ugh! Quit it! I don't wanna rub cheeks with a dude! Aaahhh!"

Finding people as untroubled as these boys would be quite difficult.

Floor Twenty-Five: Sweetener Is a Groundbreaking Innovation

I was at the Divers Guild receptionist's window one afternoon telling Ashley I'd be off to the dungeon to hang out on route one. I was mentioning that I wouldn't be bringing her any gifts back when she told me about a potion exhibit out of the blue. That was strange since it had absolutely nothing to do with me in any way whatsoever.

"A potion exhibit?" I repeated.

"Yeah, they need more people," she said.

"That must be rough," I said. "You're already so busy as a receptionist. They're giving you way too much work, don't you think? I wouldn't do it if I were you. I'd wanna make a living doing something easier, like dungeon diving."

"No, *I'm* not participating."

"Oh, so it's an acquaintance of yours?" I asked.

"Yeah, you could say that," she said.

I had a bad feeling about this, so I said, "Well, I suddenly remembered I have something to do, so I'll be going now," and I turned on my heel.

Ashley leaned out the window, grabbed me, and said, "Wait, wait. Don't go!"

"Nope, nope. I'm not waiting. Please let me go. Goodbye," I said quickly.

"Kudo, this won't get anywhere if you don't stop kidding around."

"I don't *want* this conversation to go anywhere! I hope it stops here and rots if I'm being honest!"

I already knew where this was going: she was gonna ask me to participate or something like that. She'd made me a potion-meister a while back. I'd had to make a deal with the shop to wholesale gold potions, and I'd gotten heavily involved in the world of potions. It was obvious where she'd been trying to

steer the topic.

“So...yeah. You’re gonna enter the exhibit,” said Ashley.

“Ah! You went right to it because I wasn’t gonna listen!”

“What else am I supposed to do?”

“Man, I knew you were trying to go there. Honestly, it sounds like a pain to deal with, so I’d like to pass,” I said.

“Don’t be like that. Potion-meisters have an obligation to present their deliverables once every few years.”

“That’s not my problem. Besides, it’s only been a little more than a month since I became a meister.”

“Unfortunately, the presentation date is predetermined, so you can’t avoid it.”

“But why?” I asked. “Normally, wouldn’t new meisters not enter these presentations?”

“Well, the qualifying exam for potion-meisters only happens once every three years,” explained Ashley.

“Uh-huh.”

“And it’s already been two years since the last one.”

“Right.”

“So any meister who’s passed the exam has already been one for at least two years. Get it?”

“Wait, but I don’t recall taking any exam,” I said.

“Yes, that’s because you were forced to become one without an exam by the guild master’s authority.”

“So I don’t get a two-year buffer?”

“I guess not,” she said.

“Oh, okay, I guess that’s how it is—not! You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“So you won’t do it?”

“No, I won’t! Come on, Ashley, I only became a meister because it suited the guild master. Can’t I be exempt from this?” I asked.

“I tried telling him that too, but he really wanted you to enter because it’d be your first potion exhibit since becoming a meister.”

“But I haven’t been studying potions at all lately,” I complained.

My potion development had stopped completely since the gold potion. Between gold potions and commercial magic potions, I could get by in most situations, so I didn’t really feel the need to pursue it any further.

Come to think of it, this entire thing was about serving *their* needs. They’d wanted me to become a meister so I could make potions and wholesale them. Now that I was a meister, they wanted me to enter the exhibit. It really wasn’t my problem. Why the heck did I even need to listen to this nonsense?

I softly placed my meister card on the counter and said, “I quit being a potion-meister.”

“No, don’t! Please!” pleaded Ashley.

“It’s way more trouble than it’s worth,” I said.

“I get it. I do,” said Ashley. “But life can be unfair. You’ll have to abandon a lot of things if you want to live completely free.”

Maybe she was right. There’d be way more unreasonable things waiting for me if I went out into society as a working adult, but that was why I wanted to keep my lifestyle unburdened in this world.

“I got the guild master to agree to some conditions, of course,” she added. “The fact that you’re the creator of the gold potion will be kept confidential, and your job as a Diver will still be secure moving forward. We can add even more if you like.”

“Oh! You were really batting for me this time,” I said.

“You helped us out with the gold potions a while back, so I owe you that much.”

“You’re the bomb, Ashley. I’ll follow you the rest of my life,” I said flatly.

“Then why did you say that like you’re being sarcastic?”

I’d had to. If I’d said it like I’d meant it, who knew what she’d try to make me buy for her?

“So, you’ll accept?” asked Ashley.

“Hmm... I will, on the condition that the guild master owes me one,” I said.

“Kudo, I’m surprised you ask that of the guild master—and you haven’t even met them before.”

“I could say the same thing to them. Besides, I need to make it clear that I’m not letting them call the shots, or I could get dragged into something I don’t wanna do again. And if that happens...”

Then what will I do? Maybe I’ll ask Lion-Maru or Sensei for help. They did say I can tell them if I ever get in trouble. That would be the nuclear option though.

As I thought about it, Ashley’s expression suddenly changed.

“Fine, fine. I’ll make sure they accept your terms, so please don’t say you won’t come back anymore,” she said.

“Hmm? O-Okay?”

She seemed to have gotten the wrong idea. Sure, I might not want to come back as much if that happened, but it wasn’t as if the guild would be bothered if a nobody like me stopped coming back. I’d only be hurting myself if I did that.

“But I haven’t really been researching potions or anything,” I said. “What should I do? Have you heard what kind of thing they’re expecting?”

“No, they haven’t told me anything in particular...”

Really? They don’t have some sort of guideline or anything?

“Just show up and show off whatever, I guess,” said Ashley.

“Are you sure?”

“You should be fine. Your special-grade meister title won’t be affected either way.”

She was right. I’d become a potion-meister on *their* request. There was a

good chance that arrangements had been made behind the scenes already and they'd let it slide no matter what I presented. Yeah—nah, there was no way that was the case.

“So, just wing it and get through the event, okay? Countin’ on ya!” said Ashley.

“Still don’t wanna do this, but okay.”

§

That was what had happened in the other world, and I was now back in modern Japan.

“So, I need to figure out what to make,” I said to my desk in my room.

If I wanted to, I was sure I could cook up all sorts of special potions only I could make. But since this was for an exhibit, submitting anything that only I could make—anything that couldn’t be made in Do-Melta—would be a bad idea. I’d have to make an announcement at the exhibit, and everyone would know about my special potions. Then, orders would come in through the guild, lots of orders, a *ton* of orders. I’d be in trouble. Potion-making wasn’t my main line of work, so a ton of orders coming in would be a problem for me.

“Maybe I should just make a few small improvements to a preexisting potion,” I wondered with my arms crossed.

Suddenly, the memories from when I’d just started making potions hit me.

“Oh! I made a bunch of stuff back then,” I said, clapping my hands.

I brought out my Dimension Bag and pulled out a part of my potion stock. It included magic potions for everyday use, healing potions, and gold potions, along with a few others.

“Oh, I remember making this,” I said while reaching for a bottle. “It’s a honey-flavored potion. Back then, I said ‘A potion and honey make a mega potion!’ but it just ended up tasting like honey with a bit of a fatigue-recovery effect.”

I’d made it as a joke, but it hadn’t even been bad enough to be funny. The result had been pretty disappointing overall. But it’d ended up being easier to drink, so it was a success in that sense. Ashley had said I could just wing it, so I

figured it'd be good enough for the exhibit. If I put too much effort into it and made something amazing, I'd probably put myself in a tedious situation like the whole gold potion incident. I didn't want people asking me to wholesale more stuff to potion shops.

"Okay, it's settled! I'm going with the honey-flavored potion!"

And so, I'd decided to submit my honey potion to the potion exhibit.

§

The day of the potion exhibit had arrived. I prepared at home, then teleported to God's place, the middle point between my world and Do-Melta. I didn't want to cause trouble by bringing in something problematic, so I'd been checking in with him whenever I brought in or created things that didn't exist in the other world. Using a literal god like a customs officer might have been insolent of me, but I had no choice.

I arrived at the usual empty white space. God was smack-dab in the middle of the place lying around like a dad spending time at home on a weekend. He must've been in a state of absolute nothingness to just be lying around in an empty void without doing anything, but I digress.

"Hi, God. Here's a souvenir for you," I said.

"Oh, welcome, Akira. Appreciate the gift as usual. Oh! I love this snack. Thanks!" he said.

"No problem," I said.

He was super nice and appreciative, but I actually felt bad that my gift in exchange for him letting me enjoy his world was just some cheap snacks.

"Oh, and about that potion thing you asked about the other day, we're good. No problemo," said Ameithys, smiling cheerfully with a thumbs-up. You really couldn't get more frank than him.

"Thank you!"

"Don't worry about it," he said, smiling from ear to ear.

I was very grateful, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that he was like some neighbor dude.

My honey potion had been officially approved.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” he said, then he opened the snack I’d brought and started digging in. He just did whatever he felt like, as usual.

Suddenly, an unfamiliar gentleman arrived. He was as buff as Lion-Maruk, had a Mohawk, suntanned skin, and was wearing a Hawaiian shirt as if he’d just come back from a trip to Honolulu.

The newcomer walked toward me and said, “You must be Kudo. Sorry you had to clean up after my mess.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Who was he anyway?

Bewildered, I asked God, “Excuse me, but which office could this scary aloha gentleman be from?”

“Oh, this is your first time meeting him,” said God. “He’s my son.”

“You mean...”

“I’m Torpaz,” said the suntanned man.

He was Ameithys’s eldest son Torpaz. Why was he wearing a Hawaiian outfit though? Was that the common office attire these days? I wanted to spend an hour or so grilling—I mean, politely asking—him about it. Also, I had no idea where Ameithys’s genes went. God seemed like he’d been a handsome guy when he’d been younger, but still.

Torpaz reached out his hand, and I shook it. It was huge. He seemed strong.

“Nice to meet ya,” he said.

“I’m Kudo Akira. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I replied.

“He’s the one who okayed the honey potion this time,” said God, double-fisting snacks and munching away.

“I’ve heard he’s the one who originally created the raw materials for potions,” I said.

“Yep. Oh, and he’s also the one who gave the green light for the gold potion last time,” added Ameithys.

I bowed to Torpaz as a show of gratitude.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m counting on you,” he said pleasantly without a hint of self-importance.

“For what?” I asked.

“You’ll see soon enough.” He smiled. “Oh, and can I ask you for something?”

“What is it?”

“I want you to limit the access to the recipe for that honey-flavored potion to the people from a small workshop.”

“A small workshop?” I repeated, confused.

“That’s right.”

I still didn’t understand what he meant, but he must’ve expected me to figure it out on my own because he didn’t elaborate any further.

In any case, the gods had given me the approval to spread word of the potion I’d picked out on a whim.

§

This is bad.

I was on the verge of an unprecedented crisis. After teleporting from God’s place to Freida, I’d gone to the venue according to Ashley’s directions, and I’d realized how huge the place was. It was like that one place: the Colosseum, I think it was called. Come to think of it, I remembered seeing this place before, though that didn’t stop me from being filled with trepidation. I’d had no idea this would be such a huge event.

I felt totally out of place, and my mind had automatically been set to “scared witless” mode. It was like being told everyone would show up to an event wearing tracksuits, then showing up to find everyone else wearing their school uniforms, or like going to a supposedly casual party, then realizing suits were mandatory. The potion I’d brought hardly seemed appropriate for an exhibit of this scale. Who’d told me to just wing it anyway? It’d been Ashley. Unforgivable.

Everyone else was wearing nice clothes and looked like their entire lives were at stake. I could hear people saying things like “If this potion gets recognition...” and “Bless me, O great Torpaz the Yellow!” Their desperation was palpable.

I wasn't sure what to do. I couldn't just stand in front of the entrance forever, but to be honest, I didn't really want to go inside either. I wished the event was *actually* being held at a small rental space next to the venue. That would've been nice.

As I was hesitating to go inside, a plain-looking girl walked toward me. She had black hair, wore glasses, and, like everyone else in this world, had a Western face. For some reason, she seemed easy to talk to. I'd called her plain, but that wasn't meant to be an insult. Thank goodness for plainness. Viva plainness. Thank you for being plain.

"Um, e-e-excuse me, is this the venue for the potion exhibit?" I asked hesitantly as she approached.

"Yes, it is," she replied.

"Th-Thank you..."

"No problem...?" she said.

So this really was the place. My faint hope of it being held somewhere else had been completely shattered.

What am I gonna do?

Reality was cruel. Despair was setting in.

"Pardon me, but could you be the person who helped me a while back?" asked the girl.

"Huh? Uh..."

I wasn't sure what she'd meant by "helped her." I didn't remember healing someone like her in the dungeon, and she didn't seem like a Diver in the first place. But looking at her carefully, I did recognize her from somewhere.

"Are you the one who was being harassed in the back alley?" I asked.

"Yes! Thank you so much for helping me back then. I was able to get out of there safely thanks to you, and my life has started turning around for the better since then."

So that had been her. I remembered going into the back alley because the

main street had been especially packed that day, and two rough-looking guys had started messing with her. I'd helped her by scaring off the two guys, though I hadn't expected to see her again here.

"Glad to hear it. Casting that spell on you was worth it, then," I said.

"Thank you so much! Really, thank you!" the girl shouted. She bowed her head deeply, overwhelmed with emotion.



I felt a bit awkward that she was showing me such wholehearted gratitude. She even thanked me for securing a potion wholesale deal after our encounter, though it'd had nothing to do with me. She seemed happy about it though; good for her.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Melmel Lamel," said the girl.

"Ah! I've heard of you!" I said.

I'd been using this girl's potions to make my gold potions.

I take my thoughts back. She does have something to do with me.

"You know me?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm a meister too, technically."

"I see."

"I'm Kudo Akira. Kudo is my family name and Akira is my first name."

"I see. Thank you again, Kudo."

This girl was super polite. All of my acquaintances in Do-Melta had rather...strong personalities, so meeting someone like her was refreshing.

"Will you be participating in the exhibit too?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess. This is my first time though. Have you done it before?"

"Yes, I also participated in the last one."

"Then that makes you my senior," I said.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that..." she said, blushing.

I was relieved that I'd found an experienced person whom I could talk to. I was feeling much calmer than before. Making a timid person like me participate in this event all alone was pretty cruel. I'd felt like the weight of my anxiety had been going to squish me flat. I had a weak stomach, so I was glad I was finally getting a break.

I'd been telling Melmel that I was worried about going in alone and how I was glad to have her with me when someone said from behind us, "Well, well, well. If it isn't the destitute workshop's meister."

That voice had oozed with unpleasantness. I could immediately tell he was a nasty person.

Melmel turned faster than me, and her expression stiffened. She seemed to know whomever it had been.

“It’s you...” she said.

It was obvious from her reaction that she knew this person, but they weren’t friends. I could tell she was on edge, and the man who’d called out to her had a disagreeable smirk on his face.

“It’s been a while. I haven’t seen you since that time at the potion shop above the guild, I believe,” said the man.

“Yes... I hope you’ve been well,” said Melmel.

“Oh, just splendid,” said the man sarcastically. “We had quite the mess to deal with after that incident. The negotiations that we were trying to close fell apart, and we lost many business deals thanks to you.”

Something had clearly happened between the guy and Melmel. He’d clearly meant to intimidate her and had spoken with vitriol in his voice; his words had been like jabs thrown from his nasty face. They said your personality showed in your face, and this man was the epitome of that saying. He must’ve been acting nasty to people for so long that it’d changed the shape of his face. If you made faces like that all the time, your features were bound to stay that way eventually.

What’s more, this guy had a bunch of thugs following him around. He seemed like one of those people from a certain type of syndicate. I was running into a lot of these people today. I felt bad about comparing Torpaz to a guy like him though.

Melmel opened her mouth to push back. “That’s quite an unusual gathering of people from your workshop to support a meister.”

“Ah, yes, these gentlemen are in charge of resolving certain problems for our workshop,” said the man.

So they really were the ones who dealt with work in the darker side of the

gray zone. They were pretty much like those people from groups in Japan known by a name that started with a *ya* and ended with a *za*.

“And why did you bring them here?” asked Melmel.

“Well, we were just going to visit some workshops we know to make a request. They’re just here to deal with issues should any arise.”

“A request?”

“Yes, I’ll be asking them to withdraw from the exhibit any potion that would get in the way of our workshop,” he said, then he laughed to himself in a typical bad-guy snicker.

His plan sounded seriously scummy, to be honest. He was trying to prevent rival workshops from presenting their research results in order to ruin their reputations with the Potion Guild and, ultimately, bring them down.

“That reminds me. You had quite the attitude with me last time,” the nasty-faced man said, and his thugs stepped forward.

“Wait, is that where this is going?” I asked. “Is this actually a combat encounter type of thing?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t call it combat. It’s more of a one-sided arrangement with you two getting beaten by us.”

“We’re right in front of the venue! Are you insane?” said Melmel.

“Oh, I assure you I’m perfectly sane.”

They’d come here for this purpose in the first place, so this sort of thing must’ve been part of their job description. Judging by their conversation, his men must’ve been bruisers for some potion workshop, and they’d planned to do everything they could to interfere with their business rivals. Even if they were caught by the guards, the potion workshop could probably get away with it by claiming that these men were unrelated to the workshop. And judging by how blatant they were being, they might have someone influential backing them.

“How did this happen anyway?” I wondered aloud.

It wasn’t as if I was talking myself into trouble with a slip of the tongue today.

They were simply being unreasonable. I didn't want to deal with it, but it wasn't as if I could walk away from it now. I wasn't *that* messed up; I was gonna do what I needed to.

Melmel gave me an apologetic look as she backed away. "I'm so sorry to get you involved in this."

"No, it isn't your fault," I assured her.

"But—"

"The instigators are solely the ones to blame. Okay?"

"R-Right."

I stepped in front of her protectively. I really didn't like doing this kind of thing, but I had no choice. I considered shouting for help, but everyone only watched from a distance. There were plenty of nice people in the dungeon willing to help people in need, but most people in the city weren't used to violence. Where was the security anyway? Seriously.

Suddenly, the thugs moved closer, their expressions hard.

"Eek!" I squealed.

I couldn't help it. Their faces were scary, and they were giving me mean glares.

Fine, I'll show them.

"Y-Y-You wanna fight? N-No, thank you. I don't like pain..."

Yeah, I tried, but I wasn't very intimidating. In fact, I sounded pretty pathetic. Why did I have to be such a coward? It made me sad that I was still like this despite being level 34.

The thugs looked at me and sneered mockingly.

"What's wrong, *big guy*? Wanna look tough in front of your girlfriend?" one of them said.

"Oooh, look how *cool* he is! Ha ha ha!" laughed the other.

No one had ever picked a fight with me like this before. They were pretty irritating.

The nasty-looking guy said, “She needs to be disciplined so that she’ll never act up like last time again. Do it.”

They were leaving me no choice.

He’d summoned his thuggish bodyguards, and it felt like a scene out of *Yakuza: Like a Dragon*. He had a crude grin on his face, proving that his personality was just as bad as his face suggested.

I didn’t like beating people up, so I usually scared people off by showing them I was a mage. But that wasn’t an option this time. I readjusted my hat by pulling it down on my head, slid my magic staff into my hand, then assumed a fighting stance. Yet the thugs were completely unfazed—in fact, they kept advancing toward me.

Normally, people would say something like “I’ll let you off for today!” or “I-I’m sorry! Please spare me!” as soon as they saw my staff, and then they’d speed off like a rocket. But these guys didn’t consider me a threat in the slightest. Showing a variety of typical delinquent mannerisms, they puffed out their chests with some leaning forward to glare at me from below and the others raising their chins to glare down at me. They were likely so full of confidence because they thought they were dealing with a mere potion-meister.

I’d heard that mages who weren’t suited to being a battle, support, or healing specialist often ended up becoming potion-meisters. Because of that, potion-meisters were also considered mages, and they all carried magic staffs too. But since they weren’t as strong as regular mages, these thugs still weren’t intimidated. They probably thought I was just a weak, cowardly potion-meister...and they’d be right about me being a coward. *Sob*.

They were also arrogant because they were in a group. Having backup would certainly make them more bold than usual.

Anyway, none of these guys had high levels; in fact, their levels were bottom-of-the-barrel low if I was being honest. I would’ve given them praise if any of them were even level 6 or 7. It explained why they didn’t even have the ability or experience to assess their opponent’s power. They would’ve immediately ended up in some monster’s belly if they’d been Divers. Still...

“I don’t like fighting humans,” I muttered to myself.

I couldn't help but feel that way. I mean, they'd die if I shot them with lightning. Maybe they'd be fine if their levels were higher, but these guys would be toast in one shot.

I know, I'll use something else instead.

I was thinking of Jinshu, one of the mysterious martial arts of Do-Melta that Scrael had taught me before. I'd spent enough time practicing it with Scrael to be pretty decent at it. Though, I still had a lot to learn, so they'd likely be fine even if I used it on them.

I took up the stance Scrael had taught me. Noticing the change in my mood, the thugs immediately turned pale—or maybe they would've if they hadn't burst out laughing instead.

"What's with that stance?! Hey, get a load of this guy!"

"Is this kid doing some sort of martial art? *Wimp* fu, maybe?"

"Ha ha ha! Cut it out! My sides! You're killing me!"

I said nothing. It seemed my best attempt at a fighting stance was pretty terrible. My timid nature seemed to have affected the way I was standing, and my hips were too far back. Scrael calling me worse than a roly-poly was valid after all. I'd been able to deal damage to their sides by making them laugh so hard, but I'd suffered even greater mental damage in return. *Sad.*

The thugs continued howling in laughter as I wallowed in my sorrow.

Laugh. Not like I care. My attack will still be effective. Just you watch. I'm gonna do it for real now. Float step, was it? I'm gonna do that hoppy thing.

"Look! Now he's hopping around and dancing!"

"Don't make me laugh any harder! Are you trying to destroy my sides?!"

"Damn him, he's going for mental attacks! I can't—pfft!"

Whatever. You'll see soon enough. I'm not sad. Really. The corners of my eyes are just getting a little warm, that's all. My eyes are just getting watery. Tears haven't spilled over yet.

My target was the man closest to me, whom I'd dubbed thug number one. I

didn't care about his name. His blood would spray from the seven holes of his body and he'd die for mocking me.

Thug number one had his guard completely down, so I stepped forward with my level 34 speed. I extended a foot forward and stomped the ground. With my back straight, I pushed my hands into his abdomen using my forward momentum. At the same time, I released what Long-Ears called jinchi—the power I'd gained through leveling up that far exceeded my muscular strength—through my palms. This was Efflux Wave, a technique from the Long-Ears martial art Jinshu.

There was a deep thud, and a ground-shaking shock wave made the nearby wooden crates and barrels pop into the air.

“Oh?”

I'd caused quite a jolt, and the response was unexpected. It felt like my attack had connected quite well. In fact, it felt much better than I'd thought it would. After a brief delay, thug number one fell backward from the impact and remained completely still.

Meanwhile, the other thugs were still laughing.

“Wow, nice of you to play along for the poor kid.”

“Yeah, seriously!”

They thought he was only acting hurt as a joke. It was hard to believe a proper attack could come from that wonky stance, after all. But they soon noticed something was off when thug number one never got back up, and they began shaking his body.

“Okay, that's enough. Get up.”

“We get it, man. Just get up.”

Thug number one didn't get up, of course. He didn't even move a muscle.

I was starting to get nervous too.

“Oh, uh, is he okay?”

I did wish him death, but I didn't *actually* want him dead. After getting a

better look, I was relieved to see his chest moving as he breathed in and out.

“Oh, good. He’s alive. Whew,” I said.

I’d been worried I’d actually killed him, so I felt like a weight had lifted off of my mind.

The thugs started to panic a little too late and began hollering.

“No way!”

“You bastard! What the hell did you do?!”

“How did he do that from that weird-looking dance?”

“Damn it, he’s doing that ridiculous movement again. He’s mocking us!”

“Please stop...” I pleaded. My fragile heart couldn’t take much more of the mocking.

Yeah, I’m never using Jinshu again until I can do it properly.

I undid my Jinshu stance, tears welling up in my eyes. The thugs seemed to think this was their opportunity to strike.

“You little shit!” yelled a thug.

“Look out!” screamed Melmel.

There was a loud crack, and thug number two’s punch connected clean with my face.

“K-Kudo?!” said Melmel.

“Ha ha ha! Idiot! That’s what you get for letting your guard down!”

“Time for payback!”

“You’ll die too!”

The thugs rained not only punches and kicks down on me but also terrible words like “die” and “I’ll kill you.” Thug number one wasn’t even dead, so I felt like they were being rather harsh. They surrounded me and continued kicking and swinging wildly. Me? I was just curled up, holding my hat over my head so it wouldn’t get knocked away.

Eventually, they realized something was off and backed away.

“Kudo...?” breathed Melmel.

She was as confused as the thugs were, and similarly, the guy with the nasty face looked like he had no idea what was going on.

It pained me, but I had to hit them with the harsh truth. It truly was a sad state of affairs.

“Uh...I’m sorry to say this, but that kind of thing doesn’t work on me,” I said.

“Whaaat?!”

“But we definitely hit you!”

Their attacks had indeed connected. They had, but unfortunately for them, this world had a level system. One’s level went up if they beat a bunch of monsters or humans, and as they leveled up, it wasn’t just their mana and muscles that got stronger; their brain and body constitution were upgraded too. Mental strength...didn’t get upgraded in the same way, sadly.

And as I’d just demonstrated, durability also improved with levels. As a mage, I was no match for people specializing in physical aspects like the warrior types, but I still far outclassed anyone who was ten or twenty levels below me. As durability increased, the body stopped feeling pain from weaker attacks as they wouldn’t be perceived as danger. I didn’t like getting hit, but that was only because I disliked pain. As long as it didn’t hurt, I didn’t care about getting hit. But still, I didn’t like it.

Don’t ask me why I was still such a scaredy-cat. That would be a question for my genes or some deep part of my brain. Anyone would feel displeased or scared if someone with a terrifying face glared at them.

“N-No way... What’s with this guy?”

“I thought he was just a meister kid!”

“Oh, I’m a meister, but my main occupation is a student—I mean Diver. Tee hee,” I said and smiled.

The thugs turned pale. I mean, it was pretty foolish of some random punks to pick a fight with a Diver who spent every day fighting in the dungeon with their life on the line. They wouldn’t even stand a chance against a porter. It might

have been a different story if they'd been people who fought for a living like guards or soldiers. But unfortunately for them, Divers were exponentially stronger than ordinary people thanks to the levels they'd gained from hunting monsters while dungeon diving. Punks like these thugs, who just hung around aboveground acting cocky for no reason, weren't even on the same playing field. It was no wonder they'd gone pale with fear. Ignorance was a scary thing.

The tables had been turned, and it was their turn to be scared. But the thugs refused to back down right away; maybe my appearance was so unassuming that they didn't want to surrender. They should've fled at this point, but their decision-making skills were pretty poor. Unlike them, I would've run away as soon as I'd realized I couldn't deal damage to my opponent.

Unfortunately for these guys, I needed to give them a beatdown. They were here to coerce potion-meisters into pulling out of the event, so unless the guards were coming, someone else had to stop them by force. I had to hurt them until they could no longer mess with others, or else innocent people would suffer because of them.

"These guys are monsters," I muttered to myself under my breath as something in my brain clicked like a switch had been flipped from normal mode to dungeon mode. "Yep, monsters, just monsters that look like humans."

I couldn't let these guys go free; I'd need to be decisive and use magic, my specialty. I wouldn't need to accelerate or buff myself since they were just humans at level 5 or lower, and I could easily slap them around in my current state.

I set my sights on one of the bewildered thugs and rushed forth, stepping right in front of him. I then drove my fist, full force, into his wide-open abdomen, making him bend more than ninety degrees and vomit. Not wanting to get covered in the disgusting contents from his stomach, I ducked and got out of the way.

I wasn't sure what came over him, but thug number three decided to charge at me. I'd just proved their punches and kicks didn't work on me, so his foolhardiness was pretty shocking. He'd probably lost his ability to make rational decisions. He screamed incoherently and kicked at me, so I grabbed his

foot by the heel and raised it even higher, making him fall backward onto his head.

I immediately began working on casting my spell. I felt a presence behind me, but I continued working without facing my opponent. There was still some distance between us, but that wouldn't be an issue for my magic.

"Secondary Magic: Ameithys Slash!" I called out, and my right arm was enveloped in a purple glow. Immediately, I spun around while swinging my arm sideways, causing the purple light to branch out into forks of lightning that pierced thug number four. The thug shuddered once, then crumpled awkwardly onto his knees.

Even when holding back my power as much as possible, my lightning shocks should cause quite a bit of damage. Magic suited me much better in combat after all.

And so, I'd defeated three more thugs with ease.

"Ah! Weapons! Use your weapons!" the remaining thugs shrieked.

"Do you really think I'm not expecting that?" I asked as the thugs surrounded me, weapons in hand.

In any case, I didn't want to get hit by those weapons, so I decided to use Force Esoterica, a technique Sensei had taught me. It allowed me to surprise my opponents and impede their movement by unleashing charged-up mana. I hadn't gotten a chance to use it last time in front of the ranking chart because Scrael had taken care of the situation for me, but it was finally time to show off the power of the technique for the first time.

I compressed the mana inside my body and unleashed it all at once, sending everyone flying away with incredible force as if a bomb had gone off. I couldn't even hear their screams since even the sound had been blown away by the shock wave.

"Whoa."

This was pretty incredible. And useful. I could use it against weaker opponents to take them down in one fell swoop without having to flee from battle. Sensei really knew her stuff.

Meanwhile, the guy with the nasty face stood frozen in place, his mouth hanging open. Now that all his men had been defeated, the situation finally seemed to sink in for him.

“Th-This isn’t over!” he shouted as he prepared to flee.

“Oh? Is it not? I’m going to remember your face, then. Maybe I should shoot magic at you next time I see you in town. I won’t hold back. Are you sure?” I asked.

“Eek! Never mind! Forget it!” he said pathetically, and he tried to run away.

I couldn’t just let him go though. I had to do what I had to do.

Using my level 34 powers, I sped forth and cut off his escape.

“Listen up. I’m not done talking with you,” I said.

“Aaaaaargh!”

“Don’t mess with Melmel anymore, or any other meister for that matter. Got it?” I said.

“O-Okay! I got it!”

“Are you sure? If you’re lying...” I trailed off.

What *would* I do? I had to threaten him enough to actually deter him. Humans were forgetful creatures, after all. Even strong emotions would fade away over time, whether it be joy, sorrow, or fear. I needed to plant fear deep into his mind, so powerful that he’d never forget.

Listen, Akira, at times like these... Sensei’s words echoed in my mind, and I knew what I had to do.

By directing my malice along with mana toward my opponent, I could inflict a PTSD-like trauma in them. It was ten thousand times worse than what Scrael had done to her enemies. It made your stomach and family jewels tighten up, and it caused so much stress that it could invoke ataxia. Sensei had used it on me in the past in an attempt to fix my timid nature, but it hadn’t helped at all. I’d ended up taking the hit for no reason, so it was a pretty awful memory. Doing things like this was probably easy for people like Sensei, who could kill people as easily as she breathed, but it was super difficult for me. I had to push

through this though.

Okay, I have to do this. Now... Please die, please die, please die. How's that?

"Ah... Ah... Aaah..." the guy with the nasty face groaned.

I seemed to have learned how to manipulate metaphysical concepts like Sensei and Scrael did.

His eyes were open so wide that I thought they were going to pop out of their sockets. Cold sweat gushed out of every pore on him, and he looked like he was experiencing withdrawal symptoms for some sketchy drug. I wondered if I'd overdone it and thought maybe I shouldn't try this when I wasn't used to doing it.

"P-Please...sh-shpare...my life..." he sobbed incoherently, snot running down his nose.

Yeah, I'd definitely overdone it. I felt bad.

I stopped sending my malicious mana at him, but the guy with the nasty face had fallen to the ground, unconscious. This should keep him from causing any more trouble, at least.

With my work now complete, I turned toward Melmel but noticed she was somewhat pale.

Ah...she's kind of weirded out. Can't blame her.

"That was...incredible," she said.

It wasn't a compliment but more like a mixture of surprise, respect, and gratitude.

"Oh, that was nothing special," I said.

"That wasn't?"

"Yeah. Just the other day, I followed Lion-Maru on a dive, and the Night Soil Swamps was bad enough already...but then he took me to this ridiculous depth level 46 area, and... Heh, ha ha ha..."

Whenever I thought back to that day, it drove me temporarily mad, and I'd blurt out a torrent of jumbled nonsense. I'd learned my place that day. I was

still nothing but a fledgling, seriously.

As I muttered to myself, Melmel looked at me, her eyes shining with wonder. “You really are a high-level mage.”

“W-Well, I guess so. Aha ha...”

Her gaze, which had had a tinge of fear to it, had turned into one of admiration. I was glad she didn’t seem to be afraid of me anymore.

“Well, no point hanging around out here. Let’s go inside,” I said.

“Sure.”

As we walked into the Colosseum-like venue together, a thought came to me.

“Hey, is running a small-scale workshop difficult?” I asked.

“Huh?” She seemed taken aback by the sudden question.

The thought had come to me because of my conversation with Torpaz and what had just unfolded with the thugs from earlier. Torpaz seemed to have said what he’d told me out of consideration for small workshops, and that guy with the nasty face had been blatantly trying to sabotage the presentations of his competition. It seemed to me that smaller workshops were in a tight spot in terms of management and dealing with such attacks.

Melmel looked at me with surprise as if she was wondering why I’d even asked such an obvious question.

I said to her, “I ask because I don’t have my own workshop. I’m just a meister who pretty much only makes potions for myself, so I don’t know much about what it’s like to manage a workshop in Freida.”

“Oh...yes,” she said. “We, small-scale workshops, have been pressured by the major ones. Not only do they expand their sales channels through sheer order volume, but they also sell poor-quality potions and directly interfere with other workshops and stores. Many workshops have been forced to close down in the past few years.”

“Ah. Thought something like that might be happening,” I said.

So the big businesses were trying to crush the smaller ones to monopolize the

market. The guys from earlier were prime examples.

Most governments in this world were monarchies, and their laws weren't advanced enough to punish those types of people. Even in modern-day Japan, there had been plenty of examples where businesses had sabotaged their competition through messed-up means and gotten off scot-free. Because of that, it wasn't surprising that unethical practices were running rampant here. Though I still didn't see how limiting my honey potion recipe to a small-scale workshop was related to all of this.

"By the way, what sort of potion are you presenting today?" I asked.

"Oh, I'll be presenting a healing potion I modified. It's a whopping thirty percent more effective than a standard one. I'm pretty proud of it!"

"You used the standard base ingredients for it?"

"The ratios are different, but all of the ingredients can be obtained quite easily," she said.

"Wow."

Boosting the effectiveness by almost a third with just the standard ingredients and easy-to-obtain items sounded pretty amazing. Melmel brewed high-quality potions meticulously, and I had a feeling she was more deserving of a special-grade meister card than I was.

Maybe I should be rubbing my hands together and be humble and respectful.

"Heh heh heh. Lookin' forward to workin' with ya, boss," I said.

"O-Okay? Why are you acting like that?" she asked, confused.

"Oh, uh...it's nothing. Just forget about it."

I should avoid these jokes with earnest people like her.

"I just recently began making enough money to start working on research I've been wanting to do for a long time," said Melmel. Overcome with emotion, tears began welling up in her eyes.

The gold potion sales seemed to have given her enough financial freedom to work on her research. It became harder for me to tell her I was the creator of

the gold potions because it'd make it seem like I was fishing for gratitude. I decided to keep this fact to myself, though I was sure we'd be working together for quite some time.

I'd scared the guy with the nasty face unconscious and beaten the snot out of his thugs in front of the main entrance. Since I hadn't gotten hurt, messed up my clothes, thrown up, or wet my pants in the process, Melmel and I entered the venue to attend the exhibit.

The giant Colosseum-like structure was split between an open-air main stage and a circular indoor area around it. Excluding the old city of Kaoloon, the venue boasted the greatest lot size in all of Freida after the Divers Guild. Its design was pretty much the same as the Colosseum from my world; maybe they were similar in form because they'd both been made by humans. One of the main differences between the two was that the outer ring for the one here was particularly wide, with many rooms built throughout. This structure had been constructed with Do-Meltan mortar and concrete. I wasn't sure if it was reinforced with rebar, but it looked very sturdy. And although it'd been built long ago, there weren't any visible diagonal or X-shaped cracks on it like the ones you'd find on the outer walls of old apartments in Japan.

Though, there was one thing I hadn't expected about this place: it was full of spectators. Lots of them. *Tons* of them.

The entrance led to the outer ring where there were many rooms, including several food stalls. It was almost like there was a little festival going on, and the place was brimming with people everywhere I looked. As I strained my ears, I heard people talking about what potions were going to be presented and who they were rooting for, and I surmised that the presentations would be done in front of an audience. This was going to be nothing like the small gathering with just the event officials and participants that I'd pictured based on what Ashley had told me—at all. She'd lied to me. This was unforgivable.

The venue was going to be fully packed, and the event would be held in front of a giant audience. If I were to go up there to present, I'd draw a lot of attention, which meant everyone would find out I was a potion-meister—well, maybe that wasn't necessarily true. Freida was full of Divers, so maybe I wouldn't stand out all that much after all. It'd be one thing if I showed off some

special potion with groundbreaking effects, but I was just presenting a honey-flavored potion. Even if people did find out I was a meister, I was pretty reserved with my dives, so no one would even recognize me. My rank was in the thirty thousands too. I was probably overthinking this, though it'd be a different story if a Diver who'd seen me before was here today. But even if someone tried to invite me to their team because of today's events, I could just tell them I'd already planned to join Miguel's. I decided to get Miguel's permission later to use him as an excuse that way. I mean, I should be allowed that much.

I did have one more concern: would I get scolded for presenting a throwaway potion at such a grand exhibit? I was pretty worried, to be honest. They were really going all out for this event, and I was about to present something I'd picked out on a whim. I was probably gonna get in trouble. This was bad. But I didn't even have the guts to run away since I'd probably get in even more trouble. And so, instead of taking action, I decided to just empty my head and see what happened. I probably needed to fix this part about me, or I'd likely have trouble adjusting to society as an adult.

I was fully aware of how awkward my movements were as I followed Melmel to the reception area. We completed our paperwork, then received number tags. Apparently, the presentation order had already been set beforehand.

Melmel turned to me and said spiritedly, "Let's do our best out there!"

She, along with everyone else, was putting her all into this event. I wanted to apologize for showing up when I wasn't serious about it at all, but she exhaled out of her nose and met my eyes to give me another encouraging look.

I tried to remain as calm as possible as I said, "Y-Yeah, I'll try. My heart's pounding and my blood pressure is through the roof though."

"You're going to do great," she said. "You're an incredible mage, after all."

"Well, I don't think being able to use magic necessarily means I'm good at researching potions," I said.

"I...suppose not. What kind of potion are you presenting, by the way?"

There it was. Did she really have to ask? Now, of all times? She was going to

be shocked and severely disappointed. I mean, it was just honey. She'd just seen me being totally awesome earlier, and I was about to completely ruin her image of me. I didn't want to tell her, but I'd asked her the same question earlier, and she was gonna find out during the presentation anyway.

I braced myself, considering it a rehearsal of sorts.

"My potion..." I said.

"Yes?" she asked.

"It's..."

"Kudo...?"

Oh, screw it!

"It's, uh, honey," I said.

"Honey?"

"Yeah. A honey-flavored potion..."

Melmel fell silent.

"Um...Melmel?" I said.

I knew she'd be disappointed. Her brows were furrowed with a puzzled expression on her face. The silence was deafening.

Why did I have to choose the stupid honey potion? If only I hadn't taken the exhibit so lightly.

As I was wallowing in regret, Melmel suddenly asked, "Would you mind sharing some?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

I pulled out a flask containing the honey potion, poured some of its contents into a small measuring cup, then handed it to her.

"It's not a glass container?" she asked.

"Nope, it's plastic," I answered.

"Plas...tic?"

Melmel stared at the transparent plastic cup in wonder, then her expression turned severe as she focused her attention on the orange potion it contained. She had a look of a pro in her eyes. I mean, she literally was a professional with her own workshop.

She took a sip of the potion, then her expression grew even more serious.

“Amazing. It truly is the work of a high-level mage,” she said.

“Huh? What?”

I hadn’t expected that. She didn’t seem to be sarcastic, but I was confused about what she’d meant. I wondered if her expression was so severe because she didn’t like the honey flavor or something. Maybe she was trying to warn me about presenting such a lame potion. If it was good, she probably would’ve given me a look of admiration like earlier, so I had to assume the worst. I stiffened, anxiety welling up inside me and sweat streaming out of my pores. My stomach hurt so bad I thought I was gonna die.

Somebody help.

As I worked up the courage to ask what she’d meant, she spoke again. “I’m sorry. I need to prepare for the presentation. Goodbye.”

“Oh, right. Good luck...” I said.

“Thank you. You too.”

Her expression still hard, Melmel returned my plastic cup and walked away, leaving me feeling uneasy.

Pain.

After some time, preparations for the exhibitors were complete, and the show began. A staff member called out to me, and I twitched in surprise.

I was led to a meeting area where a total of around thirty exhibitors were also waiting. There were more than thirty meisters in Freida, but most meisters from workshops performed joint research, and their presentations were handled by single representatives. They got to take turns attending the exhibit too.

I was super envious.

I'd been told that each presentation was around five to ten minutes long, which meant the event would likely take around three hours or so. But some presentations ended quickly without doing a tasting, so it should wrap up sooner than expected. I was glad it was Sunday, meaning I'd been free from the morning. But come to think of it, I might have been able to avoid coming entirely if it hadn't taken place on a weekend. It was too late for that though. How unlucky could I be?

I was led to the venue, which was as spacious and full of spectators as I'd imagined. There were so many people involved in this event that it reminded me of the MLB Japan All-Star or the NPB Climax Series. Balloons and confetti flew in the air, and vendors busily walked through the crowds. I had no idea why a potion exhibit was such a major event. How did they draw such a crowd when it wasn't a certain world martial arts tournament or a certain dark tournament? The citizens of Freida had way too much time on their hands, and they were way too into events.

Anyway, this was really bad. I was so nervous I felt woozy, and I felt like I was going to faint. You needed nerves of steel to be able to overcome something like this, and mine were super thin, like, microfiber thin. I knew nerves were actually thinner than microfiber, but that wasn't important right now.

I was shaking in my boots from the scale of the event when the judges appeared from the other side and took their seats. On the far right was the Divers Guild master. He was the very person responsible for putting me through this hell, earning him the title of "demon number two."

You'll pay for this, you damned handsome blond man.

"I'm the master of the Divers Guild, as I'm sure you all know already. Ha ha ha!" he laughed, and the crowd cheered for him.

As the representative of the Divers Guild, he was obviously a major figure in the city of Freida. His work was even more important than resource gathering as it was directly linked to the survival of Divers, so he was quite popular among Divers and had a lot of fans.

As an aside, a spell had been cast on the venue so that when someone spoke from a specified point, their voice would be amplified throughout the venue. I'd

been wondering why the guild master's voice had suddenly become magnified, so I'd looked into it with magic. Magic sure was useful.

Next to the guild master, Dracarion Hueller, aka Lion-Maru, took a seat. He seemed to have dressed up for the occasion, his mane looking cooler than usual. He cared a lot about how his hair looked, and I'd seen him making some adjustments in the corner with a giant comb earlier.

"I'm Dracarion Hueller," he said.

His voice was rather rigid and serious today in contrast to his usual lively and boisterous tone. The crowd immediately fell quiet to his overwhelming presence as if a wave of silence had washed over them. Then they erupted into applause—that was Do-Melta's hero for you. It was no wonder there were stuffed dolls of him being sold at some of the stalls, the kind that looked like they'd break all sorts of copyright laws.

Next up was Greenia Reartail, also known as Esmeralda, who was the head of Brave Wings, one of the guild's major teams. She was a graceful green-haired Tail woman with animal ears and a tail. There was a dignified and mature air about her, and I had a feeling people with certain inclinations would willingly get verbally abused by her. The word "capable" sounded perfectly fitting for her, and she seemed the polar opposite of my receptionist Ashley. Her tail was especially big and long compared to all other Tails I'd met before. It was the same emerald green as her hair, and it gleamed with a beautiful luster in the sunlight.

"This is Greenia Reartail from Team Brave Wings," she said. "I spend an hour carefully grooming my tail every morning, and the reason it shines so brilliantly in the sunlight is because I've diligently polished it with a brush made with Mutable Horse hair..."

After her introduction, Greenia went on boasting about her fox-like tail, describing its smooth texture and claiming hers was the best in all of Freida. It was a fine-looking tail indeed, but I had no idea why she was talking about it for her self-introduction. In fact, she took more time talking about her tail than introducing herself. Why wasn't anyone stopping her, anyway? Maybe they were already used to it.

I felt like I'd entered another dimension—well, I was in another world. My “capable woman” image of her vanished into thin air. Eldrid was like this too, so maybe this was a shared trait among all Tails.

The next person was even more out of this world.

“I’m Gale Huomottio from The Bloody Blood of the Goddesses. Mm-hmm.”

It was the buff dark-skinned okama manager of the potion shop I frequented. Their physique rivaled that of Lion-Maru, and they made Greenia look tiny being sandwiched between the two. Gale was more overdressed than usual today, and I couldn’t help but feel a monsterlike vibe from them. Even Orcs from the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine would run away from them in fear. Also, I wished they wouldn’t wink like that because there were going to be some casualties. Even now, people were retching in the audience. There were plenty of potions here though, so there shouldn’t be any serious issues.

The representative and master of the Potion Guild came next, followed by an old man named Grado, who was an authority figure from the Freida Parliament, making six judges in total. As an aside, the Potion Guild representative was not only obese but also really shady-looking. The phrase “stinkin’ rich” came to mind, and he just gave off bad vibes for some reason.

With the introductions completed, the bizarre potion-drinking exhibit began. My presentation was near the end while Melmel’s was near the beginning. The examination process went quickly, like I’d been told earlier. The judges were evaluating potions, after all. They either healed wounds or recovered mana, so unless there were some novel and outstanding effects, there wasn’t a whole lot to go over. Most of them were about having slightly more potent healing effects or making the production process more efficient.

One person claimed their potion had the same effects with fewer ingredients, but that was exposed as a lie by Greenia and Lion-Maru during the taste test, and that person was escorted out. I was amazed that Lion-Maru was knowledgeable about potions. That incident actually fanned excitement in the venue, and the crowd was really enjoying the show.

Some of the most innovative things I’d seen so far were the invention of a tool that could be used for making potions, a magic potion that could be made

with lower production costs, and a hybrid potion that had the effects of both healing and mana potions. Those were the only ones that had caught my attention, and the rest were pretty much run-of-the-mill stuff that didn't get much of a reaction. As expected, everyone put emphasis on the efficacy of recovery effects. I felt like none of them were inferior to my honey potion, and I was feeling more and more cornered with each presentation.

The crowd had gone wild during the hybrid potion reveal. Melmel's presentation had been popular too. The judges had clearly been impressed by her potion, which was thirty percent more effective than a standard one. It was an incredible achievement.

Then came my turn—unfortunately.

My name was called, and I walked up to the presentation stage. I felt eyes on me from every direction. I could hardly breathe from the tension.

"I-I'm Kudo Akira," I said. "This is my first time showing up to an event like this, so please don't be too harsh on me..."

Lion-Maru smiled at me from the judge's seat. "What's wrong, Kudo? You're more nervous than when we went on that adventure together."

"Oh, no, this is nerve-racking in a different way!" I said.

"An exhibit makes you more nervous than the high-depth-level floor we went to? Impressive, Kudo. Ha ha ha!" he laughed.

"I didn't mean it like that!"

He'd completely misinterpreted me. I really hoped he didn't plan on taking me on a spontaneous dive to a place like that again. That'd actually be a bigger issue than this event, considering I could actually die.

Greenia looked at Lion-Maru and asked, "Do you know him?"

"Yes, a bit," he said.

"Hmm..." said Greenia, the look in her eyes changing.

It was as if she hadn't intended to take me seriously but had reconsidered. She was observing my every move now. It was making me even more nervous, so I wished she wouldn't.

“Pardon me, but we’ll need to get this moving along,” said the moderator.

“Ah, forgive me,” said Lion-Maru.

I bowed appreciatively knowing this great lion had seen how nervous I was and interjected to help me relax a bit.

I then turned to the moderator, who said, “Now, please proceed with your presentation.”

The time had come. I didn’t want to do it, but there was no turning back now. I took a deep breath, then opened my mouth to speak.

“Um, what I made for today’s presentation is a h-honey potion.”

“Honey?”

“Potion?”

I could see question marks over the heads of the judges. It was the exact reaction I’d expected.

I’m so sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry!

I continued mentally apologizing, then the Potion Guild’s representative looked at me with utter confusion. “Meister Kudo, what sort of effect does this ‘honey potion’ have?”

“Uh, there aren’t any special effects in particular. It’s really just a normal potion,” I answered.

“Huh?”

“I-It just tastes like honey now.”

“What about its healing effects?” he asked.

“It’s exactly the same... I’m sorry!”

The silent stares were painful. I wanted to die.

Lion-Maru and the okama manager looked like they weren’t sure what to do.

Then the Potion Guild representative, who was questioning me, suddenly slammed the desk and said, “Its flavor changed? That’s it? What kind of research is this?! Are you trying to make a mockery of this prestigious exhibit?!”

“N-No, not at all...” I muttered.

Okay, maybe I had been. I’d just picked a random potion without putting any thought into it. I’d been told it’d be fine. It wasn’t my fault. Probably, maybe, possibly.

My potion was so lame that people were looking at me with scary looks in their eyes. I didn’t know what to do. The Potion Guild representative was yelling at me nonstop, and I was starting to feel dizzy. I hadn’t felt like this ever since my level had gotten higher, but it felt like I was suffering symptoms of anemia.

I was about to reach my mental breaking point when a loud voice suddenly called out, “I’m interested in that honey-flavored potion! *Very* interested!”

It was Grado, the old man from the Freida Parliament.

“Huh?”

“Whaaat?”

The judges made confused noises in response to the sudden statement.

“Mr. Grado? Pardon me, but, uh, you are aware he told us all that he’s changed was its flavor?” asked the Potion Guild representative.

“Of course I’m aware! Don’t you see how incredibly important the change in flavor is?!” asked Grado.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Preposterous!” shouted Grado heatedly. “How can you be in charge of the Potion Guild and not understand this?!”

“B-But it’s nothing but a normal potion that tastes sweeter—”

“How *dare* you! Do you realize how many of our brethren have died refusing to drink potions because of their bitterness?!” screamed Grado, sending his chair flying away in his fit of rage.

“Aaah!” shrieked the Potion Guild representative.

Grado wasn’t wearing any fur, but maybe he was an Adorner, given that he’d said “brethren” just now. Adorners competed with Long-Ears for the title of the most powerful race in Do-Melta, but they had the unfortunate trait of

consuming an incredible amount of energy. Not only that, but they absolutely couldn't ingest anything that was even remotely bitter. They said it was because they were influenced by their creator Ruvy the Red, who hated bitter food. I remembered this well because Scrael had taught me that when we'd run into a certain couple causing a scene at a safe point a while back.

Come to think of it, Grado was the only one who hadn't been taste-testing the potions. Did Adorners hate bitterness *that* much? I couldn't figure out why they couldn't just bear the unpleasantness a little. Everyone else seemed to be thinking the same thing, and they all looked at him as if he was out of his mind. Then it hit me.

"Ah..." I said, realizing the honey-flavored potion was actually very meaningful. It wasn't bitter at all, and it tasted just like honey water.

The judges seemed confused about how to react, then Greenia asked kindly, "Ah... Kudo, was it? Why did you choose to make your potion honey-flavored?"

"W-Well..."

This was bad. I couldn't just say something like "I actually just realized its practical use, tee hee," so I had to come up with something convincing on the spot.

"I-I thought the sweetness would make it easier to drink. And like Judge Grado mentioned earlier, I've run into an Adorner at a dungeon safe point who refused to drink a potion, so I thought this would be helpful for people like him," I said.

"Fantastic! You made this out of consideration for us? Ah, such kindness!" exclaimed Grado, shedding tears as he became overwhelmed with emotion.

It really wasn't like that. That was just something I'd come up with to get through this awkward situation. I wished he'd stop crying because I was feeling unbearably guilty. Grado could hardly contain himself, and I heard similar cries of gratitude and sobbing from the audience, likely also from Adorners.

In this world, being unable to use potions was a terribly dangerous disadvantage. Having one fewer option for healing injuries and illnesses meant being that much closer to death. It was no wonder they were so exhilarated to

see a potion they could finally use. As for me, my heart was full of guilt for lying through my teeth at them.

Wait a second, could it be...?

So that was why Torpaz had said what he had. He'd known the potion would be well received, so he wanted its production to be limited to a small-scale workshop. Melmel had mentioned how small workshops were on the verge of bankruptcy beneath the pressure from the major businesses. Torpaz must've intended to stop workshops from closing and artisans from quitting by having smaller workshops make potions that would definitely have a demand. But that meant my job here was to make sure my potion got widespread attention and to get it on track toward tons of sales. This was a pretty huge responsibility. I couldn't afford to chicken out now, though I was starting to feel a different kind of nervousness. It was pretty awful of a god to put such a burden on a mere student.

Suddenly, the potion shop manager flamboyantly said, "Say, why don't we try drinking it first? I've never had a sweet potion myself, and this sounds pretty interesting."

"Y-Yes, let's try it."

Each of the judges picked up the potions I'd provided them for the taste test. Some wounded Divers had also been invited to confirm the healing properties of potions during the presentations. They all stared at the orange-colored liquid for a moment, then they tipped the contents into their mouths.

"Ah."

"Interesting."

"Oh."

"Hmm?"

"It...tastes like ordinary honey water."

Well, yeah. That's the point.

Its healing effect on the injured Divers was about the same as that of an ordinary potion too. They were obviously glad to have their wounds healed for

free.

Meanwhile, Grado was having a never-ending staring contest with his reflection on the potion bottle.

“Mr. Grado,” said the moderator.

“Wait,” said Grado. “I’m conflicted. If this even has the slightest hint of the bitter thea taste...”

I wondered if he’d drop dead right then and there. Actually, if it was bitter, I’d probably be the one who’d get killed.

Eventually, Grado braced himself and tipped the potion into his mouth. His eyes then shot open, and he shouted, “I-It’s honey! It tastes exactly like honey!”

He flailed his arms around excitedly, which was kind of unseemly of him considering his age and position.

“A long time ago, I tasted a drop, just a mere drop, of a potion. It was so bitter that I spent an entire day and night writhing around in agony. I never thought I’d see the day when bitterness was completely eliminated from a potion,” said Grado, getting emotional in his own little world.

“It really is like honey,” said the Divers Guild master. “I’ve never had anything like it. Come to think of it, I wonder why no one has made something similar already.”

Greenia replied, “No one has been able to. A completed potion doesn’t mix with other fluids, and mixing in flavors during the brewing process wouldn’t eliminate the bitter thea taste. There was no way to completely change the flavor like this.” She then turned to me and asked, “How in the world did you make this potion?”

“Oh, uh, it’s all written here if you’d like to see,” I said as I took the recipe out of my jacket pocket and handed it to the moderator.

“What? But...” said Greenia, eyes wide.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You’re handing over the recipe just like that? This is the fruit of *your* labor. Shouldn’t you keep it a secret?”

“Oh, I planned on making the details public in the first place,” I said.

“But why?” she asked.

“I mean, that’s the point of the exhibit, right? We publish groundbreaking potions so everyone gets to know about them. It’d be pointless if my potion doesn’t become widespread after putting in the effort to make and present it. That’s why I picked something that is easy to make and uses ingredients that anyone can acquire. Oh, but I’ll be charging the Divers Guild for the recipe, of course,” I said.

I’m sorry, I lied to make myself sound cool.

I was mostly doing it to fulfill Torpaz’s request. Though I didn’t have any qualms about making the recipe public. It wasn’t as if making it widely available would hurt me in any way.

“Yes, of course...” said Greenia.

“You’ve put *that* much thought into this? Ah, I’m so incredibly moved!” said Grado dramatically.

Grandpa, you’re gonna burst a blood vessel. Let’s take a deep breath.

The truth was that the honey potion meant nothing to me, but of course I wasn’t gonna say that. I *couldn’t*. My undershirt was soaked with cold sweat.

Greenia accepted the recipe from the moderator and looked at it with Gale, who was sitting next to her.

“Well?” asked the Divers Guild master.

“Oh my, there are quite a lot of differences from a regular potion recipe,” said Gale.

“I see. He didn’t just mix the ingredients together; he split up their roles instead,” said Greenia. “Instead of adding honey into the potion, he extracted the effects of the thea and implemented them into the honey. This necessitates additional steps because magic is needed in several of the steps, but it makes it possible to turn honey into a potion. And by applying this principle—”

“Yes, you can use it for things other than honey,” I said.

“As I thought.”

Indeed, the strange drink called “potion” couldn’t be mixed with other things by normal means. Because of this world’s so-called “law of complete existence,” once a potion was completed, it couldn’t be blended with anything else.

“What is this ‘Anti-separation’?” asked Greenia.

“Oh, that’s an original generic spell I made. I wrote down how to use it in the corner,” I replied.

Greenia fell silent and started rubbing her eyebrows. I figured it was because I’d shared an original spell so freely, but it was nothing but an ancillary spell that I’d made to mix things that were difficult to mix. It wasn’t like the anti-deterioration spells I’d used for my gold potions or the pressurizing spell that used a ton of mana, so I didn’t really mind giving it out. Besides, I thought of it as a donation to potentially further magic development down the line.

“You think you can make this?” Gale asked her.

“Yes, but...not everyone can,” replied Greenia.

“Really? But Kudo just said he made it in a way that everyone can follow.”

“It requires a certain level of skill. However, a veteran potion-meister should have no problem with it,” she said.

“Is it that difficult?” asked the Divers Guild master.

“The magic required is one thing— It’s easier to just show you,” she said, then she beckoned him and the Potion Guild master over.

“Wh-What are these numbers?!”

“Hmm... Such specific numbers and procedures.”

They were shocked by the recipe, and I couldn’t blame them. The recipe was full of strange numbers like 226 and 741, and these portions weren’t just specific; there was no obvious rhyme or reason to them. Of course, I hadn’t tested every minute increment to see what would work or not. They were just how the numbers had ended up after being converted from the units of my world—grams of the metric system, that was. It was the same thing with converting grams into pounds or meters into yards. The numbers would’ve

been all over the place if I'd measured using units of this world, so I'd converted the numbers into grams and milliliters, made some minor adjustments, then rounded them up. I hadn't thought it'd work so well at first, so I'd been surprised by the results.

"How did you come up with such specific numbers?" asked Greenia.

"Oh, actually, I'd like to keep that to myself if you don't mind," I said.

"Yes, I understand... I'm sure you'd like to keep some things secret."

"Aha ha..." I laughed dryly.

There'd been a lot of steps in making the potion, and it'd required minute adjustments to my magic according to the amount of ingredients used, so it'd taken a lot of precision and mental energy. But even a potion rookie like me had been able to pull it off, so anyone who spent time making potions daily shouldn't have any issues making this one.

Though, I'd been brutally trained by Sensei. Everyone should be thanking her, not me, seriously. Sensei could probably save the world with ease if she felt like it. I couldn't help but wonder why she was so demonic.

Grado excitedly asked Greenia, "So, is it possible to put this potion into circulation right away?"

"Yes, if both guilds can make the arrangements," she said.

"Then make it happen, Guild Masters! This will save many of my brethren's lives! They can dive into dungeons without worrying about drinking those terribly bitter potions ever again!" said Grado.

"Oh, you're more worried about that than their wounds?" I wondered aloud.

The Adorner I'd run into before had said something similar. I had a feeling their inability to drink potions wasn't just a matter of preference. Grado had mentioned how he'd writhed around in agony from a single drop. Maybe it was more like some sort of curse.

"Well, this will definitely be a hot seller," said the Divers Guild master.

"Of course. Even if there were no demand, Adorners will buy them *a//!*" said Grado.

I wouldn't be surprised if they bought up the entire stock for future use.

Oh, now's a good time to bring this up.

"I'd like to add a condition if you don't mind," I said.

"Oh? What is it?" asked Gale.

"It's about who gets the recipe. How about only small-scale workshops that make their potions with care get access to it?"

Greenia narrowed her eyes. "Is this out of concern for the current state of potion workshops?" she asked.

"W-Well, something like that. Yes," I said.

"But that sounds a bit like shallow thinking. As long as you're giving out the recipe, it'll leak eventually," she said.

Oh, I guess she's right. I'll have to think of a work-around.

"Hmm... Then can we have the Freida Parliament make it so that transactions involving honey potions can only be done by workshops that were given the recipe through some sort of licensing system?" I suggested.

Grado asked, "I wouldn't mind doing that, but why go to such lengths?"

"Well, the thing is... Let's just say I have a little situation on my end," I replied.

"I'm willing to do it for none other than your sake. However..." said Grado, then he looked at the Divers Guild master and the Potion Guild representative.

"That would be difficult for the Divers Guild," said the Divers Guild master.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Limiting potions like that would go against our policy since we want potions to get to as many Divers as possible."

"Oh, then how about this, Guild Master? If you don't accept these terms, I'll stop making that other thing completely," I said.

I was, of course, talking about the gold potion. The backlash from Divers would be catastrophic if I stopped making them, giving me a lot of leverage for negotiations. This method was a double-edged sword, but I'd brought it up

because I knew he had no other choice.

“You’re threatening me? Ha...ha ha ha... How amusing. Aha ha ha!” he laughed.

“Aha ha ha,” I laughed along with him.

“Oh, that reminds me. You aren’t going to ask me to return that favor?” he asked.

“No, because I’d like to hold on to it so I can cash it in when I really need to,” I said.

“How terrifying. Aha ha ha!”

The guild master was still laughing. It was kind of scary.

He then exhaled and said, “Okay. I’ve been concerned about this issue for a while now too. I think I’ve been prioritizing Divers too much and letting the situation for the potion workshops get out of hand. You’re right. I think we can resolve this problem if they were the only ones to get access to products that will definitely be in demand.”

“Great! Then—”

“I’d like to refuse, but we can say I had no choice since you put it that way,” he said.

“Yes!”

It’d worked. The condition was unconventional, but it shouldn’t cause any big losses for the major workshops either. The only difference between a honey potion and a regular potion was whether it was bitter or not. They wouldn’t compete with each other and should be able to coexist. The demand for potions far exceeded their supply anyway, so it wasn’t as if people would stop buying bitter potions. Besides, honey potions would likely be a bit more expensive because of the increased cost and labor. But of course, getting access to new customers would be a huge benefit. The rest would be a matter of power balance, which wasn’t my problem. I was only doing as I’d been told by a god. I wasn’t taking responsibility for that.

The matter appeared to be settled when the Potion Guild representative said,

“The Potion Guild absolutely refuses those terms.”

“What?! This was about to be settled,” I protested.

“What are you saying? Of course it’d be better for major workshops to make these potions too. The more potions are being produced, the more people will be able to benefit from them,” he said.

“But the small-scale workshops won’t be able to survive like this,” I went on.

“That’s completely irrelevant. They just need to work harder,” he said.

“Whoa, are you being serious right now?” I asked.

That was a pretty wild thing to say. He sounded like he ran a sweatshop or something.

Oh, I get it. He must be connected with those major workshops.

“Besides, a meister shouldn’t be demanding such conditions...” The Potion Guild representative went into lecture mode and began grumbling.

I wasn’t sure what to do. It seemed this guy wanted to find some reason to get rid of the condition I’d proposed. Allowing the bigger workshops to make honey potions wouldn’t mean the end of small workshops, but it’d ruin the plan to give them a means of survival.

Then I remembered what Torpaz had told me just before I’d teleported into this world. He’d told me to say something as a last resort if anyone refused to cooperate and that they’d understand what it meant. It’d sounded strange to me, but it’d come from a god, so I was sure it was important.

“I think you’ll regret it if you don’t agree to these terms,” I told the Potion Guild representative.

“Wh-What’s with that tone? Is that a threat?!” he shot back.

“Actually, this isn’t coming from me.”

“What’s wrong with you?!” he screamed.

“Eek!” I squealed, surprised by his loudness.

Seeing this, Lion-Maru intervened by saying, “Potion Guild Representative, calm down.”

“How can I be calm?!” he shot back. “Did you see how that brat was talking to me? I represent the Potion Guild! Even if you—”

“I told you to *shut up!*” roared Lion-Maru with an intensity that matched his Raaaaaargh Crusher.

Having taken the full brunt of his scream, which could be classified as a special attack, the Potion Guild representative immediately turned pale.

Lion-Maru is so cool and dependable.

“Go on, Kudo,” he said.

“Yes. Well, a certain someone told me to relay his words if someone refused to listen,” I explained.

“You mean...”

“Yes. So I’d like to share that now.”

Lion-Maru’s expression changed. He seemed to have an idea of who I was talking about. A while back, I’d told him I was from another world, and we’d mentioned God during that conversation. He’d told me the other races met with their creators pretty frequently.

“Well?” he asked.

“He said Beast-Heads should understand what it means,” I said.

“Me?”

“Yes, he told me to relay the words ‘Don’t make me shake a leg.’ He said there should be at least one Beast-Head here, and—”

“What?!” said Lion-Maru, his expression changing even more dramatically.

“Kudo! Is that true?!”

“Eek! I’m sorryyy!”

Please don’t roar at me! Please! I’m scared!

“You were lying to me?!” he yelled.

“No, that apology wasn’t because I lied. The words just came out of my mouth because you startled me!” I said quickly.

“So it’s true, then?”

“Y-Yes. He was laughing as he said it too...”

“I see...”

“Excuse me, but what does it mean?” I asked.

“Well, let’s just say this is a serious issue,” he said. Then he turned to the other judges. “Guild Master, Mr. Grado, I want these conditions accepted no matter what.”

“I’ve already agreed to it,” said the guild master.

“I owe him a great debt for making this honey-flavored potion. I have no objections,” said Grado.

Those two were fine with it, but the Potion Guild representative was still against the idea. He said timidly, “A-As I’ve been saying, the Potion Guild can’t accept such terms—”

“Keep up your obstinate attitude and Freida could be destroyed. How will you take responsibility if that happens?” asked Lion-Maru.

“What?”

Huh? That sounds ominous.

Meanwhile, Greenia’s face turned stern.

“Dracarion, does ‘shake a leg’ mean what I think it means?” she asked.

“Yes, it does,” he replied.

“I see. Everything makes sense now,” she said.

“Whoa, this is serious. It isn’t just a matter of owing or paying debts now,” said the Divers Guild master.

Uh, so what’s going on? Can you explain it so I can understand too?

Anyway, this case was settled with Lion-Maru’s insistence. He, the guild master, Greenia, Grado, and all the other races in general seemed to know what “shake a leg” referred to, and they, with dire looks on their faces, ultimately made the Potion Guild representative agree. They’d threatened force

to reach a conclusion, and it'd been very effective.

How scary.

And so, my presentation came to a chaotic close, and the rest of the exhibit was pretty uneventful. In the end, the young potion-meister who'd made the hybrid potion won first place. Melmel won a separate technical award, and I finished in fourth place because my potion's healing effect wasn't very strong compared to the others. Yet, Grado appeared when the results were announced and praised me with all his heart.

"Potion-Meister Kudo Akira!" he called out. "I speak for all Adorners when I say thank you from the bottom of my heart! Please give him a warm round of applause!"

I received the greatest applause of the day, and getting all that attention was a bit embarrassing.

Come to think of it, all I did was make a potion that tastes like honey. I really don't think it's all that amazing...

Floor Twenty-Six: Unlucky People

Today, a couple delinquent-looking guys were messing with me, not in Japan but in Do-Melta. I'd been wandering around Freida instead of adventuring when two scary-looking guys had stood before me and demanded money. They even had weapons with long blades on them, which wasn't too uncommon in Do-Melta. I was in some serious danger.

"Hey, buddy. Mind lendin' us some money?" said one of them.

"We're so broke that we won't even be able to eat tomorrow. Help us out, yeah?" said the other.

If that was true, they should've found a part-time day job instead of harassing me. I didn't understand why they'd decided to turn to crime instead when they were just going to end up in jail cells or worse. I supposed it was because this was the easy route or they didn't know how else to make money.

This was a rare experience though. I usually wasn't the type to get targeted by these kinds of people, but I seemed to have caught their attention today for some reason. Maybe I looked wealthy to them. Oh, I'd mentioned I didn't usually get targeted by people like them, but Kaoloon Walled City in Freida's back alleys was a different story. Anyone and everyone who set foot in there got harassed by someone, so that didn't count. As soon as someone tried to mess with me there, I immediately drove them back with magic. I'd already decided it was okay to shoot the folks there with lightning, so there were no problems there.

"Hey, punk, you deaf or something?"

"Speak up, pip-squeak!"

"Y-Yesh! I'm not listening! Not even a little bit!" I stammered.

"So you *aren't* listening?!"

"No, I'm not! I shut out people like you, who extort others!" I replied.

“You think you’re funny?!” yelled one of the men.

“Argh! Don’t glare at me! And please don’t talk all menacingly like that!” I squealed in surprise and covered my face.

I’d never get used to these encounters no matter how high my level was. I was easily intimidated by loud voices and scary faces. I had no idea how to stop being so scared of everything. Maybe it was a skill I had to reincarnate into another world to gain.

“Hey,” a threatening voice suddenly said from behind the two.

It sounded like it’d come from a girl. Her voice was actually cute, but the tone was quite low, maybe because she was angry. She was directing pure, unadulterated malice in our direction, and it rivaled even Scrael’s when she was going in for the kill.

The men turned to her immediately.

“Wh-Wh-Who the hell are you?”

“Wh-What do ya want?”

They sounded rather pathetic with their voices trembling and cracking. Their legs were, like mine, shaking uncontrollably like a newborn calf’s. At least they managed to stay upright. Though, their reactions were understandable. Her malice was palpable like a gust of hot air blowing toward us. My skin was actually starting to sting. I had to brace myself, or I probably would’ve collapsed.

I looked between the two men to see who was standing there and realized it was Eldrid. She was a young girl with unruly long golden hair that curled up at the ends. She always wore expensive-looking armor, but today she was wearing formal knightly attire and carrying on her back a giant sword that could probably slay a dragon. She had flat dog ears and a fluffy tail above her butt, and she looked like the half-human, half-beast type often found in fantasy stories.

Eldrid glared at the two men with a look that could actually kill.

“What the hell do you two want with him? He’s with me,” she growled.

“Wh-What, isn’t it obvious?!” one of the men shot back.

“Y-You got a problem?” said the other. “We’re the infamous Authemir Family’s—”

“Yeah?” scowled Eldrid.

The two men had tried to put on a tough front, but she made them back down with a single glare.

“N-Never mind. It’s obvious,” said one of the men.

“D-Do you have a problem, miss?!”

They’d straightened their backs and become much more polite. Something in their DNA seemed to have told them to obey the powerful.

“No, I don’t have a damned problem. But...” said Eldrid as she exhaled, but her malice was only growing stronger.

The air grew tense, and it was getting harder to breathe even for me. I then realized Eldrid had drawn her sword. She’d been so fast that I hadn’t even been able to see her do it. I wasn’t sure if it was her speed, power, or some mysterious force, but something had extended forth from her sword and made a loud explosion. Level 48 people were scary.

“Just cutting you in half would be letting you off easy. How about I break you into tiny pieces and blow you away? Hmm?” she asked.

“Eek.”

Yes, that was me squealing. She was scaring me. If someone had threatened me like that, I could confidently say that I would’ve fainted immediately. I wasn’t ashamed to admit it.

Hearing the pathetic noise I’d made, Eldrid looked at me with a concerned expression and asked, “Wh-Why’d *you* get scared?”

“I mean, that was scary...and you caught me by surprise,” I said.

“I didn’t do much. Was it really *that* surprising?”

“It might not be much for you, but you can knock people out doing that. See?” I said and gestured toward the two men, who were standing on their feet

completely unconscious.

“Huh? Oh, right,” she said.

I couldn't really make fun of the two guys for losing consciousness. Malice was more of a metaphysical concept, but when wielded by someone who was level 48, it was like a directed nonlethal laser beam. It was no wonder they'd been knocked out after getting hit with the full force of the malice. It caused so much stress that it could probably cause cancer that would even spread around and get to stage four easily. I thought they actually deserved praise for not falling over.

Anyway, I said to Eldrid, “Thanks for the help. You really saved me.”

“I-It's not like that. They just annoyed me. Besides, you'd be just fine even if I hadn't stepped in,” she said.

“That's true,” I admitted.

These guys who'd been messing with me were just some random thugs roaming around Freida. They would've been more problematic if they'd been Orange Divers who frequented the dungeon, but these guys were level 5 or so on average, level 7 at most. I didn't even need any combat skills to beat them because the level difference alone was more than enough. I didn't have to be made of rubber to deflect their attacks and be like “It won't work!”

Eldrid made a face and asked, “So why were you scared?”

“They had scary faces, okay?” I answered. “I've always been a plebe in that sense.”

“You were so manly when you saved me from the Great Boar,” she mumbled, frowning discontentedly.

“Hmm? Did you say something?” I asked.

“N-Nothing! I didn't say anything!”

Confused, I asked her again, but she didn't answer. She'd spoken so quietly that I really hadn't been able to hear her. I wondered if she'd said I was pathetic or something.

Sad.

“Anyway, it’s been a while since I ran into someone I know while I’m outside the guild,” I said, changing the subject. “The last time was at the potion exhibit a little while ago, I think.”

“What?! Kudo, you know other people?!” she asked.

“Huh? Well, yeah. I know I’m always solo, but of course I do.”

I was kind of shocked that she thought I was a loser with no friends.

Pain.

“Y-Yeah. Right. Of course... Sorry,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t blame you, really.”

I had somehow managed to get to know a lot of people and even had some friends. Over here, there were Miguel and Scrael, and back in Japan, there were Hiro, Kogano, and Okadome. I wasn’t totally alone.

“So, um...who did you meet? Was that person a guy or a girl?” asked Eldrid.

“A girl,” I replied.

“What?!” she suddenly shouted. Her tail was sticking straight up too.

“Y-Yeah...?” I said, wondering what was up with her.

“Are you two close?! Are you?!”

“Uh...I don’t think I’d consider us friends or anything,” I said. “I guess we’re just acquaintances because of our line of work.”

“Oh. Good,” she said, putting a hand to her chest in relief for some reason.

I’d only met Melmel twice. We were more like business associates, and she was also my senior as a potion-meister. Claiming that we were friends would’ve been presumptuous of me.

That aside, Eldrid seemed to be having some intense emotional swings today, and her expression grew serious. She moved her face closer to my clothes and body—and took a few whiffs.

“Excuse me,” I said.

She sniffed some more.

“Uh...”

Eldrid was acting like a dog again. My scent seemed to have caught her attention, and she was sniffing me all over as she wagged her tail.



I'd taken a shower after getting home from school, so I didn't think I smelled funny or anything.

Oh, this isn't good. It makes me nervous when she gets close like this. The combination of a pretty girl, animal ears, and a tail just isn't fair.

"Eldrid! Eldrid! I think that's enough!" I said.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry!" she said and moved away.

She seemed to be embarrassed too, judging by how red her face was.

"Uh, I'm not sure why you did that, but did I smell okay?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. You smelled fine," she said.

"What was that about?"

"Well, um, I was just curious..." She trailed off.

I looked at her with confusion as she patted her own chest again and let out a sigh of relief. What had she been checking for? I wished she'd just tell me.

"You're not going to the dungeon today?" she asked.

"Nope, I have some business in the city," I replied.

"Going shopping?"

"Yep. Over there," I said, pointing toward my destination on the west side of Freida.

Eldrid looked at me blankly and asked, "What? That way?"

"Yep."

"But that side of Freida..." she said as she looked where my finger was pointing. Then she suddenly got flustered and yelled, "Th-Th-That's where the pleasure district is! Don't tell me you—"

"What? No, no, no, no! I mean, yes, the pleasure district is over there too, but that's not where I'm headed! I'm going to a shop over there!" I said.

"You're going to one of those shops selling seedy items, aren't you?!"

"No, I'm not! I'm not going to an adult goods store you might find near a town

known for electronics! I'm shopping for something completely nonsexual! Get your mind out of the gutter, will ya?!" I said.

Eldrid finally seemed to realize her mistake and said, "What? Oh, I see! Sorry. I shouldn't have assumed."

"I'm glad you understand. Sheesh."

If I hadn't cleared that up, Eldrid would've assumed I was some pervert. Though, that would imply all people in the pleasure district were perverts, and that wouldn't necessarily be true.

"So, like I mentioned earlier, there's a shop I want to check out over there. I was just about to go there," I said.

"So that was when those guys started messing with you. Those types are all around these parts of Freida, even this early in the day. You should be careful if you don't wanna get harassed by them," said Eldrid.

"Oh, no wonder," I said. "I usually only get harassed by those types in the central back alleys, so I was pretty surprised."

"Wait, you've been in the Kaoloon back alleys?"

"Yeah. Like the time I got kidnapped by Sensei and the time I wanted to take a shortcut—oh, and the time when I went to beat up this really bad guy," I said.

"'Bad guy'?"

"Yeah. This big beefy tiger Beast-Head with black fur. He was someone who shouldn't exist in this world."

"Huh..."

It'd happened just a little while after I'd gained the ability to come to Freida. I'd wandered into a back alley and encountered the black tiger. He was such a villain that he'd immediately set off my bad-guy sensor, and he'd been so strong I hadn't been able to do a thing against him. Part of it had been because I'd just started using magic back then, but I'd surely have a hard time against him even if we fought again today. Sensei had helped me that time, and after going through some grueling training, I'd gone back for a rematch and kicked his butt. It was one of my memorable episodes from when I'd begun to grow more

powerful.

I then noticed Eldrid's stiff expression.

"K-Kudo?" she said.

"Hmm? Oh, so yeah. Anyway," I said.

"R-Right... You know, you were just..."

"Huh? What's wrong?" I asked.

"N-Nothing. Never mind."

Maybe I'd been making a funny face or something. I thought I'd been putting on a stoic expression.

"Say, Kudo, could that black-furred Beast-Head have been called Obses Ord by any chance?" asked Eldrid.

"Oh, you know him?"

"I heard he was famous in Kaoloon. So you're the one who took him down."

I told her I'd messed him up good, and she made a strange expression. Maybe she didn't like the phrasing.

"Are you heading to the dungeon today?" I asked.

"Nope, don't have any plans today," she said. "I was just wandering around town when I saw those guys messing with you."

"I see. Well, thanks again," I said.

"Don't sweat it, really. Besides, you've saved me before too. Let's just say we have each other's backs."

I was grateful to hear that.

"Hey, do you mind if I go with you?" she asked.

"Sure," I said casually. And just like that, we'd decided to spend the day together.

We talked about random things as we walked, like what kinds of food we liked and how we spent our free time. Apparently, she liked grilled meat and trained a lot.

We'd been so caught up in our conversation that we ended up turning onto the wrong street, where Divers were seeking companionship from scantily clad women. There weren't neon lights or anything, but everything, including the very air here, looked pink, unlike any other street. It was crazy to see sexy ladies basically walking around in underwear.

"Th-Th-This place is like this even in the middle of the day?" I stuttered.

"W-W-Well, a lot of their patrons go dungeon diving at night, so yeah," said Eldrid, similarly flustered.

"I-I guess that makes sense! The customers won't be able to get in there unless they're always open!"

"What?! D-Don't say things like 'get in there'! Can you be any less subtle?!"

We were both panicking. My movements had become completely stiff, and Eldrid's ears and tail were sticking straight up. We awkwardly hurried back to our original path, and we eventually arrived at the shop I was looking for.

"There it is," I said.

"You mean that brush shop?" asked Eldrid.

"Yep. I heard they have some nice ones made of items from the dungeon."

"Huh, I didn't know about this one. I thought I'd marked most of the brush shops around here," she said.

I hadn't known she frequented brush shops.

The building's sign had text and an illustration on it indicating that it was a brush shop.

Suddenly, Eldrid looked as if she'd just realized something and said, "K-Kudo, you're here because...?"

"Oh, there's an animal—I guess it's like a pet?—that has been visiting me recently, so I needed to pick up some supplies," I explained.

Her expression grew serious.

"Is something wrong?" I said.

"No. That'd be way too sudden..." she mumbled.

I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but she seemed kind of down.

Anyway, I'd come to this shop for Carbuncle (I deliberately didn't call it by the name Mittens as dubbed by Sensei). Carbuncle wasn't always with me, but it often followed me to Japan, so I had to make sure I had the proper environment to care for it. I needed food, a litter box, a bed, a scratching post, and a grooming brush.

It was totally like a house cat, and it was popular with my family because it was so friendly they couldn't fathom it was a stray. Although it was a strange creature that didn't exist in my world, I'd told them it was a new mascot candidate for Hiro's hero team, and they somehow bought it.

We entered the shop and looked around. The variety of brushes and combs seemed excessive, but there clearly was a demand for them. Beast-Heads and Tails were especially particular about the brushes and oils they used, so it made sense that there'd be a far bigger lineup here than in Japan.

We went further into the building and found some glass display cases.

"Wow, so pricey," I said, observing the expensive products in the cases.

The priciest of them all was a brush made of Mutable Horse mane. I was certain this was the same brush used by Greenia Reartail, the mage from Brave Wings, who'd been at the potion exhibit.

"Sheesh, twenty gold coins? That's crazy," I said.

"Actually, that's a pretty fair price," said Eldrid. "I heard refining Mutable Horse mane takes a ton of work. And besides, they're rare monsters that appear at depth level 40."

"Oh, right. I guess that makes sense if you consider how hard they are to find."

I'd been going to those deeper floors lately, but I'd yet to find any Mutable Horses. I avoided areas with lots of monsters, which made it even more unlikely for me to run into one.

"The only monsters I see there are Rugalga Roos," I said.

"You go all the way down there solo?" asked Eldrid.

“Yeah, but I avoid monsters as much as possible. I go there from time to time looking for pearl beans.”

“Pearl beans? But they’re pretty hard to find in the wild.”

“I know a spot,” I said. “But those Rugalga Roos do get in the way.”

“They’re pretty tough, aren’t they? I’m sure dealing with them is hard for a mage.”

“Not really. They cover their ears and run away whenever I cast a certain spell,” I said.

The “spell” was actually just me reciting mathematical formulas. I suspected saying grammar rules out loud would work too.

“Anyway, twenty gold coins, huh? That’s enough to get four high mana potions—or four White Horn steaks!” I pointed out.

“Ah, I haven’t had a White Horn steak in a while,” said Eldrid.

“They’re so good.”

“Yeah. Delicious.”

We went on talking about our favorite foods for a while, then I asked Eldrid to recommend a good brush. She chose a reasonably priced brush for me, and its bristles felt good in my hand.

“Is there anything you want?” I asked.

“Huh? Me? I wanna try this one,” she said, pointing at a comb made with a Frisbee Turtle shell.

The comb was quite affordable despite its beautiful, elaborate workmanship.

“I’ll get this too then,” I said.

“What? Are you sure?” asked Eldrid.

“Yep. It’s my way of thanking you for helping me today.”

“Oh... Th-Thanks.”

I reached for the comb without realizing Eldrid was doing the same, and our hands touched. Her fingers were soft and slender even though she handled

such a huge sword.

“Ah! Aaack?!” she yelled as she pulled her hand back, her tail sticking straight up again. The motion made her lose her balance, and she fell toward me.

“Wai— Mmf!”

“Ow.”

I ended up breaking her fall with my body. It was a good thing she wasn’t wearing her armor today, or it might have hurt. Instead, I could now directly feel the soft and squishy parts of her body.

“S-Sorry!” she said.

“Oh, it’s okay! No problem! No problem at all!”

“I-I’ll get off you now! Uh, um, whoa!”

Eldrid began squirming around on top of me, and the soft feminine bits on her chest smushed up against my chest. I was so nervous I stayed completely still. I felt like I might touch something I shouldn’t if I moved a muscle, so I had to wait for her to get off me.

“Let’s calm down for a sec!” I suggested. “Take a deep breath! Breathe!”

“Okay!”

We both inhaled and exhaled deeply.

What are we doing?

Eldrid then rose and helped me to my feet. It was even more awkward now that we’d calmed down. I quickly purchased the brush and comb, and we hurried out of the store. The employees must’ve seen what had happened earlier, and they smiled warmly at us as we left.

“Guess we should start walking...” I said uncomfortably.

“Y-Yeah,” she agreed.

Awkwardness lingered between us, but it didn’t bother me much.

Suddenly, Eldrid spoke up, her face bright red. “H-Hey!”

“Hmm? What is it?” I asked.

“I was just thinking. You always call me by my name, so maybe you can call me by my nickname instead.”

“Sure. What should I call you?” I asked.

“People close to me call me El.”

“Okay, then I’ll call you El. You can call me Akira.”

“Okay!” she said, wagging her tail.

Seeing her happy about us getting closer made me happy too.

She looked at me shyly and asked, “Also, if you don’t mind, I wanna—”

“There they are!” said someone behind us. That voice was familiar; I’d just heard it earlier today.

I turned around to find the two guys who’d tried to extort money out of me but ended up losing consciousness. Behind them was a whole crew of nefarious-looking dudes, and there had to be twenty or thirty of them. The two of them had mentioned they were part of the what’s-their-name family, so this must’ve been them. They’d come back so quickly.

The mob approached us right away, and once they got close enough, a big man stepped forward.

“That’s them, boss!” said one of the guys from earlier.

“These little brats, huh?” said the big man, cracking his knuckles intimidatingly as he moved his face closer. “I heard you two disrespected my guys. You know who you’re messing with? Huh?”

His dopey-sounding line and his classic knuckle-cracking move seemed rather cliché to me.

One of them from earlier today, who’d become the big guy’s pathetic henchman, chimed in, “Our boss is an undefeated level 15 badass!”

“We’ve got a reputation to uphold. We can’t let little punks like you talk down to us!” said his partner.

“Ha ha ha! You two are done for now!”

We were done for, apparently. Their boss did look scary, but there was

nothing impressive about him. I mean, he was only level 15. I didn't want to be rude, but that wasn't very strong.

Meanwhile, Eldrid was looking down at the ground, trembling—not from fear, like I often did, but for a different reason. This was the calm before the storm. I wasn't sure why, but she was furious.

The guys misinterpreted our silence, and they grinned mockingly. “What’s wrong? Scared?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Very. Maybe the most scared I’ve ever been,” I said dryly.

“Ha! About time you realized what you’ve done. But it’s too late to apologize now.”

They definitely had the wrong idea. I actually was scared—not of them but of Eldrid and the molten fury boiling inside her. I was easily intimidated by scary faces, but they felt like nothing in comparison. After all, there was a ticking time bomb right next to me. But they were right about one thing: it was too late to apologize. The countdown had begun, and there was no avoiding the brutal beatdown that awaited them.

“You bastards...” growled Eldrid in a low voice, still trembling with her barely contained rage.

“Huh? You sayin’ something?” asked one of the guys.

“We were having such a good time before you ruined it,” she said.

“What?”

“Oh, I’m gonna step over there, El,” I said as I moved away, sensing imminent danger.

“Right,” she replied.

I could’ve fought them alongside her, but I’d only get in the way. I instinctively understood that she needed to blow off steam properly. If I impeded her in any way, something else could end up taking collateral damage. Maybe five or six buildings would be burned down. Besides, my lightning could be fatal, so I didn’t want to use it against low-level humans or people without some sort of resistance to magic.

Anyway, Eldrid exploded. It was as if she'd become a super version of a certain race of vegetable-themed aliens or entered a super mode from a certain robot-fighting anime. She unleashed a golden aura tinged with a red hue, which reminded me of a legendary warrior with a gentle heart who was awakened by intense rage. Her visible aura was actually a mixture of dense mana and energy stemming from her otherworldly power, a dangerous combination. It was making this "fwish, fwish" sound, and I could hear familiar dialogues and imagine an anime episode with fifteen to twenty minutes of nothing but tremors on a certain planet named Namek playing in my head. It played at seven o'clock on every Wednesday night, which was the worst time slot possible because that was when the baseball games were on too.

"You've done it now," she said. "Your whatever family is getting wiped out and disbanded today."

I had a feeling getting disbanded would be the least of their problems. Imagining them being reduced to a bloody pulp by Eldrid wasn't hard considering she could solo a Storm Raider, the boss of the Floating Garden at depth level 48.

RIP.

"You think you can bluff your way out of this?" asked the big guy.

"You'll see if I'm bluffing when you eat my Woof Buster," said Eldrid.

"Wow..." I said, making an awkward expression.

"Woof Buster" was a pretty cute name for an attack. It hardly seemed fitting for how serious the situation was.

Wait, I think I've heard of a similar move name before...

Eldrid took in a deep breath, then she unleashed her devastating attack.

"WOOOOOOF!" She projected her voice like a sonic boom.



The move's name itself was cute like a puppy's bark, but its volume was anything but cute. It made the ground and even the air tremble, violently spreading out shock waves that made me worry for the buildings around us. It was more like a directional sonic weapon than a loud shout.

Her sound wave attack targeted not just one or two of our unwelcome guests but the entire entourage standing before her. Everyone in her line of fire was mangled and sent flying backward. It was as if she'd hit them with a hypercompressed tornado, and it was terrifying to behold. I wondered what it took for her lungs to be able to create such forceful waves. Maybe they'd become superpowered as she'd leveled up so much.

Having completely emptied her lungs, Eldrid took in a deep breath and exhaled. It wasn't even a cold winter day, yet she breathed out a puff of white air.

"Looks like there's still half of them to go," she said.

"Eek!"

Oh, that shriek hadn't been from me but from that guy they'd been calling "boss." I wasn't sure if he'd gotten lucky or if Eldrid hadn't hit him on purpose, but he hadn't been in the range of the previous attack and therefore was still alive. It was only a matter of time though since I could see an enraged golden retriever looming behind Eldrid.

"Wh-Who are you?" breathed the big guy.

"Me? I'm a Diver, rank 54, level 48," replied Eldrid.

"Ah... Uh..."

He could hardly speak. Of course he couldn't. As I'd mentioned earlier, thugs like him acting tough aboveground in Freida were typically around level 5 to 7. This guy was supposedly level 15, but that was hardly going to make a difference, to be honest. In contrast, Eldrid had the level of some of the most terrifying monsters in this world, and she was an ambitious Diver with a high Diver Rank to show for it. These thugs had an ice cube's chance in hell of putting up even the slightest challenge for her.

I couldn't help but wonder how they could be so careless when Divers could be found all around Freida. Anyone could've been a Diver regardless of how they looked. Not to mention, she was carrying a huge sword on her back. The only thing she could've done to make herself more obvious was to carry a sign that read "I'm a Diver," so it was completely reckless and brain-dead of them to have opposed her.

"Wh-What's someone like you doing here...?" he mumbled.

"Where do you think we are? Divers are all over Freida," said Eldrid, then she angrily furrowed her brows. "Don't worry. I won't kill you all the way, only around eighty percent or so."

She then secured her giant sword to its sheath using a string and charged toward the members of the what's-their-name family. If you were wondering who won, that'd be a silly question that didn't even merit a response. It'd been a while since I'd seen humans flying in the air, and it wasn't like in gag manga where people disappeared into the horizon without actually getting hurt.

It'd all ended so quickly that the word "eventually" wouldn't be appropriate here, but the whatever family had been completely wiped out. True to her word, Eldrid had beaten them to near death, but they were all still hanging on to their lives. They were in such bad shape that they wouldn't be up to no good for a while, but at least they got to keep all their limbs intact.

"Well, that was weird," I said.

"Yeah," said Eldrid, her shoulders slumped, ears flat, and tail dangling. She was obviously pretty bummed out.

"Well, we got rudely interrupted this time, but let's go explore around town again sometime," I said.

"Oh, okay!" she said, perking up suddenly to my surprise, but I was glad to see she was feeling better.

I'd need to think of a place for us to hang out together. Maybe I could take her around Japan like I'd done with Scrael.

Floor Twenty-Seven: The Circumstances of Dungeon Exploration

I was at the safe point in the Yellow Wall Vestiges with Scrael today, and I was in a somewhat, very, *extremely* dire situation. Scrael was crouching in front of me with the front part of her slitted outfit pulled up. I was sure you'd understand what that meant: I could see certain parts that I wasn't supposed to see.

"A-A-Aaah!" stammered Scrael.

"Uh, I, uh... It isn't my fault!" I blabbed in a fluster.

Scrael's face was turning a shade of red reminiscent of a boiled crab, a shrimp, or maybe an octopus. There was steam rising from it too.

One might wonder how we'd gotten here. To explain that, I'd need to go back in time a bit.

After school, I'd gone home and prepared for my trip to Do-Melta, then I'd headed to the main hall, ready for another day of leveling in the dungeon. There, I'd run into Scrael, and we'd spent some time hanging out in the dining hall together.

Scrael was drinking some orange juice—her favorite treat after soy sauce—gulping some Knorr corn soup, and eating salted bread. She was inhaling the beverage out of her eight-hundred-milliliter plastic bottle at an alarming rate. She sometimes bought some of my stock off me and would even ask me to buy some specifically for her on occasions.

Meanwhile, I was going through my final checks to prepare for the upcoming dive on route two by going through the items I'd need and their remaining stock. After making sure everything was good to go, I stuffed them back into my bag.

"Time to go?" asked Scrael.

“Yeah, I think it’s about time,” I said.

Scrael stuffed the rest of her salted bread into her mouth, washed it down with her orange juice, then let out a cute little burp.

I looked over to see her bottle completely empty.

“You...drank the whole thing?” I asked.

“Was I not supposed to?” she asked guiltily.

“No, it’s fine, but don’t you feel bloated?”

“I can handle it,” she said.

“Why did you chug it, anyway? You could’ve just taken your time.”

“But then I wouldn’t have finished in time,” she said, implying she was trying to keep up with me. And sure enough, she added with her usual unamused expression, “If you want me to go with you, I can tag along for your sake.”

Her phrasing had changed as of late. Ever since I’d messed with her a while back, she’d started offering to dive with me instead of saying “I wouldn’t mind diving with you.” She never said she wanted to go with me outright though. Apparently, that was where she drew the line.

“But I’m going on route two today. It might not be all that interesting,” I said.

“That’s fine,” she replied.

“Then I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Okay.”

“Cool, I’ll let Ashley know,” I said, then I rose from my seat and walked toward the receptionist’s window.

“Hi, Ashley, I’m here again!” I said with a wave.

“As usual,” said Ashley with a resigned smile.

There weren’t many other Divers who visited the dungeon as often as I did, so I couldn’t blame her for that reaction. According to her, I was a special breed.

We only exchanged a few words for the reception process as usual, then Carbuncle poked its head out behind the window. I’d ended up taking it home

with me when it'd first followed me from the Paradise Hot Springs. But it'd done whatever it'd felt like in general, whether it be chilling in my room, following me on adventures, or staying in the main hall. It'd stayed in the main hall after tagging along with me on my last adventure and had been staying with Ashley since.

"How has Carbuncle been?" I asked.

"You mean Mew? Well-behaved and adorable. The other receptionists love it too."

There was no denying it was adorable and beautiful. And it seemed to have gotten a new name again. Naming it after how its meow sounded felt kind of lazy, but Sensei's "Mittens" and the way I addressed it by its species name wasn't any better.

"Does it get tired of getting so much attention?" I asked.

"Oh, don't worry about that. It isn't here all the time. It wanders in and out of the dungeon or climbs up that shelf whenever it pleases," said Ashley.

"Sounds like it's been living freely."

"Yep. What a good little furball," she said and patted its head.

Carbuncle narrowed its eyes, seemingly enjoying the head pats. It kind of reminded me of a bunny, though it ate cat food, so I wasn't sure what animal it resembled most.

As I talked to Ashley about Carbuncle, it suddenly started growling at me, looking rather upset.

"Meeew..."

"Huh? What's gotten into you?" I said, puzzled.

I hadn't done anything to upset it or anything at all, really.

I moved closer and tried to touch it, then it grasped my outstretched hand with its paws and started sucking on my finger.

"Oh, that's why," I said.

Carbuncle closed its eyes and savored my mana. Basically, it was upset

because it hadn't been able to feast on my mana. That was pretty unreasonable considering it'd stayed here of its own accord.

It was eventually satisfied and released my hand, the gemstone on its forehead now completely purple. I'd yet to see it reflect magic or use the mana it'd absorbed from me to attack, so I wondered what that was like. Maybe I'd be able to find out if we went dungeon diving together.

I took some cat food out of my Dimension Bag, placed it on the counter, and said, "I brought some food for Carbuncle. Please feed it once in a while when it's time for it to eat."

"Is this food for kitties?" asked Ashley.

"Yes. I asked a certain someone what it eats, and he told me cat food is fine. And sure enough, it ate that stuff right up."

"I see," she said, then she stared at the picture on the bag. "Wow, that's one realistic drawing."

Photos weren't a thing in this world yet, so she'd assumed it was an illustration.

Anyway, Carbuncle was an omnivore, and I'd seen it catch bugs with its paws and eat them along with flowers and fruits. I'd seen it munching on fish too. It really did whatever it pleased when we adventured together.

I took a piece of cat food out of the bag and offered it to Carbuncle. It grabbed the pellet with its paws and chomped it right away. I could hear satisfying crunching noises with each bite.

"It doesn't just go straight for the food with its mouth. It always uses its paws to grab it before eating," I noted.

"I've seen it eating while sitting down too," said Ashley.

"How strange," I said.

"Right?"

We talked for a while longer, then I remembered I'd brought other snacks too.

“Oh, that’s right. Can you eat these too?” I said to Carbuncle as I took a tube of Churu, a favorite treat of house cats everywhere, out of my Dimension Bag.

I ripped the tube open and slowly squeezed out a bit of its contents, and Carbuncle started licking it immediately.

“Mew!” it meowed with its paws pressed against its cheeks. I’d never heard it sound so excited before.

The cat treat seemed to be a hit. I moved the tube away after feeding Carbuncle for a while, then it grabbed on to me and stretched its neck out. Whether it be mana or Churu, this little critter was a fiend when it came to eating.

“It can’t get enough of that stuff,” said Ashley.

“Seems so,” I said. “Okay, I’ll give you the rest. Calm down, will ya?”

“Mew! Mew!”

I fed it the rest of the Churu, and it licked the empty tube like a regular cat.

“Ashlay,” said a voice out of nowhere.

“What’s up, Nem?” asked Ashley.

The receptionist with a cat-ear hat on her head had called out from the next counter over. I assumed she had business with Ashley, and I was preparing to leave when Nem looked at me.

“Oh, hello, Nem,” I said.

“Hi... That smells, like, really good,” said Nem.

“Th-This?” I asked.

Nem was full of vigor in stark contrast to her usual sleepy, unmotivated self when she was doing reception work. Her eyes were glued to the empty Churu bag, and drool was running down her mouth.

“Um, this is a snack for cats!” I said. “It isn’t for humans!”

“That’s okay. Like, no problem,” she said, then she slurped her dribbling drool.

It was then that I realized she was a cat-type Tail. Upon closer inspection, there was a cat tail extending out from just above her butt.

“S-Still, you’re a person,” I protested.

“Just a taste. Come, lemme just have a little taste.”

“I don’t think I should—”

“Please. This is totally a once-in-a-lifetime request,” she pressed.

“It probably won’t hurt, but still...”

Nem looked just about ready to get on the ground and beg. I mean, there were some odd people out there who ate some of this stuff and called it a taste test. I really hadn’t expected her to be so adamant about it. This world was full of surprises. It was as if the people here were living in the year 3000.

Resigned, I ripped open another tube and handed it to her. Nem squeezed its contents out a bit and licked it. She then closed her eyes and tilted her head back as if her mind were immersed in some faraway land.

“When I put this paste in my mouth, I first felt the rich fragrance of fish. Then came a wave of deliciousness rushing in. It had a complex fishy flavor I’ve never tasted before. I close my eyes, and I see big fish swimming through the ocean,” she said.

“I see...”

“Amazing. Whoever made this, like, really gets cats.”

Ashley unexpectedly joined the conversation with a crazy request. “Nem, is that stuff really *that* good? Can I try some?”

“Ashley?! What are you saying?!” I said.

“She made it sound so good...” she said enviously.

“Like I said, it’s cat food! As in food for cats!”

“But everything you bring tastes good,” she protested.

“Maybe, but still!”

“No, this is *mine* now. I can’t give you any, Ashlay,” said Nem.

“Don’t be stingy, Nem! I just want a little taste!” argued Ashley.

What was happening? Why were humans fighting over a snack made for cats? Everyone from Do-Melta was such a glutton.

Meanwhile, Carbuncle had opened my bag of cat food and started digging into the pellets. It really was in its own world.

Things settled down after some time, then Ashley asked, “Is that all you need for today, Akira?”

“Actually, I’m also reporting in to go for a dive,” I said.

Ashley shook her head, then she gave me a grim look.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Listen, I just have a bad feeling about this.”

It wasn’t like her to say something like that. Usually, I’d tell her I was going to the dungeon, and she’d simply wish me luck, so this had completely come out of left field. The only times she’d insinuated that she didn’t want me to go to the dungeon were in the early days of my joining the guild.

“Hmm, but I’m feeling completely fine. I don’t have a cold, and I didn’t pull an all-nighter or anything. Scrael’s also going with me, and she’s fully healthy too,” I explained.

“I get that, but still... Where are you planning to go today, by the way?” she asked.

“Just my usual spot. I’ll be hunting Blood Bats in the Dark Corridors like always.”

“I see. I guess there’s no need to worry then,” she said, though she still didn’t sound fully convinced.

“I’m sure it’s gonna be a walk in the park, especially with Scrael there. Even if I get swarmed by bats, I’ve learned a move that can send them flying away.”

Still, I had to consider Ashley’s concern. There was a chance that she’d subconsciously sensed something from my demeanor or something. It was definitely something I couldn’t ignore.

“Do you think something bad has been building up?” I asked.

“I don’t think that’s it,” she replied.

“Then maybe it’s like a sixth sense kind of thing?”

“A what?”

“Oh, it’s like a premonition, I guess.”

Some phrases didn’t seem to translate well in Do-Melta. God’s translation power wasn’t always perfect.

“Anyway, I’ll remember to be careful,” I said.

“Good. Make sure you come back right away if something is off,” said Ashley.

“Will do.”

I always listened to Ashley whenever she spoke with that serious tone. As far as I knew, forty-six people across seven teams had never returned from the dungeon because they hadn’t heeded her warnings. Ashley’s intuition and perception were really like precognitive superpowers when it came to this sort of thing, so I trusted them wholeheartedly.

As I turned to leave, Carbuncle hopped onto my backpack with a “Mew.” It seemed to have decided it was tagging along for today’s adventure.

“Okay then, let’s go,” I said.

“Mew!”

I returned to Scrael with Carbuncle accompanying me and asked, “Ready to go, Scrael?”

“Yep,” she replied, then she noticed Carbuncle. She cocked her head inquisitively. “That’s the strange creature that has been hanging around the main hall lately.”

“This is a Carbuncle. Supposedly, it’s like a creature that’s somewhere between a monster and an animal. I guess it’s kind of like a monster impostor,” I said.

“I don’t get it,” said Scrael.

“Mew, mew,” said Carbuncle.

“I don’t know much about it either. I recently found it in the dungeon, and it followed me here. It tags along with me every once in a while,” I explained.

“Hmm. Well, it’s cute,” said Scrael.

I handed Carbuncle to Scrael, and she held it in her arms. Her expression had softened into a smile. Fluffy was justice, after all.

“I’ll name it Carlburg the First,” she said, giving it a name out of nowhere. A rather eccentric one too.

I looked at her, saying nothing. I couldn’t really argue considering I hadn’t even given it a real name, but Ashley, Sensei, and now Scrael all addressed it differently.

“Anyway, this will be our group for today,” I said.

“Okay.”

“Mew!”

As we started walking toward the dungeon, I overheard a rather unpleasant conversation.

“Hey, check out that Long-Ears over there.”

“She sure is fine. Nice body too.”

“Man, what I’d give to make her mine!”

I looked over to find a group of older Divers leering at Scrael. There was a distinct look in their eyes that seemed common among people who got arrested for a certain type of crime. I had a feeling they wouldn’t have hesitated to get grabby if they’d been on a train with a high school girl. There was a distinct ickiness to their gaze, and they made no effort to hide it.

As always, Scrael attracted all sorts of attention. Teams often tried to recruit her for her skills as a Diver, but I’d also heard people often tried to approach her for her good looks.

“Those guys are awful,” I said.

“Humans are always like that,” said Scrael. “Fools. They really are

irredeemable.”

“I don’t think it’s fair to collectively judge all humans,” I said. “I mean, I’m human too.”

“You’re not like them. You’re kind, and you have a sense of justice.”

“Huh? Y-You think so?” I asked, flattered.

“I wouldn’t be with you if I didn’t. I would’ve kicked your ass instead,” she said.

“I guess that means you trust me to an extent, huh?”

“Of course. I trust you,” said Scrael, then she pressed up close to me.

“Whaaat?! Scrael?!”

“You saved me that one time. You didn’t make any weird demands either.”

“Well...right,” I said, suddenly self-conscious with her body against mine.

Scrael suddenly gave me a displeased look and said, “You’re a fool in a different way though.”

“Huh? Did I do something messed up to you?” I asked, confused.

“No. You didn’t do anything. That’s why you’re a fool.”

“What? Huh?”

Scrael moved her face closer to mine, but I just returned a confused stare. She puffed out her cheeks.

“Yep, you’re a fool. So dense,” she sighed, seemingly super discontent.

Why? What did I do wrong?

And so, Scrael and I were off to explore the dungeon. We walked through the familiar Great Forest Ruins at depth level 5 and arrived at an area near the Misty Border leading to route two.

“The rabbits are calm today,” noted Scrael, patting a Walker Rabbit on the head.

Walker Rabbits usually unleashed their Rabbit Kenpo on sight, but this one seemed to be in the mood for some head pats and was making satisfied

squeals. It was curled up in front of Scrael for her to more easily reach its head and was rubbing its head against her hand. The juxtaposition of its big body and its actions made it all the cuter.

“There, there,” said Scrael as she stroked the friendly rabbit’s head. This went on for a while longer, then the rabbit stood up and hugged her as if to show thanks.

Aw, I’m envious.

To be hugged by what was basically a giant stuffed animal sounded like pure bliss. It was like earning a reward without even clearing the scenario. Scrael did end up getting a bunch of fur on her, but it was a small price to pay to fully recover your sanity and then some.

Eldrid had mentioned the rabbits were friendly and had given her hugs, but I hadn’t actually thought it was true until now. Just recently, I’d beaten one up for attacking me with Rabbit Kenpo, so this behavior was a complete one-eighty. These creatures sure were strange.

The two were eventually satisfied, and the rabbit waved goodbye before leaving. Scrael waved back and walked to where I was waiting. There was fur all over her, so I took a brush out of my Dimension Bag and brushed the fur off.

“I’m so envious that you got a hug from that rabbit,” I said.

“They don’t give you hugs?” asked Scrael.

“Nope, never.”

“Really? I would’ve thought you’re more likely to get hugged than I am.”

“I dunno, but they never seem to be in the mood for hugs with me,” I said.
“They always want to attack me with Rabbit Kenpo or race me.”

“Mew.” Carbuncle rubbed its head against me as if to console me. I appreciated that.

“Let’s start heading for the next floor,” I said.

“Yeah,” agreed Scrael.

As I was about to step into the Misty Border, I noticed Scrael wasn’t following

me. Confused, I turned around to find her standing still.

“Scrae?” I asked.

“Don’t worry... It’s nothing,” she said.

“Yeah? Okay, then.”

I wondered if something had happened, but she wasn’t injured and didn’t seem to be sick or anything. We’d only run into a Monoceros Deer and a Wooden Soldier, a rare monster; both hadn’t given us any trouble at all. The Monoceros Deer had run away when I’d shot lightning at it, and Scrael had made short work of the Wooden Soldier with her martial arts.

“Weak,” she’d said. “No wonder its rank is lower than a Wooden General’s.”

According to her, all sorts of dangerous monsters appeared around her Long-Ears village. I couldn’t help but wonder about the roly-polies she often mentioned. I *really* didn’t want to encounter any roly-poly-type monsters or bug types in general, like that monster that had appeared in —, the floor I’d gone to with Lion-Maru. I couldn’t remember the name of that place for some reason.

Anyway, it was time to head to the next floor. Our destination was the Infinite Gray Castle at depth level 10, which was where I’d run into Miguel’s group a while back. We warped into the Castle, and the transition from the lush greenery of the forest to the monotone of the castle was quite jarring.

“I really can’t get used to this place,” said Scrael, wincing at our new surroundings.

“Yeah, it makes my eyes water,” I agreed.

This place really felt bad for the eyes. It was all white, black, and gray, and these monotone colors were quite a pain. It also messed with my sense of distance. I’d heard old TVs used to look like this, and it made me wonder how people had dealt with it back then.

“The rubble here can be dangerous too,” I said.

“And we need to look out for the parts that are about to crumble,” added Scrael.

“Yeah, that too.”

“This is ruining all of that happiness from earlier,” she complained.

“Are you doing okay, Carbuncle?” I asked.

“Mew,” it replied.

There was energy in its voice, so I probably didn’t need to worry.

Scrael patted Carbuncle on the head and said, “That’s good, Carlburg the First.”

She seemed to be pretty set on that name. I wasn’t going to argue.

We made our way down the long corridor, and I occasionally used eye drops to hydrate my eyes. The design of this floor was quite complex, but I’d already mapped out the optimal route to the next Misty Border. I was glad this place wasn’t like certain Mystery Dungeons, because that would’ve been awful to navigate.

“Have you been here a lot, Scrae?” I asked.

“Not really. The area deeper north is annoying, so I avoid exploring this area,” she replied.

“North? I haven’t been up there before. What’s over there?”

“Doors installed sideways; stairs leading into walls. It’s all a mess,” she said.

“Wow. So it’s like the Winchester Mystery House over there.”

I’d always wanted to visit that place if I ever had the chance to go to America, but I’d never expected a similar place to exist in this world. A part of me was curious, but on the other hand, I wanted to proceed on my usual route without taking any unnecessary risks.

Scrael’s with me today, and I should go when I’m alone. Or maybe it’s a bad idea to go solo.

“There’s something wrong with whoever made this place. Who’d make something like that in this endlessly gray building?” I wondered aloud.

“Gimmicks are to be expected in a castle like this, but they have no consideration for people who’d actually live here,” said Scrael.

We continued complaining about this floor. Every floor had its inconveniences, so I often complained to my companions whenever I went dungeon diving with someone else. The designs for these places really didn't make sense, and this floor was as if it was made for the sole purpose of getting people lost and trapped inside. It probably didn't even have the facilities to defend against invaders.

"Meeew..." growled Carbuncle.

I felt a presence behind us. I'd always thought sensing the presence of others was an ability that only existed in battle manga, but I'd learned how to do it through leveling up and going through Sensei's rigorous training.

Scrael had probably learned it long ago though. She'd already turned around to see what was approaching.

Behind us was a Backstabber, a sword-shaped monster that appeared in the Infinite Gray Castle. About seventy centimeters long, it had a core stone embedded in the handguard. It was a vile creature that would emit a purple aura whenever it detected Divers, and it'd lunge at them from behind.

The Backstabber began to exude its purple aura (this purple had nothing to do with lightning). But just as the monster looked like it was about to lunge at us, Scrael made a move.

"This one's easy," she said as she instantly closed the gap, went behind the Backstabber, and grabbed it by the hilt.

The Backstabber struggled to get free from her grasp, but she held on tight. It was odd seeing a sword squirming around, but these things could also fly at people, so there was no point in questioning that.

"What are you gonna do with it?" I asked. "I usually beat them with magic."

"This," she said, then she casually slammed the Backstabber against the stone wall.

"Whaaat..."

Flabbergasted, I watched her as she repeatedly slammed it several more times. It was a surreal sight. There wasn't even the slightest hint of

swordsmanship in her swings. I almost felt sorry for it, but then I remembered it was a monster.

The Backstabber's blade eventually shattered, and its core stone rolled across the floor.

Raising her fist, Scrael said, "Victory."

"That was kind of cruel," I said.

"This is the easiest way to do it."

"Maybe you're right. You can avoid touching the blade that way too."

This place was full of monsters based on weapons and armor, perhaps because of the environment. Maybe the key to beating them was simply to swing them around recklessly like Scrael had just done.

Scrael's long ears twitched, then clanging noises could be heard from down the passageway.

"They must've heard the noise," she said.

"I wonder how. They don't have any ears," I said.

We already knew what was coming our way. They were a familiar sight in the Infinite Gray Castle: Living Armors. Lots of them. Even from a distance, I could see there were around ten of them. They hobbled toward us, their movements ungraceful since nothing occupied the interior of their armor. It was like a scene from a horror movie, but they weren't strong at all, so there was no need to worry. I absolutely hated when they pretended to be normal armor and jump scared people though.

These things were annoying because I had to use magic to defeat them. There were quite a lot of them, so I prepared to cast a spell. But then I heard something.

"Mew!" yelled Carbuncle as it jumped off my backpack. It unleashed mana from its forehead, making a crackling noise as it emitted a field of purple electricity all around it. A moment later, lightning bolts shot out from the electricity field toward the Living Armors.

The Living Armors tried to evade the attack, but there were too many of them

packed in the passageway. They were struck by the lightning blast and reduced to heaps of scrap metal all at once.

“Oooh,” said Scrael.

“Whoa, I’ve heard it can reflect magic, but this is my first time seeing it shoot magic on its own.”

Being able to use such powerful magic without incantations was super convenient. I could cast spells without incanting myself, but it was far less powerful that way, so I usually used incantations.

Carbuncle looked at me with a self-satisfied expression. I reached out to pat its head, thinking this little critter had quite the personality, but it leaped onto my arm, clung on with all four limbs, and sucked on my finger as usual. It reminded me of those videos on YouTube and TikTok where cats hung on to their owners’ arms and didn’t let go.

Scrael gave me a dubious look. “What...is it doing?”

“Replenishing mana, I think. It’s been sucking my mana since we first met,” I explained.

“It’s kind of cute.”

“It’s cute and all, but yeah...”

It might seem cute, but it was draining my mana. It was kind of brutal when you think about it.

I let Carbuncle recharge its mana for a while, then I collected the core stones with Scrael.

Suddenly, I realized something. “I haven’t been useful at all so far, have I?”

“We’re still on the easy floors,” said Scrael. “There’s nothing for you to do yet.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Just rest. Every Diver knows you should let mages reserve their energy on the early floors,” she insisted.

“I know, but still.”

It didn't feel right that there was no opportunity for me to shine. I didn't want her to think my existence here was pointless.

A while later, something happened on the floor after the Infinite Gray Castle, the Yellow Wall Vestiges at depth level 20.

"Get away. You creep me out. Come back when you get some eyelids," I said to some Hypno Eyes as I shot my water gun filled with Kinkan anti-itch liniment at them, making them sizzle and fall to the ground.

Suddenly, Scrael froze.

"Scrae? Did you get hit by their hypnosis wave or something?" I asked.

I'd heard of people falling asleep where they stood because of it, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"No, it isn't that," said Scrael.

"Oh? Something else, then?" I asked, then I turned toward Carbuncle and said, "Oh, can you handle those ones over there?"

"Mew!" replied Carbuncle, then it went off to defeat the remaining eyeballs.

Scrael nodded softly, then said, "Can I ask you for a favor?"

"What is it?"

"I want to stop by the next safe point," she said.

"Sure, but if you wanna rest, wouldn't it be better to go a little further? The next stop is pretty small. Or are you not feeling well?" I said.

"It's not that, but I can't wait that long."

"Why not?"

"W-Well..."

Scrael fidgeted, her face red. She seemed embarrassed about something. I was relieved to hear she wasn't sick, but I wasn't sure what the issue was.

I asked her again, then she looked down as she mumbled, "I...need to relieve myself."

"Oh! Okay! I understand! Sorry about that! That makes sense!"

“Jeez, quiet down!” shouted Scrael, looking embarrassed.



I'd been expecting something far more serious, but she just needed to pee. I thought it was rather anticlimactic.

"It's because you chugged that orange juice earlier," I said.

"But I was gonna go dive with you, so I thought I should hurry," she replied.

I couldn't really blame her if she'd hurried so she could catch up with me.

There were restrooms of sorts at the safe points located on each floor, but on these building floors, there was an unspoken rule that you weren't supposed to relieve yourself at some random spot unless it was an absolute emergency. It wasn't much of an issue out in nature, like a forest or a grassy field, but a building would become pretty nasty if people excreted all over the place. People generally took care of their business before entering the Yellow Wall Vestiges, but that wasn't always possible. We couldn't be worrying about bathrooms all the time when dungeon diving, and I'd heard it wasn't too uncommon for people to answer nature's call in front of their teammates.

Realizing that, I said, "Oh, come to think of it, I don't think there's a restroom in the upcoming safe point."

"Ah! You're right!" said Scrael, horrified.

Some safe points had such facilities installed—basically, partitions to hide you from view—but that wasn't always the case. Smaller safe points that were meant to be used as emergency shelters against monsters omitted them to secure enough space for people to hide inside.

"But I don't think I can hold it in much longer," said Scrael.

"R-Right! I get that!"

"I'll have to do it here..."

We didn't have much of a choice. I did have all sorts of camping gear including a simple toilet, but I didn't have a partition. Though, it'd probably be fine as long as I looked out for her.

And so, we made our way past monsters and entered the next safe point. Luckily, no other Divers were around at this time, so we had the place to ourselves. This one was supposed to be for emergency shelter, so it was pretty

tiny.

“I’ll have to use the corner of this safe point,” said Scrael.

“Yeah, there’s no other option,” I agreed.

Scrael was crossing her legs as if she was five seconds from exploding; a strong breeze probably could’ve dislodged the floodgates. I’d never seen her in such a precarious state before.

I quickly assembled my compact emergency toilet, which was just a small cardboard box covered in a plastic bag with an absorbent tossed inside. It was quick, simple, and very useful for times like these.

“Do it here,” I said.

“Th-Thanks,” she said timidly.

“I’ll be outside.”

Just as I spun on my heel to stand outside the safe point, I heard something.

“...we should.”

“Then...”

“...right?”

Voices could be heard from the path we’d taken here, and they sounded familiar. They were from the guys who’d been giving Scrael nasty looks earlier at the guild hall.

“No way, are they heading this way?” I wondered aloud.

I had to do something, or they were about to walk in on Scrael relieving herself.

“Akira! Help!” said Scrael.

“R-Right! But what do I do? What do I do?!”

The voices were getting closer.

“Scrael! Hurry up and let it out!” I said.

“But you’re still in here!” she protested.

“I know, but still!”

“Mew.”

“Carbuncle?! You stay quiet for a bit, okay?” I said.

We really couldn't have those guys see Scrael like this. I had to hide her somehow.

I enormously blundered by not realizing I should've gone outside to buy some time. I was in a complete panic and pulled out a wrapping cloth from my Dimension Bag. I was going to take a page out of my ninja otaku friend Kogano Shinobu's book and use the ninja art of camouflage.

I held the piece of cloth up behind me and cast a generic illusion spell, Stealth Hermit. The spell would blend the target with its surroundings so anyone coming this way wouldn't be able to see what was behind the cloth.

Phew, that was close. I can't have those jerks seeing her like this.

And so, I'd camouflaged everything behind the cloth without much thought, thinking the issue had been resolved. But in fact, I'd been standing facing Scrael at that moment.

When I opened my eyes, Scrael was before me with the front of her tribal outfit pulled up to her knees, her sensitive parts completely exposed. Yes, that included the groin area and the little bush growing there.

Scrael yelled in a hushed tone, “A-Akira! Why are you facing this way?!”

“Well, uh, this is just the cool way to use this spell, or ninjutsu, you see. I couldn't help it!” I said quickly.

“Just shut up and look that way!”

“The thing is, it's hard for me to turn around like this...” I tried to argue.

“Mew,” interjected Carbuncle.

“What is it, Carbuncle?” I asked, then I noticed it was pointing toward the entrance with its little paw.

“I wanna make a bit more money.”

“Should we go to the next floor then?”

“At our level? Nah, no way.”

The voices were getting closer and closer.

We immediately closed our mouths.

The footsteps were getting louder along with the voices. Eventually, they came up to the passageway right next to the safe point entrance.

A moment later, they passed by the safe point. They’d never intended to stop by in the first place.

The voices grew distant, and I said, “Looks like they left.”

“Good...” breathed Scrael.

As we let out a sigh of relief, it happened.

“Ah.”

“Ah...”

The sudden drop in tension seemed to have made her relax and opened the floodgates. A remarkably loud sound was heard as a considerable amount of liquid was suddenly unleashed. Her position seemed to have shifted as she’d relaxed, and she completely missed the makeshift toilet and went all over the floor, which was immediately stained. There was no way for Scrael or I to stop the damage, of course.

“Ah, ah, aaah...” she said quietly, her face red and completely helpless.

The discharge, which had been coming out at an arc, gradually weakened until it stopped completely.

I was looking right at her, but she couldn’t even scream as the Divers from earlier would hear. An awkward silence hung in the air as neither of us knew what to say.

Not able to handle the awkwardness much longer, I said to Scrael, “U-Um...”

She stared at the ground, not saying a word.

“Well, uh, how do I say this...?” I continued stuttering. “That was very regrettable, and I’m sorry—”

“Stop. Don’t talk,” she said simply.

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

I put the wrapping cloth away and stood at attention. Meanwhile, Scrael cleaned up after herself, then she stomped on the makeshift toilet—hard.

“Akira, you stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid...” she said.

“I-I’m sorry! There was nothing I could do!”

She sobbed, her face red and eyes full of tears. “I’m so ashamed. I’ve never been so embarrassed...”

It went without saying that the return trip was incredibly awkward. Scrael wouldn’t even answer me when I talked to her, and she just stomped her way forward.

She took her frustration out on monsters by blowing them into pieces with excessively powerful attacks. Her victims included Lizard Skins and Golems, and she even used a Jinshu move called Blast Palm on one of the bosses on this floor, a Don Lizard, tearing it asunder with a single blow.

“Scary...” I said under my breath.

“Mew...” agreed Carbuncle.

Still, she looked kind of cute with her cheeks puffed out in displeasure.

Ever since this incident, Scrael and I occasionally had awkward moments when we saw each other and remembered this day.

Epilogue: Here Comes Another Outing

Eldrid, a high-ranking Diver, was at the Divers Guild to report on her dive to her receptionist at window six.

“Maya, can I get your assessment for today?” asked Eldrid.

“Oh, Eldrid! Good work again today!” said Maya.

“Thanks. I just went for a quick one today, so I don’t have much to report.”

“You haven’t been going to the high-depth-level floors lately. What’s up?”

“Oh, well, remember what happened a while back? I thought I should keep my feet on the ground for a while,” said Eldrid.

“Ah, you mean *that* incident... Oh, that reminds me!” said Maya. She moved her face closer with a grin. “Sooo, how’s it been with Kudo since? Well?”

“Wh-What do you mean? There’s nothing between us...” mumbled Eldrid.

“Reeeally?”

“Yes, really! I mean, we’ve dived together, and we’ve met outside the guild sometimes, but that’s about it.”

Maya frowned, unamused by that answer.

“How boring. No progress at all? That’s no good, you know. Someone else might scoop him up before you do.”

“That won’t happen... W-Would it?” asked Eldrid.

“It could. And it looks like you won’t like that,” said Maya.

“N-No, I didn’t mean it like that!” denied Eldrid as she waved her arms around, but the movement of her tail gave away her panic. “Really, there’s nothing between us. Last time we were together, all we did was walk around Freida...”

“Hmm, you’ll need to make more progress than that.”

“You think so too? I mean, what are you talking about?!”

As they continued on this topic, the neighboring receptionist at window seven joined the conversation.

“What are you two talking about?” she asked.

“Hey, Ashley, it’s that thing we were talking about before, about Eldrid and your Kudo,” explained Maya.

“Oh, *that*. What happened afterward? I’m curious,” said Ashley.

“You two...” Eldrid growled at the two gossip lovers, her hands balled up into fists.

“Eldrid, you’ll need to be more assertive if you want to get anywhere,” said Maya.

“Yeah, Kudo is...well, terribly dense,” agreed Ashley.

“Really?” asked Eldrid.

“Yep. He doesn’t even realize it when girls try to flirt with him,” said Ashley.

Eldrid’s tail shot straight up. “Th-There are girls who flirt with him?!”

“Huh? Yeah, there are,” said Ashley.

“No way... There are...?” said Eldrid quietly, her tail anxiously swinging from side to side.

Maya grinned and said, “I knew it. Why don’t you just admit how you feel about him?”

“What? Ah, no! That isn’t what I meant! Really!” denied Eldrid, but it was too late.

They went back and forth a few more times, then Maya asked, “So, how have the adventures been with him?”

“There haven’t been any problems... Actually, his diving skills might be better than mine,” said Eldrid.

“But you’re stronger than him, right?”

“My level is higher than his, so yeah. And warriors aren’t really comparable to

ages,” said Eldrid. Then she remembered a previous conversation with him. “Also, he’s supposedly beaten up one of the seven leaders of Kaoloon.”

“Excuse me?” asked Maya, completely flabbergasted.

“Yeah, I understand your reaction,” said Eldrid.

“I mean, that’s...kind of hard to believe.”

“But considering his skills, I have to admit it’s possible. Besides...” Eldrid trailed off.

“What?” asked Maya.

“No, never mind. What do you think?” Eldrid asked Ashley.

Ashley’s expression grew serious. “I think it’s possible with Kudo. Also, it was a little while after he became a Diver that I started hearing about Obses Ord’s defeat.”

“Really?” asked Maya.

“Yep. And he’s incredibly strong. That’s why I was surprised when he recently told me it’s only been half a year since he learned how to use magic,” said Ashley.

“If that’s true, it would mean he was just a magic newbie of a few months when he defeated Obses Ord!” said Maya.

“But he does have the level to show for it.”

As the two receptionists pondered over the recently born Dungeon Phantasma, Kudo Akira appeared at the Divers Guild entrance.

“Hello— Oh! El’s here. Hi,” he said.

“Akira!” said Eldrid.

The two walked up to greet each other.

Meanwhile, the two gossip lovers whispered to each other.

“He’s calling her by a nickname.”

“And she’s calling him by his first name now.”

“Those two...” grumbled Eldrid, her hands balled up into fists again.

“Are you done for the day?” Akira asked Eldrid.

“Yeah, I just got back,” she replied.

“Ah. Been working hard, huh?”

“No, I just went for a light run...” said Eldrid shyly.

Akira looked like an idea had just come to him and said, “We talked about going somewhere together the other day. Do you still wanna go?”

“Y-Yeah! I’m good to go anytime!” said Eldrid.

“I’m thinking we can go to the place I’m from.”

“What? You’re not from Freida?”

“Nope. Wanna check it out?”

And so, Akira’s plan to bring a guest to Japan for the second time had begun.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. This is Hitsuji Gamei.

Thank you so much for picking up *After-School Dungeon Diver* volume 3. A lot of people buy ebooks nowadays, so "picking up" may not be the right phrase, but I'd like to thank everyone who purchased this volume.

This is the third volume of the series, and I understand this is around the time many light novels hit a wall and end up getting discontinued. If they aren't popular enough, the series ends there, but they can continue to be published if they can secure enough sales. Lately, many series have ended at the first or second volume without reaching the third, which is quite a difficult situation to be in as an author.

Maybe more copies have been sold thanks to the convenience of ebooks. I've definitely been benefiting from them, for which I'm very thankful.

In the third volume of *After-School Dungeon Diver*, a surprising development awaits not only Akira but also all readers: "that person" appears in their true form, which was never depicted in the web version of this novel. Karei's lovely illustration should be featured right before their appearance too. I can't help but pump my fist. *Thank you.*

I think the main theme this time is Akira being pulled into all sorts of adventures. He gets kidnapped by Sensei, gets dragged along by Scrael, and gets tricked by Lion-Maru into going somewhere. There aren't many food-themed episodes where they eat in the dungeon, but there's a lot going on on the potion side, so I'd be thrilled if you enjoy it. Maybe there'll be more food-related episodes in the next volume...

Lastly, 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.









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After-School Dungeon Diver: Level Grinding in Another World Volume 3

by Hitsuji Gamei

Translated by Shoji Izumiya Edited by N@TSUKI

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