



HITSUJI
GAMEI
ILLUSTRATOR:
KAREI

2

AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
WORLD



HITSUJI
GAMEI
ILLUSTRATOR:
KAREI

AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
WORLD



AUTHOR:
**HITSUJI
GAMEI**
ILLUSTRATOR:
KAREI

AFTER-SCHOOL

DUNGEON DIVER:

LEVEL GRINDING
IN ANOTHER
WORLD



AKIRA KUDO

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 interested in all things erotic.

**"QUINARY MAGIC:
HORIZON LIGHT PILLAR."**

Then, branches of lightning pierced downward into the Four-Armed Goat and its surroundings.

MIGUEL HYDE JUNKERS

Akira's friend and leader of Bacchus Hawks. A skilled warrior and a womanizer.

She used it to scoop up
some unagi and rice
with some sauce, then
took a bite.

"Waaaaaah?!"



Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Prologue: Where the Gods Are](#)
4. [Floor Twelve: Let's Go to Modern Japan](#)
5. [Floor Thirteen: Nuisances at the Main Hall](#)
6. [Floor Fourteen: Fluffy Is Justice](#)
7. [Floor Fifteen: The Dangerously Good Creamy Stuff](#)
8. [Floor Sixteen: Trouble at the Rankings Chart](#)
9. [Floor Seventeen: This World Needs More Salt!](#)
10. [Floor Eighteen: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route Two! Part One](#)
11. [Floor Nineteen: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route Two! Part Two](#)
12. [Floor Twenty: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route Two! Part Three](#)
13. [Floor Twenty-One: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route Two! Part Four](#)
14. [Epilogue: Alas, I've Been Kidnapped!](#)
15. [Afterword](#)
16. [Bonus Short Story](#)
17. [About J-Novel Club](#)
18. [Copyright](#)

Prologue: Where the Gods Are

I was at God's—Ameithys's—place today. And no, I didn't mean I'd died and gotten sent to his place. I was well and alive, and there was no surprise twist at the end where I'd been a ghost the whole time. I always had to visit this place whenever I traveled between my world and this one. It was a transit point of sorts, and I had to pay my respects to God every time.

This time, Scrael was with me, so I wasn't alone for once. I'd been hanging out at the Divers Guild and thinking about what to do for the day when I'd encountered her. She'd expressed interest in visiting Japan, and so here we were.

Scrael curiously looked around the unfamiliar environment like a country bumpkin visiting a major city for the first time, but she was going to be even more fascinated once we arrived in modern Japan. Well, I'd had pretty much the same reaction as her the first time I'd been here, so I kept my mouth shut.

"This is your world?" asked Scrael.

"This is where God lives. We need to get his permission first," I explained.

"Your god is Lord Ameithys, right?"

"Yup."

Calling him "my god" may sound like I worshipped him or something, but I didn't mind since he'd indeed been taking care of me and he was the reason I could use magic. In fact, if he asked me to become his follower, I'd agree without being asked twice. I'd been regularly giving him gifts, so I was already covered in the "offerings" department.

This place was as strange as ever though. There'd been times when it'd just been a white room with a bunch of manga and novels, times when it'd been a library filled with books, and times when it'd looked like a regular living room in some foreign country. I'd even considered getting my eyes checked when I'd found him chilling on a beach chair at a private beach. This place was never

consistent, but I figured I was just being sent to wherever God was at the time.

We were at a library this time, and God was reading a book while lying down on the floor. If “lazy bum” was a phrase in the dictionary, you’d probably find his picture there. My impression of him was—well, he just seemed like some dude from my neighborhood. He had blond hair and rugged-looking features, but his chill and friendly personality made up the majority of what I thought of him.

“Hi God, I’m back,” I said to the relaxing Ameithys.

“Oh, Akira, what’s wrong? Did you forget something?” he asked.

“No, a friend wants to visit Japan, so I brought her with me,” I replied. “I think you mentioned it’d be fine before, but I thought I’d make sure.”

“That’s fine!” he said, then turned to us and waved with a smile.

He was so casual about it like I’d asked if I could go to a friend’s house down the street. The conversation was so casual that Scrael just stood there frozen, and she wouldn’t even react when I called her name. The gap between her expectations and reality had been far too wide.

Eventually, Scrael finally recovered and asked me, “Akira, Akira, is *that* him?”

“Yup. That’s Mr. Ameithys,” I said softly.

She narrowed her eyes. “You call a god ‘mister’? Sounds blasphemous.”

“Huh? But he said he doesn’t mind.”

“He’s right,” agreed Ameithys. “I don’t.”

Scrael looked a bit bitter but let it go and walked up to God.

“Lord Ameithys, I thank you for your daily blessings,” she said.

God rose from the ground, his demeanor now completely changed.

“Very well,” he responded. “Continue to keep your word and promise to your god and live a fruitful life.”

“Yes, Lord Ameithys,” said Scrael solemnly.

I could feel Ameithys’s godly majesty. He was usually so apathetic and

indolent, but he was now acting like a completely different person.

“You really seem like a god right now,” I said to him.

“Well, I am? I’m kind of expected to say this kind of stuff, ya know?” he said, pointing at me with both index fingers.

He could be silly like that—or maybe I should say he was frank and friendly.

As we continued our casual conversation, Scrael wordlessly shot me that dubious look again.

“Well, I mean, this is how we usually talk,” I said.

“You should still show a certain level of respect,” she argued.

I was already used to talking to him like this, so I didn’t know what to say. Besides, I’d already been showing respect, so there was nothing for her to worry about. And why was it okay for God to talk to me so frankly but not the other way around?

“So, she wants to visit your world, right?” Ameithys asked me.

“Yes. We’d be honored if you could give us your approval,” I said.

“Please, Lord Ameithys,” added Scrael.

He’d already said it was fine earlier, but we wanted to double-check for the official green light. We had to be careful about these things, or we could end up in a whole lot of trouble.

“I don’t mind,” he said, “but you shouldn’t go over there as is. Let’s take care of a few things first, starting with your ears.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Just a little magic. With my *godly powerrrs*,” he said in a jokey way, waving his hand around.

He’d made such a casual gesture that it didn’t seem like it’d actually done anything. Then, I looked over at Scrael and found that she now had human ears. They weren’t long or pointed; they were now rounded.

“Whoa! That’s amazing!” I exclaimed.

“Huh? Whaaat? What?”

Scrael looked around in confusion. She then seemed to realize she couldn't see her ears at the edge of her vision as usual, and she became even more bewildered.

Ameithys offered her a mirror and said, “Here you go.”

“My people's pride...” she said as she peered into the mirror, a look of despair on her face.

The color had drained out of her as if the world were ending, and her disappointment was palpable. Those trademark ears were her race's identity after all—their race was even named after them.

Seeing her devastation, Ameithys added in a fluster, “Oh, no. All I did was make them look different. They Haven't actually changed, okay? There's no need to worry.”

“Really?” I asked as I reached out to where her long ears should've been, thoroughly feeling them.

Sure enough, I could feel something there. The tips were pointy and stiff. And no, I wasn't talking about anything lewd.

“He's right. Your ears are still there,” I noted.

“Don't touch without permission,” said Scrael.

“Can I touch them?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said after hesitating.

I wasn't sure what that exchange had been about, but at least I'd gotten permission after the fact.

“Next, we'll take care of your clothes,” said Ameithys with another casual wave of his hand.

Scrael's clothes drastically changed from her usual outfit that looked like a Chinese dress. In an instant, a big, cute hat appeared on her head, and a blouse with a tie and a skirt wrapped around her. Her attire was reminiscent of a schoolgirl's outfit and looked very cute on her.



That was quite a useful technique. I wished I could use it too. I could probably be a great magician with a trick like that.

Ameithys then conjured a full-length mirror with a puff. Scrael saw her own reflection, and her expression brightened.

"It's cute. It's nothing like Akira's clothes," she said.

"Well, my outfit is pretty unique," I pointed out.

"I thought that's how everyone dresses in your world."

"They'd all have to be explorers if they were all wearing this."

They'd all probably had names like Kawaguchi or Fujioka and go on TV looking for strange things around the world like they'd done in a certain TV program. But if I had to step into the Amazon rainforest or something, at least I was dressed for the occasion. Though, I'd still have to be wary of infectious diseases and parasites.

"These clothes are a gift from me," said Ameithys.

"I'm most grateful," said Scrael with a ninety-degree bow.

Such reverence.

God didn't seem too concerned. "I'll also make it so you can speak and write some stuff in his world."

"Isn't 'some stuff' a little vague?" I asked.

"It'll be fine. You managed in this world without issues, didn't you?" he said.

"Well, that's true."

"Just go with the flow," he said. "People in your world go to foreign countries and just wing it, don't they? It's kind of like that."

I wanted to say a few things, but I kept my mouth shut. Indeed, people did travel like that and ended up fine, and I'd done the same thing myself in Do-Melta too.

I still had to take some time to teach Scrael about my world, so we decided to excuse ourselves.

Floor Twelve: Let's Go to Modern Japan

We'd ended up back in my room. The interior of my room—well, that wasn't all that important. There was a desk, a TV, a dresser, a laptop, and nothing else really special to note. It was your run-of-the-mill student's room.

Now it was time for Scrael's lessons, but I had to get changed first. A safari outfit was pretty much cosplay in modern Japan. I threw my mud-covered outfit in the laundry sometimes, and I felt bad for my mom when I did.

"Let me get changed first," I said.

"Okay," said Scrael.

I quickly got changed in the corner of my room. I didn't feel any reservations about changing with a girl in the room, probably because I'd gotten used to it from going back and forth between here and Do-Melta. With Scrael in particular, we'd already had that spicy episode at the washing area in the Divers Guild, so we didn't think much of it.

I changed into a casual outfit of a white tee and a pair of blue pants, and Scrael looked at me with a critical look.

"You look better in this outfit..."

"Well, I wear the other one because it's easy to move around in, and I don't mind if it gets dirty. This is what I usually wear," I explained.

"Is that how it is?" she asked.

"Yup."

"It's so weird that you wear the other outfit when you have decent aesthetic taste."

She really must have hated the safari look. It was a well-established style that could even be considered traditional, and I couldn't understand why she loathed it so much.

Suddenly, Scrael glanced out the window and said, "There are houses

everywhere.”

“Yeah. It’s like that everywhere in Japan—er, in my country’s major cities.”

She’d pointed out the housing problem here without knowing it. I figured she meant it was impressive that there were so many houses, but there were far too many people here for how little land there was, which was how it was in a place like Japan.

Anyway, I started teaching her about this world. She’d come in here completely blind, so she was full of questions. If I didn’t teach her some basic knowledge now, it’d be a matter of time until we ran into trouble.

Learning to use a toilet, for example, was crucial. I’d heard there were places with flushing restrooms in Do-Melta, but they weren’t the norm there, and they didn’t use Western-style toilets.

After giving her a rundown of the basics, I decided she was going to need to learn the rest on her own. That was what I’d done in her world, and things had ended up all right.

“Oh? Is she a foreign friend of yours?” asked my mom.

“Yup. She just came here, so I’ve been teaching her about Japan,” I said.

“Ah, that’s probably for the best if she’s new here.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Scrael.

“Nice to meet you too,” replied my mom. “I hope you two get along well. Are you about to go out?”

“Yup. I’m going to show her around for a bit,” I said.

There were surely some more things my mom could’ve asked in this bizarre situation, but she just giggled without prying any further. Maybe it was just her unassertive personality, but I was impressed that she’d just let it slide. Maybe she was just used to me having strange friends like my childhood friend Hiro.

I showed Scrael a TV, but she didn’t have the cliché reaction of thinking there was a person inside the box. I had to admit I was a bit disappointed.

As we continued watching the TV for a bit, a superhero and kaijin villain

appeared on the screen. The coconut-crab-looking creature was about two meters tall, but the hero was only about two-thirds of its size. He was tiny.

“Your evil deeds end here, kaijin!”

“Dai Red! At last! It’s time I—”

“Shut up and take this! *Burniiing Smaaash!*”

“At least let me finish my liine—”

The time it took for the hero to blow the bad guy into smithereens was about two panels in manga terms. RIP.

Japan was peaceful as always.

“Your house is so fancy,” said Scrael.

“This is a pretty standard household,” I explained.

“*This* is standard? According to my observations, the standard of living in this world is extremely high,” said Scrael, using big words and nodding to herself.

She was right if we were comparing Japan to Do-Melta, but they had magic, so I was interested in seeing how things would develop over there. Magical technology was usually a land mine in fantasy stories, but I was sure it’d be okay with Ameithys keeping watch.

Afterward, we stepped outside into the residential district. Scrael was already finding surprises everywhere, her eyes bright with excitement.

“I saw them through the window earlier, but wow. So many big buildings,” she said.

“It must be impressive if you’re seeing them for the first time.”

“Yeah. I see even bigger buildings over there too.”

“That one’s near the station,” I explained. “Twenty-story buildings are pretty common over there.”

“Twenty stories...” breathed Scrael, her eyes wide with surprise.

“But things here weren’t so different from your world just a century or two ago, I think,” I added.

“Can things really change that quickly?” she asked.

“Well, you’re looking at it. Guess there’s no limit to human greed.”

“Humans truly are greedy. And foolish,” said Scrael, nodding thoughtfully.

I wasn’t sure how we’d ended up at that conclusion, but humans were indeed sinful creatures.

As we continued talking, Scrael began freely crossing the street.

“Scrae, you can’t walk into the road like that. You might get run over by a car,” I warned.

“A car?” she asked.

“Yeah, an automobile. You’ll see.”

Eventually, a car drove by. Scrael, of course, stared with her eyes as wide as saucers.

“It’s so fast. There isn’t even a horse pulling it.”

“That’s an automobile. It runs by burning fuel to make the wheels spin,” I explained.

“Huh? Burning fuel makes wheels spin? How?”

“Uh...”

I couldn’t explain it without looking it up, so I showed her an image on my smartphone titled “Explaining Automobiles Like You’re Five.” It would’ve been too difficult to try and break down the mechanisms on my own.

Scrael’s eyes were full of wonder. “This world is amazing... It must be so fun here.”

“It’s normal to us, but it must seem that way to visitors from another world,” I said.

I would’ve probably had the same reaction if I went to a future world; I’d be super excited if I saw flying cars.

I explained things one by one as we made our way toward the station, then I suddenly felt her tug my hand.

“Akira, Akira, what kind of dungeon is that?”

“Dungeon?”

It was a rather alarming word to hear amid our peaceful stroll. In this world, the word “dungeon” never really came up except in video games or light novels.

“Scrael, there aren’t any dungeons in this world.”

“But everyone’s going into there,” she said.

“Where?”

I looked over to see her gesturing toward a subway entrance.

“Hold on, that could’ve been any underground structure. Why did you immediately assume it was a dungeon?” I asked.

“Men of prime working age are going in there with lifeless eyes. I speculate that there’s a high-depth-level floor down there.”

“No, no, there isn’t.”

It was still around the time people made their commutes to work, so there were a bunch of office workers using the subway. It seemed Scrael had seen those people and assumed there was a dungeon down there. If that were the case, there’d be dungeons throughout every major city. Though, some subways probably deserved a dishonorable title like “Dungeon.”

“You wanna go down there? There’s no dungeon,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Okay, then let’s go.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Scrael extended her hand toward me. She was—well, she wanted to do that thing we’d done before. I felt a bit shy as I held her outstretched hand.

“Th-This kind of feels like a date,” I said.

“It’s not,” she said.

“But—”

“It’s not.”

I said nothing.

I didn't know why she had to be so stubborn about it, but apparently this wasn't a date. Why were we holding hands, then? Surely, she had to know it could cause some misunderstandings. I was a sucker for anyone who showed me even a little bit of kindness, so I wished she was more aware of the consequences of her actions.

As I stood there with those thoughts in my head, brows furrowed, Scrael squeezed my hand hard. It hurt. It seemed she intended to shut me up by force. I, of course, immediately succumbed to her superior strength, so she quickly eased up on me.

Scrael and I made our way down into the subway even though we had no business there. She was on guard the entire time as if we were stepping into a dungeon floor.

§

Our tour of the unremarkable subway had ended, and Scrael and I were looking up at the trains running aboveground.

I told her, "Those things run underground too. They're all over the place in my world."

"They're so convenient. You could use them to transport things in no time," she said.

"Yup. I guess advancements in logistics are a big part of what pushed our human civilization forward."

We'd ridden on a train for a few stops in the subway earlier, then we'd come back to where we'd started. Scrael's thoughts had included "It's so fast," "There are so many people," and more. I didn't think she quite understood how useful trains were for transportation without any idea of the distance traveled, but she'd gotten a feel for their speed.

We entered a specialty store in front of the station that bought gold and precious metals. We'd come to exchange gold from the other world for Japanese yen since sightseeing wasn't exactly free.

One might wonder, what about all the intricate paperwork? We'd used magic to finesse our way through it, of course. The staff was surprised when two kids walked in but only for a moment. I knew I was the one who'd used it, but magic was pretty scary stuff. Still, I was pretty satisfied with the results.

"Heh heh, so many Yukichis..." I said, admiring my stack of ten-thousand-yen notes.

"Akira, your eyes look like money signs," Scrael pointed out.

"Oh, oops."

It seemed my brain had been completely filled with thoughts of money. I didn't want to overuse this cheat code to make money, but this was a special occasion. Ameithys had given us the green light too, so it shouldn't be an issue. We weren't hurting anybody anyway.

Heh heh heh.

As we continued on with our tour around the station area, Scrael asked, "What's that, Akira?"

She was pointing at an establishment that was rather noisy even though it was so early in the morning. It was a place where war and bloodshed befell upon opening every day as the folks who'd been in line since early morning rushed inside to fight over the best seats. After all, there was money on the line.

"That's a gambling place where only adults can enter. All the patrons there are like Instructor Seeker. We can't go in. Unlike in Do-Melta, you have to be at least eighteen to be considered an adult here."

"I'm a kid?" asked Scrael, pointing at herself.

"Yup."

Fifteen-year-olds were considered adults in Do-Melta but not here.

The automatic door to the pachinko parlor slid open, and Scrael jerked in surprise.

"It's so loud... I feel like my ears are going to explode," she complained.

“Yeah, I have no idea how they can listen to all that noise all day.”

Being exposed to all that noise could seemingly cause some hearing damage. At the very least, your ears probably wouldn't work right for a while after being in there for a long time.

We hurriedly moved away from the clamor of the pachinko parlor and resumed our sightseeing tour. She was fascinated by convenience stores, supermarkets, fancy cafés, arcades, and pretty much anything else we saw along the way.

She glanced at the building of a not-so-reputable company and said, “Another dungeon...” repeating the same joke from earlier.

“What's that place?” she asked, pointing at a casual-looking chiropractic clinic.

“It's a chiropractic clinic,” I explained. “There's a chiropractor in there, and—”

“What does a chi-ro-practor do?”

“Um...work out knots in your muscles, I guess?”

“Mm-hmm...” she said thoughtfully.

“Maybe acupressure on your feet?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And maybe stretch your shoulder blades?”

“What? That sounds painful,” said Scrael, confused.

“Does it? It shouldn't be,” I replied, equally perplexed.

“Huh...?”

“Huh...?”

We looked at each other, and Scrael was clearly disturbed for some reason.

“I mean, they just stretch your shoulder blades,” I repeated.

“Yeah, that sounds painful.”

“Hold on, what exactly are you picturing, Miss Scrael?”

“Well, I guess someone puts you in a shoulder lock, then sticks their fingers under your shoulder blades and stretches them out in one fell swoop like this...” she said, then did a stretching motion with both hands.

“No, no! You’ve got it all wrong! And it’s not some sort of monster-fighting job like a Diver!”

“It’s not? I thought there was a martial arts master with the title of ‘chiropractor’ in there.”

“They basically give you massages,” I told her.

Scrael had assumed I was talking about some sort of gory finishing move. I mean, that would be pretty painful, or it’d probably just kill you outright. It seemed she was inspired by this imaginary move, and she was moving her hands around and trying to come up with a new technique as we continued walking. I wished she’d stop mumbling things like “Bend their joints like this...” and “Break it like this...” because she sounded like a crazy person. There was a pretty intense juxtaposition of her cute appearance and violent tendencies.

“There are so many incomprehensible things in your world,” said Scrael.

“Well...yeah, you’re right. I agree.”

“There are so many unnecessary things here.”

“They say humans start wanting unnecessary things when they live fulfilling lives. I heard it on TV once,” I said.

Suddenly, she started sniffing around as if she smelled something. “I smell something sweet,” she said.

“It’s a crepe shop. They sell desserts. Wanna try one?” I offered.

“Yes.”

I decided to buy two crepes for us. It was a franchise crepe shop you could find anywhere. They weren’t particularly amazing, but they were never terrible either, so you couldn’t go wrong.

Which flavor should I get...?

I had to get at least one with chocolate. I ended up deciding on one custard-

cream flavor and one chocolate-banana-cream flavor. I wanted to try both, so I thought we'd share.

Just as I finished paying for the crepes, I heard voices from where I'd been standing earlier.

"Hey, girl."

"You free right now?"

That was fast. I'd expected something like this to happen if I took her around, and it had already happened less than an hour into our tour. They were like supersonic-speed heat-seeking missiles. They were going to end up exploding, so I had to quickly make them change direction and blow up somewhere else. Actually, they probably shouldn't be blowing up at all. I'd been worried about running into trouble because Scrael hated humans, and sure enough, trouble had found us.

I quickly turned around to defuse the situation, but it was too late. By the time I turned all the way, the strangers were on the ground.

"Whaaat?! It's been five seconds since you met!"

I saw Scrael standing there, facing away from me, and two men lying face down on the pavement. It'd all happened too fast for me to process. It was like all of the events between the beginning of the encounter and now had been blown away by a certain anime character's Stand attack.

I rushed over, and Scrael slowly turned to me. She wore that trademark narrow-eyed reproachful look on her face.

"What happened?" I asked.

"These two talked to me," she answered.

"I can see that. But why are they on the ground?"

"...I don't know. They suddenly fell without warning."

"No, they obviously didn't! I mean, that'd be scary for other reasons if that was true!"

"They did. I'm not lying," she insisted.

“Can you say that without looking away?” I said as I tried to look into her eyes, but she blatantly avoided eye contact.

Eventually, she seemed to realize her excuses weren’t working and changed strategies. “M-My hand barely brushed them!”

“People don’t lose consciousness from barely being brushed against!” I argued.

“Humans are fragile. Such sad creatures.”

“Stop trying to sound deep! I mean, there’s some truth to that, but still!”

Scrael stared at the two on the ground with a pitiful gaze and wouldn’t look at me.

I sighed. “Fine, let’s just say you’re telling the truth. Are these two okay?”

“I didn’t injure them,” she said.

“Uh-huh. You’re sure?”

“I...don’t think I did. I’m not sure,” she corrected herself, glancing away again.

She clearly didn’t want to admit to any wrongdoing.

“Okay, then. Let’s run. We got our crepes, so we’d better eat them.”

I had no choice. I didn’t want to deal with someone calling the cops or an ambulance. Surely, if that happened, we wouldn’t be able to enjoy our crepes. This wasn’t exactly the right thing to do, but humans were surprisingly sturdy. Time was limited, and I wanted to put it to good use.

Scrael and I trotted away from the crime scene.

“Om nom... Yum! Akira! This is yummy!” said Scrael, expressing joy with her entire body as she hopped up and down. She really loved the custard-cream flavor.

“Don’t eat while running. It’s bad manners,” I pointed out.

“I couldn’t help it,” she replied.

Her cheeks were puffed out like a squirrel’s, and there was cream on them.

How cute.

We arrived at a bench in a nearby park, but Scrael's crepe was already gone. She seemed to have finished eating it on our run here. She stared at my crepe. Her mouth was partially open, and I could see some drool running down from the corner of her lips.

"Do you...want some?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said, slurping the drool back into her mouth.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said after a pause, but her expression hadn't changed, and her eyes were glued to my crepe.

"Are you really sure?" I asked.

"If you really want me to, I wouldn't mind eating some for you."

"Yes, yes. So you want some. Here."

"Mm-hmm."

Scrael accepted the crepe and immediately took a big bite. She'd made her move faster than the eye could see.



“Mmf. This one’s good too,” she said with satisfaction.

She seemed very happy.

§

After Akira and I finished eating the crepe, we spent some time relaxing at the park. I was learning about this world as we operated Akira’s contraption called a “smartphone,” and we watched records of past events called “videos” as he explained things to me.

“I’m getting thirsty. I’ll go get us some juice,” said Akira.

“Then I want that sweet orange drink you got me last time,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll get you some orange juice. Be right back,” he said, then he left the park.

That sweet orange juice was tasty, so I was looking forward to it. I waited on the park bench, my feet dangling under me, and I observed my surroundings. The equipment here looked interesting, but there were children using it already, so I couldn’t just join them.

Suddenly, I heard a loud noise overhead and saw something huge flying in the sky.

“That’s...not a big bird,” I said.

It definitely wasn’t, and it wasn’t a monster either. It looked rigid, perhaps man-made. There were so many mysteries in this world, which made it all the more interesting.

“I won’t be able to understand everything here even if I spend a year learning.”

“Haaa ha ha ha!!!”

I heard an odd booming laugh out of nowhere. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw something strange.

It was like a strange crossover between some tasty crustacean in the Submerged City at depth level 18 and a bipedal creature that was wrapped in bandages. It was huge, nothing like those two who’d tried talking to me earlier.

The creature looked like it was wearing some sort of costume, but the costume didn't seem like it was made of typical costume materials.

"What...who...are you?" I asked.

"I am Horsehair Crabbian Five!" said the creature.

"Crappy Man Five? Good for you."

"No. Crabbian! Horsehair Crabbian Five!"

"Did you hit your head or something?" I asked.

"How dare you! You shouldn't say that kind of thing so directly!"

"Sorry, I just can't bring myself to lie."

"You're lying right now!"

As I messed with the strange creature, it started moving closer to me while it screamed. Maybe it was trying to capture me. Maybe it was some sort of degenerate unique to this world.

"You're creeping me out. Stay away," I ordered.

"I'm not backing down just because you told me to!" said the degenerate, angered.

Eventually, I heard people yelling in the distance.

"A foreign girl is being attacked by a kaijin!"

"Someone call for a hero!"

What is this "kaijin" and "hero"? I thought, then I remembered seeing something similar on the so-called TV at Akira's house.

Meanwhile, the degenerate was reaching toward me. It was definitely trying to cop a feel. I wasn't about to show any mercy to some deviant.

"Ha ha ha. Looks like the bystanders will save me the trouble of getting a hero here. I'll take you hostage and take down my hated enemy!"

"I won't let you take me hostage so easily," I said.

"Quiet, you! I'll use you to get revenge for Coconut Crabbian Z! Now, come here and—"

Just as it reached out for my hand, I grabbed its hand instead and used the momentum to throw it onto the ground. Seemingly poorly balanced, the unsightly creature easily lost its footing and rolled around on the ground.

“Gaaaaaaaahhh!”

“So weak,” I said. “Weaker than a roly-poly bug.”

“Whaaat?! Did you just call me weaker than a roly-poly?!”

“Yes. They’re sturdier, and they don’t get hurt by rolling around like you.”

Roly-polies were protected by rigid cuticles, and I couldn’t damage them unless I repeatedly hit them in the abdomen with Jinshu strikes. Besides, they were much, much bigger than this degenerate. It was a bad comparison, but I couldn’t think of any other general comparisons.

“What a pathetic creature,” I said regrettably, “being compared to our village pests. I pity you.”

“A pest...? You dare compare me to a pest and insult my beautiful shell?! That’s it! Behold my pow—”

“I don’t have time for this. Begone.”

I leaped toward the creature, stepping into close range with one motion. I kicked off of the ground and used the momentum to drive my palm into...where I assumed its solar plexus would be.

The creature was slow, inefficient with its movements, and too talkative. It was beyond saving.

“What are you—”

Before the degenerate could finish the sentence, I delivered an Efflux Wave into its stomach. The impact usually penetrated the target, but it sent my opponent flying to the other side of the park. It left a trail on the ground as it landed, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

“Humph,” I said.

It definitely wasn’t getting up after that decisive blow—or at least I thought it wasn’t.

Amid the dust clouds, I saw a figure rising in an unnatural position. Its movements reminded me of a roly-poly toy, which rises even when you knock it over.

“How?” I asked myself, unable to believe my eyes.

The degenerate’s strange appearance seemed to not be for nothing. I assumed my fighting stance again, but then something strange happened.

The degenerate suddenly did a somersault from a standing position for some reason. I stared in confusion as that was usually something that was done while rolling on the ground. Perhaps it was some sort of ritual. Whatever it was, I felt like I shouldn’t let my guard down.

As I prepared for whatever was coming next, the degenerate shouted, “I didn’t even do anything yet!!!” and exploded.

Yes, *exploded*. I was quite startled by the sudden turn of events.

“Why did it explode?” I wondered aloud.

It didn’t make any sense, and Jinshu wasn’t a technique that could cause explosions. Maybe it was a characteristic of degenerates in this world.

This world really was full of mysteries.

§

I’d left Scrael at the park bench to go get some juice before I heard a loud boom. It sounded like some sort of explosion, so I ran back to the park to find out what had happened.

I didn’t want to assume, but I was ninety percent sure it had something to do with Scrael. Now that I’d brought her here, if there was any trouble, it was entirely possible that she was involved somehow, whether it was her fault or not. In fact, anyone who couldn’t put two and two together like this would be too oblivious to survive a dungeon dive.

On my way back to Scrael, I saw people running away from the park.

“What the... Did she seriously cause all this chaos?”

In anime and games, it was a common trope for visitors from another world

to cause trouble due to their lack of familiarity with our social norms. Do-Meltans tended to be prudent and flexible in general, and Scrael was usually pretty reserved, so I hadn't expected anything like this to happen at all. This was complete pandemonium, and it was only a matter of time before the police would be called.

When I returned to where I'd left Scrael, I found her standing in the park alone, dust clouds dancing around her. I felt an odd sense of familiarity: namely, it reminded me of Hiro.

I quickly rushed over to Scrael and asked, "I heard a loud noise earlier. What happened?"

"A crazy degenerate appeared," she said.

"A crazy degenerate?"

"Yes."

They must've been a *real* degenerate for her to describe them that way. I could only imagine how bad it'd been, but that did explain why everyone was running away from the park. Whoever it'd been seemed to already be long gone, but I didn't think such a phenomenally weird person would leave without doing anything.

And why did it smell like something was burning?

"Um, Miss Scrael? Don't tell me—I mean, I'm sure you didn't, but—"

"I took 'em out, of course," said Scrael, proudly puffing out her well-endowed chest.

That sounded rather morbid. Usually, people here only got knocked out in fights at worst, but her words implied they were either dead or completely out of commission.

"Just curious... How, exactly?" I asked.

"With one hit of my Efflux Wave."

"Eek!" I shuddered inadvertently. "W-Was that person, uh, okay afterward?"

"Don't worry. They blew up into smithereens with no evidence left behind,"

she said.

“That’s not what I meant! I was asking about their well-being!”

“No mercy for degenerates. They should all be annihilated.”

“That’s a little extreme, don’t you think? Even degenerates have at least a tiny sliver of human rights!”

I wondered how hard she’d hit this person anyway. Efflux Wave was a move that dealt serious damage to the target’s internal organs. It must’ve been quite a blow if it’d made someone explode. Maybe she’d ended up shooting some sort of beam, like how a vegetable prince had blown up an alien named after cabbages.

“I was surprised. I didn’t know degenerates explode in your world,” said Scrael.

“Explode?” I asked.

“Yes. After I hit it, it did a somersault while standing and then blew up. It made no sense.”

I said nothing, confused.

“It slowly moved its arms around like this while yelling ‘I didn’t even do anything yet!’” said Scrael, demonstrating what had happened with a flat tone and completely devoid of emotion.

Come to think of it, I recognized what she was talking about. In fact, it was something everyone around here was familiar with. Assuming my hunch was right, it suddenly made sense why everyone was running away from the park and why it smelled like something was burning.

“Ah, I get it,” I said. “Then it’s fine that they blew up.”

“It is?” asked Scrael.

“Yup. You can just forget about it,” I told her.

Here in Japan, there was only one thing that exploded after getting defeated, and blowing them up was not a problem. In fact, getting rid of them was a good thing. They deserved no mercy, and I certainly wasn’t going to give them any.

“But you can’t use that move on normal people, even if they happen to be a degenerate,” I told her.

“Okay, I’ll try not to,” she said.

Not very reassuring.

Now that that was settled, we sat back down on the bench to drink some juice.

“Ah, this is nice and cold,” said Scrael. “There’s nothing like a sweet orange drink after a job well done.”

“I wasn’t gone for very long. Was it hard work?” I asked.

“Not at all, I ended it in one hit. It was weaker than a roly-poly bug. A rough wood louse is stronger,” she said.

“A rough wood louse...?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding her head.

However weak her opponent was, it seemed a bit harsh to compare them to such a tiny creature.

“Is there anywhere else you want to go, Scrae?” I asked.

“What about a shop selling weapons? I’d like to see the weapons of this world.”

“A weapon shop, huh...” I said, thinking that was a rather disturbing answer.

It was strange to imagine such a cute-looking girl wanted to go look at weapons. Though, not only was she a Diver, but she’d already taken out someone dangerous. I already knew about her violent tendencies, but still.

“Well, there aren’t any shops like that around here.”

“There aren’t? Then how does everyone protect themselves?”

“We don’t really need to... Though, we aren’t a hundred-percent safe all the time either.”

“If there are any more of those weirdos around, protection is necessary.”

“There are people to counter those guys, so it hasn’t really been an issue.”

Scrael made a noncommittal noise.

I decided I should teach her about heroes sometime soon, though she'd seen one on TV this morning.

"Is there anywhere *else* you want to go?" I asked again.

"I want food. I'm hungry."

She had quite the appetite for someone who'd just eaten two crepes; maybe it was because she'd gotten some exercise. I thought about where to take her and thought she might want to eat a bunch of sweets, like a jumbo parfait at a family restaurant.

After finishing our juice, we went back to the area in front of the station. I was looking for a reasonable-looking place to eat, with a family restaurant as my primary target, when Scrael stumbled away from me.

"Huh? Scrae? Hellooo?" I called out.

I hadn't really seen her like this before. She staggered unsteadily, moving toward a particular direction as if drawn there by a mysterious force.

"Scrae! Hey, Scrae! What's wrong?"

It seemed she couldn't even hear my voice, and she looked like she was under some sort of illusion magic. Maybe I could use a generic spell to counter it, but I had to find out the source first.

Then, I found out what had drawn her over: ufugi.

I stared, speechless and exhausted. The mystery was completely solved as soon as I saw the sign for the unagi shop. They were grilling over charcoal in front of the shop, and the fragrant scent of the sauce and cooked unagi had probably wafted over. Well, not "probably." That was the only explanation. The wind was blowing in our direction, carrying the appetizing smell right to us.

Fun fact: "ufugi" was actually the incorrect way to read the Japanese characters written on the sign—the character I read as "fu" was actually a stylized way to write a kanji that made the "na" sound. My friends and I had been reading "unagi" as "ufugi" until my mom had corrected me recently.

Maybe unagi was better than sweets for Scrael. I rushed over to her and

tapped her on the shoulder.

“Scrae! Scrae!”

“Whaaat?!” she said, the tip of her ponytail jerking up as she snapped back to reality.

“I have to ask...what happened?”

“I don’t know...” said Scrael. “Before I knew it, I was here.”

She was dumbfounded as if she’d been teleported without realizing it. Her mind had been gone the entire time.

Scrael looked around cautiously and said, “This...must be the work of someone’s illusion magic. Be careful, Akira.”

“No, no, there’s no need to be on high alert. There aren’t any mages in this world anyway,” I said reassuringly.

“But there’s no other explanation. If it’s not a mage, it must be a dangerous monster.”

“There aren’t any monsters in this world either. Though, there *are* other weird things.”

“Do you know what happened, then?” she asked.

“Must have been that. Or its smell anyway.”

I pointed at the unagi shop. Scrael’s nose twitched, then her eyes glazed over. She was drawn to the shop again, staggering over there as if she were sleepwalking. Food could be scary sometimes.

“Scrael!” I shouted.

“Ah! What was I—”

“Pull yourself together! Take a deep—actually, that’s probably not a good idea right now.”

I had no doubt it’d be over for her if she took a deep breath here and now. However, it seemed she was starting to get used to the scent of roasted unagi. Her nose twitched some more, then a euphoric and almost intoxicated look surfaced on her face.

“It smells like shoy sauce...” she mumbled.

It most certainly was soy sauce.

“That’s an establishment where they serve food with soy sauce,” I told her.

“This is the magic of shoy sauce. So powerful...”

“They say some people can eat a bowl of plain rice with just this smell as the side dish.”

“I completely understand,” said Scrael. “I did the same thing while having bread.”

“Whoa... Seriously?”

That was a pretty crazy confession. She was pretty advanced if she could use the smell of soy sauce like that. Once you got to that level, there was surely no going back.

“So, wanna check it out?” I asked.

“If you wanna go, I wouldn’t mind going with you,” she said after a short pause.

You can never just admit it, can you?

“Then let’s go somewhere el—”

“If you wanna go, I wouldn’t mind going with you,” she said again.

“There are other places we can—”

“I said, ‘If you wanna go, I wouldn’t mind going with you’!”

She wouldn’t even let me finish my sentence. If she felt so strongly about it, she could’ve just said she wanted to go.

I finally caved and said, “Fine... Let’s go.”

She nodded without hesitation.

I couldn’t figure out why we’d needed to go through all of that. She’d been straightforward about wanting to come to my world, so what was the difference here?

Anyway, we went into the unagi restaurant. These types of places were

ridiculously expensive, but we'd converted a bunch of gold to money earlier, so we had more than enough. We could eat like kings.

Ha ha ha.

The middle-aged lady who came to take our order was surprised to see two kids at such a pricey establishment.

"Are you two students? We don't get guests like you every day. And it seems you brought a friend from overseas," said the lady.

"Yes. She said she wanted some unagi, so my family wanted me to bring her here," I replied.

"Oh, is that right?"

"Yeah, everyone visiting Japan has to try some unagi," I said.

I continued making small talk, lying as naturally as I breathed, and Scrael watched me the entire time with a suspicious glare. I wasn't going to let that deter me though.

"Two premium unagi bowls, please. Extra sauce for hers," I said.

Scrael looked like she could hardly wait.

The server repeated my order loudly upon taking my order. Scrael and I talked while we waited for the food, and two food boxes and bowls of soup were brought to our table.

"Here you go," said the server.

I thanked her, then lifted the lid from my box, releasing steam and the delicious smell of cooked unagi into the air. The unagi was plump and cooked to perfection, the sauce giving it a beautiful luster. I could tell it was going to taste amazing just by looking at it. The unagi was topped with Japanese pepper and laid upon a bed of white rice with freshly grated wasabi on the side.

I looked over and saw Scrael was absolutely elated. I could literally see sparkles in her eyes. This must've been the aforementioned magic of soy sauce. Maybe she'd been Japanese in a previous life or something.

"What is this?" asked Scrael.

“It’s an unagi bowl. They cut open a fish known as unagi—or a freshwater eel—coat it in some sauce, cook it over charcoal, then place it on rice. Converting to Freida’s currency, it costs around five to seven silver coins,” I explained.

“That’s pretty pricey,” she noted.

“It’s worth it though,” I assured her.

“I can already tell it’ll be good by the smell.”

The White Horn steak in Do-Melta cost a ridiculous amount of five gold coins, but five silver coins for a single meal was pretty crazy too. Unagi bowls had been way too expensive lately.

In any case, the one thing I had to be concerned with here was the proper way to eat the unagi bowl. Most non-Japanese people didn’t have the concept of in-mouth seasoning, which was a method of mixing flavors together by chewing different ingredients at the same time. People who didn’t use this eating method were often confused by the rice-to-topping ratio for this type of food, and some people even felt like the rice was being used as a filler to skimp out on the main dish. Part of the issue may be the difference in staple foods, and maybe the perception would be different depending on one’s region. For example, Germans may not have as much of an issue since I’d heard that rice balls had been getting popular there, but Americans, on the other hand, may be averse to the idea since they mainly ate meat. They’d probably prefer sushi rolls that could be eaten in one bite instead.

As I was teaching Scrael how to eat the unagi bowl, the server lady was kind enough to bring her a wooden spoon. She used it to scoop up some unagi and rice with some sauce, then took a bite.

“Waaaaaah?!”

She gave her usual wide-eyed surprised reaction. I couldn’t see her ears, but I imagined they were moving up and down.

“This fish is delicious! It’s so fatty!” she exclaimed.

“Good. I’m glad I brought you, then,” I replied.

“The sauce is amazing. I could eat a bunch of rice with the sauce alone.”

“Yeah, I’d have to agree with you there,” I said.

“Yum, yum.”

Most Japanese people would probably enjoy rice with this unagi sauce even if they weren’t extreme soy sauce lovers like Scrael. It was just that good, and it was even better with a bit of wasabi.

“The rice itself is good too,” noted Scrael. “There’s a faint sweetness to it.”

“Looks like they use some high-quality rice here.”

There were posters in the restaurant featuring a female farmer holding a bundle of rice plants with the brand name featured in big letters at the top: Munehikari. Yeah, that was good rice.

Scrael was nodding to herself, taking her time savoring the unagi bowl. It must’ve made the staff here happy seeing just how happy it made her. The head chef in the back of the restaurant and the lady from earlier were watching her with smiles on their faces. She ended up getting seconds—yes, she ate two whole unagi bowls. I wondered how she fit all of that in her stomach without it inflating like a balloon.

We eventually finished eating and went outside. Scrael was full of energy, perhaps thanks to the power of unagi. Though, she’d eaten more rice with sauce than eel, so maybe that was what was fueling her. The energizing meal that she happened to love seemed to have a multiplicative effect on her.

Afterward, we spent some time hanging around the station and called it a day. Scrael seemed satisfied with her little trip to Japan, and we decided to come back again sometime. It went without saying that she’d bought a whole bunch of soy-sauce-related products before heading back to her world.

Floor Thirteen: Nuisances at the Main Hall

A huge group of people were gathered at the Divers Guild main hall today.

“What the...” were the first words that came out of my mouth when I entered the hall. I’d noticed it seemed more crowded than usual before entering the guild. I’d assumed they were celebrating after someone had hunted a giant monster or something, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Usually, the hall was only busy during lunchtimes when most teams gathered to eat, drink, and talk among themselves. But it was already evening, well past noon and teatime. It was a bit too early for dinner, and Divers usually went home or into the dungeon around this time. Yet the spacious hall was filled with Divers as if there was some sort of assembly happening, and I couldn’t help but wonder why.

They’re all wearing similar equipment, and they seem well-coordinated. Which means...

It had to be a meeting for some sort of superteam. The people gathered were separated by their professions, such as vanguard, rear guard, mages, and porters, each wearing similar attire. There was an air of intensity to each of them, making it obvious that they were about to go for a dungeon dive. Judging by the scale of their team, they had likely rented out the hall to hold a pep rally of sorts before they went into a deep, unexplored dungeon floor.

It was quite annoying that they were doing it here though. A giant team like this must have a big base where they could gather, so why were they taking up space that everyone else needed to use? Maybe they wanted to show off or something. They should leave that sort of vanity behind in the dungeon because it wasn’t going to do them any good here.

As I complained internally, I noticed some of the members of the team were standing at the end of the hall. A massive bear of a man stood before them, giving them a morale-boosting speech with his booming voice.

“Today, we march into unexplored territory, a place that’s said to be unreachable by the Divers of Freida!” he shouted. “Many trials await us, but we

mustn't fear or let it stop us in our tracks! As the team responsible for the Guild's prosperity, we must prevail!"

I watched him make the overly dramatic speech and cringed. It was way over the top if you ask me. A little pep talk before a dungeon dive was fine, but to claim they were responsible for the Guild's prosperity was a bit much. A casual Diver like me might have no room to talk, but it sounded like a slight to Divers who'd been working hard in their own right. It sounded like their team had grown too much, and their leader had let it get to his head. It was embarrassing to watch. Having enthusiasm was fine, but getting overeager was never a good thing. Though, I didn't want to get involved, so they didn't really concern me.

There were others watching the assembly, and I heard them talking among themselves.

"They always put on a show, huh?"

"I heard they're going for an unexplored floor on route two today. That's probably why they're so fired up."

"A new floor, huh..."

I wondered if they were a part of the same team. They were a rare combination of four young men from different races: a human, an Adorner wearing a monster pelt, a Beast-Head, and a Tail. It seemed they were familiar with the superteam holding the assembly. Curious, I decided to talk to the closest one, the Beast-Head with the black wolf head.

"Excuse me... Do you know that team?" I asked.

"Huh? You don't? That's Eagle's Talon. You've at least heard the name before, right?" said the Beast-Head.

"Ohh... That's them?"

Team Eagle's Talon was one of the three major forces of the Divers Guild. They had many Divers under their organization, and they dived into the dungeon day and night to seek out unexplored territories. The other two of the big-three teams were mutual aid organizations that operated with "supporting their members" and "contributing to the Guild" in mind, but this one prioritized their own prestige above all else. They were what you'd call "try-hards," the

exact type of people I never wanted to associate myself with.

“Exploring new floors, huh...” I said to myself.

In the Gandakia Dungeon, there were several different routes you could take. Using the Great Forest Ruins as a starting point, there were multiple warp points that sent Divers to various floors. My usual solo farming spot, the Dark Corridors on depth level 30, was on route two, which was the route that Eagle’s Talon was trying to reach a new floor through.

I mumbled to myself, “Hmm, after the Meadows is the Nordianes, so...”

“Their primary target must be the Catacombs of the Dead,” said the Beast-Head.

I wasn’t very familiar with that floor, so I hadn’t quite remembered the name. Still, I’d at least heard of it before. It was a giant underground cave full of gravestones and hordes of zombies. It was one of the two infamous horror floors of the Gandakia Dungeon. Not to mention, its depth level was in the 50s. It was a ridiculously difficult floor where you had to be at least level 60 to dive there solo, and teams going there needed their members to be at least level 30 with a few mages in their ranks.

The four of them began chattering.

“Can they really make it? I say they’ll fail again.”

“Probably. The only person who can handle that place is probably Dracarion.”

“There’s just way too many zombies down there. I heard the last big team that went in there got messed up pretty bad.”

As the group said, the Catacombs of the Dead was a pretty gnarly place. Supposedly, hordes of rotting corpses rose out of the ground there all at once to attack Divers. When I’d first heard of this, it’d reminded me of certain *Resident and Evil* games and *Dead and Rising* games. I’d thought I’d need chainsaws, shotguns, grenade launchers, or holy or healing magic from RPGs to clear that place. The floor was nearly impossible to beat with infinitely spawning, hard-to-kill zombies that continued to increase in number the longer you waited. Personally, the idea of going to an underground graveyard full of zombies was gonna be a no for me. That kind of thing may be fun in video

games, but it didn't mean I wanted to experience it in person.

As I mulled over these thoughts, the human of the four-man group said, "I hope they'll fail if I'm being honest."

"Hey, you shouldn't say things like that," said the Beast-Head.

"Come on, Leader, I can't be the only one thinking they've been way too cocky lately," replied the human.

"Yeah, I'm with you!" joined in the Adorner, nodding in agreement. "You mean how they think the Guild can only keep running thanks to them, right? Who do they think they are?"

"Well...I can't argue with you there," admitted the Beast-Head leader. "They seem to take their rivalry with Order of the Black Dawn and Brave Wings too seriously."

It seemed we shared the same thought. The big-three teams had been competing against each other. Though, none of them had been able to achieve any significant results lately, making the competition more intense than ever. One of the teams had to accomplish something huge to come out ahead of the others.

"But they're a top-tier superteam, so all of their members must be really strong, right?" I asked.

"Well, their vanguards and rear guards should all be level 30 or higher," replied one of them.

"I think they have around five mages or so," said another.

"Wait, but wasn't there a rumor a while back that they had ten mages in their team?"

"Their levels are probably still too low to join the dive. A novice mage would only be level 10 or so. The team wouldn't be able to bring someone like that along even if they were taking up a supporting role."

"What do you think, Rada?" the Adorner asked the Tail.

Judging by his black robe, Rada seemed to be their team mage.

Rada said, “If the fighters of the team are good at protecting—actually, no, it’d still be difficult. Low-level mages can be strong, but there’s a limit.”

“Yeah, I figured,” said the Adorner.

The young Tail man was right. I remembered when I’d been around level 10. I wouldn’t have been able to cast my magic in time if I’d gotten surrounded by monsters.

“Still, it’s impressive that they’re trying to reach a new floor at all,” I said.

That much was for sure. Their desire to step into unexplored territory made them truly worthy of being called Divers. I admired them for their efforts, but I was too much of a coward to do it myself.

Sensei wouldn’t make me go there...would she?

The dreadful possibility suddenly crossed my mind, but surely, even Sensei wouldn’t make me do something so reckless. It’d be crazy to send me there when it was literally impossible for me to clear it. And if she seriously wanted me to go, she’d probably prepare me somehow.

I shivered at the disturbing thought, and the Adorner seemed to think I was trembling out of excitement.

“They might take you along if you ask to join them as a porter,” he said jokingly.

“No, that’s okay,” I said.

“Yeah, I figured as much,” he replied.

Then I asked, “Are you all interested in exploring new floors?”

The Beast-Head leader said, “We are. But at our own pace.”

“Yeah, it’s not like the dungeon’s going anywhere. If someone else gets there first, we’d just need to find another new floor.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t be jealous though.”

Suddenly, the four of them lined up in a formation like superheroes.

“But our motto is—”

“Have fun, make money, and don’t overdo it!”

“We have our own way of doing things! Who cares about the others?!”

“It doesn’t matter if our rank goes up by a hundred or down by a hundred!”

The four of them struck a pose together, energetically declaring what was apparently their motto. There were all sorts of teams in the Gandakia Dungeon, from big teams that took things too seriously to teams working at their own pace like this one.

Floor Fourteen: Fluffy Is Justice

I was relaxing at the dining hall in the Divers Guild when I saw a familiar face. It was Eldrid—the girl with curly light-gold hair, droopy ears of the same color, and a fluffy tail—who I'd become acquainted with by chance. She was a Tail clothed in ridiculously expensive armor with a disproportionately huge sword on her back. She had a masculine personality with a boyish speech pattern, and her level was shockingly high at 48. It was rare to see people with such a high level in Freida, and I wondered how she'd gotten so strong when she was only around my age. She was a seriously impressive high-rank Diver.

As soon as Eldrid noticed me, she walked over, her fluffy tail wagging like a golden retriever. She then stopped in front of me and scowled for some reason. She'd been smiling when she'd noticed me a second ago, so I had to wonder what was wrong. She was obviously tense about something.

"K-Kudo!" she said, "Are you free right now?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I guess. I was just planning to go leveling, so it's nothing urgent," I replied.

"Then...do you wanna dive with me? I mean, remember how you said we'd go together sometime? So..."

"Sure, sounds good."

"Really?!" she said, the tension in her immediately gone as her expression brightened.

Her tail was swinging pretty hard too. I had to say, it was really easy to tell when she was pleased.

"Then let's get outta here!" she continued. "Do you need to get ready?"

"Already did. I'm good to go."

"Great! Let's go! Let's go!" she said excitedly.

She seemed to really want to go dungeon diving with someone. Maybe she

was a bit of a loner? That was hard to imagine when she was so cheerful and friendly, though being friendly didn't necessarily mean you'd have a bunch of friends. I might have been excited if we were going to the city for a date instead of the dungeon. Though, I guess this would provide a different kind of thrill. After all, Eldrid's level was higher than mine, so we could end up going to some places where I'd be in danger of dying if I'd gone alone.

I'd been going out with girls a lot recently, but none of those encounters had been dates. I'd been vehemently denied the last time I'd asked if we were on a date, and on those encounters, we usually just went into the dungeon, which was full of dangers. Maybe it wasn't meant to be, and I'd never get a girlfriend to go on a date with. How sad.

Anyway, we ended up going to the Submerged City at depth level 18. I'd been here before, so I'd spare the details, but it was a postapocalyptic-looking floor with dilapidated buildings submerged in a giant body of water that seemed to be a lake or sea. This place, along with the Great Gale Wilds and the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus, was often used as a summer resort by veteran Divers. The monsters here included fish, sharks, sharks, and sharks. It was a scary place with flying sharks, crawling sharks, and all sorts of sharks.

We'd decided to come here so Eldrid could get revenge on Great Boars for the sticky situation (pun intended) one of them had put her in last time. And apparently, she wanted some more braised pork too. We stepped into the Submerged City, and we were greeted by the warm sunlight.

"The weather's nice today," I noted, "perfect for a nice walk."

"Yeah, it's nice and sunny. I'd love to lie down out in the sun for a while," said Eldrid.

She really was like a puppy or kitten.

"Do you sunbathe a lot?" I asked.

"Yeah, we Tails are all about sunbathing. Haven't you seen one lying around outside with their belly out?"

"Can't say I have," I said. "Wait, do *you* lie in the sun with your belly out?"

"No, not me," she said. "It's considered indecent."

I didn't really get what was indecent about it, though I could understand why it wouldn't be socially acceptable. I'd had no idea all Tails sunbathed. I wondered if it was so they could produce things like serotonin and vitamin D since that was how it worked for humans. Lately, I felt like Tail was the strangest of all the races out there.

"Do you use this route a lot?" I asked.

"Yeah, I use it a lot on my way to hunt in the Floating Garden."

"I'm impressed. I've never been there before."

"That place would be pretty rough for a mage to solo," she said.

"But you go there solo as a warrior, right? That's pretty amazing."

"Really? I don't think it's all that hard," she said nonchalantly. She was just that strong as a level 48 Diver.

Anyway, we had to figure out how we were going to do this. We could prioritize looking for Great Boars or go for a more casual approach and walk around the dungeon like Morita taking a stroll on a certain Japanese TV program—I wasn't knowledgeable enough to explain things in the dungeon as we walked around though.

"Hmm, this is the path down the Submerged City, I think?" I said and pointed.

There were two routes we could take: we could simply walk around the water's edge in one route, but in the other, we'd have to hop on the roofs of the buildings that were poking out of the water's surface. Needless to say, the latter one was more difficult.

However, it seemed Eldrid had another idea.

"Nah, we're going this way first," she said, pointing in a direction that went completely off-route.

"That way? But that's..."

I recognized the place she was trying to take us: this was the route that would lead us to the seals, which were the idols of this floor.

"Come on, let's go!" she called out from a distance.

She'd already started walking away briskly as I'd been thinking about it.

"What the—how did you get so far already?! Wait for me!"

She was walking at a quick pace like an impatient puppy. I wondered if she—and all Tails in general—often got compared to dogs.

I started running to catch up.

"Grrr, get the hell outta the way!" Eldrid yelled, using her sword to cut the Krossular Flytrap that had leaped in front of her in two.

She'd attacked the monster as if it was just a minor inconvenience, and their level difference was so massive that she easily sliced through its stem and killed it in one shot. It thrashed around for a bit even after death, which was pretty disturbing to see.



Krossular Flytraps looked like giant versions of Venus flytraps, and they were aggressive monsters that attacked Divers on sight. Yes, they attacked people, as in they were able to walk around. Unlike most plants, they used their roots like feet to roam around the Submerged City and harassed people. They were huge menaces. Shredded-up corpses of Divers would sometimes show up at the guild, and it was usually the work of these monsters. They were considered the first gatekeepers of route four, keeping out those who attempted to venture into there. Yet Eldrid didn't even seem to perceive them as any kind of threat. Considering she was level 48, they probably couldn't hurt her even if they happened to get the jump on her somehow. I suspected she could even take them down by only scratching them with her nails.

"Yeah, I can," she said, extending her nails like knives.

"Seriously?"

I'd seen Beast-Heads extend their claws before, but I hadn't known Eldrid, as a Tail, had the same ability. Her hands seemed to be the same as a human's, so I wasn't sure how that worked.

Anyway, we eventually arrived at what seemed to be some sort of a private beach. The place felt like a resort, and it was hard to believe this beautiful sandy beach was on a monster-infested dungeon floor. There was a guild staff member keeping watch at a nearby lookout post. They were there to protect a certain rare species: the white, fluffy seals that hung out around the shore. A herd of them was lying around the beach, looking like giant stuffed-animal versions of baby harbor seals. They looked hot in all that fur, but supposedly, they were just fine.

Known as Chorus Seals, these creatures claimed this beach area of the Submerged City as their territory and lived in groups here. One of their defining characteristics was their friendliness. Whenever humans approached, they'd always move closer to beg for attention.

They were super cute. Many people, mainly Divers, visited the Submerged City just to play with the seals. These visitors were mostly women, though a good number of men showed up too.

These seals weren't monsters but a species unique to this world. Walker

Rabbits in the Great Forest Ruins also fell under this category.

“Why are we here?” I asked Eldrid.

“I-It’s obvious, isn’t it?!” she squealed quietly.

She looked a bit flustered and embarrassed. I figured she, like everyone else here, just wanted to play with the seals. In fact, she probably played with the seals every time she came to this floor, which was kind of cute of her. Her tail was wagging like crazy as she watched the seals. She may have been on the masculine side, but she seemed to love all things cute.

“Y-You don’t like this kind of thing?” she asked abashedly.

“I love seals, actually,” I said.

“Y-Yeah? Good! Then let’s go play!” she said with a bright smile.

She could be very childlike and innocent, yet she could be calm and thoughtful at times. I felt that people like her filled everyone around them with their good vibes.

“If only Walker Rabbits were cute like these seals,” I said.

“Hmm? You don’t like rabbits?”

“It’s not that I don’t like them. They’re fine to look at, but they steal my stuff to play with, which can be annoying.”

“They must find you interesting. You do carry a bunch of unusual stuff,” said Eldrid.

“I dunno...”

“And maybe you seem approachable to them.”

“Maybe they like me, or they take me for a chump. What do you think of them?” I asked.

“I like them,” she said, “they’re friendly.”

“Huh? Friendly?”

I stared at her blankly. I thought I’d misheard her. They did seem friendly at first glance because they’d come close for head pats, but they attacked people

with their unique form of martial arts known as Rabbit Kenpo and stole stuff from Divers, running away if they got chased. I mean, they did eventually return the things they took, but still.

Eldrid saw my confusion and said, “Maybe they’re friendly to me because of my ears and tail.”

She pointed at her own ears and moved them along with her tail.

“Huh, is that why?”

“They do come hug us and Beast-Heads.”

It was hard to imagine the rabbits walking up to carnivorous Beast-Heads and hugging them. I mean, they probably wouldn’t get eaten or anything, but it’d be quite a sight. This world’s food chain didn’t make any sense to me.

“I have a membership card too,” said Eldrid.

“What membership card?”

“This,” she said, holding up a card with both hands.

It was for the Bunny Lovers Club, an illegal organization in Freida. It was shady, and its members often went into the Gandakia Dungeon to show love to Walker Rabbits. Not to mention, she was member number 11,506, which implied that one percent of Freida’s population was a member of this illegal group—that was crazy to think about.

“Huh... I didn’t think you’d be a member of that club,” I said, slightly taken aback.

I’d seen members of that club before, and they gave me some weird, crazy vibes. The look in their eyes changed whenever they saw a rabbit, and they tried to outrace each other to get to it first. At least they weren’t trying to hurt the rabbits.

“Hey, don’t lump me in with the others! I keep things civil!” said Eldrid.

“You mean the other people don’t?” I asked.

“Well...there may be a few bad eggs that get carried away from time to time.”

“What do they do?”

“I’m sure you’ve seen them before, but they’ll chase the rabbits and grab them for a hug. I’m sure the rabbits think it’s all a game, so they should be fine, but it’s never good to overdo it,” she said, showing an awkward expression on her face as she admonished the members who weren’t here.

They sounded scary.

We continued talking as we made our way toward the seals. We splashed around in the water for a bit, then the seals approached us to beg for attention. Soon, we were surrounded by the fluffy creatures. We split up the workload of giving out head pats and hugs, and they happily narrowed their eyes.

“Over here,” giggled Eldrid, beckoning a seal over and gently patting it. She looked like she was in heaven.

The seals were very soothing, and it felt like their presence was rapidly restoring my sanity, which was diminished whenever I was in the dungeon. It was mostly Sensei’s fault that it was so low. Thank goodness for these fluffy angels.

Suddenly, the seals began crying out. Gradually, their voices joined together, finding a rhythm and forming music. Yes, these seals could sing—and in a proper chorus. Their singing voices were quite beautiful too. This was one of the reasons why they were so popular. Plus, their singing somehow kept monsters at bay. Monsters seemed to hate the seals’ beautiful singing and fled whenever they heard it. They were like mobile monster-warding stakes.

Eldrid and I, along with the other Divers, were listening to their song in a daze when Eldrid lost her balance and fell.

“Whoa!” she yelled, then fell into the water with a splash.

She emerged from the water soaking wet.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah, sorry. Just slipped a little...”

I extended a hand to help her up, and she shook her entire body to shake off the water like a dog.

“Ugh... I just groomed my tail earlier...” she said.

Her once-fluffy tail was now limp and wet. She seemed pretty heartbroken about it. I could see tears in her eyes.

I took a bath towel out of my Dimension Bag and handed it to her.

“Here you go.”

“Ah, thanks,” she said, then removed her armor and knight’s garb, leaving herself pretty much half naked with just her underclothes on.

“Wha—hey!” I said in a panic.

“Hmm? What? What’s wrong?” she asked, cocking her head in confusion.

“What do you mean ‘What’s wrong’? Your clothes!”

“Relax, I still have a layer on. You’re making me embarrassed by making a big deal out of it...”

Eldrid only had a thin layer left, and because she was wet, I could almost—actually, I *could* see through it. She actually had decent-sized breasts, and the outlines of her body were clearly visible. Apparently, she wasn’t into wearing bras. *Heh heh.*

No, I need to stop, I thought and pulled myself together.

I decided standing in front of her was a bad idea, so I grabbed another bath towel and went behind her.

“L-Let me dry off your hair!” I said in an attempt to change the subject and distract myself.

“Huh? Oh, sure. Thanks...”

Eldrid lowered her head. She’d become a lot more docile compared to earlier.

I wiped her head with a towel, then wiped the inside of her droopy ears too.

“Wha—hey! Not inside my ear—ah! That tickles, stupid!” she complained.

“Well, we have to make sure you didn’t get water in there,” I said.

Dogs were vulnerable to ear infections, so I had to make sure.

“Okay, let’s dry off your tail next!” I said.

“M-My tail?!”

“Huh? Yeah, we should wipe it down too, right?” I asked, confused.

“Of course not!”

“Why not?”

“Well, I mean...” she grumbled and trailed off.

I wasn’t sure what was up with her, but I said, “You shouldn’t leave it wet like that. Come on, let me wipe it down.”

“I know, but—hey, don’t touch—meooooooooow!” she squealed and plopped down on the ground when I began wiping her tail.

“‘Meow’?”

Why did she sound like a cat when she was supposed to be a dog? Maybe I’d been mistakenly assuming she was a dog when she’d been a cat the whole time.

Eldrid looked up at me, teary-eyed, her hips and legs twitching erratically. “Y-You...idiot...”

“Isn’t that a bit overdramatic?” I asked. “All I did was wipe your tail.”

“I know that...but you caught me off guard...”

“Is the tail a weak point for Tails or something?”

“N-Not exactly...”

I didn’t understand what I’d done wrong, then. Eldrid seemed completely exhausted and seemed to have trouble getting back up. She even sounded weaker. Getting weaker when her tail was grabbed made it sound like she belonged to a certain vegetable-based alien warrior race. Though, that bit of lore had eventually been updated when the character trained their tail to overcome their weakness in a later episode.

Anyway, I didn’t want to just leave her tail wet. At least with dogs, a wet tail was a breeding ground for bacteria, which could lead to skin diseases and bad odor. I was sure she’d wash it once we left the dungeon, but I wanted to play it safe.

“Come on, stop being shy,” I insisted.

“Hey! Stop! Stop it!”

“It’ll be over in a second,” I said, determined to dry her off quickly.

Judging by her reaction when I’d dried off her head and ears earlier, she was embarrassed by the idea of getting wiped down, but with a towel, I could quickly remove any excess moisture, then I could use the dryer for the rest.

I stroked her tail with the towel, and she moaned, “Ah! No! Don’t!”

I felt like I was doing something wrong. I then worked on the base of her tail.

“Where do you think you’re touching, you jerk?!”

Her tail. I was touching her tail. I’d like to make it clear that I didn’t touch any other body part. Besides, I’d only touched her through the towel, and there wasn’t an ounce of indecency to my intentions.



“Meooooooooow!!!”

I couldn't help but wonder why she kept yelling like a cat. I was somewhat amused, but I got the job done as quickly as I could.

Eldrid remained immobile on the ground, her eyes rolled back and her hips and legs twitching. She was like a newborn fawn.

“Did I...go too far?” I wondered aloud.

I hadn't been rough with her or anything, and I'd wiped her down in the past, so I'd thought it'd be fine. I hadn't had any idea she'd end up like this.

Eldrid eventually recovered, and she glared at me with tears in her eyes.

“You—I told you to stop!” she barked.

“I'm sorry! I didn't think that would happen!” I said.

“Y-You owe me for this!”

“S-Sure, yeah. I promise to repay you somehow.”

“You'd better!” she said, her arms wrapped around herself.

I felt like I'd done something terribly obscene to her.

Afterward, I took out my dryer like before and quickly dried her hair and tail. Maybe it was because of my promise to repay her, or because of her straightforward personality, but she no longer seemed particularly bothered. She did shoot me a reproachful look every once in a while though.

Once our playtime with the seals had ended, we continued exploring the Submerged City, peeked into the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine, and then called it a day.

What about the Great Boar, our original target? It obviously stood no chance against the fully healthy Eldrid. She'd sliced it into ribbons in five seconds. High-level people were scary strong. I hoped she hadn't been taking it out on the boar because she was upset with me.

Floor Fifteen: The Dangerously Good Creamy Stuff

Every Diver team wanted at least one mage in their group. Not only were they, individuals who could control the supernatural phenomena known as magic, extremely rare, but mages were an indispensable part of a Diver's life. Mages required more EXP to level up, making it harder for them to level up in general. This may make them sound like burdens, but because of their abilities to manipulate paranormal forces, they were useful in all sorts of situations even at a low level: they could heal their companions' wounds, reduce the labor required to carry cargo with their Dimension Bags, and so on, resolving all sorts of issues that Divers faced on the daily. This was why those who strove to climb the ranks always sought to recruit mages.

Bacchus Hawks—led by my friend Miguel Hyde Junkers—had a mage in their team already, but still, Miguel has been consistently looking for more to join them. Mages greatly increased their chances of survival in the dungeon, so he wouldn't be satisfied with just one. Even today, the area in front of the dungeon entrance and receptionist's windows in the main hall was filled with people holding up signs to recruit mages.

"Recruiting red mages! Dungeon novices welcome. Let's put your fire magic to good use!"

"Green mages urgently needed! You can be our team's breath of fresh air!"

"Seeking yellow mages. Protect the team by tanking and buying time to retreat!"

"Exploring the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine at depth level 30. Blue mages—even beginners—are very, very welcome!"

Looking at their signs, they seemed pretty desperate, but it was understandable—there simply weren't enough mages to go around. Mages could receive preferential treatment and high salaries if they worked for the government, so they had no incentive to take up a dangerous career like a Diver instead. Everyone, including myself, just wanted to live an easy life where they

could do whatever they wanted. I wished I could just freely live as I pleased for the rest of my life, though things weren't quite that simple in reality.

Anyway, every team was suffering a severe mage shortage and fighting over what little supply there was left. This competition even broke out into wars between teams, and I wanted nothing to do with that—there was nothing more pointless than fighting other humans in the dungeon.

I stopped and stared blankly at the recruitment efforts going on when a grim-looking man glared at me.

“What do you want? You got a problem or something?” he said.

“Oh, no, it's nothing. Sorry about that,” I apologized.

I may have been a mage, but I was a coward at heart, so it scared me whenever someone got aggressive with me like that. I'd always been that way since I was born, so I wasn't going to change so easily.

“We're busy recruiting mages, so get outta here and mind your own damn business,” he ordered.

“Okay,” I said hesitantly, then I sneaked away before I could get scolded again.

I was a mage too, but no one ever tried to recruit me. Mages in this world always wore robes and carried unique staffs like you'd see in fantasy stories. Ricky Rudiano, the green mage I'd adventured with in the past, had pretty much the default appearance when it came to mages in this world. Meanwhile, I wore a safari jacket and safari hat, didn't bring out my magic staff or use magic unless I needed to, and didn't go around announcing that I was a mage. No one had any idea I was a mage.

As an aside, mages were associated by color depending on the magic they used: red for fire, blue for water, green for wind, and yellow for earth. They mainly fit into one of these four categories, and a purple magic user like me was considered the exception. If, for whatever reason, I decided to show off my magic in the main hall, I'd likely be bombarded with team invitations. In this world, it was generally believed that generic spells, healing spells, and the aforementioned four categories of magic were the only types of magic out

there. It wasn't hard to imagine what would happen if someone suddenly demonstrated a new color of magic. Various teams would fight over the right to claim me, and a meeting would be held behind closed doors to settle the decision. That was scary to think about, but mages were just that important.

I decided to start heading to the receptionist's windows, but then I saw a group of three Divers around my age ahead of me. They were chatting cheerfully among themselves and had an air of naivete about them. Their equipment looked new with few blemishes, but they didn't seem like complete novices either. I assumed they'd been Divers for about a month or so. Not that I was too much better, considering it'd only been six months or so since I'd come to Freida and become a Diver.

If I had to guess, the group had just become able to reach the Great Forest Ruins or the floors just beyond. Divers started getting a certain bloodthirsty look to them once they could reach two or three more levels from there. This was probably the most fun time of their careers—it'd been for me, at least. Leveling up had been easy back then, so I'd wanted to keep going for dives nonstop. It was similar to how you just wanted to pull all-nighters when you started playing a really fun game. You keep playing without finding a good stopping point and then later regret not getting enough sleep.

My receptionist Ashley noticed me and waved. "Oh, Kudo! Kudo!"

It seemed she wanted to talk to me.

"What is it? You're still helping that team, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I need to talk to you," she said, beckoning me over.

I wondered what she was up to. It was highly possible that this had something to do with money, so I remained on high alert.

The leader of the fledgling team noticed me and asked Ashley, "Who's he?"

"Kudo, one of my assigned Divers," she answered, then she turned to me. "So, Kudo..."

"I'm not lending you any money, just so you know," I said.

"Not this again," she said. "You should know I'd never ask you for money."

“But you’d mooch off of me in other ways?” I asked.

“Yeah, so just give it up and—wait, shut up!” yelled Ashley, slamming her hands on her desk. She cleared her throat, then she slunk up to me and said with a flirtatious voice, “So, Kudo, these people told me they’re looking for a mage.”

It was kind of creepy how big her smile was.

“That’s nice. I’m not joining any team,” I said firmly.

My response may seem cold, but if I entertained her requests even once, I could see her introducing me to other teams, and I’d have to deal with even more of a hassle down the line. I felt bad, but I had to shut it down here and now even if she thought I was cruel.

Ashley then let out a loud sigh. “Still? Listen, Kudo. I really think it’s about time you join a team. And this group just happens to need a mage. What do you say?”

“No, thank you. I like playing in the dungeon without worrying about others. I’ll have to decline your offer,” I replied.

“You know...you and Dracarion are the only ones who call it ‘playing’ in the dungeon,” said Ashley.

“Lion-Maru is on a completely different level. He could go through a floor at depth level 50 while humming as if he were strolling through a park. He’s inhuman. Literally.”

“Well...true.”

The leader of the fledgling team, who was still standing at the receptionist’s window, suddenly spoke up. “Um, are you a mage, by any chance?”

“Technically, yeah. But it’s only been half a year since I first learned magic, and I’ve only been in Freida for that long too.”

“So you’re still a novice...” he said, looking a bit disappointed.

Obviously, a full-fledged mage was more appealing than a novice one; not only did it sound better, but they’d obviously be more useful too. I realized that if I could discourage their team from wanting me to join, I could escape this

situation without issues. *Good.*

I turned around and realized Ashley was frozen there, her eyes wide open.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Practicing how to make funny faces?”

“Um...Kudo, is what you just said true?” asked Ashley.

“Yes? You already know I’m a newbie who’s only been in Freida for half a year,” I said.

“Not that. You said you’ve only been a mage for half a year! I thought you were already a mage when you got here!”

“No...?”

“You didn’t graduate from Meruem Magic Academy?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Were you maybe born in Vineberg?”

“I was born in Japan, and I’m a natural-born Japanese. Vive le Japan! Yeah!”

Ashley stared at me, speechless, her expression transforming as if she was trying to win a funny-face contest. She then rubbed her eyebrows with her fingers.

“I... I knew you were no ordinary person, but I had no idea...”

“Um, excuse me...” said the leader of the fledgling group, sounding rather troubled. He’d been completely left out of the conversation.

Ashley’s head then shot up for some reason, and she looked at him.

“Kudo here is the highest-level mage assigned to me,” she said.

“Huh? Uh, Ashley? What are you doing?” I asked.

“He’s level 34,” she went on. “He’s an expert Diver who’s always breezing through the Dark Corridors at depth level 30. Not only that, but he’s a special-grade potion meister too.”

“R-Really?!” asked the team leader.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” said Ashley, breathing out a puff of air through her nose. She’d said it so plainly and decisively.

I was no expert by any means, so she was dramatically overselling my merits. All I'd been doing was going into deeper and deeper floors using cheap tricks just so I could gather ingredients. I hadn't even been going on real adventures or fighting much unless I was with Sensei.

The fledgling team's members looked at me with awe.

"Whoa... A high-level mage."

"I've heard there are only a few special-grade potion meisters in all of Freida..."

"No, uh, really," I sputtered, "it's not like that."

Their admiring looks were painful to see. Sensei always told me my magic had a long way to go, and all I'd done to become a meister was mix potions with energy drinks. Thinking back, I *really* hadn't done anything worthy of admiration. But there was a bigger problem going on here.

"Ashley...isn't it against the rules to leak my personal information?" I pointed out.

"Quiet, you!" she snapped. "What harm does it do anyway? You keep way too much to yourself! You should be more open about these things!"

"I don't think so. This is an invasion of privacy," I argued.

"I don't even know what that means!" said Ashley, and I realized there was no point in arguing with her.

"Oh! But I'm rank 38,038. I'm lower than 30,000th place," I said.

"Eh?"

"Whaaat?"

"Huh?"

The team's members looked at me with surprise, and my comment only seemed to have fueled Ashley's anger. A malevolent aura emanated from her, and her expression reminded me of a hannya mask.

"How many times have I told you that you need to get evaluated for a rank-up?! Why haven't you done it yet?! Are you stupid? Huh? Are you an idiot? Are

you one of those dummies who only know how to level up?!” she snapped.

“That’s...kind of harsh...” I said.

“You deserved it, dummy Kudo!”

As Ashley relentlessly insulted me, the team’s leader asked, “You aren’t going to raise your rank?”

“People would bug me to join their teams if I did, and I’ve heard the high-rankers get difficult dungeon missions forced on them. I’ll pass,” I said.

“Why would you pass on it?” asked Ashley. “Come on, please, give it a try. Since you’re assigned to me, I’d get recognized for your accomplishments too. It’d count toward my assessment for raising my bonus, and I’d be able to buy more clothes and bags!”

“So you’re just being greedy,” I pointed out.

“Hee hee. Well, one of the reasons I took this job was because it pays well,” said Ashley.

“A high salary does sound appealing.”

“It does, right? But whenever I bring up money, some snob always goes on and on about working just for the ‘fulfillment.’ Not everyone wants to slave away for their entire lives, you know!”

“I totally get you,” I agreed.

“Right?!”

Ashley was clearly stressed out. I seemed to have gotten her carried away by agreeing with her too much, and the youngsters—who were around my age—were clearly disturbed. It went without saying that this wasn’t the kind of thing you wanted to hear from your receptionist. Their profession was one based upon trust, and you didn’t really want to work with someone in this role who went on and on about money.

“Look! They’re all weirded out! This is all your fault!” Ashley complained.

“That’s terribly unreasonable...” I said. All I’d done was agree with her.

“So, what do you say?” asked Ashley.

“Like I said, I’ll pass. I’m not joining a team.”

“Why not? You’re about to go for a dive, right?”

“Actually, I’m not. I didn’t come here to dive today,” I said.

“Huh? Then why?”

“I’m here to pick up the thing I asked for yesterday.”

“You asked me for something...? Oh! Just a sec!” said Ashley, clapping her hands together as she recalled what it was.

Guild receptionists also worked as intermediary agents between Divers and merchants, so they accepted requests from Divers as well. This time, I’d given ingredients I’d gotten in the dungeon to the receptionist and asked for them to be processed by a specialist. I’d already paid for the service, so I’d come empty-handed today.

Ashley soon returned holding a large pot.

“Here you go,” she said. “Pearl beans that have been soaked in water, ground, stewed, and pressed, just like you ordered. They said you got a good haul.”

“You’re right,” I said, feeling the pot’s weightiness as I accepted it. I shook it lightly, hearing and feeling the liquid sloshing around inside.

Curious, the team leader asked Ashley, “What is that?”

“Apparently, it’s something made from dungeon ingredients that can only be gathered in the Evernight Meadows, which is just beyond the Dark Corridors, the place I mentioned earlier. I’ve never eaten the base ingredient myself, though,” she answered.

“Oh, you haven’t?” I asked.

I was honestly kind of surprised. Receptionist work was pretty difficult, which was why it was one of the highest-paying jobs, only second to dungeon guides, if I recalled correctly. And since her profession was so closely tied to the dungeon, I’d assumed she was very familiar with dungeon ingredients, so I never would’ve guessed she hadn’t tried pearl beans before.

“Pearl beans aren’t something you can find in the markets that often... The

lady at the dining hall was shocked when she saw them. She wanted to know how I got so many,” said Ashley.

“I found a good farming spot while I was going around and mapping the floor,” I said.

“Why didn’t you report that kind of info?”

“I’d rather not. It took me a lot of work to find it. Besides, I’m sure there are others who know about it already.”

“You’d be surprised,” she said. “People don’t really take the effort to make maps because you can go anywhere on an open floor, plus they don’t want to deal with roaming monsters. People who do make maps just keep the maps to themselves.”

Of course nobody wanted to tell others about their private farming spots as it’d only reduce their own yield. I especially wanted to keep these pearl beans for myself. They were beans that looked like pearls as their name implied, and they could be harvested year-round in the Evernight Meadows at depth level 40. Highly nutritious and tasty, they were like a souped-up mix of soybeans and rich cow milk. If I brought these back to my world, they could probably start a culinary revolution. They were generally served stewed in water or milk in this world, and no one even knew about soy milk. So I’d put together instructions with pictures, translated them, then sent the beans in to be processed.

“Are you going to drink that, Kudo?” asked Ashley. “Grinding, stewing, then turning it into a liquid sounds like a waste to me.”

The people of this world all seemed to think this way. I’d heard that almond milk had existed in my world in medieval Europe, but they apparently didn’t have plant-based dairy products here.

“I’m using it for cooking,” I explained. “Right here, right now.”

“With that?” she asked.

“Yup. With this,” I said, shaking the pot.

Ashley clapped her hands together as if she’d just had a great idea. “Oh, well, it’s lunchtime, so maybe I’ll have some. I’m dying to know what you’re going to

make.”

“That’s fine, but don’t you need to help them?” I asked, referring to the Diver team.

“I just finished up with them. They said they’re going for a dive.”

“I see,” I said and shrugged it off.

Meanwhile, the team was clearly curious to know what I’d be cooking. I could see them fidgeting. I couldn’t blame them; anyone would be interested to see how rare dungeon ingredients would be used in cooking. It wasn’t as if I was going to make anything particularly complicated though.

“Since you’re here, would you guys like to try some too?” I asked.

The team’s members exchanged looks.

Luckily, I had far more pearl bean milk than I’d expected, and I could feed three or four more mouths without issues.

The three came to an agreement without a word.

“If you don’t mind...” said the leader.

“Okay, then let’s go sit at those seats over there,” I said and walked over to a corner with some seats and a table.

Once I was there, I pulled out a small hot plate from my Dimension Bag. This was far higher tech than this world was used to, of course.

“What’s that?” asked Ashley.

“It’s a tool for heating ingredients,” I explained.

“Where does the fire go? Do you burn stuff on top of it?” she asked.

“No, no, I won’t be using any fire.”

“Huh? Then how are you going to heat anything?”

“Just watch. Oh, the black part is going to get hot, so don’t touch,” I said, then I lifted the pot. “First, we pour some pearl bean milk in like so...”

The black fluorine coating on the hot plate was covered in the white fluid as I poured the milk in. There was a luster to it as if it were made with real pearls. It

was so white that it was almost too bright to look at.

Once I finished pouring, it was time to turn on the hot plate. It would, of course, be powered with...my magic.

“Heh heh, the day has finally come. I’ve been practicing how to fine-tune voltage and current output, even in Japan,” I said.

If Sensei were here, she’d probably call me an idiot for wasting so much work on something so pointless, but I spared no effort when it came to eating good food. I could even use hair dryers as much as I wanted thanks to this skill.

I looked around and saw that everyone was crowding around the hot plate with curious looks on their faces. They had no idea what was about to happen.

Ashley eventually asked, “So, what’s this?”

“This is...a yuba party!” I exclaimed.

Indeed, I was trying to make fresh yuba, or tofu skin. Yuba parties were easy to do even at home; all you needed to do was pour soy milk into a frying pan or hot plate and heat it. Normally, I’d use unadjusted soy milk, but this time I was using only ingredients from this world. I’d already confirmed that soybean milk solidified when heated. This was an upgrade from soybeans in every way imaginable.

“So...does this ‘yuba’ taste good?” asked the team leader.

“It’s made from pearl bean milk, so I’d think so...” I said.

“Oh, it’s getting warmer,” said Ashley. “What’s with this tool? Was it made by a mage or someone like that?”

“No, it’s a product of civilization,” I said.

Ashley cocked her head in confusion. I was sure there was a lot she could’ve said, but I wanted her to leave it at that.

I fanned the pearl bean milk as it was heated, then I stopped the heat. I brought out some small bowls, then I filled them with either some ponzu soy sauce or soy sauce mixed with dashi broth.

“We dip it in these sauces and eat it,” I explained.

“Dip what?” asked Ashley.

“This,” I said, then I picked up the milk with a pair of chopsticks, revealing a piece of pure-white yuba.

“Whoa! Where did that come from?!”

“Is that the hardened surface of the milk?”

“You can eat that?”

“Yup,” I said to the bombardment of questions from the fledgling team.

I placed the yuba on a big plate I’d prepared beforehand, and it was even whiter than the white plate it was placed upon. It was beautiful.

“Ah... So white and glossy...” I said admiringly.

Yubas usually had a yellowish or brownish tint to it, but this maintained its perfectly pure-white color. There weren’t even any wrinkles on it, and it seriously looked like I’d scooped up some sheer silk. This was a weird physical phenomenon, but it was otherworldly food, so who cares?

“No one would mind if I tried it first, right?” I asked.

“Go ahead...” said Ashley anxiously.

I’d just scooped up the film that had solidified on the surface, so they had no idea what it’d taste like—no, they must’ve been imagining that it’d taste like the film that formed when dairy milk was heated. Too bad for them, yuba was something else entirely.

All four of them watched closely as I dipped the fresh yuba in some dashi soy sauce, then I put it in my mouth.

“Ah!” I shouted.

“What? Kudo?” said Ashley, bewildered.

“It’s so rich!” I exclaimed. “It’s super rich! And so creamy! It’s delicious! Oh man, the rich, soft goodness is melting my brain...”

I could hardly contain the excitement as the rich umami spread throughout my mouth. As soon as I’d put the yuba in my mouth, my entire mouth had felt like it was melting away with the flavor, and my brain along with it. I was at a

loss for words. I sat there for some time, taking in the afterglow of the pearl bean yuba.

Unable to wait any longer, Ashley asked, “Kudo, um...is it okay if I try some too?”

“Oh, sure, of course,” I said, recovering from my daze and standing up. I scooped up some yubas and put them on a plate for Ashley. Then, she began poking at it with a fork.

“It’s so soft,” she observed.

The pearl bean yuba solidified quickly, and I scooped some for the other three as well.

“This is food...?”

“They look like Pop Slimes when you pile them up like that.”

“Hey, don’t compare it to slimes! You’ll ruin my appetite!”

Do-Melta was rich in variety when it came to food, but only the wealthy had access to the high-end ingredients. Divers who were already well-off would be one thing, but those who’d just started getting into this lifestyle could only afford cheap bread, cheap herbs, cheap herbs, *cheap herbs*, beans, potatoes, and the occasional mystery meat. Life really wasn’t easy for them. I suspected this would be the first time this team had ever tried luxury dungeon food.

They each used a fork to dip a piece of yuba in some ponzu soy sauce, then they put it into their mouths.

“Ah!”

“Oh!”

“Whoa!”

“This taste...!”

The four of them each made a surprised noise. They were even more expressive and dramatic than I’d been. I thought they were being a bit *too* dramatic, but the rich creaminess was apparently quite a shock for the citizens of this world.

“Ah, what’s happening? My mouth is melting...”

“W-Wow... I’ve never tasted anything so rich with flavor...”

“My brain... It’s melting...”

“Whooooaaa! Whooooooooaaa!”

They all seemed to have lost their minds as soon as they’d put the yubas in their mouths. I suspected it was because it was so soft that they hardly had to chew at all. They were all in a trancelike state as if they’d taken some illicit substances. Maybe it’d been a bad idea for me to share with them.

The men managed to hold their ground, but the women were in a disgraceful state, drool drooping from the corners of their lips. I was kind of weirded out, to be honest.

“Um, Ashley,” I said.

“Wh-Wha’s thaht, Kuro...? I’m fwying high in the sky right nyao...” she mumbled.

“Hey, snap out of it!” I shouted.

“H-Hey, Dan... A-Are you all right?”

“I’m hanging in there, somehow... But Marle...”

“Oho, oho ho... Eheh heh...”

Our table was super chaotic compared to everyone else’s. All they’d done was eat some food, and now they were writhing around on the table, on the verge of getting knocked out. They may be in dire need of healing magic—or better yet, they may need to be revived with Kazing or Raise. The Divers around us were staring at us, wondering what was happening.

Please don’t mind us. Just a bit of sensory overload. I’m sure they’ll be fine in a minute.



Surprisingly, not a lot of people in this world had tried good food. Because of this, food that's good enough to start a culinary revolution in my world was too much of a good thing for them. I'd used an extravagant amount of pearl bean milk, cooked it, then served it with condiments from my world. It was akin to hitting them with culinary violence.

I turned off the hot plate for now, having had no idea they'd react this way. I was standing amid a pile of corpses—well, two of them were toughing it out and still hanging on by a thread.

They'd all recovered after some time, risen like zombies, stared impatiently with bloodshot eyes as I cooked more yubas, then devoured them like rabid dogs as soon as they were ready. I had some too, of course, and that was why I was making them in the first place—they were absolutely delicious. The other four eventually built up a tolerance and were able to eat normally by the fourth or fifth round. One might wonder, "What about the second and third?" but it was uncouth to ask about the forbidden fluids the ladies had been leaking.

"I'm in heaven... I don't think I've ever felt so happy from food before..."

"Yes, it's so creamy and delicious, and the saltiness of the sauce pairs with it perfectly..."

"Om nom nom."

"I've never had anything so good in my life. This is amazing..."

I'd been eating too, but before I knew it, I was solely cooking for the others. It was fun just watching them eat, and I kind of felt like a mom.

"This sauce is good too," I said, offering the dashi soy sauce.

"Oh, this one tastes different. I like it... Oh, wow! I feel it again!" said Ashley, gradually going crazy again.

I was seriously starting to wonder if I should cut her off for her own good.

We went through the remaining pearl bean yuba at an alarming rate.

"That was amazing. Kudo, let me know next time you get more pearl beans, okay? Promise!" demanded Ashley.

“O-Okay...”

The members of the Diver team thanked me one by one.

“Thank you very much. It was so delicious... I couldn’t believe it!”

“The crispy ones at the end were good too!”

“I’m gonna level up so I can eat stuff like this every day!”

They were full of cheers and excitement. I thought setting good food as a goal was a good thing, but I told them, “Just make sure you don’t rush through things. You never want to get hasty and careless when it comes to dungeon diving. Avoiding injuries and leveling up slow and steady is the best way to go.”

“Is that how you did it?”

“Yup. Before I go for a dive, I always do ample research on the floor I’m going to and calculate everything I’ll be bringing to and from the dive. I only fight monsters I know I can beat, and I head home once I finish my objective even if I have plenty of energy left. I never bite off more than I can chew. Ever.”

Of course, this didn’t apply to the dives I’d gone on with Sensei as it’d been a fight for my life every time. I’d been *seriously* close to dying—no, close to getting killed last time.

The three members of the fledgling team gave me a surprised look without saying a word.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s just...I kind of assumed you’d be going on grand adventures every day.”

“No way,” I said. “Besides, if every dive were some grand adventure, you wouldn’t be able to go all the time. You’d have to take time off from injuries or fatigue, so you wouldn’t be able to steadily gain EXP.”

“Ah...”

He finally seemed to get it. That was the key point to dungeon diving. To earn a steady daily wage, they had to avoid getting hurt and overworking. Getting injured meant they’d need to take time off, and it’d cost money to buy potions

or request healing magic from a mage. They wouldn't be able to earn any EXP during the downtime, and if any money was spent on treatment, they'd need to prioritize earning money over gaining EXP. No matter what level a Diver was, these risks were always their greatest obstacles. It would've been a different story if we could just rest at an inn and heal up to full HP, but this world wasn't a video game even if it did have levels and potions.

Ashley joined in with her own thoughts on the matter. "You know, there are even high-level Divers who don't understand that. They say it's for glory or money or some other reason, and they get way too reckless. My seniors told me it's gotten even worse since the ranking system was put in place. A lot of Divers have way too much pride."

There was a hint of resignation in her expression. As a receptionist, she must've seen Divers who'd taken on too much risk and paid the ultimate price. But more importantly...

"*You*, of all people, are speaking out against making money?" I said.

"Stop that," she said. "I may have my faults, but I'm a receptionist—I care about Divers."

"That's our Ashley. I'll follow you forever," I said.

"Oh, cut it out," she said jokingly.

I looked at the trio and said, "If you're willing to learn, you should ask Instructor Seeker for guidance. He'll teach you everything you need to know."

"Everything would be resolved if you just joined their team though," said Ashley, getting back at me for teasing her earlier.

"I told you, that's not happening," I replied.

I really couldn't join a team because I was a student and would have difficulty coordinating with the schedules and lifestyles of the people in this world. That meant they'd have to accommodate mine, which would be asking for a lot. The only people who could manage it would probably be high-rankers like Miguel.

We'd been talking with the yuba party set still left out on the table, and Scrael eventually appeared. She nimbly walked over to us as soon as she noticed me.

When she arrived at our table, she asked, “Akira...what were you eating?”

No hello? I thought, but I decided to let it pass and said, “Oh, we were just having a yuba party—”

“Where’s my portion?” she asked.

It was a classic move by the gourmand Scrael, cheekily asking for some of my food. I turned my gaze to the hot plate. All that remained on the fluorine-coated plate were tiny dried-up bits, and there was no pearl bean milk left in the pot either, of course. It was all gone. Even the crispy stuff that’d been left over had all disappeared into our stomachs.

“Uhh...” I mumbled.

“You don’t have any?” asked Scrael.

“Well, um—”

“You don’t, do you...?”

I thought I heard a low rumbling sound as if the ground were shaking or a volcano were moments away from erupting. There was an ominous air about her as she turned to Ashley.

“Was it good, Ashley?” asked Scrael.

“Huh? Yeah, it was delicious. I was in bliss when I had some earlier,” said Ashley.

Ashley... Ashley... Please wipe that dreamy expression off your face.

Scrael said nothing, her gaze growing colder than ice.

“You guys even ate it with shoy sauce...” she said.

“Oh, this? It’s called ponzu soy sauce,” I explained.

“Ponzu shoy sauce...the stuff we didn’t buy last time.”

I didn’t like where this was going. Scrael was serious about her soy sauce.

She dipped her finger in the ponzu soy sauce, licked it, then shuddered.

“Why didn’t you leave any for me?” she asked.

“I mean, I had no idea you’d be coming. How was I supposed to know?”

“You have your Dimension Bag. You could’ve saved me some.”

“I have a policy of not storing perishables in—Hrrrgh!” I blurted out as Scrael pinched my cheek.

“You’d better call me next time! You’re obligated to!” she demanded.

“Yesh! I’m sowwy! I’ww definitewy caww you neksh time! Pwease wet me go!”

“You’d better not eat something without me again. You’ll be sorry.”

It was a completely unreasonable order. Anyway, it seemed like I had to go get some more pearl beans as soon as possible.

Floor Sixteen: Trouble at the Rankings Chart

The main hall at the Divers Guild was like an enormous school gymnasium housing over a hundred table seats and various facilities. For example, there were receptionist's windows where we processed paperwork before diving, a simple washing area in front of the large staircase leading to the dungeon entrance for us to rinse off dirt from clothes and armor, and a dining hall where Divers could order awful food and drinks for cheap.

One of the biggest eye-catchers there was the giant bulletin board spanning the back of the main hall. The guild posted Dungeon mission requests there as a public call for Divers to gather certain ingredients or hunt down certain monsters, and Divers posted trading requests for materials they needed.

Diver Ranks could be found on the board too; it listed out Divers in the order of the magnitude of their achievements. However, the rankings only listed the top ten thousand Divers. If anyone belonged to a team, only their team name and the top-ranking member among them were listed, so there were fewer than ten thousand entries in reality. Having one's name included on the list was a common dream among Divers who challenged the Gandakia Dungeon.

"Huh..." I said absentmindedly as I stared at the bulletin board when I came here after school.

The rankings were updated once a month to reflect changes based on the guild's assessment. The Diver industry was a competitive and dangerous space, so the order on the list changed dramatically all the time. An up-and-coming team that had just made the list recently could be kicked off it or listed as disbanded, missing, or wiped out by the next update, but the top-rankers were consistently listed at the top.

In first place was the immovable hero Dracarion Hueller, aka Lion-Maru. Listed right below his name were the big three teams: Eagle's Talon, the biggest team in Freida, which had inconvenienced everyone by hogging up the entire main hall a while ago; Order of the Black Dawn, the team with a cringey name,

comprising members of many different races; and Brave Wings, which, although smaller than the other two, had many powerful Divers in their team. A little further down the list, I found Miguel's team Bacchus Hawks.

There were a bunch of other individual names, but mine obviously wasn't listed—I was rank 38,038. I wouldn't get on the rankings unless I slaved away doing dungeon missions for the guild, made a good impression on Ashley and gained her trust, and did well on the ranking exams. The missions were assigned based on rank, so they'd be pretty easy for my level, to be honest. Ashley liked me, so I wouldn't have an issue on that end...I think. The problem was the exam: the rank-up exam was always done in the morning, which was pretty harsh for a student like me. I'd given up on it because I didn't want to ruin my perfect school attendance, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in getting my name on the list. Still, the thought of all the hassles that'd come with it always made me reconsider. It was just as Sensei had said: standing out too much makes you a target for jealousy. I may consider increasing my rank if I had a reason to, but there wasn't anything pushing me to act quite yet.

If I were to do it, I'd probably need to level up so much that no one could mess with me, and I'd make a lot of allies.

Those were the bare minimum requirements. I had to be as strong as anyone else in the top hundred, or I'd get hammered down as soon as I started earning fame. Having a lot of friends would also make it harder for anyone to mess with me. Regardless, it'd also have to be after my schoolwork was settled too. There was a long road ahead.

"Hey, Kudo," said a familiar voice as I gawked at the rankings chart. It was the youthful and energetic voice of Miguel Hyde Junkers.

The voice seemed to be coming from nearby, so I turned toward its source and saw Miguel tied to a pillar with a rope.

"Huh?" I said, doing a double take.

Yeah, it *was* Miguel, tied to a pillar with a rope. He had short blond hair and friendly-looking droopy eyes. He was clad in light armor with his trademark shoulder armor on one side. I assumed he'd just returned from a dive, judging by the spots of dirt on his attire.

I stared wordlessly.

Someone seemed to have tied him up to shame him. Looking at him now, he'd been tied up in a very conspicuous location, but I hadn't noticed because other Divers were standing in front of him. I wished I'd never noticed him at all. Why had I reacted?

I met eyes with Miguel, but I wasn't sure what to do. He flashed a smile. I really wanted to pretend I didn't know him.



I tried my best to fade away while still acting natural, but he said, “Hey, don’t ignore me, man. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“I don’t remember being friends with someone who gets shamed in public,” I said.

“Come on, quit kidding around and come over here.”

I *really* didn’t want to, but I didn’t have it in me to ignore him.

“So...is this some kind of new game you’re playing?” I asked.

“Does this look like a game to you?” he asked.

“Then is this some kind of advanced humiliation play that only deviant high-level high-rankers do to get their rocks off? The kind where you can enjoy humiliation, neglect, and bondage all at once? I’m impressed. I could never do anything like that. I guess that’s why you’re the superhigh-ranker here. You’re way ahead of the rest of us.”

“Don’t assume I’m some pervert just because I’m tied up here,” he said.

“Then is this some sort of punishment game? Are we supposed to write on your face?” I asked.

“Hey, don’t even joke about that— Whoa, put those pens away!”

The Divers around us had all brought out writing utensils and closed in on Miguel after my comment. The people of this world really did get my kind of humor.

“Then what is it? Are you sure it’s not some new type of kink?” I asked.

“No, it’s just... A girl on my team did this to me,” he admitted.

“Your lover?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I’m jealous that you even have a lover. Die. At least perish.

“Burn in the pits of hell,” I said.

“Huh...? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it,” I said, then changed the subject. “So, what

did you do to deserve this?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. All I did was drink with another girl and get a little touchy.”

“You totally deserved it, then,” I said.

“How?” he asked, looking at me with genuine confusion.

Miguel the chronic cheater. I could tell he’d been crossing the line by the way he’d said he’d gotten “a little touchy.” He’d definitely been feeling girls up. I envied—I mean, I seriously questioned his morals.

“Listen, Miguel,” I said, “you wouldn’t like it if your girlfriend was flirting with another guy, right?”

“Right,” he agreed.

“See? Then why did you do it?”

“Because I’m a guy,” he said confidently, and the female Divers around him looked at him with slight disgust.

I couldn’t blame them. He was hopeless. But those were words that could only be spoken by Divers who made good money. The ability to earn money was a huge part of a man’s status in this world, and most people here prioritized it over romance. My values as a modern high school citizen of Earth were far different from many Do-Meltans’. The fact that the women were only *slightly* disgusted by his comment proved my point.

“Anyway, can you untie me already?” asked Miguel.

“But if I do that, your girl will be mad at me, right? I don’t want to get involved with your advanced kinky stuff,” I said.

“Don’t you want to save a friend? Are you going to abandon me just to keep yourself out of trouble?”

“Of course I am,” I said.

“You didn’t even think about it for a second,” he said immediately. That was a nice comeback from him.

“Jokes aside, are you sure it’s fine for me to untie you?” I asked.

“You’re really worried about that, huh?”

“Don’t change the subject,” I insisted.

“You do it all the time.”

“Don’t forget that your life is in my hands. Heh heh.”

“She went home, so you’ll be fine,” he said.

It seemed I wouldn’t get in any trouble for freeing him. If the girl was here, she probably would’ve stepped into the conversation already.

I quickly undid the rope, and Miguel rotated his arms as he said, “Whew. Well, that sucked.”

“You got what you deserved for cheating,” I said.

“That wasn’t cheating.”

“You’re not gonna admit it, are you?”

“I’m devoted. I don’t cheat.”

“Sure you are. You’re probably three-faced,” I said.

“What am I, some kind of freak?” he asked.

He didn’t seem to get it, so I figured there wasn’t an equivalent idiom in this world.

Miguel brought up another topic out of the blue. “So, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, you know, they put out the updated info today,” I said, pointing at the rankings chart.

“You were checking the list?” he asked.

“Yup. It’s fun seeing how the rankings change.”

“You should put in more effort if you’re interested in the rankings. As a mage, you should be able to get in the top ten thousand no problem.”

“Yeah, maybe...” I trailed off. But I had no intention to do so for the reasons I’d considered earlier.

Miguel seemed to have misinterpreted my vague answer and said, “You won’t gain anything in the dungeon if you avoid hard work.”

“You’re right about that. When I first came to Freida, I quickly learned that you need to put in the effort or give up something else of value to gain anything worthwhile,” I agreed.

“Why don’t you do it, then?”

“It’s not that simple,” I said. “There are other things I need to do too. It’s just not the right time, I guess. And...well, I guess it just feels like I don’t have my feet on the ground yet.”

“You mean you don’t have a solid foundation? That’s all the more reason to join a team. You’d have friends around to help when you need them.”

“You’d help me?” I asked.

“Yup,” he said as he grinned broadly.

“Oh my, you’re so cool. It’s kind of upsetting,” I said.

“What are you going on about...?”

“Maybe you make me jealous.”

“Oh? Well, thanks for the ego boost,” said Miguel, slapping me on the shoulder with a laugh.

The way he’d said he’d help me reminded me how dependable and cool he could be. He was a natural-born leader, and he seemed like the type of guy whom others relied on to make a living.

We chatted for a while longer, then I noticed it was starting to get noisy around us. I wondered if someone famous had arrived and soon realized I was right. Several people, presumably members of a team, stood in front of the bulletin board as a group.

“Ah, here comes this year’s hottest team,” said Miguel.

The group that had shown up to check the rankings was the team that was known for appearing seemingly out of nowhere and accomplishing great feats this year. The members, diverse in races, were young and attractive, and they

were promising rising stars who'd been receiving generous support from the kingdom. They were known to be highly skilled and had become the hot topic for a while when word had gotten around that they'd defeated the bosses at the Yellow Wall Vestiges at depth level 20 and the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine at depth level 30. If I remembered correctly, their members had been somewhere between level 25 and the high 30s when I'd first arrived in Freida, so they were probably still around that range.

"They kind of feel like a party of heroes going against a demon lord," I said.

They were a group of good-looking youngsters in fancy equipment, so I thought my impression was pretty appropriate, but Miguel didn't seem to agree.

"*Them?*" he said incredulously.

"Yeah. You don't think so? Don't they give off that kind of vibe?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said. "I'm actually confused why you'd even think that."

"I mean, they're a bunch of pretty folks, and their ranking is exceptionally high."

"I guess that's true, but there's no way they'd be able to take down the Demon Lord," he said.

I paused at his phrasing. I was talking about a demon lord in a general sense, like from a video game, but he seemed to be talking about something more specific.

"Wait..." I said. "Is the Demon Lord real? Like, they actually exist?"

"What? You don't know? You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Ah... Is that considered common sense here, by any chance?" I asked.

"Of course it is! Who doesn't know about the Demon Lord's defeat four years ago? Have you been living under a rock? Or did you come from some boonies out in the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, no, but—wow—that trope really is a thing here, huh."

God had never mentioned anything about it before, so I'd had no idea this

world was like the kind you'd find in *Dragon Quest*.

"You said the Demon Lord was defeated. So it's all over now?" I asked.

"Yeah, he was defeated by the hero four years ago."

So the Demon Lord was no more. RIP.

"Huh, I didn't know that. Do you know the person who took him down?"

"Of course I do," said Miguel.

"What are they like?"

"I mean, you've met him already. It was the Boss Man, Dracarion."

"Wait, are you serious? Lion-Maru really is amazing. Huh, so the hero of Freida was an actual, bona fide hero," I said, then a realization hit me. "Oh, so *he's* your image of a hero."

"Yup," he said. "Just try comparing those guys to the Boss Man himself."

"You're right, they can't hold a candle to him."

It's not even fair to compare them to someone like Lion-Maru. I feel sorry for them.

"Even the Boss Man's team barely managed to win and suffered some casualties in the process. Those guys wouldn't stand a chance against the Demon Lord, and neither would anyone else in Freida," he added.

"Yeah, there's no way. It's impossible," I agreed.

Lion-Maru could send monsters at the lower-level floors flying with a flick of his finger and make them scatter just by roaring. If even he'd had a hard time, it'd be absolutely impossible for any other Diver.

Suddenly, the group of Divers parted, and a girl surrounded by a group of armed personnel walked through. I looked to see who it was and saw an awfully lofty-looking person wearing an extravagant outfit that you wouldn't normally see in Freida. The bodyguards around her were neatly dressed in surcoats of some sort adorned with the royal coat of arms. The words "royal guards" seemed to be a very fitting description for them.

"Whoa, whoa, is that who I think it is?" said Miguel.

“Who?” I asked.

“It’s the second-eldest royal princess. I’ve heard that she took a liking to their leader, but I didn’t expect her to follow them into Freida,” he explained.

“The royal family likes them? They’ve really made it, huh.”

The team’s leader was the best-looking one of the bunch, so it was no wonder people would fall for him. Though, it probably wasn’t just about his looks. If it hadn’t been for Lion-Maru, I assumed he’d be the hero.

The princess was clearly annoyed, or even disgusted, by all the attention she was getting.

“She looks really annoyed,” I whispered to Miguel. “I’m surprised she hasn’t told everyone to bow down.”

“She wouldn’t do that, considering she’s trying to keep a low profile. Plus, the Divers Guild would have something to say if she did,” he whispered back.

“But she’s a royal, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s just how powerful the guild is; not just in influence but also in a military sense. If, for whatever reason, the guild puts out a mission to attack some country, just imagine what would happen. They’d tremble in fear, no matter how strong their country was.”

“I guess you’re right.”

That would probably never happen, but it’d be a huge deal if it did. Divers were a bunch of freaks who went around hunting monsters all day, and no country would want to go to war with people like that. Monsters were humanity’s natural enemies, and many Divers were like the natural enemies of monsters. Surely, minor issues with the guild would be overlooked to avoid making waves.

Miguel and I observed from afar and saw the team’s leader talking and laughing with the princess, front and center before the bulletin board and blocking everyone’s view. A few people looked like they were about to snap, but even the toughest Divers couldn’t bring themselves to complain face-to-face, especially with the royal guards there.

Oh, it's Scrae, I thought, noticing that she'd come to check her ranking.

Scrael leaped gracefully over the crowd and landed near the bulletin board. Suddenly, Divers swarmed her to invite her to their teams, though they kept a certain distance because she'd intimidate them if they got too close. They each presented the benefits of joining their teams and tried all sorts of tactics to entice her, but she shot them each down with simple replies of "No," "Stop," "I'll pass," and "You're annoying me." They seemed to know that Long-Ears disliked humans, evident by them not being too put off by her standoffish attitude. They were just that infatuated with her—she was adorable, after all.

Once the recruiting efforts settled down, the leader of the team that had been getting attention lately spoke to her. Maybe he was trying to invite her to his team as a fellow emerging star.

"Oh? Looks like they're approaching Silvertail too," said Miguel.

Silvertail was Scrael's nickname. People had started calling her that once she'd started going up the ranks, and it was a pretty cool name. So what did it matter if it sounded like a middle schooler had come up with the name? Nothing wrong with that.

"I doubt they'll get her to join though," I said.

Scrael not only hated humans, but she also was wary of the Divers Guild and kept a distance from its members. There was no way she'd agree to join them simply by them offering her a spot.

"I think so too," Miguel agreed. "They may be famous, but she's not going to budge."

"You know about her?" I asked.

"Yeah, I've tried recruiting her before."

"Can't say I'm surprised, coming from you..."

"What, you think I'd just go for any woman? Well, you're right," he admitted.

"Oh, so you would. That's pretty scummy."

"I know," he said, but I knew he was probably joking.

When it came to dungeon diving, Miguel was all business. I was sure he'd tried to recruit her because of her abilities and not her appearance or how it'd make his team look. His team wouldn't be able to maintain their superhigh rank of 258 otherwise. Yeah, he was definitely joking...probably.

"Mixed-race teams are pretty hard to pull off, huh?" I said.

"Yeah, there can be clashes between Oracles sometimes. Not to mention, Long-Ears tend to be hostile toward humans."

"Yup," I agreed, then noticed the princess's expression. "Oh, the princess looks upset."

"I mean, he's trying to cozy up to another woman in front of her. Of course she'd be mad."

The princess was clearly irritated, but the leader didn't notice. Perhaps he was thickheaded when it came to that sort of thing. Come to think of it, I was surprised that Miguel understood the subtleties of how women felt when he didn't consider his own cheating a problem. Maybe my friend was just a scumbag after all.

As we'd expected, the leader's recruitment effort ended in failure. All she'd said to him was a simple no. There was no room for argument. As Scrael's friend, I thought it might be good for her to make other friends, but there was nothing I could do if she didn't want to.

Finally free, Scrael made her way toward the bulletin board.

Meanwhile, the princess was still agitated. She seemed to have some thoughts about Scrael shooting down her favorite team without even considering its offer. She seemed kind of annoying to deal with.

The team leader then noticed Miguel and approached us. I really didn't want to deal with this.

"You're the leader of Bacchus Hawks, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Miguel.

The leader politely introduced himself and his team. I assumed he wanted to get acquainted with Miguel because of his involvement in a superhigh-ranked

team. He praised Miguel's team while working in details of how competent his own team was. Supposedly, they had one of the top five swordsmen in the kingdom, a genius mage who'd graduated Meruem Magic Academy with top marks, and a mercenary who'd seen many battlefields since a young age. They sounded like quite the distinguished group that had been gathered from all around the kingdom. The royal family's support was definitely nothing to scoff at.

I wonder if that mage from Meruem is someone who Ricky knows.

"Your accomplishments make me proud as a fellow native of the kingdom," he said.

"That so? I've still got a long way to go," said Miguel, aloof and unaffected by the praise.

"Ah, but we greatly admire your team. And"—the team leader paused—"it won't be long before we surpass it."

He'd actually said it. I was surprised that he could say something like that directly to Miguel's face—or rather, Bacchus Hawks, a superhigh-ranking team. The fires of ambition were burning brightly in the leader's eyes. Maybe he had orders from the kingdom to make his name known in Freida.

The crowd around us began buzzing. The leader had just declared war, albeit in a roundabout way. I heard comments like "Who does he think he is?" and "He needs to learn his place." He'd said "It won't be long" before he surpassed Miguel's team, which did come off as arrogant.

Yet Miguel was unperturbed.

"Yeah? Well, good luck with that," he said.

"You're quite confident. Do you think we can't do it?" asked the leader.

"I'm not saying that, but you should know that rising through the ranks and exploring the dungeon isn't so easy. If you get too caught up in the climb, you're going to get burned," warned Miguel.

Suddenly, the princess butted in. "You seem to think awfully highly of yourself. Perhaps it's hubris to say such a thing against a team of this caliber?"

I wondered if their team really was all that great. It didn't feel like any of them were higher level than Miguel according to my perception as a mage.

"With all due respect, I was merely advising him to take a cautious approach to the dungeon instead of getting carried away by prestige. I'm sorry to hear that you've perceived my concern in such a perverse way," said Miguel.

"I see you're still a snake," said the princess.

Apparently, Miguel and the princess knew each other. Miguel did have some genteel qualities about him, so I'd had a feeling he was from a wealthy family. I seemed to have been right.

The leader then turned his attention to me. "Is he...a member of your team?" he asked Miguel.

"No, just a friend," I said.

Miguel jabbed me with his elbow, but it was the truth. What else was I supposed to say? I didn't want to come up with some poorly crafted lie that could bite me in the butt later.

The princess gave me a cursory glance and said, "You certainly don't look like a Diver."

"There's a profession known as a porter. They're responsible for carrying luggage for Divers using bags, like he does, or by pulling a cart," said Miguel.

"So in other words, it's grunt work," said the princess.

It was subtle, but I noticed Miguel's eyebrow twitch in reaction. Even I found myself irritated at her choice of words. It wasn't that I was annoyed she'd implied I did grunt work, of course, but that she'd demeaned porters, though she probably didn't even realize it.

Porters played a crucial part in dungeon diving. As Miguel had just mentioned, they carried bags and used tools like carts and shoulder-strapped racks with boxes to support Divers by transporting luggage. They secured EXP through power leveling to raise their level appropriately high to carry cargo. But since porters specialized in luggage transport and monster dismantling and generally didn't fight, they were said to be the Divers who took the most risk. This was

why decent Divers treated porters with respect and never looked down on them. Porters who could carry big loads were highly coveted.

The team leader seemed to understand this, and he started to panic a bit. Even if they had a mage among their team, they must've been getting help from a porter too to carry cargo. The capacity for a mage's Dimension Bag varied depending on the individual. As for mine, it probably had enough capacity to hold a four-ton truck.

Attempting to change the subject, the leader said, "Ah— What rank are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

That's the question you settled on?

"Oh, uh...it's in the thirty thousands," I said uncomfortably.

"I-I see..." he said, looking incredibly awkward.

I couldn't blame him. Who'd think Miguel's friend would be at such a low rank?

"It appears he is not worthy of attention," said the princess, disrespecting me completely.

She had quite the sharp tongue. Maybe her default attitude was disrespect.

"I cannot believe you spend time in the company of the likes of him," the princess continued. "Have you considered that it could damage your reputation?"

"A bit harsh, don't you think? That kind of hurts," I said.

"Do you have a problem with that?" asked the princess.

"Nooope," I said sarcastically.

"Hey, you little worm!" shouted a guard as he stepped forward. He seemed to not like my attitude.

You wanna go? Let's go. I'm ready to run like the wind. I'll flee to a place called Japan, where you'll never catch me.

"Princess, he is my friend. I ask that you stop there," Miguel said to protect me.

The princess called off her guard, looking rather displeased. The guard hesitated but finally backed down when Miguel shot him a glare. He couldn't have been more than level 20 or 25, so I wasn't surprised. He stood no chance in a head-to-head fight against Miguel, whose level was higher.

Wait... Am I bragging about someone else's abilities? How sad.

There was a moment of awkwardness, then I heard a young, gentle voice call out from behind us.

"Miguel!"

I turned around and saw a girl with wavy, light-blond hair. Judging by her robe and long magic staff, she must've been a mage. The tip of her staff was adorned with a sapphire gemstone, which meant she had to be a blue mage.

"What's up, Mimir?" asked Miguel.

She seemed to be a member of his team.

"Reverie told me to let you go now, but...it looks like there's no need for that," said the girl.

"What else did she say?" he asked.

"She wants you to prove your sincerity," she answered.

"Thought so." Miguel clutched his head upon hearing the message from his girlfriend Reverie, which sounded like something a yakuza would say.

The girl named Mimir sighed and said, "You brought this upon yourself, you know. What kind of man flirts with another woman when he has a girlfriend? You're not just a terrible person, you're shit—less than shit, even. You're vomit. Why don't you get splattered on the streets of Freida like the vomit you are?"

She continued muttering criticisms to Miguel while a grim atmosphere loomed about her. She didn't just have a dirty mouth, but it was like all the darkness inside her was pouring out of her mouth at once. It was rough to watch.

"Um, Mimir? Can you please stop now...?" said Miguel apologetically.

She covered her mouth as if she'd just realized what she was doing and said,

“Ah! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

How can she say all that without meaning to?

Miguel seemed to have some eccentric friends.

“She’s gonna yell at me if I don’t bring her a gift...” he muttered to himself, looking disheartened.

Of course, he fully deserved to get yelled at.

“Why don’t you give her the liquor you were drinking last time?” asked the girl.

“Actually, that was...” he trailed off awkwardly, then glanced in my direction.

They were talking about whiskey.

“Sorry, I don’t have any more,” I said.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” he said.

Come to think of it, I hadn’t gotten any more since. I decided to use magic to buy some more for him later.

Miguel let out a resigned sigh, then looked at the princess and said, “I’ve been summoned elsewhere, so please excuse me.” He then put a hand on my shoulder and moved his face close to mine to whisper, “Sorry I couldn’t say anything back to her.”

“I understand. Don’t worry about it,” I whispered back.

This was a princess we were talking about. There was no telling what would’ve happened if we’d picked a fight with her. It wouldn’t be as big of a deal for someone riding solo like me, but Miguel had to consider his team. He couldn’t do anything that could harm them.

After apologizing to me, Miguel left with the blonde girl. The team leader and princess were both only interested in the superhigh-ranker Miguel, so they didn’t even spare me a glance before going back to their original position.

Meanwhile, Scrael began walking toward me. The team leader tried talking to her again, but she completely ignored and walked past him.

Sheesh, I could never do what she does.

It was impressive how smoothly and naturally she'd ignored him. She hated humans like none other, and I realized that Ricky was a very special case. Scrael didn't care even if she was dealing with a rising star or a princess.

"Hey!"

The princess's royal guards who had stayed behind yelled at me and marched over as I was admiring Scrael's nerves of steel.

"Yes?" I asked.

"You had some nerve to give attitude earlier!" said one of the guards.

"Oh, uh..."

"You think you can get away with mouthing off to Her Highness like that?"

Welp, I'm in for it now.

The royal guards seemed to be pretty upset about my earlier demeanor. They were yelling loudly, their faces contorted with rage. I'd probably need to run like the wind after all.

Now that my brain cells had made a cabinet decision, I pretended to be bewildered as I slipped my magic staff from my sleeve into my hand. As I was about to cast Celerity on myself, I saw one of them reach for me from the corner of my eye.

Can't let them grab me. Time for plan B.

I switched my mind from normal mode to dungeon mode. They were already within grabbing distance, so even if I cast a spell to accelerate my movement, they may still catch me before I started moving. So I decided to put off fleeing for later and unleash Force Esoterica, the move Sensei had taught me, to send them flying and make some distance between us. Even if they didn't get knocked away, the wind from the magical blast should stun them to buy me some time. I could then cast Concentration to enhance my senses and reaction speed, followed by Power Surge and Celerity to force my way out of— "What are you doing?"

As I was considering my next move, I heard a voice from behind the royal guards before me. It was a familiar voice but cold enough to make one shudder.

The guards turned around to find Scrael walking toward us.

“Who the hell are—”

“I asked you what you’re doing. Answer me, human,” said Scrael.

“Ugh...” the guard groaned, seeing the malice in her eyes.

Her malice was far more intense than that from when I’d first met her, and it made me wonder if she could kill someone with her hostility alone. It wasn’t the kind that just made your stomach churn or your balls retract; the stress from being subjected to that could probably cause stomach cancer. Her malice was like tens of thousands of needles pushed into one’s skin, and, oh god, the royal guards were gonna die.

Was she mad? She probably was. Scrael didn’t raise her voice or show much emotion through her expression, but I was certain she was super pissed off. Meanwhile, the guards were paralyzed by the crushing tidal wave of hostility like they’d never seen before. Their knees trembled at the Long-Ears’s intimidating and murderous smoldering rage.

One of the royal guards had the guts to resist and put his hand on his hilt. I was amazed. It was truly commendable that he could even move in this situation.

“D-Da—”

He probably intended to shout something like “Damn you!” But he hadn’t even fully drawn his sword or finished his sentence before I heard a loud crack, and he was sent flying twenty meters away toward the edge of the hall.

I didn’t know humans could spin vertically like that.

Scrael stood where the guard once was, her stance low, fist raised, exhaling a puff of white air from her mouth. She’d knocked him away with a Jinshu move, and she didn’t seem to have held back either.

“Eek...”

Yeah, that was my own voice. She scared the crap out of me, to be honest. Who wouldn’t be scared after seeing a human get sent sailing through the air?

The rest of the royal guards had watched their colleague fly away, but they

didn't say a word. Intimidated by Scrael, they couldn't even move a muscle.



Scrael shot them an icy glare, then spoke in a low, flat voice. “He’s the one who went for his sword first. If you want to make a problem out of this, take it to the guild. Otherwise...”

She stomped the ground hard, and a thunderous noise reverberated throughout the main hall. It was a Jinshu technique called Seismic Stomp, and the impact was enough to suspend the chairs and tables in midair for a moment.

The princess noticed the commotion, but unaccustomed to such hostility, she said nothing. The members of her favorite team remained silent too. Overwhelming strength was a scary thing.

The onlookers watching the spectacle murmured among themselves.

“Long-Ears are amazing...”

“So cool!”

“I wish she’d join my team.”

“Did they piss themselves?”

After confirming that no one had dared make a move, Scrael finally relaxed and walked over to me.

“Akira,” she said.

“Hey, Scrae. Thanks,” I said.

“That was nothing. Compared to a Four-Armed Goat, they’re weaker than a roly-poly.”

I kind of felt bad that they were being compared to a boss at depth level 30. This was a *boss monster* we were talking about, a terrible beast that could destroy a town by itself.

“Akira,” said Scrael.

“Yeah?”

“There’s a place I want to go today. I wouldn’t mind going with you if you take me.”

Her phrasing was weird as always, but I figured she wanted me to take her.

“Sure. Where to?” I asked.

“I want to go to ‘the city’ today. I need lots of Slender core stones.”

“Oh...that place.”

By “the city,” she meant the Smoky Verdigris City at depth level 22. It was known as one of the two main horror floors, the other being the Catacombs of the Dead at depth level 50, which that superteam had gone to challenge a while back. The Smoky Verdigris City was one the first hurdles for novice Divers going through route one, and although 22 was a reasonable depth level for Scrael, the place was brimming with wraith-type monsters, which couldn’t be defeated without a mage.

“What do you need the core stones for?” I asked.

“I’m going to send them to my people in the West. There have been many outbreaks of wraith monsters lately, so they asked me to gather some for them,” she explained.

“I see.”

So she was helping out her fellow Long-Ears. She took that kind of stuff seriously. Come to think of it, she’d once mentioned that she’d gathered ingredients and core stones in the dungeon to send to her people. I was garbage compared to her since I was just here for my own entertainment. She’d even been paying me back money regularly and giving me the majority of the core stones whenever we’d gone diving together. She was a good soul.

Suddenly, I realized the other Divers were staring at us dumbfoundedly. I mean, the girl who they’d been desperately trying to recruit had just kicked a royal guard’s ass and talked to me. Even the star rookie was staring in shock.

“Uh... Let’s get going,” I said, leading Scrael by the hand as she gave me a confused look.

I didn’t want to go to the scary floor, but I just wanted to get out of this awkward situation.

I’d learn at a later date that this incident didn’t lead to any more trouble.

Apparently, a bunch of Divers had vehemently voiced their protests through the guild and even wrote petitions in our defense, though I wasn't sure why.

Floor Seventeen: This World Needs More Salt!

Today I'd gone home after school, dropped my stuff off, changed into my usual outfit, and arrived at the Free City of Freida in the world of Do-Melta. I'd just entered the main hall in the Divers Guild, ready for another day of leveling, when I'd run into a familiar face.

"Oh? Instructor Seeker," I said.

"Ah, Kudo," said a slightly-younger-than-middle-aged man who was sitting at a table and staring at a bowl in front of him. He was the very picture of unhealthiness with his unkempt hair, his ungroomed stubble, and his pale complexion that made him look like he was on the verge of death. He had the potential to be handsome if he took care of himself, but he seemed to be completely indifferent about his appearance.

His name was Seeker Reimnant, and he was quite the renowned figure in the Guild. As a dungeon guide, he was the one who'd taught me all about Divers, exploring the dungeon, and how to deal with monsters. Everyone called him Instructor Seeker, or simply Instructor. Dungeon guides were generally liked by everyone, but he was a heavy gambler, so it was kind of hard to say. In fact, most people probably thought of him negatively.

The umbrella he usually carried was leaning against the table. Instructor Seeker was a dungeon guide and a Parasoler, a type of warrior who fought with a tricky style utilizing a sword built into their umbrella.

In Do-Melta, there were several unconventional warrior classes that you didn't really hear about in our world. Other than the Parasolers, there were the Flagbearers, who fought with flags made of poles and sturdy cloths attached to their ends, and the Rippers, who fought with giant scissors. These fighters with unusual weapons were actually standard here, and I'd always been impressed when I saw them in dungeons.

"You look unhealthy as usual, Instructor," I said.

“You always have something to say about my face, don’t you? I’m actually feeling pretty decent today,” he replied.

“You look the same to me,” I said and got a closer look.

Sure enough, he looked as unhealthy as ever. The dark circles around his eyes made him look like a tanuki or even a panda, and he appeared kind of worn out too. He always looked unwell for some reason, but it wasn’t as if he wasn’t eating or was ill. I didn’t get it. I’d even asked him about it before, but he’d just dodged the question.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes, we hardly see each other because you usually go diving in the mornings, and I go in the afternoons.”

“Yeah, can’t help that we live such different lifestyles,” he said.

Other than the weekends, I usually went diving in the evenings after school, but he went in the mornings as a guide, so there was very little overlap. I could’ve booked him, but since I could go diving on my own now, it’d been quite some time since we’d seen each other.

“I didn’t think I’d see you here at this time of day,” I said.

“I had a morning booking that took longer than I thought, so I’m having a late lunch,” said Instructor Seeker.

“Oh, you’re having the bland herb soup,” I said as I noticed what was in the bowl he was staring at.

It was the bland herb soup, a local specialty here at the Divers Guild dining hall. It was made by simmering herbs that were supposedly nutritious, and as the name implied, it had a light flavor—or more like it was pretty much flavorless. I didn’t even consider it actual food.

He continued the staring contest with his own reflection in his soup.

“Aren’t you going to drink it?” I asked.

“I don’t want to.”

“Then why did you order it?”

“Because I’d starve if I don’t, obviously.”

I said nothing. Pointing out the contradiction was probably uncouth. The bland herb soup was a top competitor for the dining hall’s worst-tasting food award along with the mystery porridge. Not only was it flavorless, but it smelled like raw grass, and it made you want to throw up as soon as you put it in your mouth. Natto and kusaya, two Japanese foods with distinct smells, were no match for its destructive powers. If someone asked what the first hurdle for new Divers was, there was a high chance the answer they’d get would be “the disgusting food at the guild dining hall.” The herb soup was pretty much barf, which explained why the instructor was so hesitant to bring it near his mouth. Although the cheap food in the dining hall tasted horrible, there were other normal and even good options too.

“Why didn’t you order something better?” I asked.

“No money,” he said simply.

“But you ordered beer,” I pointed out.

“I need beer. It’s my lifeblood.”

I didn’t understand why drinkers were all like this. Why did they like comparing alcohol to their blood? Would they die if they didn’t drink? It reminded me of Miguel and his superlight white beer. As someone who wasn’t old enough to drink, I didn’t understand it at all.

“Wait, why don’t you have money?” I asked. “A dungeon guide’s salary isn’t *that* low, is it?”

Dungeon guides had dangerous jobs. Since they’d be escorting new Divers, they had to be extra cautious of their surroundings while they kept an eye on the newbie. That was why they got paid more than other guild personnel according to what Ashley had told me a while back. I didn’t think he’d run out of money so easily.

“Who knows? I have no idea,” said the instructor.

“Did you splurge on something?” I asked.

“Not that I know of.”

“What did you spend money on recently?”

“...Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Why would I lie?”

“Well, I guess you’re right. Oh, by the way, I overheard some delinquent orange Divers in the dining hall talking about a gambling den that opened up recently,” I said deliberately. As soon as I said it, Instructor Seeker blatantly twitched as if I was right on the mark. “What’s wrong, Instructor?”

“N-Nothing? Nothing at all. I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“But Instructor, if I mentioned a gambling spot that you’ve never heard of, I think you’d usually say something like ‘Where is it?!’ or ‘Tell me where it is right now!’”

“Ugh...”

“You blew your money gambling, didn’t you?” I asked pointedly.

“Yeah, I did!” he finally admitted. “Got a problem with that? It’s my money!”

“No, but you’re only hurting yourself, you know.” I sighed.

It was pretty pathetic that he couldn’t manage his own money. People who went broke gambling could be found anywhere, I guess.

Meanwhile, his soup had been completely untouched the entire time. Instructor Seeker eventually let out a resigned sigh, then looked at me pleadingly.

“Kudo, I’m sorry to ask this...but can you buy me something to eat?”

“You lost your money gambling, and now you’re mooching off me? That’s low, Instructor.”

“I think it’s still a step above asking to borrow money,” he said, proudly.

“That’s nothing to be proud of,” I pointed out. “It’s still pretty scummy.”

“But I can’t drink this thing.”

“I do understand drinking that soup would take a lot of courage, but still.”

“Help me out here. Please.”

I sighed again. “Okay, fine.”

I probably shouldn’t enable people like him, but he’d helped me out so much in the past that I couldn’t turn him down. After all, my diving style was based on Instructor Seeker’s methods. Although he could be blunt, he’d been quite kind when he’d been teaching me. He was an incredible person except for his whole gambling problem. He didn’t hesitate to use money for novice Divers either.

Regardless, I didn’t want to buy something else from the dining hall, so I brought out a certain item from my bag.

“What’s that?” asked the instructor.

“Just a condiment that should make your soup taste a bit better.”

It was some tonkotsu-soy-sauce-flavored ramen soup concentrate that I’d gotten from a grocery store. I figured adding it should somewhat improve the herb soup’s flavor. I’d brought it for my snack today, but I could get another one for next time.

I cut the bag open and poured out the contents, and Instructor Seeker blatantly made a disgusted face.

“What’s with that thick stuff? Looks nasty,” he said.

“Please don’t complain.”

“It looks like a slug,” he went on.

“I said quit it!”

I didn’t understand why people in this world were always so negative with their comparisons. They had to be masochists to use words that would decrease their own appetites.

“I mean, it’s just so— Hmm? Oh?”

The soup base dissolved into the hot water that wasn’t quite soup yet. Instructor Seeker’s disgusted face transformed into a curious one, and he seemed to be surprised by the change in fragrance. It was a good thing the bowl was still piping hot.

I confirmed that it'd fully dissolved, then handed the bowl back to him.

"It's ready. Here you go," I said.

"R-Right."

Instructor Seeker timidly scooped some soup with a spoon and brought it to his mouth.

His eyes widened.

"Better?" I asked.

"It's not just better, it tastes great! And there's so much flavor! Though, it still smells like raw grass," he said.

"You'll have to deal with that."

"It's fine, I can tolerate this," he said, then started gulping down the soup enthusiastically.

I totally understood the desire to chug tonkotsu soup.

I didn't know what'd come over him, but he shot me a suspicious glare as I watched him. After a short pause, he said, "You're not getting any."

"I don't know if you realize how sad that makes you sound... And no, I don't want any," I said as I sat down next to him. I then decided to ask him something that I'd been wondering about. "Salt is rare in Freida, don't you think so? You could even say there's a shortage."

"True," he agreed.

"Why do you think that is?"

I found it odd that there wasn't much salt here. Even if salt was rare, it didn't make sense that there wasn't enough salt to go around in the dining hall. A city as well-connected as Freida should have the money needed to secure an important commodity like salt, and salt hadn't been this inaccessible even in Medieval Europe. I'd heard wars had been fought over salt springs. Something just felt off.

"It's just how it is," said Instructor Seeker. "Salt is a rare commodity in any city that's in the middle of the continent. You can't keep a shortage from

happening, especially in Freida.”

“Why is that?”

Suddenly, a serious look came over Instructor Seeker’s face; it was the face of a teacher.

“Freida is connected to monster dens, so it has access to materials that can be acquired from those monsters, as well as whatever yields can be gained from the land itself,” he said. “On the other hand, we’re always face-to-face with the dangers posed by monsters. You understand that much, right?”

“If I recall correctly, the monsters could overflow into Freida if we don’t keep thinning them out,” I said.

“Yeah, and that’s why the guild and the governors need to stockpile everything,” he explained.

“That’s the part I don’t get.”

“You don’t?”

“I mean, they don’t seem connected to me.”

Even if the monsters leaked into the city, it wasn’t as if they were going to use up the salt supply or as if we’d need salt to defeat them. I didn’t understand why we’d need to prioritize stockpiling salt over distributing it to Divers.

“If you look at things in a vacuum, maybe. But Freida isn’t just facing the threat of monsters. You need to think about the neighboring countries too. We’re smack-dab in the middle of the continent with good access to transportation. Don’t you think ambitious countries would love to expand their borders and claim Freida as their own?” he asked.

“Oh...”

“Let’s say, for example, Freida suffers some major damage from monsters, we lose a lot of Divers and merchants, and the country’s national power takes a massive hit—this would be a huge opportunity for other countries to get their hands on Freida, right? They could invade while Freida’s capable fighters are busy trying to contain the monsters, and the city would be ripe for the taking.”

“So that’s why we stockpile salt...”

“Salt is a necessity in daily life,” said the instructor.

“We’d be in trouble if we ran out. So we’re preparing in case another country gets a monopoly on it?” I asked after some thought.

“That’s right. The surrounding countries could put us in a stranglehold by jacking up the price of salt when we need it. If there’s a conflict, strategic commodities like salt and wheat tend to be bought up, and we’ll need a good amount to supply the huge population here. More people means more labor, and more labor means more sweating, and thus more salt is needed. When you consider all of that, you can’t help the fact that Divers are on the bottom of the list when it comes to salt distribution.”

“But Freida gets its revenue thanks to Divers, right? Shouldn’t we get preferential treatment?” I asked.

“They want us to buy our own. Supposedly, the governors made some adjustments to prevent the Divers Guild from increasing our share of the salt supply.”

“Ah.”

Most of Freida’s revenue came from selling materials obtained in the dungeon to other countries. Freida’s Divers Guild was quite influential because of this, and if it also had priority on an indispensable commodity like salt, the balance of power could crumble completely. Salt wasn’t the only factor keeping the balance, of course, but it was certainly an important piece of the big picture.

“There’s also the fact that there aren’t a lot of places where you can obtain salt. There have even been wars fought over salt springs in the past,” he added.

“Is it that hard to get? I understand we’re far from the sea, but can’t we mine for it or something?” I asked.

“I heard the mines were depleted long ago, and you can only get a small amount from mining these days. Every country is looking for new salt mines these days.”

“They’ve been gone for that long?”

“That’s what they say,” he said. “According to an Oracle, there’s plenty to go around in unexplored regions, so the gods aren’t planning to interfere. Though, no one has been able to find them yet.”

Maybe they didn’t have the technology to find it yet. Instructor Seeker said he’d *heard* the salt mines had been depleted long ago, but I couldn’t help but wonder where he’d heard that from.

“Come to think of it, there aren’t a lot of sweets here either,” I said.

“That’s because the Adorners buy them all up. They love honey way too much,” Instructor Seeker said and turned around.

I followed his gaze to find a Diver girl hugging a pot to her chest and licking honey off her fingers as if it were the best thing in the world. She was probably—well, almost certainly—an Adorner, like the instructor had mentioned.

“She’s just like Winnie the Pooh,” I said.

She seemed to really love honey. For some reason, honey was the one thing that was available year-round, albeit in limited quantities.

“Thank you for the lesson. I learned a lot today,” I said.

“No, I should thank you. You really saved me,” he said.

“Oh, no, that was no problem at all.”

“Then can I have some more of that slug stuff?” he asked.

“Sorry, but no. You need to quit gambling first.”

“Darn it.”

What kind of grown-up says “Darn it”?

Floor Eighteen: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route Two! Part One

I was on my way to farm EXP, core stones, and loot on dungeon route two as usual.

People always said “route this, route that” because the Gandakia Dungeon had preset courses for Divers of varying levels. Supposedly, back when God had created the dungeon by setting up the transportation magic for each region, he’d made it so anyone would be able to progress through each route as long as they had the appropriate levels. Over the years, the Divers Guild had settled upon a specific order for these routes based upon its own research.

There were four routes in total. Starting with route one, it was a beginner route of sorts, where novice Divers could first experience the hardships of dungeon diving and understand what it was like. It started with the Great Forest Ruins at depth level 5, followed by the Misty Hills at depth level 8 and the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus at depth level 14, where Sensei let me touch her boo—I mean, the place with the giant statues where we’d hunted Moss Faces. After that was the Smoky Verdigris City at depth level 22, where Scrael had asked me to take her to, and the Machine Temple at depth level 38, which was an unexplored area on route one.

Routes two, three, and four were restricted by default by the receptionists’ authority, but one could unlock them once they were able to dive down to the Grotto of the Sleeping Colossus without issue. It was like an unofficial trial for Divers to overcome as a minimum requirement before going up to the next level. Any Diver who could clear this route without issues should at least be around level 15. They’d presumably have learned the basics of dungeon diving and would no longer be considered a novice.

The route I was taking today was route two. All routes started at the Great Forest Ruins, but route two branched off to the Infinite Gray Castle at depth level 10. Next came the Yellow Wall Vestiges at depth level 20, which

resembled underground ancient Egyptian ruins. After that was my usual farming spot, the Dark Corridors at depth level 30, then the Evernight Meadows at depth level 40, where it was perpetually night. Next up was the Nordianes Basement at depth level 48, which mostly consisted of a giant spiral staircase leading underground, then the Catacombs of the Dead, where the depth level was a whopping 52.

Currently, I was at the Infinite Gray Castle at depth level 10, just beyond the Great Forest Ruins. The area was supposedly inside a castle somewhere in Do-Melta, and the building interior was like what most people would picture when they thought of Western castles and manors. It looked gorgeous with banners hanging on stone walls, carpets adorning the floor, and armor, swords, and various furnishings displayed on armor stands. It was known for being an extraordinarily big floor befitting of its dramatic name, and no one had successfully mapped it out in its entirety to this day. One could even say some parts of this floor were completely unexplored. It was a low-level floor that hadn't been completely cleared in the decades since the Divers Guild had been founded, which was pretty exciting to think about. Since it was assumed to be a man-made area, there was a thrilling possibility that treasures no one had ever seen could be sleeping somewhere inside.

And just as the name implied, the place was gray. That may sound silly to mention, but it really was. The walls, decor, furnishings—everything was completely gray as if someone had covered everything in gray paint. Because of this, it made one lose track of where they were while walking around, and they'd feel as if they were in monochrome footage or a two-dimensional world. The lack of any other colors made it hard on the eyes. And there were monsters that camouflaged by blending into the background, so you had to focus to avoid losing sight of them. This floor could be particularly tough if you weren't used to it.

"Hmm, I'd love to map out this entire floor one day," I said to myself.

There were many places I hadn't fully cleared or visited yet. I didn't count outdoor floors because they didn't have boundaries, but I'd never gone past the Smoky Verdigris City on route one, and I'd only mapped out about half of my usual farming spot, the Dark Corridors. Not only was my farming spot smelly

and damp, but it was dark, and the boss there was strong. I'd only been able to take down the Four-Armed Goat last time because it'd been distracted fighting Scrael. If I'd faced it head-on, I probably would've ended up being a stain on the floor.

As an aside, I'd never gone beyond the Night Soil Swamps on route three or the Red Iron & Cogwheel Mine on route four. There was still plenty of fun to look forward to in the dungeon.

I continued trudging along, staying mindful of the gray castle interior and occasionally applying eye drops. Suddenly, I heard a clanging sound around the corner like something was hitting metal. I waited for whatever was approaching, and a heavy-looking gray suit of armor came into view. It was the common RPG trope that appeared in castles: a Living Armor. It was one of the few wraith-type monsters that wasn't immune to physical attacks, and it moved like humans, making it surprisingly easy to beat. It would've actually been a terrible newbie killer if it did inhuman movements, but it couldn't shoot a rocket punch or dismantle its armor and fly around, which I appreciated. Not to mention, it had one significant weakness.

"They're metal, so they're easy to beat. The end."

I formed a hand seal and activated my elemental magic, then blasted the monster with a bolt of lightning before it could even make a move. Living Armors were highly vulnerable to my magic. But to be fair, most monsters went down if I zapped them with lightning; the only monsters it didn't work against were magic-resistant ones in the deeper floors. Though, that didn't mean I could just breeze through everything. I wanted to reserve some mana for later, but these guys were all over this floor, and I had no choice but to strike them down on sight.

The Living Armor crumbled to the ground after getting zapped, so I moved the fallen armor pieces aside and grabbed its core stone, which was around ten centimeters or so in diameter. The size of a core stone was proportional to the size of the monster, so bigger monsters had bigger core stones. The color varied depending on the species too.

Bringing these to the main hall, washing them clean at the washing area, then

turning them in to the receptionist's window was the easiest way for Divers to make money. Once traded in, specialists would process the core stones into monster-warding stakes, then other specialists would take them into the dungeon to construct safe points. It was thanks to this process that Divers could explore dungeons safely and the guild had a steady means of procuring loot from the dungeon. This process had been going on ever since the guild had first been established. Exporting core stones was supposedly a big revenue source for the guild, and it seemed to be making pretty good money too.

After obtaining the Living Armor's core stone, I noticed someone nearby.

"Oh boy."

I didn't want people to see me, so I decided to hold off on using magic for now, effectively disabling my main fighting method. But on this floor, I used magic only against Living Armors, so I'd be fine as long as I was careful. If things went south, I could just accelerate myself and run away.

Curious, I looked around the corner to see who was there and saw what seemed to be a four-person team. They were laughing, chatting, and walking around, looking unconcerned as if they weren't in the middle of a dungeon. I wondered if they were a high-level team, then I recognized one of them: a young boy with blond hair and distinctive shoulder armor on one side.

"Wait, that bulky shoulder armor... Miguel?" I said.

"Hmm? Is that you, Kudo?" said Miguel, turning around as he recognized my voice.

Us running into each other in the dungeon like this was rare. He waved at me in his easygoing manner and walked toward me.

"You're here for a dive too, huh?" he asked.

"Yup, what a coincidence," I said.

"Come to think of it, I've known you for a while now, but this is my first time running into you in the dungeon."

"Now that you mention it, I think you're right. It's been nearly half a year since I started dungeon diving. Crazy to think we've never crossed paths."

I'd never met Miguel outside of the main hall in the past six months or so since I'd arrived in Freida. My level had been too low at first, and Miguel had been diving in other areas because he was a high-ranker. These days, Miguel usually went diving in the mornings and I went in the afternoons, so our timing never matched. It was no wonder we'd never run into each other, though we did often eat snacks and chat together in the hall.

"You don't usually go diving at this time, do you?" I asked.

"No, but I had something to take care of this morning. I wasn't planning on diving today, but we decided to go for a light one since we had some free time."

They seemed to be here to earn some pocket money. High-level Divers could go into relatively deep floors even on "light" dives, so they should have no problem earning enough for a decent meal—or in Miguel's case, drinks—with just a quick run.

"Is he your friend? You can introduce us any day now," said one of Miguel's companions.

"Oops! Sorry about that. This is the guy I mentioned before, the one I've been trying to recruit," said Miguel.

"Oh? So this is him," said a woman with long red hair and a sharp look in her eye.

She seemed to be slightly older than Miguel and me, though there was still youthfulness in her appearance. She definitely had an "older sister" vibe about her. She was walking sex appeal with her glamorous body and outfit with exposed shoulders that emphasized her ample breasts. A big iron bow was slung on her back, and I could easily picture her hunting giant beasts in a forest somewhere. She was about as tall as Miguel and me and wore an animal pelt around her waist, so I figured she was an Adorner.

"I'm Miguel's friend, Kudo Akira," I said.

"Reverie Clawhand. I'm an archer who supports the team as a rear guard," said the woman.

I'd heard her name somewhere before.

“She’s my woman,” said Miguel, putting his arm around her shoulder and grabbing a handful of her boob.

“Oh, cut it out,” said Reverie as she bopped him lightly on the head, but she didn’t seem upset at all.

And stop smooching in public. Are you showing off?



“Jealous?” asked Miguel.

“I’m so jealous, my resentment is about to ooze out of my body,” I said.

Miguel laughed.

Stop laughing. Die. Maybe instead of resentment, my magic will ooze out instead. And you cheated on a sexy lady like her? Unforgivable. You really should die.

“Anyway,” said Miguel, completely unaffected by my curses.

He moved on to introduce the girl next to Reverie. She was a pale young girl in a robe with bright-blond hair. She was short and slender, and there was a delicate, almost ephemeral quality to her. She looked quite young, and her skin was as smooth as a baby’s. I wouldn’t have guessed she was a Diver, but she was obviously a mage judging from her magic staff, her robe, and the mana surrounding her. Her robe, embroidered with gold and silver, looked very expensive. She seemed to come from a wealthy family judging by her appearance and reserved demeanor, but this was the same girl from a while back who’d spewed venom at Miguel when she’d come to untie him.

“You’ve seen her before, but this is Mimir. She’s our elite mage who’s graduated second in her class at Meruem Magic Academy,” said Miguel.

“I’m Mimir Triss...a blue mage. I mainly provide rearguard support for the team,” said Mimir as she bowed.

“Nice to meet you again,” I said and bowed in return.

She’s an elite student who’s graduated second in her class... I feel like the topic of Meruem Magic Academy has come up before. What was his name...? Ri... Whatever-his-name-was said he was the top of his class, I think. Maybe they know each other.

“And finally,” said Miguel, and the large man clad in blue armor stepped forward.

“I’m Oriland Lando. I’m the vanguard on the team along with our leader Miguel. I’m a shield user, as you can see,” said Oriland as he placed his shield forward with a thud.

It was a giant rectangular shield called a scutum, its size befitting of the man's hulking frame. In his other hand, he held a huge mace.

This man, probably in his late thirties or so, was like a giant rock wall. He was entirely covered in such thick, bulky armor that it made the Living Armor I'd defeated earlier look like the monster was made of paper. He was a vanguard shield user, which meant he must be a tank. It wasn't a glamorous role, but it was an important one in the dungeon. Not only did they defend the front line, but they protected mages and other allies from danger. They had to have the pain tolerance of a professional wrestler to be able to handle the job.

His most notable feature was his face.

"His face—he looks like a gorilla, right?" whispered Miguel.

"Yeah, he does," I whispered back. "Is he a Beast-Head by any chance?"

"No, he's human."

"Huh... Humans sure are strange."

"Right?"

"What are you two whispering about?" asked Oriland.

"Nothing," said Miguel.

"Yes, please don't worry about it. It's nice to meet you," I said.

They had quite the team. Mimir could provide support with magic attacks from the rear while Reverie, also from the rear, could keep watch, provide midrange support, and be ready to help if the rest of the team needed to retreat. Oriland would protect the two in the back while holding the front line, and Miguel would be the attacker leading the team. Each of them held a crucial role for dungeon diving, and none of them overlapped.

"You have a real coherent team going here," I said.

"Right?" said Miguel proudly, and I could understand why.

His team comprised an attacker, a tank for holding the front line, a mage for providing support, and an archer acting as a lookout in the back while providing midrange and retreating support. Most teams didn't have such coherent

compositions, and this was a testament to Miguel's eye for talent, connections, and capability. It was no wonder his team had such a high rank.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked Miguel.

"We're going for a quick run at the Yellow Wall Vestiges. Wanna tag along? Don't worry, I'm not trying to recruit you," he replied.

I was going in that direction anyway, so I had no reason to refuse.

"Sure, sounds good," I said.

And my first dive with Bacchus Hawks began.

Floor Nineteen: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route

Two! Part Two

We'd quickly passed through the Infinite Gray Castle and arrived at the Yellow Wall Vestiges. Miguel and his crew had defeated a bunch of the monsters at the Castle, so I hadn't had to fight much.

We'd entered through the mirrorlike white boundary at the Infinite Gray Castle and come out of the other side in the middle of a grove. It wasn't a forest dense with greenery but a group of withered trees on a barren land. Branches and leaves jutted out of them like wires, making them quite visually aggressive. Beyond them was an entrance leading to the underground dungeon known as the Yellow Wall Vestiges.

"Ahhh, help meee. I got caught in the wirelike branches," I said.

"Don't worry, Kudo. I'll come help youuu," said Miguel.

We were playing the "Nearly Died Getting Caught in the Thorns" game when Reverie, with a dubious look, asked, "What are you two doing?"

"Uhhh...just messing around," I said.

"Kudo started acting weird, so I just played along," said Miguel.

"Yeah, you two are both idiots," confirmed Reverie.

Suddenly, a dark aura began to emanate from Mimir.

"Why are you two fooling around? Do you understand that we're in a dungeon right now? Do you have no sense of danger? Your level may be high, Miguel, but there are things you just shouldn't do, don't you think so? Are you stupid? Are you? Are you both stupid? Did your brains melt into irreparable mushes?" she said, venom spewing out of her mouth.

"Mimir. I think they get the picture," said Oriland the gorilla face.

"Ah, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to..." said Mimir, putting her hands over her

mouth as if she'd just realized what she'd done.

Meanwhile, our playful excitement had been completely extinguished by her merciless torrent of words, so we apologized.

"Sorry..."

"I'm sorry..."

I didn't want to make excuses, but I'd made sure there were no monsters around before I'd started fooling around. We'd been right next to the Misty Border, so there were monster-warding crystal stakes embedded all around us. I also hadn't detected monsters' presence anywhere nearby. That was why I'd goofed around, and I hadn't expected her to blow up like that.

Either way, things didn't get awkward or anything afterward. Miguel's teammates were all good-natured, and we warmed up to each other as we continued walking.

I revealed that I was a mage—well, they'd already known I was one since Miguel had already told them that he was trying to recruit me.

Mimir looked at my short magic staff and asked, "Where did you get such a big crystal?"

"This? At a souvenir corner at a roadside station," I answered, holding my homemade staff with an amethyst on the tip.

"What is this 'roadside station'?"

"Oh, well, I guess it's a place where they sell local specialty goods," I explained. Though, all that came to mind when I thought of roadside stations were restrooms.

Mages used magic staffs to regulate their mana, and the gemstone crystals on the tips of their staffs played a role in this mechanic. Whenever I brought gemstones into this world, they gained this power, although this was only limited to topazes, rubies, sapphires, jades, amethysts (like what I had), and onyxes (like what Sensei had). This was knowledge that Ameithys had given me when I'd first arrived in Do-Melta and he'd turned me into a mage.

"A purple crystal... Is that thing real?" asked Reverie.

“It is,” answered Mimir. “I can sense its power, but I’ve never seen a purple one myself.”

“Oh, he’s a purple mage,” said Miguel, and everyone looked at me with shock.

“Miguel...” I said with exasperation.

“What? Who cares, you’re joining my team anyway,” he said.

“Huh? Has that been decided already?” I asked.

“Of course!”

“Whaaat,” I said, sounding like I wasn’t against the idea.

Miguel slapped my shoulder with a big smile on his face. I didn’t mind being asked to join his team, to be honest. He wasn’t overly persistent or unpleasant about it.

Suddenly, Mimir spoke up. “I-I’ve never heard of purple magic before!”

“But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, right?” asked Miguel.

“No, but still...” said Mimir, sounding unconvinced.

She didn’t seem to want to accept it because it’d never been taught in school. This was the case especially because Meruem Magic Academy was so prestigious.

“Mimir,” Oriland joined in, “the Magical Queen, who killed the Demon Lord, was said to use magic outside of the four main types. I don’t think you can deny the possibility of its existence.”

“I...have heard that before, but still,” she said.

“Oriland, what kind of magic did this ‘Queen’ use?” I asked.

“Well, all I’ve heard is that she used magic outside of the four main types, so I can’t tell you,” he replied.

“Oh, I see.”

“You want to know?” he asked.

“If there are others who can use my magic, yes.”

If there really was someone out there, I wanted to meet them.

Our conversation continued as we walked, and we eventually arrived at the entrance.

Miguel looked around and said, “We’ll need to deal with the Silver Wolves before we go in.”

Silver Wolves were the first hurdle we had to overcome before going into the Yellow Wall Vestiges. They, with beautiful silver furs, were wolves that appeared in the grove before the entrance. They looked like normal animals, but they were definitely monsters. Their fur hardened like metal upon impact, stabbing assailants like a coat of needles. Their pelts could be sold for a pretty penny, and Adorners loved wearing them.

A pack of Silver Wolves appeared from between the thorns, growling as they slowly closed the distance.

“Well, now we’ll get a look at your power,” said Oriland.

“I’d love to bear witness to your purple magic too,” said Mimir.

But I said, “Huh? I’m not using my magic here.”

“What? Come on now, you won’t get through this without using magic. Or do you intend to wait until we take them out?” asked Oriland.

“No, no, I wouldn’t do that.”

I was going to use a different method to deal with them, like I always had.

“What are you going to do?” asked Miguel.

“I’ll use this,” I said as I took something out of my backpack. I ripped a plastic bag, then brought out the items within that would easily get us through here.

“Are those...bones?”

“Yup,” I said, then turned to the wolves. “Here, doggies, I’ve got some yummy chewing bones for you!”

I waved a chewing bone, which dogs loved, then tossed three of them in a row into the distance.

“Woof! Woof!”

The Silver Wolves scrambled after the dog bones, drool dribbling from their

mouths. They were pretty adorable.

The others stared at me, speechless.

“This is how I avoid fighting them every time,” I said. “Oh, wait, were you guys planning on beating them for the EXP?”

“Well, no, we didn’t need the EXP or loot, but this...”

“Ah, good. Then let’s go inside.”

Even though they were monsters, they couldn’t escape their animal instincts. It was strange how well it worked considering they were wolves instead of dogs, but there was no point in trying to bring logic into how this world worked.

I started walking forward, but Miguel stopped me and said, “Whoa, whoa, hold up. There are a bunch of Hypno Eyes in there.”

“The eyeballs? Don’t worry about them,” I said and kept walking forward.

Other than the boss, there were about four types of monsters that appeared in the Yellow Wall Vestiges: Silver Wolves, which we’d encountered just outside; Lizard Skins, which Scrael had destroyed the last time we’d come here with Ricky; Golems, which were one of the classic monsters everyone knew; and Hypno Eyes, which were the greatest hurdle for Divers who set foot in here.

Hypno Eyes were particularly nasty and could quickly wipe out parties that got surrounded by them. My receptionist Ashley had repeatedly warned me about how dangerous they were when I’d first come here. Miguel had tried to stop me out of concern, but I already had a way to deal with them.

I continued down the stairs leading underground, and I saw a yellowish light in the distance as I entered the darkness. The light was coming from perpetually glowing stones, which was one of the wonders of this world. These stones, embedded in the walls of the Yellow Wall Vestiges, acted as decent and stable light sources in place of candles, and they were environmentally friendly too.

Eventually, I began to see some blurry outlines approaching us. They, slowly swaying closer like beach balls floating on waves, were giant bare eyeballs—yes, eyeballs—each about fifty centimeters in diameter. They had a luster to them as if they were covered in films of moisture, and that was pretty disgusting.

These were the infamous Hypno Eyes.

Hypno Eyes attacked Divers with hypnosis beams. Well, I didn't actually know if they were beams, but they were visibly wavy, so that was how I thought of them. These eyeballs surrounded Divers, put them to sleep with their hypnotic waves, then left them there for the roaming Lizard Skins to sniff out and finish off. They were a pretty scary combo.

"Keep your eyes down! Lando, Reverie, go!"

"Right!" said Oriland, stepping forward with his shield up.

"You got it!" Reverie called out, readying her bow. She looked imposing with her bow in hand.

It seemed their plan was to have Reverie take down the Hypno Eyes with her bow from outside of the Hypno Eyes' attack range. Though, it was unnecessary because there was a much easier way to get through.

"Hey! Kudo's going in by himself!"

"Kudo, you idiot! What are you doing?!" said Miguel.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," I said. "It's no problem—actually, floating bare eyeballs are really gross, so that part *is* a problem, but still."

I had to deal with the visual discomfort from looking at them, but they were nothing if you knew how to deal with their hypnosis.

"Ew, too close! Move back a bit!" I complained.

Yeah, it definitely was a problem after all.

The giant eyeballs determined I was prey and surrounded me, then shot their hypnosis waves at me.

"Kudo! Wait...what?" said Miguel.

Their hypnosis had no effect. I hadn't used magic or anything, but I'd gotten a little help.

"Ta-da! It's the favorite late-night study aid for students everywhere: caffeine pills! I don't get sleepy from their hypnosis waves if I take these."

Their hypnosis must be pretty weak if caffeine pills made me immune to

them. The Hypno Eyes strained hard as they continued to blast me with their beams, becoming bloodshot and trembling with effort in the process. Though, it was pointless since their attacks still had no effect on me.

I left Miguel and the others flabbergasted, and I decided to make my move.

“And now, I’ll easily take down these exposed eyeballs with this!” I said as I brought out my water gun filled with Kinkan, an anti-itch liniment. “I’ll just give ’em a squirt of this. What kind of creature has its weak point out in the open like that, anyway?”

The eyeballs seemed to realize something was wrong and started backing away, but it was too late. I aimed at the eyeballs clustered together and fired away.



They began jerking around in the air and making sizzling sounds as if I'd poured sauce on a hot plate, then they withered away.

"What was that...? He took out those Hypno Eyes so easily," said Reverie.

"Some potent holy water, perhaps?" said Mimir.

Nope, it was an anti-itch liniment. There was ammonia in it, so you definitely didn't want to get it in your eye. I'd diluted it a bit, but it was still highly effective. The trio of caffeine, Kinkan, and water gun was my Eyeball-Busting Set.

As an aside, urine was effective against them too. Since I'd been dealing with eyeballs and they'd used something like a curse on me, I'd referenced the story of the Evil Eye from a certain online imageboard and fought back with something profane...and they'd died instantly. Don't call me nasty.

Surprisingly, many monsters here had their roots in things like folklore from Earth. I suspected there might be a universal collective consciousness behind all that.

"You're used to this, aren't you?" asked Miguel.

"Well, I do come here all the time," I replied. "This is the place to make easy money, so it'd be pointless if I gassed out halfway through. That's why I use items on the way, instead of magic, whenever I can."

This method wasn't very wallet-friendly, but I could turn a profit by buying vases, china, and otherworldly knickknacks here to sell at a local antique shop back home. It would've been much easier if I could just keep trading in gold coins directly, but doing so too often would lead to trouble, so I only resorted to it when necessary.

"Wait," said Miguel, "did you just say you come here all the time?"

"Hmm? Yeah, my go-to leveling spot is up ahead," I said.

"You mean the Golems?" he asked.

"No way, they don't give much EXP for how hard they are to kill. I farm the Blood Bats in the Dark Corridors."

Oriland furrowed the brows on his gorilla face and said, “You must be kidding! There’s no way a mage could solo farm them. They’d swarm you!”

“Actually, that makes it easier for me. I can just take them all out in a single attack if they cluster up.”

Blood Bats swarmed their targets by the dozens. They didn’t just fly at their prey; they dived at them as if to tackle them with full force. To make things worse, they attacked in pitch-black darkness too. You could go into shock from blood loss if you didn’t deal with them quickly.

Normally, magic wouldn’t be much use against them because they attacked from every direction and couldn’t really be swatted away, but I had my mountaineering lights and lightning magic. The more they clumped together, the better my electricity was at crowd control.

“Hey, Kudo,” said Miguel.

“Oh my, Miguel, your face looks so scary right now. What could be wrong?” I asked.

“I never got a chance to ask you this, but what level are you?”

“Oh, you’re asking me that *now*?”

“Well, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he said.

His cold tone made me feel bad, so I told him. “I’m level 34. Oh, and this isn’t a joke, by the way.”

“Level 34?” he repeated, his expression growing serious. His teammates couldn’t hide their surprise either.

“Did you just say 34?!”

“You’re kidding!”

“What? But I should’ve known about you if you’re such a high-level mage...”

I’d told Ashley not to tell anyone, so it was no wonder they didn’t know. Though, she hadn’t been so good at keeping my secrets lately.

Miguel reached his hand out as the others were still reeling in shock. He was asking to see my EXP Card. It was considered taboo to ask for it from someone

outside of one's team, but I didn't mind because he was my friend.

As soon as he looked at my Card, the tension left his face. His expression was hard to describe, but it looked like resignation.

"Hey...how many mages above level 30 are there in Freida right now?" asked Miguel.

Mimir, the mage of the group, answered, "Ten to fifteen if I remember correctly."

"How about level 34 or over?" he asked.

"Um...Ra Falco of Order of the Black Dawn, Esmeralda of Brave Wings, and, I think, the free mage Mara Papiyas was at least level 35 also."

"Huh, I thought there'd be more," I said.

"You didn't know?" said Miguel.

"I don't get access to information like you guys do at my rank," I replied.

"I see. So that's why there's a discrepancy between the info we have..." he said contemplatively, then he asked, "It's been half a year since you first came here, right? How did you get to such a high level so quickly?"

"I mean, all you have to do is keep diving—well, most people might not get to my level, but it should be close. I usually go solo, which is way more efficient."

"But still..." said Miguel, "Okay then, how many times have you been diving each week?"

"I slowed down a bit when I had tests, but I dive pretty much every day. Oh, but the amount of time I spend here isn't always consistent; some sessions were shorter, and some were longer."

"Come on, man..." Miguel sighed.

"What? Is it that weird?" I asked.

"Most people can't go diving every day."

"Maybe not, but it's not impossible if you have the motivation, right?" I asked.

“I guess, but still...”

Apparently, it just wasn't a reasonable thing to do, but I knew firsthand that it was possible with proper planning and preparation, even if taking injuries and fatigue into account. Being able to use healing magic was a big factor though; I could just heal myself if I got hurt.

“Any other reasons why you were able to level up so much?” he asked.

“Other reasons? Well, let's see...”

“What is it?”

“I...got bullied by Sensei. She's a demon.”

She really was. Her grueling training was a living nightmare. I'd nearly died like ten times—no, I'd died on the inside.

I continued, “The other day, she dragged me to the Night Soil Swamps and made me fight Pop Slimes and a Poison Chimera Zombie. It was awful. I thought I was gonna lose it. Seriously, I just can't.”

“Oh yeah, that place is really disgusting,” agreed Miguel.

“Disgusting? What about the difficulty?” said Oriland. “That place is at depth level 25. There's no way a regular mage could go there solo. And didn't he just say he fought a Poison Chimera Zombie?”

“I'm pretending I didn't hear that part, but I guess I should ask: did you beat them, Kudo?” asked Miguel.

“Yeah, I managed somehow. It's on there, right?” I said, showing them my EXP Card.

“No way...even we haven't been able to take one down,” Miguel said with disbelief.

“Only an idiot would fight those things,” I said. “No Diver should ever deal with them.”

“So, seeing how you've been promoted to an idiot yourself, how did you defeat it?”

“First, I wore down the poison mist and swamps around it with lightning. The

shock wave from my lightning blasted away everything around the point of impact and chipped away at the Chimera itself. Once its body was exposed, I bombarded it with my high-firepower magic. That's about it. It's not that hard as long as I have mana, but it's still a pain."

Reverie asked, "How did you deal with its poison breath?"

"It does cover a wide area, but I can mitigate it by stacking a bunch of generic spells on myself."

It was the "stacking and maintaining" method that Sensei had taught me. I'd learned to boost myself with multiple buffs thanks to her, but the learning process had truly been hell. I couldn't even begin to describe how grueling it'd been. There'd been times when morning had come immediately after I'd crawled into bed.

Mimir asked hesitantly, "Excuse me, but how many spells did you stack...?"

"About six. I could go up to seven, but I had to leave room for my elemental spells," I answered, and Mimir turned into dark mode.

"Six...and you can go up to seven? And you can use elemental magic on top of that? What? That doesn't make any sense. You're basically cheating. How is that possible? No one should be able to do that. How did you cheat your way to being able to pull that off?" she muttered, venom spewing from her mouth again.

She was wrong to assume I'd cheated somehow though. This was what I'd attained in exchange for going through hell. It would've been pretty messed up if I hadn't gotten anything in return for all of my suffering.

"Hold on, there aren't any mages who can do that even in the royal court," said Oriland in disbelief.

"Does that mean he could fight while giving a bunch of buffs to two frontline warriors? So *that's* the power of a mage above level 30," said Reverie, sounding impressed.

It wasn't often that I got praised for my magic, so hearing it made me kind of happy.

“Come on, Kudo, you really should join my team,” said Miguel.

“Well, it does sound nice,” I said, “but there’s stuff I need to do right now. If you’re okay with waiting till after that’s done, I’m thinking of accepting your offer.”

“Oh? For real?” he asked.

“It’s going to take a bit of time though. Do you mind waiting?”

“Nope, not at all. I’ll wait.”

“Why are they so casual about it?” said Oriland, dumbfounded.

Suddenly, Reverie asked, “So, you don’t use magic unless necessary. What are you going to do about the Lizards and Golems coming up? You’ll need magic to beat them, right?”

“Nope, I’m going to get past them without fighting. Lizard Skins are annoying to deal with, and like I mentioned earlier, Golems give crap EXP for how tough they are,” I answered.

“How?”

“I’ll take a path where Lizard Skins don’t appear. Golems have a set patrol route, so I’ll be avoiding them too.”

Miguel had a question next. “I understand avoiding Lizard Skins, but can you really get through without running into Golems?”

“Once a Golem passes through the upcoming intersection, it won’t come back for some time.”

“But what if another one appears right after?” he asked.

“I’ve already looked into this,” I began. “Golems don’t travel in groups, and when they run into each other, they split up and head in different directions. For some reason, only twenty of them appear at a time, and there are eight on the east side, six each on the west and south sides, and none on the north side. Once a Golem walks past here, it won’t come back for another ten minutes.”

“Ten ‘minutes’?” asked Miguel.

“Oh, right, the concept of smaller units of time doesn’t exist here yet.”

This world had sundials, but they didn't have anything that measured minutes or seconds. Or maybe such tools just weren't widespread yet, but I hadn't personally come across any so far. They seemed to only use broad approximations of time in Do-Melta.

I rolled up my sleeve, and the others looked at my wrist curiously.

"What's that? It's...moving?" Miguel asked.

"It's so detailed," said Reverie.

"Is it a magical tool of some sort?" asked Mimir.

"Nope, just a mechanized device called a 'watch.' It's used to measure time. When this needle goes from here to here, it means ten minutes have passed," I explained as I pointed at my watch.

"So you kept observing Golems and used this to measure the timing for when they appear?" asked Miguel.

"Their movements seemed to follow a pattern, so I thought I'd look into it. Golems seemed a bit different from other monsters too. They're like robots running on a preinstalled program of some sort."

Mimir asked, "What do you do if they find you?"

"They won't, but I guess I'd dash away if they did. They're as slow-witted as they look. I also could just take them out, but that would be a waste of mana. By the way, if you take this side passage here right now, you'd run into another Golem."

The group just stared at me in shock. Apparently, none of them had known such methods existed. There were quite a few monsters you could avoid like this.

I explained the routes and timing, and we proceeded forward while keeping an eye out for Golems.

"I don't see any of them."

"Yeah, it's really working."

"I can't believe we're getting through so easily..."

“Oh, we need to go right here,” I said. “We’ll go into that small room, wait five minutes, then run all the way to the opposite end.”

We eventually got through the Golem spawning zone in the Yellow Wall Vestiges and arrived at a safe point.

Then, Mimir said, “Reverie, it’s time to eat.”

“Ah, thanks,” said the Adorner.

Mimir brought out some rolls of bread from her Dimension Bag. They weren’t the fluffy kind of bread that we were used to. They were meant to be rations, so they were hard like rice crackers and the size of a food tray.

Mimir brought out a leather bag, and Reverie soaked her cracker bread into its contents and began eating. The bag was likely filled with milk.

Reverie was an Adorner, which meant she was blessed with her race’s natural strength, but she got hungry quickly and had to eat more often than people of other races. She’d probably need to take another break to eat again on the way home.

“She really does get hungry, huh?” I said to Miguel.

“She can’t help it,” he said. “That’s just how their god made them. By the way, she was hungry when we first met too.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“I heard that when Adorners dive solo, they end up eating all the food they brought with them. She accidentally ate too much on that day, so she ran out of food and was so hungry she couldn’t move.”

I said nothing. She sounded like a puppy that ate any food within reach. The way she ate goes to show just how strong their hunger drive was. Dealing with it must’ve been a pain.

“So that’s how you two met?” I asked.

“Yup, she fell for me after that incident.”

“That’s all it took?! You just gave her some food, and she fell for you?”

I mean, there was nothing wrong with that, but it made her sound really easy.

Reverie, who was eating her hard bread, noticed my surprise and said, “What’s wrong with that? A man needs to be able to provide for a woman.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Wealth is one of a man’s attractive assets. But that’s not the only reason I fell for Miguel, of course,” she said and gave Miguel a look.

The smug look on Miguel’s face annoyed me a bit, but everyone agreed with Reverie and looked at me as if I lacked common sense.

It felt comparable to feeding an animal to get on their good side, but apparently that was the norm here. Providing food—and therefore displaying wealth—was believed to be a way of showing one’s attractiveness.

Come to think of it, I’d learned in school that in the old days, connections between families had been regarded as highly important, and forming a connection with a wealthy family had been a way to make one’s own family prosper even further. People back then had rarely married for love.

In this world, tons of people still starved to death whenever winter rolled around. It must’ve been common sense here that marrying for love was difficult. Here, a man’s ability to provide food was attractive in itself—though I couldn’t say I agreed with that. But I only thought this way because I’d been born in a privileged age, and my sensibilities were different from those of the people of this world, where financial resources were a huge factor for survival.

Still, it was clear that these two were dating for romance. They wouldn’t be so close otherwise. It made me jealous, to be honest.

Why did you cheat, Miguel? Die.

It was mealtime, so we took this opportunity to rest. I didn’t want to just wait here and do nothing, so I decided to have a snack myself. I reached into my Dimension Bag, and Miguel immediately took notice.

“Oh, what are you bringing out this time?” he asked.

“Nothing special,” I said. “Just some sweet pastries.”

“What kind?”

“They’re sweetened bread that people eat as snacks.”

“Oh?”

I had jam bread, margarine bread, chocolate bread, and more. I pulled them out one after another, and the others gathered around and watched.

“They’re in a transparent bag,” noted Oriland.

“They look quite soft,” said Mimir.

“Om nom nom,” said Reverie. She still looked pretty with her mouth full of food.

As I pointed at the rest of my snacks, I said, “This one has strawberry jam in it; this is a chocolate cornet; that one is stuffed with custard filling; that’s melon bread with chocolate chips; that one is filled with red beans, and that one is made with honey sugar.”

Oriland picked up a bag and stared at it. “Hmm, there’s a lot of variety here.”

“These are my rations,” I said.

Mimir smiled. “It’s nice that food gets preserved inside Dimension Bags, isn’t it?”

“It really is,” I agreed. “I might even consider it the best part of becoming a mage.”

“Yeah, this is one of the biggest reasons Diver teams fight over mages,” said Miguel.

“Om nom nom.”

The topic of porters had come up before. Finding a solution to carrying baggage was a huge deal for Divers, and a team without a mage struggled to figure out what they could take into and out of the dungeon.

Meanwhile, Reverie was still chewing. She was halfway through her hard bread before I knew it.

“They’re mostly all sweet. I can bring out something else if you’re not into that,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry about—”

“Hey, I can eat all of these?” asked Reverie, her eyes glowing with excitement.

The hard bread she'd been eating earlier was now gone—maybe it'd disappeared into a black hole.

"I don't know if eating all of them in the middle of a dive is a good idea," I said hesitantly.

"I could finish these easily," she replied.

"Come on, Reverie, let's not. We're not done exploring yet," said Miguel.

"Miguel," said Reverie. "There are so many sweet buns here, and you want me to give up on them?"

"Wait, when do you ever obsess over food this much?" he asked.

"But...they're sweet buns..." she said, fidgeting as if embarrassed.

She'd looked so cool earlier, but she was like a different person now. Beside her, Miguel was poking her with a finger and teasing her.

Stop flirting, dammit.

They were having trouble coming to an agreement, so I decided to help.

"It's fine. You can save some for souvenirs if anything."

"Oh! Good idea! Let's go with that," said Reverie.

Now that was settled, everyone started to eat.

"Oh? This one's good. It's a lot softer than I thought," said Miguel.

"Compared to the bread here, I'm sure it is," I said.

"You're using these as rations? You're really living it up," he said.

"I can get these for about one copper coin where I come from."

"Are you serious? Man, what's with the place you're from? I'm taking another one."

"Help yourself."

It was a sweet pastry party. You'd never heard of such a thing, you said? Don't worry, neither had I.

"This one is a 'melon bread,' right? It's so crispy and delicious on the outside,"

said Mimir, taking bite after bite with her small mouth.

“I haven’t had strawberry jam since I was a kid. Mock-strawberries are sour, but this is sweet. I can taste the sugar with every bite,” said Oriland, seeming to feel sentimental recalling an old memory.

They each gave me their feedback, but Reverie only said, “So sweet. So good...” stuffing her mouth with bread as if intoxicated.

Adorners absolutely loved sweets. I’d seen them in the guild’s dining hall and rest area hugging pots of honey and licking them like they were Winnie the Pooh. Reverie seemed to be no different.

“Is she going to be okay?” I whispered to Miguel.

“I think so. Mimir?” he said in a hushed tone.

“Yes, I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Mimir whispered back. “I don’t blame her. The bread Kudo brought is all delicious.”

“If she gets out of control, we’ll have our leader take care of it,” whispered Oriland.

Putting all the responsibility on Miguel seemed irresponsible, but I was on board. I was sure she’d be back to normal once she ran out of bread anyway.

The honey sugar bread was her favorite one. Maybe it was the honey since Adorners couldn’t get enough of that stuff. It felt weird watching a pretty woman with food stuffed in her cheeks like a squirrel.

Once she finished eating, Reverie walked up to me with a serious look on her face.

“So, about keeping some as souvenirs, how much do you want for them? Name your price.”

“Uh...how about a silver coin for all of them?” I said tentatively.

“Deal!”

I couldn’t say no to her intensity and ended up selling the rest of my emergency bread. I never wanted to stand between an Adorner and food.

Once everyone finished eating, we held a meeting to plan out the rest of our

dive.

“So, Miguel, what do you want to do about the boss monsters? If you want to hunt them, we’ll have to go through the Lizard Skin route after all,” I said.

There were boss territories on each floor. You usually couldn’t progress to the next floor until you hunted down the boss in video games, but that wasn’t how it worked in the Gandakia Dungeon. Here, bosses were powerful monsters that ruled over their territory and only spawned in small numbers, and we could go to the next floor without fighting them at all. However, bosses gave much better EXP compared to other monsters, and they contained big and powerful core stones. They were hard to beat, of course, but the returns for hunting them were significant.

Miguel shook his head in response to my question.

“No, we won’t hunt the boss here,” he said.

“Are we changing our original plan, then?” asked Oriland. “We came here to beat the boss. Our whole dive would be pointless otherwise.”

He was right. We’d barely even fought any monsters, so we hadn’t gotten anything of much value so far.

“We’ll make up for it on the next floor,” said Miguel.

“We’re going to the Corridors? We never planned for this,” said Reverie.

“Are you prepared for it?” I asked.

“Mimir has our supplies. Besides, one of us was already planning to go to the Corridors today anyway,” he said, referring to me. He winked at me.

“Oooh, Reverie, your boyfriend is flirting with a man,” said Mimir.

“Oh? I didn’t know you were into that.”

“I’m not! Anyway, we’re going to take down a Four-Armed Goat today,” said Miguel.

Reverie’s expression turned grave. “Miguel, you’re getting in way over your head. We didn’t plan for this at all.”

“No, it’ll be fine,” said Miguel.

"I don't know what makes you think that," she said.

"I'm against this too," said Oriland. "Sure, it's not impossible to beat, but we're not prepared. Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

"Ah..." I said.

I had an idea. It was probably because he'd seen a certain something.

"There was an entry for a Four-Armed Goat on his EXP Card," said Miguel.

"What?!"

"No way..."

"Is this true?!"

All three of them were shocked. Bosses weren't easy to beat even if your level was high, after all.

"Yeah, uh, some stuff happened a little while ago," I said.

"Don't tell me you beat it solo?!" said Miguel.

"No, no, there's no way I could! All I did was deal the finishing blow!"

"Oh. Then did you dive with someone?"

"No, I just happened to be diving in the Corridors when I ran into someone in trouble. The Four-Armed Goat was distracted, and they needed help, so I blasted it with magic from the side," I explained.

"And you beat it?" asked Miguel.

"Well...I guess."

"So, in other words, you could one-shot it as long as you find an opening?"

"How did you interpret it that way?"

"But it's true, right? If you went in to help, that must mean the Four-Armed Goat was still in fighting condition. If a mage beat it from the side, it would've had to be done in one shot, which proves you have the firepower to pull it off. Am I wrong?"

"Yes, you're right, okay?! Humph!" I admitted.

There was no point in trying to hide it anymore. I hadn't thought he'd see right through me like this.

"So, there you have it," said Miguel to the rest of the team. "Right now, we have two mages for backup and high firepower. I don't think it's impossible at all."

"Okay, you convinced me. We have more than a fighting chance in that case," said Reverie.

"He did say he could stack about six buffs earlier. If he has a spell that can one-shot it, I say we do it," agreed Oriland.

"I'm a bit nervous going up against a boss, but...if you all want to," said Mimir.

"But...that's going to take a huge toll on me... Have you considered that...?" I said in a whiny tone.

"What? You don't want to go with us? You aren't going to get a lot of opportunities like this diving solo," Miguel pointed out.

"Well...that's true, but—"

"You'll rake in a ton of EXP," he said.

"All right! Let's do this!" I said.

He was right, and I was all for earning a ton of EXP. It wasn't as if the odds were against us either. In fact, we had a high chance of success, and the situation was even better than last time. Miguel's team had beaten it before too, so it may actually end up being easier than we thought.

It was decided. The five of us would advance to the next floor together.

Floor Twenty: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon Route

Two! Part Three

Having decided on the ultimate objective of our dive, Miguel's team—Bacchus Hawks—and I left the Yellow Wall Vestiges at depth level 20 and proceeded to my usual farming spot, the Dark Corridors at depth level 30.

Diving at this depth level was still potentially dangerous for me, but I'd planned out my dives here so often that I'd established a safe exploration method. Thanks to that, I could come here regularly without issues.

This place seemed to have gotten its name from its literal description: it was completely dark except for lights that revealed long corridors with vaulted ceilings, with walls on one side and pillars on the other. The darkness was pretty scary at first, but it was crazy how humans could get accustomed to anything. It didn't bother me at all anymore, but I digress.

The design of the corridors varied depending on the location, with gardens or only walls in certain areas. The floor looked like it could be a part of some huge structure made up entirely of corridors, but there weren't many rooms other than a few small ones for storage, the courtyard and the room where the boss resided, and a safe point. Navigating the Dark Corridors was pretty annoying because it was a maze with random dead ends here and there. The corridors stretched on and on with various turns and branching paths along the way.

To top it all off, the Dark Corridors had a devilish system that weakened the brightness of all light sources. Its mechanism was unknown, but torches, glowing ores from the Yellow Wall Vestiges, and magical lights all wouldn't glow as bright as usual and would just light your immediate surroundings at best. As for me, I'd been bringing a powerful modern flashlight to help me get through. Its effect was weakened too, but it far outclassed anything else in this world. Long live civilization!

Parts of the Corridors were exposed areas outdoors, but they were still always dark as if they were indoors for some reason. Perhaps it was nighttime outside,

but there were no stars or moons in sight. I could feel the wind and it just felt as if I were outside; it was a strange feeling.

I had a theory that this place was directly connected to the next floor, the Evernight Meadows. As the name suggests, it was always nighttime in the Meadows. The sky there was completely dark like polar nights, unlike white nights in my world, where the sky didn't get completely dark. I'd have to investigate every corner and find the exit leading outside if I were to solve this mystery. I wanted to do that someday—though I'd have to overcome my worst enemy: the stench of the ruins and the terrible dampness. Yuck.

We exited the Misty Border and began preparing to press forward. Miguel started assembling some sort of lantern by attaching a light source to the end of a stick.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a light specifically for the Dark Corridors. You don't have one?" he said.

"Nope. Didn't know that's a thing."

"You didn't?! Let me guess, you have some weird gadgets like the ones from earlier."

"Yup," I said.

I had a mountaineering headlight attached to my safari hat. Come to think of it, I'd seen other Divers here holding the same thing Miguel had. It didn't leave much of an impression on me because it provided such little light.

"Here's what I use," I said.

I turned on my headlight and set up the LEDs on both sides of my hips, and I was ready to go.

Miguel's three teammates stared, mouths agape.

"Huh, that thing gets really bright."

"It's not fire or the glowing ore."

"It's not magic either...and it's such a strong light."

Mimir stood on her tiptoes and pursed her lips as she stared into the light on

my head. She must've been curious about how it worked, but I wasn't smart enough to explain its mechanics in detail.

"Uh...it'll take too long to explain, but yeah," I said vaguely.

Meanwhile, Miguel and the others were ready to go. They'd rearranged their formation, and Oriland was now walking right behind Miguel. This would allow them to deal with Blood Bats easier even if they got ambushed in the dark as the fully armored Oriland could immediately step forward into a swarm of bats.

"Is it okay if I choose the route?" I asked out loud.

"Oh? If you know a good way to go, sure," said Miguel.

"All right, then. Let's see..." I said as I pulled out a notebook from my backpack.

It was one of my notebooks, its contents organized by floors, on which I'd been steadily taking notes over time to plan out my dives. This one featured information and maps of each floor, as well as details on monsters, including photos. I made my dive plans based on these notes, and I always made sure to check them before setting foot into the dungeon.

The others peered into my notebook curiously.

"Memos, huh? I've never seen those characters before," said Miguel.

"It's my native language," I replied.

"You made this?" he asked.

"Yup."

I'd written detailed notes regarding the dungeon, but they couldn't read them. I'd once gotten carried away and showed them to Ashley, and she'd asked me to translate them and sell them to the guild. Aside from the handwritten info, the visual information in the photos must also have been highly useful for them. I didn't sell them, of course.

They all seemed interested in the photos too.

"This drawing is so detailed..." said Mimir.

"It's not a drawing. It's a photo I printed out," I said.

The concept of “cameras” and “photos” didn’t exist in this world, so people always mistook photos for drawings here. I didn’t know if they’d even accept my explanation if I told them about the principles behind burning and copying images.

“Miguel, can you come here for a sec?” I said.

“Yeah? Whoa!”

I’d pointed my camera at him and snapped a picture with my smartphone. It was dark, but I’d had the flash on, so it was no problem.

“You surprised me! What was that thing?” he asked.

“That’s the camera function. I used it to take this picture,” I said and showed him the screen on my smartphone. Everyone’s eyes widened.

“Huh? How? What’s this thing? I see Miguel...”

“Whoa, you’re right! What the...”

“Is this your surprised face from earlier? You look funny.”

“You made this in that second? Is this some sort of magic?”

“No, it’s not magic,” I said. “It creates a picture— Well, you guys don’t really have pictures like this here. How do I explain this...”

As I was struggling, Reverie suddenly spoke up. “So, basically, you can transfer whatever you’re seeing directly onto paper, right? And that notebook shows how each level and monster looks.”

“Oh, right. Pretty much.”

“This is amazing! You could use it to easily share info on monsters, down to the finest details,” said Reverie, obviously impressed.

Through photos and videos, we could find out exactly how a creature looked on Earth now, but before the camera had been invented, people could only learn through drawings or word of mouth. I was already used to it, but it must’ve been a huge shock for people in this world. It was especially difficult to make detailed drawings of monsters from the dungeon, so these photos could cause quite a stir if they ever went public. It was no wonder Ashley—I mean,

the Divers Guild wanted it so much.

Reverie asked to see my notebook, so I handed it to her. She seemed very interested in the photos of the monsters and floors. Impressed, she flipped through the pages, oohing and aahing as she did so.

Suddenly, Miguel started grinning and said, "Say, Kudo..."

"What's up?" I asked. "You look like a pervert right now. Are you thinking of something inappropriate?"

"No, nothing like that," he said. "I just realized how wonderful your little gadget is."

"How's that?"

"With this, you could stare at a woman's naked body as long as you want."

"Whoa, you must be a genius to realize that so quickly!" I said.

"Oh, stop it, you're making me blush," said Miguel.

Oriland joined in and said, "Hmm, you're right. You could make a permanent copy on paper. Ha ha!"

"Men think of the dumbest things..." Reverie said and laughed it off.

Meanwhile, Mimir was mumbling, "Perverts, perverts, perverts, perverts, perverts, perverts..."

We couldn't help it though. As guys, of course we were going to get excited about this kind of stuff.

"Well, there's a lot I want to ask about your light and the 'camera' and 'photo' stuff, but I'll save it for later," said Miguel.

"Yeah, we should focus on the dungeon for now," I agreed.

"Are you sure, Miguel?" asked Reverie, who was leaning back with her arms folded.

"I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious, but there's no reason to rush it either. We're all going home together, so we could just ask then," he said.

"Well, I guess that's true," agreed Reverie.

Reverie was interested too, but she didn't push the matter any further. She had a pretty straightforward personality and didn't seem to get bothered by the little things. Maybe that was why I felt like she was more of a leader than Miguel was.

I was mulling over such thoughts when the actual team leader asked, "So, which route are we taking?"

"Let's take the west route," I replied. "That's the way I usually go, so I know it like the back of my hand."

"The west side? Isn't that side further from the boss room?" he asked.

"But we'll only run into Blood Bats on this route, which would be a lot easier. There are Shadow Walkers and Sludgemites on the east and north sides. These routes with lots of monsters will be risky especially since we haven't prepared properly."

"So you think we should take the western route."

"Yup."

Dealing with more types of monsters would mean we'd have to deal with a wider range of situations. We'd pretty much decided to dive here on a whim, so it'd be very risky for us to face them without the proper prep work. Though, with the combined power of this team, the common monsters here wouldn't pose much of a threat to us. But even so, there was no reason for us to take the more difficult route when there was an option that was easier, safer, and more fun.

Not to mention, Shadow Walkers ambushed Divers in the dark from behind, so they were scary, scary, and very scary. Sludgemites were the monsters I hated running into the most on this floor. They were the source of the terrible stench in the Dark Corridors, and their smell was unbearable up close. I was terrified that my nose would get destroyed by their stink before the fight even started. I'd always thought they belonged in the Night Soil Swamps, and I wanted to avoid them at all costs.

As Miguel and I were talking, Oriland spoke up and said, "I agree with Kudo's idea. We should avoid facing more monsters than we need to."

“I see,” said Miguel. “Reverie, Mimir, what do you think?”

They didn’t seem to be against the idea, and they nodded in agreement.

“I guess it’s settled, then,” I said.

Now that everyone agreed, I took the lead as the one who’d chosen the route. I came here all the time, and I had a light that wasn’t hindered as much by this floor’s special properties, so I was best suited to be at the front.

I continued forward carefully as the group followed, using my light to reveal the path and ceiling ahead.

“You walk without hesitation even though it’s hard to see,” pointed out Reverie.

“There aren’t any monsters near the entrance, and I have this,” I said, gesturing at my light.

Having this light was definitely reassuring, and it also helped that I was so used to this place. I could hear faint screeching sounds whenever Blood Bats were nearby, so I just had to keep my ears open.

“That thing really is bright,” said Miguel.

“Yeah, it’s a lifesaver in a place like this,” I said.

“It’d be so much easier to explore this place if it weren’t so dark in here,” he said with a sigh.

“There *is* magic that helps with visibility,” I said.

Mimir perked up as a fellow mage. “Do you mean an illumination spell?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “Want me to try it on someone? Abyssal Sight, that is.”

I then turned around and pointed my magic staff at Oriland’s gorilla face, then I cast the generic spell.

“Ah— Whoaaa!” he shouted.

“Lando?” asked Mimir.

“This is amazing! I can see! I can see everything! Aha ha ha!”

Oriland should be able to see everything around him clearly now. The spell I’d

cast on him didn't emit light to increase visibility, but it allowed the target to see in the dark as if it were daytime. Since we couldn't brighten this place with magical lights, I'd figured I could just buff the viewer's vision instead, and that was why I'd created Abyssal Sight. Night vision devices—no pun intended—didn't hold a candle to this spell. The spell really made it much easier to see, but it also made the target's eyes more sensitive to light in exchange. This meant I couldn't use my lightning spells while it was active, so I didn't usually use it to boost my vision. Not that I'd ever tried it out; I was too nervous to.

Yes, I could make my own magic spells, but although they were convenient, they came with drawbacks too. I still had a lot to learn. Sensei's generic spells, on the other hand, were truly amazing. They were mostly designed without flaws and were easy to use. This was incredibly difficult to pull off, but that demonic teacher was built different.

Oriland was having the time of his life. Seeing an older guy getting so excited with no regard for his age was strangely heartwarming, though the image of a frolicking gorilla did pop up in my head.

I cast Abyssal Sight on the rest of the team, and Reverie said, "I get it. Instead of making it brighter, you made it so we could see better in the dark. Mages come up with the craziest ideas."

Suddenly, Mimir walked up to me and asked pleadingly, "K-Kudo, will you teach me this magic?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "I wouldn't mind."

"Really? Thank you!"

I'd made this spell myself and had no reservations about teaching it, so it shouldn't be a problem. I'd have to get permission from Sensei if I wanted to teach one of her spells though.

I taught her how to use the spell as we walked. She wasn't called elite for nothing; she picked it up pretty much right away.

"This is incredible!" she said excitedly. "This will make the Dark Corridors—not only that, but the Evernight Meadows easier to explore too!"

"We won't have to buy a bunch of light sources anymore either. Thanks,

Kudo, this is really useful,” said Miguel, happily slapping my back.

Ow, ow.

“That actually hurts, you level 38... Oh, and now that you can see better, you’ll have to watch out for bright lights. You can’t really make any bright lights here, but treat it as a general precaution.”

Strong flash spells would hurt their eyes while they were under the effects of Abyssal Sight. Though, Abyssal Sight was only really used on this floor, and lights were weakened here anyway. On top of that, I was the only one here who could use lightning magic, so they didn’t really have much to worry about. But regardless, I’d wanted to warn them just in case.

“I wonder if Blood Bats see like this...” Mimir wondered aloud.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’ve heard that bats tell the distance between them and their surroundings by emitting sounds and sensing the reflected sound waves that bounce off walls and other objects. They’re always in the dark, so they don’t rely on vision to get around.”

“How do you know that?” asked Miguel.

“People studied bats and found that out. They studied normal bats though, not Blood Bats,” I said.

Then, a high-pitched scream pierced my ears.

“One of them fled that way,” I said as I pointed.

Blood Bats were sensitive to light, and when one of their scouts detected any light, they retreated to the rest of their colony to call for backup. Once they flew out of view, it wouldn’t be long before a huge swarm of them came at us.

Miguel also noticed the bat and narrowed his eyes. “Looks like we’re gonna have some company.”

“Yup,” I said lazily.

“Mimir, why don’t you handle this?” suggested Reverie.

“Me?” asked Mimir.

“Now’s your chance to show off your skills as a blue mage.”

Encouraged by Reverie's words, Mimir said, "Okay. Lando, please take point."

"You got it."

As they readjusted their positions, we heard the first wave of flapping wings coming toward us. By the time Blood Bats came into sight, it was usually too late as they'd already be diving at you. That was why any incantations needed to be completed before the bats' attacks connected. Mimir readied her magic staff and began chanting while Oriland stepped forward with his shield raised in a defensive position. Meanwhile, Reverie was standing by at the rear with several arrows notched to her bow.

"Can she really shoot like that?" I asked Miguel.

"Yup," he replied. "Though I don't understand how either. Supposedly, it's a secret technique Adorners use."

"I guess all other races can ignore the laws of physics..."

They and Long-Ears were simply amazing. At this rate, Beast-Heads and Tails probably had some crazy ability too. I guess anything goes in other worlds.

"By the way, what are you doing?" I asked Miguel.

"Me? I'm just watching."

"Uh..."

"What am I supposed to do? It's not like I'm heavily armored, so I can't go in there and fight up close. If things go south, I'll throw a knife or something," he said as he pulled out a throwing knife from a sheath on his waist. He seemed to have come prepared after all.

As we were talking, Mimir completed her spell and called out, "Secondary Magic: Sapphia Surge!"

Moisture gathered in the air and formed mist, swelling and transforming into a white-crested wave that crashed into the swarm of Blood Bats. Several of them survived the blow and charged at the team, but they were quickly sniped by Reverie before they could reach Oriland.

"I did it!" said Mimir, looking happy and confident.

“Nice,” I said.

Miguel poked me in the rib. “Well? What do you think of our mage’s skills?”

“Uhhh, why are you asking me?”

The only other mages I knew were Sensei and Ricky. I only had those two to compare to, so I wasn’t sure how to answer him. I could wipe out the entire swarm in one hit, but was I supposed to compare her to myself? That didn’t seem right either...

“Miguel, there’s more coming.”

“Already? Then—”

“Okay, leave this one to me,” I said.

“Nice. Let’s see what you’ve got, Mr. Mage,” said Miguel.

“We can finally witness your purple magic,” said Mimir excitedly.

I decided to use this opportunity to show off the technique Sensei had taught me recently. I had learned two things: how to cast elemental magic simultaneously and Force Esoterica. This time, I’d use the former.

Magic spells came in various categories: area of effect, single target, and multitarget. As they grew more advanced, their spell grades and mana costs increased. But this technique allowed me to combine multiple low-grade elemental spells to use mana more efficiently than if I’d cast a powerful high-grade spell.

“Tertiary Magic: Lightning Sphere—Replication!” I shouted at the swarm of Blood Bats that appeared out of the darkness one after another.

The spell would normally only summon one sphere, but three purple spheres appeared with magic circles and rained lightning down upon the charging bats.

A sound dozens of times louder than an exploding firecracker erupted and reverberated all around us, rumbling in our ears. When the flash of light and noise settled, countless Blood Bat corpses strewn the cobblestone pavement.

“And that’s a wrap,” I said.

The bats’ bodies were still intact, but their insides were surely fried to a crisp.

Lightning magic was powerful and hard to adjust, so I had to be careful about how I used it.

It didn't look like a third wave would be coming, and that was the last of them. I touched the ground with my shoe a few times to check for any remaining electricity even though it wouldn't affect me anyway. I then used my knife to carve out some core stones. It was pretty gory, but I'd looked up how to dissect animals on YouTube, so I wasn't too affected by it.

The impact of my spell seemed to have affected those behind me too.

"So that was Ameithys's Hammer—I mean, lightning."

"It was like a branch made of light, or more like a spear."

"That's grand of you to take them all out at once. Your firepower could even compete with that of red mages."

After Miguel, Reverie, and Oriland commented, Mimir simply said, "Amazing..."

"Oh? Even you thought that was impressive?" I asked Mimir.

"Impressive? That was spectacular! Not just the elemental magic, but you cast multiple copies of the same spell too! Nobody can use magic like that, not even in Meruem!" she said.

"I-Is that so?" I asked. "I guess that *is* amazing..."

"Yes, it is!"

"R-Right... Yeah, that's good," said Reverie, taken aback by Mimir's enthusiasm.

To be honest, I was surprised too. This technique couldn't be found even in a city with an educational institute for magic, yet Sensei had taught it to me, claiming it was something basic.

As I wondered just who in the world Sensei was, Mimir stared at me with sparkly eyes and said, "Kudo! You just used a Tertiary Magic spell, but can you use Quaternary Magic spells too?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can," I said.

“Incredible!” she exclaimed. “Kudo, please teach me magic— No, please let me be your disciple!”

“Ah...sorry, but I can’t do that. I’m still a disciple myself, and I don’t consider myself to be at a level where I can teach others.”

“Even though you know such extraordinary techniques already?”

“Uh...yeah.”

Was it really “extraordinary”? I was able to use it pretty effortlessly after Sensei had taught me. Again, I didn’t have anyone else to compare to, so I had no idea. Mimir sure seemed amazed though. She was observing my every move as we continued walking.

“That’s enough chitchat for now. We’re close,” said Reverie.

She was especially sensitive to the presence of others, which would explain why she’d been trusted with the rearguard position. Sure enough, we were nearly at the boss’s territory.

“You sure are sensitiv— Gah!” said Miguel.

“I just said to stop talking. Idiot,” replied Reverie.

I didn’t know how Miguel came up with dirty jokes so quickly, but Reverie had interrupted him with a quick punch. Once again, I wondered who the real leader of this team was, but there were surely other reasons why they’d all rallied under Miguel.

“Mimir, hand me my arrow,” said Reverie.

“Sure. One second,” replied Mimir.

She then reached into her Dimension Bag and pulled out an arrow the size of a lance—yes, an arrow the size of *a lance*.

“Uhhh... That’s an arrow?” I asked.

“Yeah. We’ll need one this big if we’re going up against a boss,” said Reverie.

“Sheesh,” I said and shuddered as she held up the massive missile.

It was enormous. I’d only seen something like this in *Monster Hunter*. Oriland’s giant mace was pretty terrifying too, and this thing was on a similar

level. Anything that got shot by this thing would probably be blown to smithereens. Adorners really were something else.

Mimir pulled out six of these super arrows, and Reverie lifted them with ease. She was probably the strongest one on her team. She was two levels lower than me at level 32, but her strength as an Adorner more than made up for that difference. She could even be stronger than Scrael, which was saying something.

I turned off my lights as we approached the boss's territory and peeked around the corner.

There it was.

It wasn't in its boss room this time, so there weren't any candles lighting up the place, and I could see its red eyes floating around in the darkness. It was the monstrosity with a goat's head, the boss of the Dark Corridors at depth level 30.

Floor Twenty-One: Charge! Gandakia Dungeon

Route Two! Part Four

Four-Armed Goats were boss monsters that ruled over certain territories in the Dark Corridors. Half man and half beast, they had mountain goat heads along with bulging muscles all over their three-meter-tall frames; although, they seemed different from Beast-Heads. These two-legged humanoid beasts had full control over their four muscular arms, and they wielded a weapon in each of those arms. Humanoid monsters like this had a tendency to be armed for some reason, and I wanted to ask where they even got their equipment. I'd asked a bunch of people why that was, but they'd all just told me "It is what it is."

As an aside—and this was a completely unnecessary aside—this goat was clearly male because I could see its dangling *bleep*. I won't specify what that is, but it should be fairly obvious. That thing was pretty grotesque to look at. As my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, the aura that radiates from powerful monsters made certain things visible even if I didn't want to look at them. *Yuck*.

"Sheesh, look at those muscles," I remarked.

I was deliberately not mentioning that other body part, but the dirty-joke-loving leader of Bacchus Hawks completely ignored my efforts.

"Man, that *bleep* is huge," he said.

"Ah! M-Miguel! Please don't say things like that!" complained Mimir.

"What's wrong, Mimir?" asked Miguel. "Are you that bothered by its *bleep*? Hmm?"

"Miguel!!!"

"I mean, I get it. That thing is enormous."

"Aaaaaargh! Stop it!"

Mimir's face went beet red from seeing the boss's you-know-what. That

seemed like the expected reaction from a girl, but Reverie was completely unconcerned. I figured the difference was whether they had a boyfriend or not. Also, Miguel should probably cool it with his sexual harassment.

Meanwhile, the Four-Armed Goat didn't seem to be on alert, and it was just wandering aimlessly around the large outdoor garden by the hallway. This boss usually hung out in the candlelit boss room where it slept; comparatively, the visibility out here in the dark garden was much poorer. If we jumped out now, the boss would notice us right away. This was our last chance to sort out some last-minute preparations before the fight.

"Oh, I nearly forgot about this," I said as I pulled out a certain item from my Dimension Bag and handed it to Miguel.

"Hmm? What's thi— Hey! Is this what I think it is?" he said as his eyes widened with surprise.

"I want everyone to have one of these just in case. Oh, but I'm going to ask for them back if you don't end up using them," I said.

Miguel let out a deep sigh. The others moved in to see what I was holding, and they were just as surprised.

"I sure didn't expect *this*..."

"Those are g-g-gol—"

"Gold potions?!"

"Kudo, how did you get so many of them?" asked Miguel.

"I made them," I said.

There was a moment of complete silence as if time had stopped. I'd kind of figured they'd react that way.

"I see. So *you're* the one behind that potion frenzy," said Miguel.

"Heh heh..."

Miguel pinched my cheek.

"Don't just laugh," he said.

"Eheh heh, that hurts... Anyway, grab a bottle, everyone," I offered.

Reverie turned pale and said, “U-Uh, I think I’ll pass...”

“Oh? You don’t want one? Are you sure?” I asked.

“Well, you know, I have Mimir. She’ll heal me if I get hurt. Right, Mimir?”

“Yes,” said Mimir.

Reverie seemed to dislike potions. She flat out refused to take one, and she recoiled from them as if she didn’t even want to touch the bottles. Maybe she’d had a bad experience with them or something; I had no idea, but I wasn’t going to push the issue.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked Miguel.

“Since we’re an impromptu team this time, we aren’t going to attempt any complicated coordination. Those in the back line will prepare their spells at a distance just close enough to accurately hit the target with magic. Stack as many generic spells as you can before we enter the fight and reapply them as they run out,” said Miguel.

“So your team will do your usual thing to wear it down, and I’ll finish it off when I get the chance?” I asked.

“Exactly. Simple, right?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

It was better to keep things simple because we weren’t used to working together as a team.

“Anything we should know about your magic?” he asked.

“Well...we should be careful with Mimir’s magic,” I said.

“Mine?” asked Mimir.

“Yeah. I use lightning spells, and water is highly conductive to electricity. So please be careful not to spray water everywhere, and everyone should make sure they stay away from water when I cast my spell,” I explained.

That was why Water types were weak against Electric types and why you shouldn’t put electrical cords in the bathtub. Everyone knew water conducts electricity extremely well. And even if Mimir’s magic created pure water, it

wouldn't make a difference since lightning generated through magic stemmed from human imagination. It technically differed from the real thing, but it still contained an extremely high voltage. It'd blow through any insulation, air and pure water alike, and blast its victims. Any human would die instantly if struck by the full force of such magic—probably.

“So, we just need to stay clear of any water when you're about to fire your spells,” said Miguel.

“Yup.”

They'd be fine as long as they weren't touching any water. I could choose where the magical lightning would strike, so it wouldn't be drawn to any metallic objects nearby either.

“Okay, let's start buffing with some generic spells. Go ahead, Mimir,” said Miguel.

“Very well. Um...” she said, looking at me reservedly.

She seemed to want to discuss which buffs to use so they wouldn't overlap with mine. I knew six generic spells. For starters, Concentration and Celerity were a must for the front line, so we just had to figure out the rest.

“How many slots do you have for generic spells?” I asked.

“I have three. I always use Concentration on Miguel, Fortitude on Oriland, and Power Surge on Reverie,” she replied.

Those would buff all three of them: they'd improve reaction speed for Miguel, boost defense for Oriland, the tank, and increase Reverie's strength so she could draw her bow better.

“Then can you cast Concentration, Celerity, and Fortitude on Miguel? I'll handle the rest,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, sure...” she said hesitantly.

I turned to Oriland and cast Concentration, Celerity, and Fortitude on him, improving his reaction speed, agility, and defense. I then turned to Reverie and cast Power Surge, Concentration, and Serendipity, improving her strength, reaction speed, and event probability.

Reverie looked at me curiously and asked, “Serendipity? What’s that? Do you know, Mimir?”

“I’m not...sure either. I’ve never heard of it,” she said.

“Oh? You haven’t?” I asked.

“This is the first time I’ve heard of it too,” said Reverie.

The rest of the team didn’t seem to have heard of it either.

Serendipity was a generic spell that Sensei had taught me. Supposedly, it’d been developed to eliminate unforeseeable microscopic factors that could lead to a mage’s spell failing. As a result, it greatly affected anything that could be swayed by luck. It wasn’t that the spell improved luck to create opportunities, but it neutralized the effect of bad luck from the equation to create more controllable outcomes. Whether an attack landed or not was a prime example of luck’s effects.

I explained this to Miguel, and he said with disappointment, “Aw man, that means we won’t be getting any lucky shots.”

“In fact, I think it’s great,” said Reverie. “I’m not concerned about lucky shots. This will eliminate the possibility of me missing because the target happened to move a certain way or some other unpredictable event occurred. This will leave it all up to me.”

Reverie seemed to understand the importance of this spell right away. She had a straightforward personality and looked somewhat rough at first glance, but she was actually logical and highly composed. Why wasn’t she the leader again? It was probably because she always got hungry and ate everything in sight.

“I think this is the first time we got so many buffs at once,” Oriland said to Miguel.

“Yup. Just goes to show how important mages are,” he replied.

“Aw... He cast twice as many spells as I could...” said Mimir, her confidence seemingly shattered.

I felt bad for her, but if she wanted to get to my level, she’d have to go

through hell and train like I had—with that demon.

“All right, time to go. Is everyone ready?”

The members of Bacchus Hawks nodded in response to Miguel’s call. They turned the corner and leaped out toward the Four-Armed Goat with Miguel at the helm.

I heard a booming roar—no, a howl powerful enough to send sand and dust flying in all directions. After enduring it, I, too, turned the corner and followed the others onto the battlefield. I was going in after them, so I didn’t have much to worry about.

Miguel and the others had tossed light sources all around the garden, making it much easier to see than before. Miguel and Oriland were up front deflecting attacks from the boss’s four arms while Reverie and Mimir kept themselves at a distance, maintaining their positions so that their lines of fire intersected at the target’s location.

They were like a hero’s party setting out to defeat the Demon Lord. I’d been using that phrase a lot lately, but seeing them face off against the boss, it really was fitting.

“Wow...” I breathed as I watched their display of sophisticated and well-coordinated teamwork.

The two in the front line maneuvered to overwhelm the Four-Armed Goat while the long-range specialists whittled it down with well-timed attacks. Specifically, Miguel fought at the forefront while maintaining a certain distance while Reverie and Mimir constantly moved around so that the boss would always remain at the intersection of the imaginary lines that extended in front of them. Meanwhile, Oriland positioned himself so that he was always standing between the boss and Mimir. While he blocked the boss’s attacks, Miguel would cut its legs from the flank, or they’d suddenly back off in sync to make room for a barrage of ranged attacks to bombard the enemy. It was truly an impressive display.

Miguel was like a personification of competency. He stood out to me, constantly fighting at the forefront while analyzing the entire battlefield and issuing orders appropriately—again, he was doing this *while fighting*. He was

aware of his surroundings as if there were eyes on the back of his head, and he struck at the enemy whenever an opportunity presented itself. The buffs surely helped, but he was an incredibly quick thinker regardless. If he were in *Nobunaga's Ambition*, his Leadership level would be, like, 120. He'd have superhigh defense stats and it'd be impossible to take his castle, making him a real pain to fight against.

As I stared in amazement, Miguel shouted, "Hey, Kudo! Don't just stand there, man!"

"Sorry! I couldn't look away!" I yelled back.

Perceptive as ever, he'd even noticed me just staring absentmindedly. I couldn't help it though; it was their fault for having such perfect coordination. Well, it actually was *my* fault for staring, but still.

Thanks to the generic spells buffing him, Miguel had such an advantage over the boss that he could taunt it, saying, "What's wrong? Got four arms but not enough brains? Do you even understand what I'm saying? Huh? Huh?!"

Despite the language barrier, even the monster could tell it was being insulted by how he was sticking his tongue out mockingly. Miguel was drawing so much aggro that it didn't even look at the other three.

How was he fending off four arms with just one sword anyway?

As Miguel drew the Four-Armed Goat away from the team, Reverie called out, "Aim for the legs, Mimir!"

"U-Understood!" replied Mimir.

Aiming for the legs was a staple strategy for taking down big opponents. It went without saying that doing so would break their posture and create opportunities to attack. The boss couldn't react in time as a magical wave swept over its legs and blazing-fast arrows fired from a metal bow sniped its feet. The Four-Armed Goat lost its balance and fell to its knees, several arrows embedded in its legs. Yet, it was still able to move and quickly rose back up to deal with Miguel and Oriland's attacks.

It was no wonder they were a superhigh-ranking team considering how well they were handling the boss fight. But there was one problem: they lacked

firepower. Although their strategy was solid, they just weren't dealing enough damage. That was probably why Reverie and Oriland had opposed taking on this boss during our meeting at the Yellow Wall Vestiges. The thing was, a mage would normally be the main source of a team's firepower, but Mimir wasn't able to keep up with a depth level 30 boss. She was around level 20 or so, which would mean Tertiary Magic was probably the highest spell grade she had access to. If a mage were to take down a Four-Armed Goat solo, they must at least be able to cast Quaternary Magic. They likely had to prepare a lot when they usually took on bosses. They may be able to take them down if they could land a solid hit to their vitals with Miguel's sword or Oriland's giant mace.

But getting past a Four-Armed Goat's arms to strike its weak point was no simple task. They could beat one with a good hit from Reverie's ballista-like great bow, but she'd only been shooting regular arrows so far, most of which had been deflected. Those four arms really were annoying to fight against.

Of course, they could simply keep going and win by attrition. Even a boss would eventually become immobile if they could drain enough blood from it. Yet this method would also be severely taxing for the team.

I couldn't stress this enough, but when it came to dungeon diving, nothing was scarier than fatigue and injuries as they'd negatively affect the next dive. "Safe and steady" was my motto when it came to dungeon diving, so being physically unable to dive was out of the question.

"There!" Reverie's voice called out.

"Graaaaaaaaargh!"

Reverie had been using regular arrows until now, but a lance-sized arrow had just impaled the boss's arm, making it scream out in pain. It didn't just look painful; it looked like its arm was about to fall off. *Yikes.*

The team's strategy seemed to be working, and the four of them were able to settle into a sort of pattern that the boss couldn't escape from. They had it completely locked down.

The battle continued for some time, and the Four-Armed Goat had visibly slowed down from fatigue and blood loss. It was about time. Monsters could be particularly dangerous when cornered, so I had to make sure it'd started to slow

down before I made my move.

My mana was charged and ready to go. I'd been on standby in case I needed to recast generic spells, but it turned out I didn't need to do anything.

"Okay, then..." I said.

Twirling my magic staff and focusing my mana on the amethyst at its tip, I chanted a chuuni incantation and held my position. A magic circle appeared in the darkness. My surge of mana signaled the others to retreat, leaving my line of fire to the boss wide open. Their abilities to quickly assess the situation spoke volumes about why they were such a highly ranked team. I gestured with my staff for them to move back even further, then I took a moment to close my eyes and concentrate.

"Quinary Magic: Horizon Light Pillar," I uttered as I opened my eyes.

I'd used Quaternary Magic back when I'd saved Scrael, but I'd made absolutely sure that it'd go down in one shot then. I'd opted to use Quinary Magic now just in case, which was the highest spell grade of all. Horizon Light Pillar was a high-power, wide-range spell—though it could also be focused at a smaller area—and was only usable outdoors. We happened to be in the garden today, so the conditions for me to use it had lined up perfectly.

The stepped leaders, which usually couldn't be seen with the naked eye, were made visible by my magic. Then, branches of lightning pierced downward into the Four-Armed Goat and its surroundings.

"Hey, Kudo! This isn't—"

Miguel was probably going to say it wouldn't be enough to take down the boss, but he couldn't even finish his sentence. After a series of stepped leaders flashed down within a hundred-meter radius or so, an upward streamer lightning erupted like a hand from the ground, catching the Four-Armed Goat's legs and waist. A moment later, lightning struck.

A ray—no, a bright pillar of high-voltage electricity formed between the ground and sky, engulfing the boss in purple and white before it could even scream. When the light and fog cleared, all that was left of the Four-Armed Goat was a giant core stone with electricity coiling around it.

Charging my mana had taken far too long. Casting Quinary Magic required much more time than casting Quaternary Magic. I still had a long way to go before I'd be able to solo this boss.

As I considered that thought, I was granted EXP for the fight. The result of the battle became a chain of causality bridging the slayer and the slain. My contribution to the battle would then be taken into account, and I'd received an appropriate amount of EXP. Facts were unwavering and couldn't be falsified. Only the results were properly reflected.

"Didn't level up," I said, twirling my EXP Card in my hand.

I hadn't expected to. As everyone had worked together in this fight and contributed in their own ways, the EXP was probably more or less evenly split. I'd gotten a ton last time because there'd just been Scrael and me. But even the smaller share I'd gotten this time was far more than I'd get from beating normal monsters.

Getting a huge amount of EXP at once felt really good—not like in a sexual way. I could feel the power surging through my body. "This is the greatest high!" as they say.

Out of Miguel's team, Mimir was the only one who'd leveled up. I thought she'd be thrilled, but she was trembling as if afraid of something. Maybe the fear from the boss fight had set in after the fact. She may be a mage and a Diver, but she did seem like a timid girl who was even younger than me.

The only things that could be harvested from a Four-Armed Goat's carcass were its horns. Its meat was hard, sinewy, and inedible, so there was no point in taking any home. Oh, and supposedly, there were people who cut off its dangling thing to make aphrodisiacs out of it.

Also, its weapons disappeared immediately after it was defeated for some reason. I wanted to look into the mechanics of how monsters spawned and find out things like why they appeared with weapons already in hand.

Though, there was nothing left to harvest this time anyway because it'd been completely obliterated. Only the core stone remained since it couldn't be destroyed with magic. I kicked the electrified core stone a few times for good measure. The sole of my foot felt prickly, but the stone seemed to be good to

touch now.

“This thing sure is huge,” I said as I picked it up.

Miguel approached me with a satisfied expression and asked, “How much did you make from it last time?”

“Ah...I actually gave it away last time, so I’m not sure,” I said.

The core stone I’d gotten last time had been used to fund Scrael’s security deposit and living expenses. She was still paying me back, so I still had no idea how much it’d sold for.

“You mean to the person you saved? Don’t you think you were too nice for your own good?” asked Miguel.

“Well...let’s just say a lot happened,” I said.

“Did you get into trouble?” he asked, misinterpreting my vagueness. “If you need help getting your money back, let me know.”

“No, no, it’s not like that,” I said. “Everything was resolved without issues.”

“Oh, good,” he said, seemingly satisfied with my answer. Then he asked, “So, how should we split up the earnings?”

“Why don’t we sell the core stone and split the profit five ways? You guys are a team, so I’ll take one-fifth of the total,” I said.

“Are you sure...?” asked Miguel.

“Hmm? How else would we split it up?”

“I mean, if you’re fine with it...” said Miguel hesitantly.

The five of us had taken down the boss together, so it made sense. It wasn’t as if I’d contributed far more than the others. In fact, all I’d done was take the shot they’d set up for me, and I hadn’t even had to work hard. I’d used a lot of mana, but I just considered it a necessary expense. Besides, I didn’t want to get into an argument about money with my friend, and I knew he wouldn’t try to distribute it in a way that’d cause problems between us. I did get into arguments with him about other stuff though, and he deserved to die ten times.

Anyway, we’d completed our main objective, so we decided to head back to

the Divers Guild together.

§

The Four-Armed Goat, the boss of the Dark Corridors at depth level 30, was a peculiar monster, quite powerful and well deserving of its status as a boss of a high-depth-level floor. Assuming an average level of 25 or so, at least twenty Divers—at least five of them mages—would be needed to defeat one according to the data book. Even high-ranking teams needed careful preparation and two whole days of rest to ensure they were in top physical condition before taking on this fight—and there were still occasional casualties even with all those precautions.

Normally, a team would never even consider challenging it with just five members unless they had a death wish. In fact, a team had been wiped out trying to fight this very monster not too long ago. It'd been an up-and-coming team called Kalanka's Stars, a team on par with another one that my friend had compared to "a hero's party." They'd been increasing their levels and ranks at such a great pace that they'd probably become arrogant and overestimated their abilities.

The reason I'd decided to challenge this monster practically on a whim was to find out just how capable my Diver friend Kudo Akira was. I'd thought it was a good opportunity when we'd run into each other in the dungeon, and I'd been planning on observing him until somewhere on a midlevel floor. I'd assumed his level wasn't very high, but as we'd progressed through the dungeon together, his abnormalities had started coming to light.

Mages normally needed a frontline shield user to go dungeon diving, but he'd passed through the low-and midlevel floors pretty much without fighting at all. Blood Bats were nearly impossible for mages to solo, but he'd done it while humming a tune as if it'd been a walk in the park. This had been when it'd become clear that he was more powerful than he let on.

The decisive factor was the Four-Armed Goat fight; not only had he bolstered us with more generic spells than we'd ever cast on ourselves, but I also hadn't been able to believe my eyes when he'd dealt the finishing blow. The flash of magical light he'd conjured was clearly that of a high-level mage. I remember

panicking when I'd assumed the small, branching spears of light were all that his spell had to offer. I'd thought he'd mistakenly cast a low-level spell for a moment, but I'd soon found out that it'd only been the precursor for the main attack. The branching lights had pierced the Four-Armed Goat's body and set off sparks as they'd struck the ground and walls around it. Then, an enormous pillar of light had descended on the target. I hadn't been able to open my eyes for some time because of the flash, impact, and resulting gust of wind. When I'd been able to open them again, the once-dark garden had become bright as if it'd been midday from the afterglow of my friend's magic.

I'd been a Diver in Freida for three years now, and I'd never seen anything like it before. None of the mages I'd met had cast such powerful magic, and I didn't even know what spell grade it was. My friend never talked about it, but someone on my team, Mimir Triss, had an idea. She was a mage listed among the "elite three" at the Meruem Magic Academy and had turned down one of the highest-paying roles working for the kingdom to diligently pursue knowledge in Freida. According to her, that was a Quinary Magic spell.

Quinary Magic was the kind of thing you heard about only in fairy tales. It was said that in the "Age of Dawn," back when the gods had first created their kin, including humans, a mage had vanquished the last of the powerful monsters known as "Apocalypse Beasts" using legendary Quinary Magic.

"I can't believe it... I've never seen such powerful magic in my life. It's not just the element, the amount of mana used is also incomparable," said Mimir Triss.

"It's *that* incredible?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And you haven't even seen it in the Academy?"

"No... Even the instructors who've earned the title of 'Master Mage' could use up to Tertiary Magic at best, and only those who are exceptionally gifted could hope to learn Quaternary Magic. Magic capable of not only defeating the hardy Four-Armed Goat but also obliterating it in one shot is unheard of," she said, curling up and cradling herself.

She'd been like this ever since we'd defeated the Four-Armed Goat. Seeing Quinary Magic for the first time must have been a huge shock for her. We'd

returned to the main hall, but she was still trembling slightly. My friend had even checked on her out of worry multiple times, though he seemed to have misinterpreted why she was so shaken.

“So, what do you think of him?” I asked my teammates when we gathered around a table in the main hall.

“What is there to say? I’m sure we’re all thinking the same thing,” said Reverie.

“Yup,” said Oriland. “There’s not much to say other than he’s a ridiculously powerful mage. I wouldn’t want someone with his talents taken by another team.”

“Yeah, after seeing what he’s capable of today, I thought the same thing,” agreed Reverie, then she looked at me as if she’d realized something. “Wait, why were you so interested in him in the first place? It doesn’t sound like you wanted him to join us just because he’s so good at magic.”

“Oh, well, he drew my attention at first because I thought he could keep us in check,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You three might not know this, but he’s barely ever gotten injured throughout all his dives. Most Divers will pick up a few serious injuries if they keep heading into the dungeon for half a year, so that’s saying something.”

“So what, he doesn’t take any risks?”

“He’s very cautious. I’m pretty careful myself, but Kudo seems to be, well, kind of a coward by nature.”

“A coward? But he took out those Hypno Eyes and Blood Bats without so much as breaking a sweat,” pointed out Reverie.

“He’s just gotten used to those monsters because he’s learned how to deal with them and they’re from a familiar floor. Remember when I suggested we take on the Four-Armed Goat? He was just as opposed to the idea as you and Oriland,” I replied.

Thinking back, he’d kept going on about how we’d been underprepared and

how much it'd wear us down. He'd wanted to back down despite having the means to defeat it in one shot. He'd wanted nothing short of a perfect victory.

"His Quinary Magic was powerful, sure, but think about it," I went on. "In the Yellow Wall Vestiges, he barely used magic until we got to the destination because he had tricks for distracting monsters and avoiding them altogether by working around their patrol routes. It goes to show just how much planning goes into his dives and that he has the ability to pull them off without relying on magic. His plans were centered around hunting Blood Bats this time, but I'm sure he has a bunch of others up his sleeve."

"So you were impressed by those traits of his and not his Quinary Magic," noted Oriland.

"Of course," I said. "You can always find powerful magic casters if you look hard enough. You all knew that's not my priority from the time I recruited Mimir."

"That's true..."

Although Mimir was a prodigy, she lacked firepower compared to other mages, making her ill-suited for fighting monsters. She hadn't specialized in combat spells at the academy, but when it came to dungeon diving, the flexibility to adapt to situations was far more important than raw firepower. Not to mention, Mimir had the guts to push forward when needed, which was rare for a mage. There were a million ways to make up for a lack of firepower. What I prioritized above all was one's disposition as a Diver, and she was a perfect fit for my team.

"It's his eyes," I said. "Did you notice that the look in his eyes changes whenever he's in combat?"

"Yes. They were the eyes of a fighter," said Mimir.

"He just seemed like a little softie at first, but I have to agree," said Reverie.

"It did seem a bit uncharacteristic of him," commented Oriland.

He was right. Kudo had said it was all because he'd gotten used to fighting, but if he really was a coward, it was unlikely that he'd be able to act like he had. He didn't seem to be pretending, so there must be something deep inside him

that gave him the resolve to fight.

“So, what do you all think of him joining the team?” I asked.

“I’m fine with it,” said Reverie.

“Yes, I’d love for him to join,” said Mimir.

“No problem. In fact, it’d be a huge loss for us if he doesn’t,” said Oriland.

Everyone agreed.

The most difficult thing to acquire in dungeons wasn’t ingredients but capable talents. It was crucial for Kudo Akira to join us if we were to become the top-ranking team.

Epilogue: Alas, I've Been Kidnapped!

As I was taking a stroll through Freida, an ominous feeling befell me. It was hard to describe, like a mixture of a tingle in the back of my neck and a shudder down my spine. My instincts proved correct moments later as I heard a voice out of nowhere. I'd already started to run, but it was too late.

"Hey, Kudo."

"Huh, I must be hearing things. I heard a voice, but there's no one around..." I said out loud.

"You never change, do you?" said the voice with mild annoyance, but I'd decided to keep pretending it was some sort of auditory hallucination and get the heck out of there.

"Ugh, maybe this is a side effect of too much dungeon diving..."

"All right, that's enough. Don't make me squeeze your *bleep*," said the voice.

"Eek! Please don't, Sensei!"

The threat was enough to shatter my resolve immediately. Just the thought of it made me shudder. The pain would be unbearable, and any man would probably agree.

Before me appeared a demon—I mean, Sensei. She was enshrouded in a black haze and what looked like black bands, so I had no idea what she actually looked like.

"Sensei...what is it this time?" I asked.

"Oh, I just felt like picking on—I mean, I need to go somewhere to get some more core stones," she said.

"Hey, I heard that! You want to pick on me?!"

"Come with me," she said, but I didn't want to deal with her bullying.

She pressed her body against mine—but that only made me happy. Heh heh

heh.

Still, I had to turn her down.

“Actually, I have plans today. I kind of need to go home right now,” I said.

“What plans?” she asked.

Her question caught me off guard, and I was at a loss for words. I wished I could just bullshit my way through situations like this, but my mind was completely blank.

“Come on now. You couldn’t think of a single excuse?” she said as if she was disappointed with a child.

“Well, you know, I’m just an honest person,” I said.

“Sure you are. Didn’t you just lie about having plans?”

“Uh... So! Where are you going?” I said.

“Real smooth,” she said sarcastically.

“Just forget about that! Where do you want to go?” I said loudly in an attempt to change the subject.

Then she moved closer. “Somewhere nice,” she whispered into my ear.



That sounded, well, nice.

“Oh? But I don’t know if I’m ready for that kind of place... Heh heh.”

“You think so? Well, maybe you’re right,” she said.

“Yes, but if you insist, I wouldn’t mind—”

“Okay then, it’s settled. Let’s go.”

“So, where is this place exactly? The west side of town where there are a bunch of those establishments?” I asked.

“Huh? What are you talking about? The dungeon, of course.”

“I see. Well, I’ll be seeing you,” I said and spun on my heels immediately.

That wasn’t what I’d had in mind when I’d heard “somewhere nice.” Of course I wanted to go home.

But as I tried to leave, Sensei’s black bands ensnared my body.

“Mmf!”

“Hey now, didn’t we just agree to go?” asked Sensei.

“Bwah! You tricked me, Sensei! Of course I’d think it’s that kind of place when you say it’s ‘somewhere nice’!” I complained.

“Maybe, but why would you think a woman would invite you to a place like that unless she worked there? And why would we go there together? You didn’t put a lot of thought into this, did you?”

“You’re not wrong, but...nooo!”

I’d resisted as much as I could, but it was no use. There was no way for me to escape from Sensei at my level. *Pain.*

“Today, I want Zant Bear core stones,” said Sensei.

“Zant Bear? I’ve never heard of that one. Which depth level and floor is it on?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s not far at all. It’s in the area right after the Forest.”

“What? Do you mean the Great Forest Ruins? I’ve never heard of a monster

with that name on the following floor.”

“Didn’t think so. Anyway, just come with me. It’ll be fun,” she said.

“I don’t know...” I said, but I let her drag me along.

It *did* sound kind of fun. Maybe she was going to take me to someplace I’d never been before—and that was how I ended up in the Paradise Hot Springs with Sensei.

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. This is Hitsuji Gamei. If we haven't spoken before, it's nice to meet you!

Thank you so much for your interest in *After-School Dungeon Diver: Level Grinding in Another World* volume 2.

I never imagined this series I've been writing as a hobby would end up being published. As the author, I'm very surprised!

It was even made into a manga! Abi is handling the manga version, and it's mainly available through Niconico Manga and ComicWalker (Dra Dra Flat ㇏). Please check them out!

Anyway, the second volume of *After-School Dungeon Diver* has been moving along at an easygoing pace. Unlike the original web version, the published version has additional stories such as the time when Scrael goes to Japan and when Akira goes on an adventure(?) with Eldrid. They also eat food, eat food, and eat food... (That's all they do.) At the climax, Akira goes on an actual adventure. He usually goes into the dungeon solo, but there's some fun content in this volume about him learning from a super-high-ranking team and showing off his own diving style. At least, I *hope* it's fun!

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank GCN Bunko, my editor K, the illustrator Karei, Ouraidou K. K., and all of the readers who have been supporting me.

Bonus Short Story

Sightseeing in Freida with Scrael

After school today, I teleported to Freida, looking forward to adventuring without a care in the world. I approached the Divers Guild and quickly tried to make my way inside without crossing the “recruitment war zone.” There, I felt someone tug on my sleeve from behind.

“Hmm? Who’s that?” I wondered aloud as I turned around, and there stood the silver-haired Long-Ears girl, Scrael. “Oh, hi, Scrael.”

“Mm. You free right now, Akira?” she asked.

“Actually, I am. What’s up?” I said.

My answer was obvious. If I was here, it pretty much meant I didn’t have anything better to do. In fact, I wouldn’t even be able to visit Freida if I was busy.

“I’m going into town. I won’t mind going with you if you insist,” she said in her usual way.

“Sure, let’s go.” I agreed.

“Okay.”

We then spun on our heels and headed back toward the city.

Whenever Scrael invited me somewhere, she always did it in this roundabout way. Why was that? Maybe she didn’t know how to be honest with her feelings; or maybe she was a tsundere, but she didn’t act cold enough to be considered one and was quick to accept whenever I agreed to go with her. I wasn’t sure. She was a real enigma.

“So, why are we going into town?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Because you showed me around your world last time,” she replied.

“I see, so now you’re returning the favor.”

Scrael nodded. “I don’t know this place well enough to be your guide, but I think it’ll be fun walking around and checking places out.”

“True. I haven’t spent a lot of time exploring it either, so this will be a good opportunity,” I agreed.

We first arrived at a street stall in front of the Divers Guild. On display were oddly shaped dolls, strange toys, and mysterious vegetables and fruits. Yeah, I didn’t really understand things from this world, and Scrael probably had thought the same thing when she’d visited Japan. The general household goods here seemed to be the same as what I was used to. They also had a wide variety of brushes for Tails, oils for Beast-Heads, and what I assumed were other species-specific necessities.

“Are there items like these for Long-Ears?” I asked.

“Not really,” Scrael said. “Though I guess we use earrings, if that counts.”

“I see you’re wearing those fluffy black ones yourself,” I pointed out.

“Everyone has them in my village. They’re made out of Triple-Headed Wolf fur.”

“Don’t see those in the dungeon. What kind of monster are they?”

“Wolf monsters with three heads. The three heads can spit out fire, poison, and ice respectively,” she explained.

“What kind of terrible monster is that?!”

“They’re nothing to be scared of. You can take them on easily.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about that. I’d have to see one for myself. Monsters that spit things from their mouths are usually pretty strong,” I said, my cowardly nature on full display.

“You know, I think it’s okay for you to be more arrogant,” said Scrael with a reproachful look.

“But that’s not really me,” I said. “Can you imagine me being cocky?”

“No. You’re right. That would be weird,” Scrael agreed.

“Ugh...”

I mean, it was true, but it didn't feel good being told it'd be weird.

Anyway, the stores along the street all carried similar items, so we decided to take a shortcut through the back alley. Then, Scrael found a peculiar stall that looked like an ordinary food stall. A fragrant smell wafted from it, but I couldn't tell what they were selling. Something didn't feel right.

“That's a back-alley specialty,” explained Scrael.

“Oh, I didn't know that's a thing. What kind of food is it?”

“Whole roasted Giant Rats.”

“Pfft!” I spat, completely caught off guard.

“What's wrong?” asked Scrael.

“They're *rats*! Can you really eat them without getting food poisoning or something?”

“They're better than the mystery meat in the dining hall. You can pretty much eat anything if you cook it well enough,” said Scrael.

“People in this world are wild...”

I'd seen on the internet that there was a crazy dish called “Three Squeaks” in a certain country called China. You never know what to expect when it came to food in other cultures.

I looked at the stall and found giant rats on metal skewers, roasted golden brown. Seeing their big, round ears, I couldn't help but be reminded of a certain mascot from a dreamland who shall not be named. *Ha ha!*

“Have you eaten those before, Scrae?” I asked.

“No,” she replied.

“Do you...plan on eating them sometime?”

“No. They don't look good. I'll pass.”

Scrael wasn't having it. She was pretty peculiar when it came to food, after all.

“If you want food, we should get something on the main street. You're mostly

going to find weird stuff in the back alleys,” said Scrael.

“Right.”

I was usually pretty careful whenever I went this way—that is, I usually kept an eye out for a demon I called Sensei. The kind of people who hung out in the back alleys were aggressive in general, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to attack and rob others on sight. But lately, no one really bothered me when I walked through here, maybe because I’d indiscriminately shot lightning at everyone. You had to get ‘em before they got you.

“Akira, you shouldn’t attack strangers with magic on sight,” said Scrael, her eyes narrowed at me with that reproachful look.

Behind her was a person on the ground, white smoke rising from their electrocuted body.

“Huh? Oh!” *Crap. Did I do that without even thinking?* “Well, I just can’t help it when I come here, you know? I mean, doesn’t everyone attack you whenever you walk through here?” I asked.

“That doesn’t happen all that often,” she said.

“But it happens to me every time,” I said.

“You do seem like an easy prey. But you’re a mage. You’re basically baiting people into attacking you. I feel sorry for them.”

“I mean, wouldn’t it be their fault for attacking me in the first place?” I asked.

“And you’re so callous about it too.”

“That’s not true. I may be a coward, but I’m known for being a kind person.”

“And a weird person,” added Scrael.

“That’s mean.”

We continued chatting as we exited the back alley and returned to the main streets.

To be continued?



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

After-School Dungeon Diver: Level Grinding in Another World Volume 2

by Hitsuji Gamei

Translated by Hiroya Watanabe Edited by N@TSUKI

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Hitsuji Gamei Illustrations © 2022 Karei

Cover illustration by Karei

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

This English edition is published by arrangement with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: June 2024

Premium E-Book for F Ragna.hztkdti