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The  
Weakest  
Mage in  
class

Story  
Isle Osaki

Art  
Tam-U

**Full Clearing**  
**Another World**  
under a  
**GODDESS**  
with **Zero Believers**





1 The Weakest Mage in Class

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# Prologue: The Story of a Game Aficionado

I like role-playing games.

I can't give a solid explanation as to why, though. I just do.

When I turned five, my birthday presents were some video games and a console to play them on. I think the first game that I played was a famous side-scrolling platformer. I tried out some others, but the one that captivated me the most was a role-playing game.

My favorite game was about a hero on a quest to save the world. And the best thing about it? The fact that the hero didn't talk at all.

Every conversation could be settled with a "Yes" or "No" every now and then. It was the perfect game for someone as bad at making conversation as I was. My only question was this: why did the hero have cute girls like the mage or the priest in his party? How'd he even meet them?

It all remains a mystery.

Since both of my parents worked, we didn't talk much. They always came home late. I was an only child, so there was nobody at home to speak with. My dinner was always junk food. But of course, I love junk food, so that was fine by me.

Bad for my health? Don't care. I barely ever got home cooking anyway.

As a shy kid who was short on friends, video games were the one thing that put my heart at ease. Enter a fantasy world, swing a sword, shoot some magic, slay some monsters, save some princesses, and—poof—you're a hero! Even clichéd plots like that sound way better than boring ol' reality, don't they?

If I could have one wish, it would be to stumble into one of those fantasy worlds, become a hero, and live out the rest of my days there.

Of course, I grew out of that silly dream back in grade school. But, you know, if I *could* go to another world, I still would. In my defense...

“Greetings, Makoto. Will you become my believer?”

There was a goddess of absolutely divine beauty floating right in front of me.

Listen, I was surprised. I mean, a goddess? Coming to *me*? I was still only an apprentice mage after a whole year of training. And yet, here we were.

“I have high hopes for you, Makoto.”

High hopes. Nobody, not even my parents or my teachers, had ever said that to me.

“Fine by me, goddess lady.”

My difficulty might be locked to Super Hard, but I’ll show you what a game junkie can do! Ya hear that, fantasy world? I’m gonna give you the 100% clear, so get your best ending ready for me.



# Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Stumbles into Another World

“Is everyone okay? Put on your jackets to keep your temperature up.”

“Ooh! It’s cold...”

“I can’t go on like this.”

“Teacher, will we really make it home?”

“Shit, where’s that rescue squad?!”

Our teacher, Mr. Satou, was patrolling up and down the dimly lit bus trying to keep the class’s spirits up. The voices he heard in passing were feeble and forlorn.

How did it come to this?

Eastern Shinagawa Public High School’s Class 1-A had been traveling back from a ski camp when we’d suddenly found ourselves engulfed in a blizzard. If that wasn’t unlucky enough, an earthquake had rumbled through at the exact same time.

The avalanche triggered by the earthquake had pushed our bus clean off the cliff. Though the bus had stopped moving, it was now buried under snow and completely inoperable. Even our heater had stopped functioning, which had left us defenseless against the freezing wind that poured in through the shattered windows.

Over two hours had already passed since we’d gotten buried under the snow. The teacher had called for help as soon as the accident happened, but emergencies had erupted all throughout the area, so the rescue squads were overwhelmed. They couldn’t send out a helicopter in a blizzard either.

*Is this...the end?*

No one said it out loud, but it had begun to dawn on me and my classmates—

this really might be the end.

“My esteemed Tackie,” said my friend Fujiyan from the seat beside me. “Are you really playing video games now, of all times?”

“If I’m gonna go out,” I responded, “I wanna go out playing a game.”

“Your eyes are transfixed on the proverbial prize. As per usual.”

“Is this my usual?” I didn’t take my gaze from the screen for a second while I spoke with Fujiyan.

It was cold. So cold that my thumbs couldn’t move the way I wanted them to.

“Oh come *on*, Takatsuki, don’t jinx us!” The girl in the aisle seat next to me sounded pretty concerned. This voice was Sasaki’s. I glanced over and saw that she was shivering from the cold.

“I’m kidding, Sasa. It’s just boring since we’re not doing anything,” I stated.

“Indubitably,” remarked Fujiyan. “Merely sitting still is most arduous.”

I looked over to my friend and saw him playing a waifu game on his smartphone.

“See, Fujiyan? You’re playing a game too.”

“Correction, compatriot,” replied Fujiyan with gusto. “I am simply experiencing my most treasured scenes once again. Incontrovertibly, Kanon here is the most adorable character of them all.”

His screen displayed a smiling girl with cat ears and sparkly eyes.

“Bleh!” exclaimed Sasaki in a clearly creeped-out tone.

“Might I inquire as to why you find Tackie’s game acceptable and mine repulsive?”

“Let it go, Fujiyan,” I said. “It’s a world that girls just don’t understand.”

“You guys. Listen,” said Sasaki in exasperation. “We’re *stranded*. Would it kill you to have a sense of urgency here?”

“C’mon, Sasa, you want to play games too, don’t you?” Sasaki was secretly a gamer, which is why we’d become friends; I’d be way too shy to talk to a girl

otherwise!

“H-Hey, Takatsuki!” she stuttered.

“No point hiding it now, right?”

“My widdle Kanon, how cyoot you are...” panted Fujiyan.

Fujiyan, on the other hand, should probably hide it a *little*.

“You really like those cat ears, huh?”

“Heavens, no!” exclaimed Fujiyan. “I am by no means limited to cat ears. All manner of animal ears are valid objects of my worship!”

“Philosophical stuff,” I said. I didn’t really get it, but more power to him, I guess.

“Jeez, you two always talk about the dumbest things.” Sasa laughed at us. Well, to be fair, it *was* a dumb discussion.

I returned my full focus to the screen of my handheld (I was playing the whole time, of course) and noticed that about a quarter of the battery’s life had drained. After doing some math comparing the percentage remaining against how far I’d gotten in the game, I figured that I should just barely beat it.

The game I was playing was an action RPG that I’d been addicted to lately. It was a dark fantasy story about a protagonist fighting for revenge against a demon who’d destroyed his village.

His job? Hero. But defeating his nemesis opens the gates to the world of darkness, enabling the arrival of the greatest evil of all—the Demon Lord. Once our protagonist defeats the giant dragon, the witch whose magic controls death, and the Fallen Hero, the last dungeon appears. And then, the Demon Lord is revealed as the final boss. Yeah, I’ve seen that cutscene hundreds of times by now.

I double-checked my play time. Yep, should be just enough.

The Demon Lord has incredibly high defense, so you can’t damage him with normal attacks. Instead, the player has to counter him when he uses a specific attack of his own. I’ve practiced the timing for the counter more times than I can count—at this point, I could pull it off with my eyes closed. I continued to



efficiently chip down the Demon Lord's HP bar before felling him in one final strike.

"Beat it..." I murmured.

That game time was a personal best. Too bad I couldn't upload it to the internet.

With his revenge taken, the protagonist on screen advanced toward the Demon Lord's throne, and then vanished inside. Since I was trying to clear the game as quickly as possible, I got the normal ending.

In the end, peace returned to the game's world, but not a soul knew what became of the man who'd defeated the Demon Lord. Saving the world without anyone celebrating your heroics—that's truly the way of the lone wolf.

Incidentally, my favorite ending was the one where the protagonist transforms into the Demon Lord himself. Hmm, I kinda wanted to see that one again.

I glanced around my surroundings and noticed that my talkative classmates had quieted down. I wondered what had happened before a wave of drowsiness suddenly came over me.

"Fujiyan?" I asked my friend sitting beside me. No response. He was sleeping like the dead.

Wait—no way...

On my other side, Sasaki's face was hanging too low for me to see. Even so, I could tell that she wasn't moving a muscle.

"Sasa? Hey, Aya Sasaki?" Still no response. The screen on my console was blank. Its batteries had died as the credits rolled.

*I'm so sleepy...*

Guess my time was just about up. It was such a short life... Oh well.

*If I get born again, please, make me a hero.*

With that foolish thought in my head, I closed my eyes and let my consciousness drift far away.



And then, I woke up.

“Where am I?” I asked groggily. From what I could see, I wasn’t in that bus anymore.

“Uh... Doesn’t look like a hospital...”

The ceiling and walls weren’t made out of concrete, but stone. Or maybe marble? I found myself lying on top of a plain, hard bed while covered by a thin blanket. There was a slight draft that made me wonder if a window was open. It was kinda chilly.

I couldn’t say for sure that the afterlife *didn’t* have temperature, but somehow, I got the feeling I was still alive.

I could see a large window a little further away. It was bright outside.

“Noon...already?” We’d left the ski camp at nighttime, so I must’ve been asleep for at least half a day. “But c’mon, you can’t just abandon exhausted people stuck on a mountain like that...”

I grumbled to myself as I walked over to the window. I wanted to look outside.

Until that moment, my half-asleep brain had figured that I’d been rescued. At most, I thought that I’d woken up in a pretty weird place. But when I reached the window and stared outside, the scenery I saw took my breath away.

“...Huh?”

Before my eyes was a forest of deep green unlike anything that belonged in Japan. There was a vast lake set before an extensive mountain range that looked like the Alps. Above the water’s surface flew a mysterious bird that soared gracefully using rainbow-colored wings. A creature that looked similar to a dinosaur was drinking water by the shore. There was also a building with several horse-drawn carriages stopped in front of it—several of the coachmen possessed heads like those of a lizard’s or a dog’s.

“Beastmen?” Well, that was strange.

Another carriage was being driven by a bird that was larger than an ostrich.

And over there was a big, lizard-looking creature. “I-Is this a Hollywood movie?”

“All right, everyone,” a voice rang out. “Open fire!”

“Fire Arrow!” shouted four others in unison.

I looked down and saw a field that looked like a training ground. A bunch of kids were lined up in a row. They wore robe-like clothes, and all shot arrows made of fire from their hands at the same time.

The flaming projectiles hit their marks and exploded. I saw the embers fly in all directions before the smoke trailed up to my nostrils.

The odor of charred wood brought me back to my senses. This really wasn’t a dream...?

“...Oh.” It suddenly dawned on me. I knew what this was. It was that thing I’d seen in manga and anime.

I was in another world.

*I should probably start by finding someone who knows what’s going on, I thought.*

With unsteady footsteps, I headed out the door. The corridor was dimly lit, but I heard the sounds of what I assumed were people’s voices from far away. Maybe coming from a lower floor? I slowly made my way down the stone steps and opened a crookedly constructed door. It led to a wide-open room, where I spotted the faces of quite a few classmates I knew.

*Phew, I thought. I’m not alone.*

“Oh hey, Takatsuki. Finally up?”

“Y-Yep...” While I was mulling over who exactly to talk to, someone else talked to me first. My classmate Kitayama? He was a bit of a delinquent, but he could be friendly with anyone.

Then, I heard another familiar voice. “My esteemed Tackie! Are you feeling well?”

“Thank goodness. Glad to see you’re all right, Fujiyan.”

“I fretted most fervently,” he said. “You slumbered for half a day longer than

the rest of us, might I add.”

“Did I really sleep that long?”

“Sure did,” Kitayama chimed in with glee. “People were talkin’ like you might not ever wake up, ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha...” I didn’t find that quite as funny. “So, uh, what’s everyone doing here?”

“Yo! You ain’t gonna believe it,” said Kitayama. “This place? It’s another world! Sick, right?”

Ah, figures. I knew I wasn’t in Japan anymore from the scenery.

But...another world?

I started to feel my back getting sweaty, but the cheerful Kitayama gave me some forceful pats on the shoulder without regard for my comfort. There sure are a lot of delinquents who speak with body language? The smacking kinda hurt, though.

“The establishment we find ourselves in is called the Water Temple,” explained Fujiyan. “We appear to have been cared for after we all faded from consciousness.”

“Huh, the Water Temple.” The decor did look pretty temple-esque.

“Now that you’re up,” said Kitayama as he chummily wrapped his arm around my shoulder, “we gotta go ask about your stats and skills, my man!”

“Stats? Skills?”

“Curiously enough, we all seem to have gained mysterious powers when coming to this world,” explained Fujiyan. “I possess the skills *Storage (Ultra Rank)* and *Appraisal (Ultra Rank)*.”

“And I got *Dragoon (High Rank)*, *Lancer (High Rank)*, and *Lightfoot!*” added Kitayama.

“Uh, neat.” All of this was kind of a lot for me to take in, but I guess it sounded impressive.

“The room in that direction,” said Fujiyan, pointing to a large door in the back,

“will inform you of the skills and statistics you’ve been granted.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. “I’ll check it out. Also, was I the last one to wake up?”

Fujiyan and Kitayama went silent for a moment.

“Y’see,” started Kitayama, “it’s not like everyone in our class made it here. The rest, well...”

“What about them?” The two looked and sounded really grim. Why?

“According to my calculations, not all of our classmates are present and accounted for...” Fujiyan trailed off.

“What?” After taking a second look, I noticed that only about two-thirds of our class was here. I might not have had a lot of friends, but I could at least remember the faces of people I’d spent the past year with.

Ah well. I would’ve liked it if everyone could’ve been safe. Which reminded me...

“Fujiyan, where’s Sasaki?”

“M’lady Sasaki appears to be absent...” Fujiyan trailed off.

“Wha...?” I exclaimed. “You’re kidding me, right?”

She’d been sitting right next to me on that bus. Heck, we’d even been talking until just a moment ago. I figured she had to be all right—but I couldn’t find her anywhere.

“I...see...”

What was the last thing we’d talked about? The catgirl thing?

So that’s how it ended, huh? Wish I could’ve sent her off with something better than that.

*My bad, Sasa.*

“Don’t let it get to ya,” comforted Kitayama as he placed a hand on my shoulder. “We’re just the lucky ones. I got some friends who ain’t here either.”

Like Fujiyan, he looked pained. Well, he did have plenty of friends. He was probably straining himself to act cheery.



“Being spared is all well and good,” commented Fujiyan, “but I’m afraid it might be too early to celebrate.”

“What? Why? Weren’t we just rescued?” I asked.

“While this facility does indeed provide a safe haven for those with nowhere else to call home, they fully expect us to become independent in due time.” He continued: “And of course, this is a fantasy world teeming with ferocious monsters, so mastering one’s skills is essential.”

Aw, really? Well, it figures that the Water Temple wouldn’t take care of us forever. You know, financial reasons and all. For now at least, we could breathe a sigh of relief that we were rescued. It looked like we all still had plenty of work ahead of us, though.

We also didn’t know if there was a way home from this world. That stuff about monsters caught my ear, but I didn’t know much about these skills or stats. I had to know one thing before anything else, though.

“Can they understand us?” I asked.

“Therein lies the wonder of this temple!” responded Fujiyan. “A spell that automatically translates their speech has been cast within these walls.”

“Oh, automatic translation. That’s pretty useful.”

“Yep, and that’s why they carry people from other worlds over to the temple.”

Yeah, that makes sense. It’s hard to have a conversation when whatever you say is all Greek to them. Or, well, whatever language they speak.

But automatic translation? This world’s got some nice tech!

“However, we must study the local language before our departure from the temple,” added Fujiyan.

“Ahh, yeah, figures.” Life’s never that easy. As we wrapped up our conversation, we reached a large door.

“One’s skills are considered private information,” explained Fujiyan, “so they’ve been informing each of us one at a time.”

“Takatsuki, my man,” said Kitayama as he grinned and patted my shoulder. “You gotta tell us what kinda skills you got later.”

“Sure,” I replied. “See you in a bit.”

I knocked on the door and entered the room.

“Pardon me.”

Inside the room, I found a pudgy man who looked like a priest. He was sitting in front of a large desk next to a thin, beautiful woman dressed like a nun.

The ol’ smiling priest with an enigmatic nun, huh?

“Hello, visitor from another world. I am the priest of this temple. May I ask how you’re feeling?”

“Hello, my name is Takatsuki. I’m feeling...okay, I think.”

“Is that so?” asked the priest. “Well, if you have any aches or pains, please tell us at once. Incidentally, did you hear anything about this place from your friends out there?”

“Just a little.”

“Ah, yes, very well. Allow me to explain. This may come as a shock to you, but this world is a different one from the world you previously inhabited. You must be anxious about being unable to see your family, but rest assured, we will look after you for up to a year, all for free, until you become independent.”

Pretty much what Fujiyan just told me.

“So, uh, we can’t go back to our old world?” I didn’t think it was that weird a question, but the priest’s expression grew grim.

“So, I take it you weren’t told about that part,” the priest said. “Takatsuki, you were on the brink of death just before coming to this world, were you not?”

“Uh, yeah. I was. I was stranded on a mountain.”

“That you were, my boy,” agreed the priest. “The same can surely be said about all your friends here—the usual requirement for coming to this world is to die in your previous one!”

“What?” *Whoa, for real? Did that mean I was dead?*

“But worry not,” said the priest. He gave me a smile after seeing the shock on my face. “Our Holy Goddess is a gracious one. Before you all tragically died young, she teleported everyone to this world!”

The priest made a melodramatic pose. It seemed kinda rehearsed.

“H-Huh. So, uh, that’s how it is.” Which basically meant that I was not, in fact, dead.

“Incidentally,” continued the priest with a smile, “returning to your original world will result in your death. You would surely find that most inconvenient.”

“Uh, oh, yeah. Totally.” I couldn’t find any words besides those.

“Now then,” said the priest as he changed the subject, “let’s get back to a more productive topic and talk about how you’ll live from here. Surely you’ve heard about skills, correct?”

“Uh, I heard a little bit from my friends,” I responded. “I don’t know the details, though.”

“Perfectly fine. Now then, I shall tell you about your new abilities. Upon coming to this world, you’ve surely been granted unique skills and accompanying stats. For example, the ‘Mage’ and ‘Swordfighter’ skills are quite famous. It is no exaggeration to say that the ranks of your skills determine the path your life will take!”

“Sounds important.” Fujiyan and Kitayama had said that skills were a big deal too.

“Now for your stats. Otherworlders tend to have stats that are far above the average!”

“W-We do?” I asked.

“Why, yes. Compared to average people like us, your stats can be over ten times that of ours!” exclaimed the priest.

News to me.

“So, what are *my* abilities looking like?”

“Well, aren’t you an eager one? We’ll look that up right now.” The priest turned to the nun. “Sister, if you’d please.”

“Yes, Head Priest.” The nun who’d been silent until now handed the priest a sheet of paper.

“This is an item known as the Soul Book,” stated the priest. “It will determine what your stats and skills are.”

“Uh, wow,” I gulped. They really brought out something serious.

“Now, now, don’t be nervous,” the priest assured. “Simply stand before this statue of the Goddess and offer a prayer.”

“Okay.” I walked in front of it and did my best prayer pose. *Was that good enough?*

“I must admit, I’m rather excited,” said the priest. “All the otherworlders so far have been blessed with fantastic abilities.”

I had to wonder whether things would really go so smoothly. The priest’s hopes sure seemed high.

Before long, my body became wrapped in a faint light. Suddenly, the surface of the priest’s sheet of paper let out a flash.

“Your stats and skills have been determined,” said the priest sternly. The suspense was killing me.

“Your unique skills are *Calm Mind*, *Water Magic (Low Rank)*, and...the last one written is *RPG Player*.” Sweet, a magic skill! Bummer that it’s low rank. That last one had a weird name, though.

“Are my skills strong?” I asked.

“Well, uh, that last one is new to me, but the rest are fairly average,” said the priest.

Aww, just average.

“As for your stats...” The priest looked dismayed. He then showed the paper to the nun. “Are you sure there’s no mistake here?”

“There shouldn’t be,” she said. “What is the matter?”

“Look here. This number’s a bit...”

After skimming over the Soul Book, the nun also looked dismayed.

“Well, it’s true that these values are low when compared with the others, but when you compare them to ours, they’re...still pretty low, huh.”

Was I missing something?

“Er, is there a problem with my stats?” I asked.

“No, no, nothing of the sort!” assured the priest. “Now, Takatsuki, your stats may be a tad...lacking, but it’s nothing to be worried about!”

The priest was smiling like always, but it definitely looked a bit more forced than it had been. Guess it wasn’t what he’d hoped for. It kinda hurt to see him be so obvious about it, though.

“Now then,” the priest asked the nun, “can I ask you to explain the rest?”

“Very well, Head Priest.” The nun bowed her head.

“Anyway, Takatsuki, my boy, good luck. You’ll need it.” With those parting words, the head priest walked briskly out the door, leaving just me and the nun in the room.

“Takatsuki, I will now explain about the Soul Book,” she began. “Please, take a look here.”

I read over the pages I was given and saw my name and age. It also listed the skills I was told about, as well as stats like Strength, Stamina, and Magic. I couldn’t really tell much about my stats just from the numbers alone.

But there was one entry that really raised an eyebrow.

Lifespan: 10 years, 0 days.

*Huh?! Uh, wh-what am I looking at here?!*

“So, um. What is this, uh, ‘lifespan’ thing?” Was I going to die in ten years? Nah, couldn’t be. Surely they just had a, uh, dark sense of humor.

“Allow me to explain. In our world, your Soul Book will inform you of how



long your lifespan will be.”

“Th-Then why is my lifespan a measly ten years?!” I was fifteen, so did that mean I’d die at twenty-five?

“Ten years is the amount of time given to all otherworlders.”

“It is? Really?” That meant Fujiyan, Kitayama, and everyone else had ten years too. I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about it all, but hearing that everyone else got the same number calmed me down a bit. Even if it was still way too short.

“Your lifespan can be extended by offering reverence points to the Holy Goddess.”

“Wait, you can extend it?” I asked.

“Yes, you can,” said the nun.

O-Oh. That was a bit of a relief. But I figured that I should ask for the details.

“So, how exactly do I show ‘reverence’ to this Holy Goddess?” I asked.

I had to know the specifics. Anything to dodge dying in ten years.

“There are many methods, but the quickest way is to donate to the church.”

*Donate?* I thought. *Does she mean...*

“M-Monetary donations?”

“Yes, monetary,” she clarified.

“So you can buy a longer life with money?” I asked again.

“Yes, you can.”

Wow. You can just do that, huh? I guess fantasy worlds just operate however they feel like.

“But keep in mind,” the nun continued, “the more years you wish to extend your life by, the more massive the price becomes. Since you possess none of this world’s currency, this method might be rather impractical for you.”

True, there wasn’t much I could say there to argue.

“Fair enough,” I conceded. “What other methods are there?”

“The second method involves defeating monsters who threaten humans or saving people in times of crisis.”

“Ah, makes sense.” This one seemed simple enough. Just help the needy. “So helping people is what my skills are for, right?”

“Yes, exactly. Now then, allow me to explain your three unique skills: *Calm Mind*, *Water Magic (Low Rank)*, and *RPG Player*.”

“What kind of skills are they?” I asked.

“The details of each skill are written in your Soul Book.”

I scanned the page and found what she must have meant.

*Calm Mind*: A skill that lets its user maintain composure. No matter how strong a monster you’re up against, you’ll keep your cool! Nice going!

*Water Magic (Low Rank)*: A skill that lets its user cast beginner water magic. Your low amount of mana means that your spells are gonna be low rank, but them’s the breaks! Good luck with training!

*RPG Player*: A skill that lets its user view from the perspective of someone playing an RPG. You can see in 360 degrees! This is a unique skill that’s exclusive to otherworlders, so you’re one lucky guy!

- Goddess of Fortune, Ira

Whoever wrote this got super into it! Were they drunk? Well, apparently *they* were the Goddess of Fortune. There were also some detailed warnings about using my skills. I’d read that later.

“I’ve got a basic idea of what my skills are,” I said. “So, what now?”

“All otherworlders such as yourself may undergo training here at the Water Temple for up to a year at no cost,” the nun explained with a stony face. “You can wait until then to decide what job would suit you best.”

“Uh, so, what job would you recommend for someone like me?”

The nun said nothing. Why was I getting the silent treatment?

“Here at the Water Temple, we offer training for a wide variety of jobs,” she said after a pause. “You’re free to try out all the courses you like and choose your job afterward.”

No recommendation? I guess there was nothing that my skill set made me suited for. Oh well. I could just try everything and think of it as an open-world RPG.

But man, I was starting off with some weak stats.

“Okay, I understand. Could you tell me how to take these courses?” I asked. “And what are the rules for living here?”

“You’ll find the answers written in this manual,” said the nun as she handed me a thick book. The words *Water Temple Manual (For Otherworlders)* were written on the cover. They were obviously prepared for this.

“Now then, if there’s anything else you’d like to know, please ask the nearest Temple staff for advice.” The nun declared this conversation over without any hint of a smile. An enigma to the end.

Fujiyan and Kitayama were waiting for me outside the door.

“What wonders were revealed to you, my esteemed Tackie?” inquired Fujiyan.

“Hmm, nothing too impressive,” I answered.

“Yo, Takatsuki, lemme see,” Kitayama said excitedly.

“Hey, wait!” Unfortunately, he had already swiped my Soul Book.

“Hold up, why’re your stats so low? Hmm. You’re right, nothin’ here looks too strong.” Kitayama suddenly lost all interest.

*You jerk!* I complained internally. *How are you gonna dunk on my results when I didn’t want you to see them in the first place?!*

Guess that meant my stats and skills really were pretty weak.

“Yep, you got some weird skills on account of you bein’ a total nerd. Good luck, though!” Kitayama gave me a firm pat on the shoulder. He was apparently trying to console me.

“Yo, guys, you gotta hear about Takatsuki’s skills!” And now he was blabbing about it to all of our classmates. Had he ever heard of privacy?

“Now, now, Kitayama, you mustn’t talk about others’ skills without their permission,” a nun warned him. Thank goodness.

“So, Fujiyan,” I asked while looking over my Soul Book, “what kind of skills are yours?”

“*Storage (Ultra Rank)* allows me to pack and unpack items at will. *Ultra Rank* means that my capacity for storage is rather large. *Appraisal (Ultra Rank)* allows me to verify the quality of the items I discover.”

“Neat.” That sounded convenient. But here, Fujiyan lowered his voice.

“I may not have mentioned it before, but I was granted one last skill.” He showed me his Soul Book.

“*Waifu Game Player?*” This name seemed kinda similar to one of my own skills. “What’s it do?”

“It allows me to read conversations I have with others as text. It even saves a chat backlog that I can refer to at any time.”

“Huh, I guess visual novels do work that way,” I said.

“I was told this skill was unique to otherworlders...but I dread the thought of anyone discovering its name!” admitted Fujiyan.

Yeah, I couldn’t blame him.

“It’s sorta like my *RPG Player* skill,” I mused. “Is this just the type of skill you get when you like video games?”

“I can’t say for certain, but neither of ours seem very suited to combat,” Fujiyan remarked. “Therefore, our humble compatriot shall master the path of the merchant.”

“Yeah, that sounds practical.” His skills seemed like they’d be well suited to

the job.

“You never know, my esteemed Tackie. You may find your skills to be quite powerful in practice!”

“I kinda doubt it.” Given how the priest and the nun reacted, I got the feeling that I’d drawn the short end of the stick.

How depressing...

Incidentally, I’d found out why the priest said otherworlders were so strong: otherworlders had wandered into this world in the past, and they’d all been blessed with crazy-high stats when they did. Guess he just compared us to them.

“Why am I the only otherworlder with such weak stats?” I later asked a nearby nun. All of my classmates were ten times as strong as anyone from this world. Meanwhile, I was three times weaker. Like, come on...

“Let me think,” said the nun, pausing a moment. “If I were to hazard a guess, it’d be because you were highly exhausted when you came to this world. Having the poorest physical condition of your friends might have affected your stats.”

“Was I that worn out?” I asked.

“Your pulse had stopped for a time. It was the magic of the clerics that brought you back to life.”

“Oh. My apologies for the trouble.” Things were more dire than I had realized. Maybe because I spent all my time gaming instead of exercising.

The nun suggested that I stay and study at the Water Temple for the time being. All of my classmates had more powerful skills than anything taught here, so they had a special class made just for them. Mine were far from that level, so I was stuck in the regular classes. It really took the wind out of my sails.

Was it just me, or was I playing on a broken difficulty level?

This fantasy world was turning out to be one dud of a game.

I breathed out a deep sigh.



“Hey, Takatsuki! Finally woken up, eh?”

A voice called out to me while I was thinking. Before my eyes was a suave playboy with a babe on each arm. A classmate, by the way.

Ryousuke Sakurai.

He was the center of attention in our class and the MVP of the soccer team. A man who never ran out of girlfriends. A life-haver to the core.

“Oh, Sakurai. Well, yeah, now. Thanks.”

“What a relief!” he said. “I was worried when I heard that you hadn’t opened your eyes.”

“Oh. Much appreciated.” To be honest, I didn’t gel with him. He was like my polar opposite.

“So, heard about your stats and skills yet?” he asked.

“Yeah, a bit.” I gave Sakurai and the girls a quick rundown of what I had. They told me their skills in return.

Sakurai had the *Hero of Light* skill. The two girls beside him had *Sage* and *Sacred Swordfighter*, respectively. Those names made it sound like they’d hit the jackpot.

“By the way, Takatsuki, want to join our party?” asked Sakurai suddenly.

“Huh?” Where was this coming from?

“Uh, do you *really* mean Takatsuki?” asked Eri Kawamoto, one of the girls next to him.

“Wouldn’t he be better off in a *different* party?” asked the other girl, Saki Yokoyama. These two were in the running for the prettiest girls in class.

“We’re planning to start our journey tomorrow, so we’re asking everyone we can,” clarified Sakurai.

“Tomorrow? Isn’t that a little soon?” Wasn’t everyone going to take the training here?

“Ryousuke here’s the *Hero of Light*, so he doesn’t *need* training!” bragged Kawamoto.

“Yeah, he’s already been nominated for captain of the Highland Knights!” said Yokoyama.

The girls basked in their hero’s glory.

“Anyway, Takatsuki, would you like to join us?” The charismatic Sakurai was apparently inviting me to his party with an innocent smile. “We don’t know anyone around here, so I figured that we ought to work together.”

“Hmm...”

I gave it some thought. It wasn’t a bad deal, was it?

No, wait. Given my skill set, I’d probably be stuck on luggage-carrying duty if I traveled with them. Or worse... Well, I wouldn’t be their slave, exactly, but I’d definitely be at the bottom of the pecking order.

I was sure that Sakurai wouldn’t turn me into the errand boy since he’s a nice guy—however, the glares that his entourage sent my way demanded, in no uncertain terms, that I turn him down.

“I do appreciate the offer,” I started, “but I’m gonna stay at the Water Temple to train.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.” Sakurai sounded like he was honestly disappointed.

“Well, hey, you gotta respect Takatsuki’s wishes,” said Kawamoto.

She then came up with a bizarre proposition: “Oh, I know! How about you teach him how to use a sword, Saki? You know, stay here.”

Yokoyama shot back immediately. “Well then, Eri, how about you teach him magic instead?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous!” Kawamoto scoffed.

“You first!” Yokoyama argued back.

And then they both laughed in unison. The two looked like they were being friendly at a glance, but I got the feeling that they had ulterior motives.

Not that Sakurai, the man at the center of it all, showed any signs of noticing, though.

“Well hey, just say the word if you ever change your mind!” he said.

He gave a smooth smile and left. Neither Kawamoto nor Yokoyama said another word. They didn't even look my way. They did shoot each other a glare for a moment, though. I think I heard a tongue click. Fights between women are scary.

Hopefully, Sakurai won't get stabbed any time soon. I was kinda worried.

A different group called out to me some time later. "Hey, Takatsukiii!"

"You've got the *Water Magic* skill, right?" asked one voice. "The one that's the weakest of the seven elements?"

"And it's low rank too... Heh heh," laughed another.

"And like, what about those stats? They could pick dudes off the street stronger than you."

This was Okada, a partier who was friends with Kitayama, and a popular girl named Kawakita. Kitayama was there too.

These three often hung around together at school. Altogether, they looked like a band of delinquents.

In other words, I didn't gel with them either.

"Anyway, Takatsuki," asked Okada with a sneer on his face, "what kinda job you thinkin' about?"

"Haven't decided yet. What about you?"

"Me? I'm goin' for Sword Master! I'm gonna hack 'n slash monsters with my *Greatsword (Ultra Rank)* skill!" said Okada.

"And I got, like, the *High Wizard* skill. I can use high rank magic from the water, fire, wood, and ground elements! Pretty nice, ain't it?" boasted Kawakita.

I didn't recall asking her, but I told her that it was nice anyway. Guess she just wanted to brag.

"You two got all the luck!" exclaimed Kitayama. "You can use your skills right off the bat—I'm a dragoon though, so I can't do squat until I catch a dragon

first. Pain in the ass, man.”

Still, he seemed pretty cheery about it.

“Bro, how are you gonna complain when you still got *Lancer (High Rank)* and *Lightfoot?!* ” exclaimed Okada.

“Hey, how ’bout giving me a ride on that dragon you’re gonna catch?” asked Kawakita.

“Yeah! You got it,” said Kitayama.

“Yo,” gruffed Okada, “hands off my girl!”

“I ain’t touchin’ nobody!”

Oh, I guess Okada and Kawakita were dating. Didn’t know. Anyway, they didn’t ask me anything else and just made me listen to them brag.

Oh, my poor self-confidence...

One month had passed since I’d come to this other world.

A third of my classmates had been scouted and whisked away by the heads of faraway countries or organizations. The first ones to go had been those with ultra-powerful skills like *Hero of Light*. Various scouts had come one after another, so with regard to the best skills, it seemed like the early bird got the worm.

Using everything they’d told us, I pieced together a bit about the state of the continent. We lived on what was known as the Eastern Continent, which contained six countries: Nation of the Sun, Highland: The largest country on the continent. Exceeds all others in population, wealth, and military might.

Nation of Fire, Great Keith: Desert makes up half of its territory. Excels in combat, so it’s home to many beastmen and mercenaries.

Nation of Water, Roses: The country I was in now. Has a booming tourism industry. Also, the church is really powerful here.

Nation of Wood, Springrogue: A forest country. Home to many elf and beastman tribes.

Nation of Commerce, Cameron: A country of finance and trade. Has plenty of banks, merchant's guilds, and more.

Nation of Ground, Caol Ilan: An underground country. Home to many dwarf tribes. Has a booming weapon-forging industry.

Or something like that. The six countries were more or less on good terms with each other. There didn't seem to be any ongoing wars, at least. There used to be a nation of the moon called Laphroaig, but it was long gone by now.

One by one, my classmates had agreed to the offers presented by the scouts, and were now scattered across the continent in accordance with the conditions of their contracts. Not a single scout had come for me. No surprise there.

Right now, I was taking the Magic for Beginners course. No other classmate from my old world was there. My new peers were kids barely above kindergarten age.

"This is Takatsuki. He's new to this world, so I hope you can all make him feel right at home."

"Yeeees, Teacher," the kids all cheerfully responded. A lone high schooler among a bunch of grade schoolers...

Ha ha, I can feel the tears coming on.

"For today's class, we'll be learning about the magic elements. There are seven elements in this world, each with their own characteristics." The elderly teacher started scribbling on the blackboard.

Sun: Controls light, thunder, and wind.

Moon: Controls darkness and death.

Fire: Controls flame and heat.

Water: Controls water, ice, and mist.

Wood: Controls plants and poison.

Gold: Controls time, space, and destiny.

Ground: Controls land, stone, and metals.

“Every element has a goddess that commands it. Six of the elements are worshipped widely across this continent, but not the moon. As you all know, the moon is the element of darkness and death, as well as the element of demons. Remember, you mustn’t worship it.”

“Yeeees, teacher.”

“Also, any magic you use requires magical power, or ‘mana.’ You have to use a lot of mana to cast stronger magic, which is why it’s necessary to level up...”

And so the lecture went on. It was a lot more exciting than classes in my old world. Guess I had to start studying.

Three months had passed since I’d come to this other world.

“I bid you farewell, my esteemed Tackie.”

“You too, Fujiyan.”

Fujiyan had gotten scouted. Not by a party of adventurers, but by a merchant’s guild. He’d apparently been networking with the merchants who’d come by the Water Temple. What a responsible guy.

“Your humble compatriot plans to work as a merchant in Macallan, the closest town to the Water Temple. By all means, greet me if your path brings you there.”

“Got it,” I said. “I’ll look for you if I’m in the neighborhood.”

“Well then, I pray that your training serves you well.”

“Yeah, same to you.”

I gave Fujiyan a firm handshake before he departed. I know I’ve never had many friends, but with Fujiyan now leaving, I’d lost just about all chances I had to talk with classmates. Over half of the people we’d started with had already left on their journeys.

I was getting lonely.

“Hey, Mr. Makoto, did you get better at water magic?”

I was talking to a kid that I had bonded with after I’d told him some stories of my old world. He was apparently the third son of some noble.

“*Water Magic: Waterball.*” As I spoke, a softball-sized sphere of water appeared above the palm of my hand.

The process of casting magic was to generate first, and then control.

For *Waterball*, the user would generate the water and then control it (by morphing it into a ball form). Simple stuff. The strength of the water magic a person could generate depended on the amount of mana they had. You could also use magic more quickly if you trained your magic’s mastery level.

My mana was at a beginner’s level, meaning I had very little. Making this tiny ball was about all that I could manage. On the bright side, I’d heard that a user’s mastery increased every time they used magic, so I’d been training every day.

“Wow! You can use magic after just three months! It took two years for me to cast *Fireball!*”

A ball of fire as large as a basketball appeared above the palm of the boy’s hand. It...was big. Like, five times the size of mine. Comparing his magic to mine just...made me sad. The boy had the *Fire Magic (Mid Rank)* and *Swordfighter (Mid Rank)* skills, so he was set on becoming a spellsword.

*You know, I thought, I wanted to be a spellsword too. Not even a hero or anything greedy.*

But I didn’t have any skills suited to being a warrior, so that entire line of jobs was off the table. I just had to commit to being a mage.

“Good luck, Mr. Makoto!”

All I could do was say “Yeah,” and give him a lifeless nod.

Half a year had passed since I’d come to this other world.

Scouts had pretty much stopped recruiting at the temple. All remaining Class

1-A students (myself included) had to think hard about the future. Then again, the others all had skills like *Swordfighter (High Rank)* or *Mage (High Rank)*, so their outlooks weren't too dire.

Unlike me.

In addition to my mage training, I was also studying normal skills like *Traveler* and *Thief*. Normal skills were ones that anyone could learn with a bit of training. Ones like *Water Magic* or *RPG Player* were called "unique" skills, which meant that they couldn't be learned by just anyone. A person's unique skills were set in stone.

The *Traveler* skill tree contained a lot of subskills that would be useful on the road, such as the ability to *Gut* and *Cook* animals, perform *First Aid*, or *Ignite* fires. The *Thief* skill tree had stuff like *Sense Danger*, *Scout*, *Dodge*, *Flee*, *Clairvoyance*, and *Listen*. It was notable for having a lot of useful subskills for predicting danger and escaping from enemies, which were essential for someone like me who'd probably be flying solo.

It was kind of exciting. Like going on a trip.

Nine months had passed since I'd come to this other world.

Three Class 1-A students remained, myself included. I'd been spending all my time outside of training in the library so I could learn this world's language. If I could read the alphabet, I could read books.

I knew absolutely nothing about this world; not its history, not its nationalities, not its monsters, not its terrain, not its diseases, nothing. I'd have to leave in three months, so I committed to expanding my knowledge of this world as much as I could.

I also researched its history a bit. This world measured years using something called the Savior Calendar—right now, it was the year 1001 AS, or After Salvation. 0 AS was the year when Abel the Savior defeated the Great Demon Lord.

...Abel the Savior. According to the history books, he had two *Hero* skills: *Hero of Light* and *Hero of Thunder*.



Talk about a cheater.

Anyway, Abel the Savior had created the largest country on the continent, Highland. Can't get more heroic than defeating the Great Demon Lord and founding a country. The nations of Roses and Great Keith were founded after Abel the Savior had rescued the world. So basically, all the countries we lived in had a history of only about a thousand years. Kinda short.

The books in the library taught me the history of the past thousand years in plenty of detail, but I could only find scattered mentions of any history prior to 0 AS. From what I gathered, it was a dark age where the Great Demon Lord ruled the continent; it was only after the savior liberated people from him that history had entered its current age.

One year had passed since I'd come to this other world.

Every one of my classmates had gone.

I was the last person from Class 1-A left.

## Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Meets a Goddess

It'd been a year to the day since I'd first arrived at the Water Temple. In other words, today was the day I'd be leaving it.

*Not by choice*, I couldn't help but think.

"Take care of yourself, Makoto," said my elderly magic teacher as she saw me off. "Your magic couldn't defeat even a tiny monster, after all."

My teacher seemed worried. After a whole year of training in my job as a mage, I was still at the apprentice level. So in the end, I still hadn't become a proper mage. Sigh...

"Don't worry," I assured her. "I'll use my *Flee* skill from my *Thief* training if it comes down to it."

"Good idea. You mustn't fight."

It was rare for apprentice mages to travel alone. And by rare, I mean "never."

Someone with a support role would get done in by monsters in a heartbeat if they traveled alone. They'd normally form parties with people who filled frontline roles, like warriors or fighters.

I'd been told over and over that I should join any party that'd take me, but I'd staunchly refused. After all, talking with strangers is tiring. And wouldn't an apprentice mage wind up being the butt of every joke? Might as well go solo.

"You know, we could probably get you a position working at the temple..."

*Yes, Teacher*, I thought, *I've heard that one plenty of times too*.

"If I do, my lifespan will run out in nine years," I said. "I have to work hard to give the goddess reverence points to extend it."

"Being an otherworlder must be hard..." she replied.

"Well then, I'll be off."

We said our goodbyes. My teacher looked a bit sad as she smiled. She was a

nice lady. No matter how useless a student I'd been, she had made sure that I'd kept up with lessons and she'd never given up on me. Even after I'd walked a little ways away from the temple, I looked back to find her still watching me.

I gave her a big wave. But I didn't turn around again—I was on my own now.

*Good luck, me.*

My path started out pretty peacefully. I heard some birds chirping from the forest every now and then, and the sound put my heart at ease. The creek that trailed along the side of the highway flowed from the spring in the Forest of Elementals behind the Water Temple. The water contained the blessing of the elementals, which I'd been told made it hard for monsters to approach. This kept the area along the river pretty safe, so roads and towns were built nearby.

The town closest to the Water Temple was called Macallan and was located on the shore of a lake. It was otherwise known as the City of Water.

That was my first stop. My friend Fujiyan was supposed to be there. Was he doing all right? That took me down memory lane as I sauntered along.

I had my *Scout* and *Stealth* skills active the whole time to make sure I wouldn't meet or be noticed by any monsters. My *Scout* skill's range was a radius of about a hundred meters. Incidentally, Kawamoto, my classmate who had the *Sage* skill, could *Scout* over a radius of around five kilometers. Fifty times further out than mine.

*Life isn't fair...*

Still, my *Scout* skill was good enough to at least detect any monsters in the forest along the river. I proceeded down the highway with caution as I kept my skill active.

Or, at least, I had caution at first...but all I found as I continued walking was the peaceful scenery of a country road. Kinda dull. I got sick of looking at the endless forest, highway, and creek. And the town was still a long ways away.

*Maybe I could...do some training?*

I decided to do the same exercises that I did every day at the temple to raise

my water magic mastery. I relaxed my mind and concentrated my mana.

*“Water Magic: Waterball, gather seven,”* I whispered.

With that, I made a waterball that was about as large as a volleyball using the water in the creek. I didn’t have nearly enough mana to generate seven waterballs at once; I’d run out in an instant if I tried. But you barely needed any mana to control water that already existed nearby—that came down to the level of one’s mastery when casting the spell. They said you could control matter using the mana floating within this world’s atmosphere.

The more a user practiced their magic, the higher their mastery would rise. Skills could also grow stronger with higher masteries. High-level masteries meant generating quicker and controlling better, so there was no downside to raising them as high as possible.

That was why I’d never skipped a day of training this past year. My teacher had even given me the seal of approval, saying that my mastery of water magic was above an advanced level...even if said magic’s strength was still low rank.

*Which is kind of a fatal flaw... Hm?*

My thoughts were interrupted as my *Scout* skill picked up something. It was in the forest, just a little ways off the road.

Was a human being attacked by monsters? I kept my *Stealth* skill active as I quietly approached. Within the forest, I found a horse-drawn carriage surrounded by a group of goblins. A man who seemed to be a merchant was stuck in the center and attempting to fend them off with a sword. There were about ten goblins there, so the merchant was clearly at a disadvantage.

*Hmm... Should I help him, or should I keep hiding?* If this were a game, I’d come to the rescue without a second thought. Goblin-slaying missions were practically tutorials.

*If I were the main character, anyway...*

Unfortunately, the fantasy world I’d found myself in was a dog-eat-dog one. If you died, there was no coming back.

If I hadn’t mentioned it by now, this world had no video game mechanics that

brought people back to life. People didn't wake up at the last inn they'd visited with half their money gone. Death was the curtain call; your life was over. And I was an apprentice mage of the weakest element of them all: water magic.

"This is rough... I mean, my teacher did say to run if I found any monsters..."

On the other hand, well, just look. Someone was being attacked by monsters right before my eyes. I couldn't live with myself if I let him die. Although it'd defeat the purpose if I died too...

*Hmm... What should I do...*

I went back and forth... Meanwhile, the goblins were creeping ever closer to the merchant.

Suddenly, a selection screen—like one you'd see in a video game—popped up before my eyes.

Do you wish to save the merchant?

Yes

No

"Huh?"

What was I looking at? I'd never seen this before. Was this the effect of my *RPG Player* skill? Wait, was this really what that skill did? Was I supposed to pick an option? I scratched my cheek, feeling bashful.

...This skill really knew how to cut to the chase. Well, I wouldn't be much of an RPG player if I picked "No," now would I?

I slammed that "Yes" button.

"All right, here goes my first battle encounter!"

I slowly approached the goblins and concentrated my mana. I steadied my aim to make sure I wouldn't hit the merchant and then shot off my low rank spell—*Water Magic: Ice Arrow*. The waterballs I'd made for training turned into arrows of ice and hurtled toward the goblins.

Each one was a bull's-eye! But unfortunately...

*Of course that won't beat them!*

The goblins were bleeding, but they were far from knocked out. Maybe it was because of my distance, or maybe it was because my shots were that weak. Either way, I had their attention.

"Hey," I shouted to the merchant, "are you okay?"

"An adventurer? P-Please, save me!"

"Got it." I kept my answer short and sweet.

I typically kept my *Calm Mind* skill running at 50%, but this situation called for its maximum setting of 99%. All idle thoughts vanished. I had pretty much no stress or fear while using this skill. I concentrated only on defeating my opponents.

The closest and largest of the goblins came toward me. Specifically, it was a higher-level species of goblin known as a hobgoblin. That must have been their leader. It was about two meters tall too. Pretty big guy.

The rest of the goblins continued to surround the merchant and his carriage while the hobgoblin used a single hand to draw a rusty, blackened dagger. I'd probably catch tetanus if that thing cut me, so uh, I definitely didn't want to take on that goblin up close. I stood at the very edge of its dagger's range as I concentrated my mana.

*"Water Magic: Ice Needle!"*

"Gyagh!"

The water magic stabbed the hobgoblin in the eyes.

Launching toothpick-sized ice needles into an enemy's eyeballs was an original spell of mine. The magic itself might've been unimpressive, but it'd have an impact on any creature that relied on eyesight. Best of all, it let me conserve my mana.

I took caution in case the enemy started swinging its weapon around at random, but it just dropped the dagger to cover his eyes.

*Perfect!* I thought. Not wanting to let an opportunity slip away, I grabbed the dagger the hobgoblin had dropped.

*But... Hmmm...* I hesitated for a moment. It was my first time using a blade, and I'd never stabbed a living creature before. And obviously, slaying a monster wasn't an experience I had under my belt. However...

*This is another world,* I thought. *Throw away those naive inhibitions.*

*Okay... I'm doing this!*

I made up my mind. With my resolve hardened, I thrust the dagger into the hobgoblin's chest.

*"Water Magic: Freeze!"*

This was a low rank water magic spell that cooled a liquid until it froze. By using the dagger as a conduit, I could cast *Freeze* on my opponent's blood. I'd spent a lot of time coming up with this special attack to make up for my deficient mana.

The hobgoblin's body gave one spasm before falling over.

I had my *RPG Player* skill active during the fight and watched my surroundings using a 360-degree perspective. The other goblins seemed wary of what was happening between me and their leader. I'd anticipated that, but even so, I now had almost zero mana remaining. I couldn't generate any more water.

*Man, I really am short on mana, huh...*

Okay then, what would the goblins do now that they'd lost their leader? I was hoping they'd choose to flee... Nope, they all faced me at once. Oh well. I decided to just lead them to the river. Can't fight without water, after all.

I activated my *Thief* skill, *Flee*, and lured the goblins out to the riverbank. I stayed ahead of them, but made sure that they never quite lost sight of me. Perfect, I found just the place that had all the water I'd need. The goblins were catching up quickly.

*Water Magic: Walk on Water.* This magic allowed its user to walk on the surface of a body of water. I used it to stand gently atop the river. Still, the water was only waist-deep, so the goblins waded in to continue their attack.

*They fell for my trap!*

*“Water Magic: Flow!”*

I ensnared the goblins who’d entered the river with my magic. The water enveloped their bodies and started to drown them. The goblins glubbed and gasped as they desperately struggled to escape, but they couldn’t breathe underwater. After five minutes or so, the breaths of the last goblin gave out.

Was that all of them?

*“Phew, just barely made that work...”*

I caught my own breath and returned to the merchant.

◇ A Certain Merchant’s Daughter’s Perspective ◇

*Ugggh... What do I do? What do I do, what do I do?*

I was distraught. It was my first time on the highway. I had heard that the road between Macallan and the Water Temple was safe, so I’d set off for the next town with my dad, a merchant, without any worries.

But all of a sudden, we were attacked by a renegade band of goblins made hostile from their hunger. My dad could use a sword; fending off a lone goblin wouldn’t have been any trouble. But we were up against ten! We were doomed!

*“Don’t come out of the carriage!”* my dad shouted.

The goblins surrounded us. Their encirclement tightened with every moment to ensure that we couldn’t escape. Were they...waiting for my dad to get exhausted? Our horse was too scared to be useful.

*Oh no! My dad got cut!* I thought. While his attention had been focused on one nearby goblin, a hobgoblin had come from behind and attacked him with a slash! My dad was now gripping his shoulder, clearly in no condition to swing a sword anymore.

*“Guh...”* My teeth were chattering. My own dad was going to be... No, it wasn’t just him. I wasn’t any safer. Goblins...kill men. And rape women. All to have us bear their children.



“I-I have to fight too...” I tried to get out, but my legs were shaking so hard that I couldn’t walk.

“Gyagh.” “Gyagh!” “Gyayagyahgh!” The goblins that had surrounded us cackled with glee.

*I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared I’m scared...*

The goblins waited patiently for my dad to wear out. He was going to get killed! And yet... And yet...! I couldn’t move my legs! The fear had made my throat hoarse and my palms were drenched in sweat.

*O Goddess, I beg you...please bring salvation to this poor family...*

“Gyagh?” “Gyagh?!” “Gyagyagh!”

As I offered my prayer to the goddess, the swarm of goblins was suddenly pierced by arrows of ice.

“Wha—?” *Wh-What was that? What was going on?*

“Hey, are you okay?” someone asked.

Who was that? Could it have been an adventurer?

“An adventurer? P-Please, save me!”

My dad pleaded for aid. But the only person I saw was a lanky boy. His armor was light and he didn’t have a single weapon in sight.

Uh... Was this a good idea? To be honest, he looked much weaker than even my dad did... Could he even defeat a single goblin?

Regardless, he didn’t leave us for dead. He came to save us from the attacking monsters. No matter how weak this adventurer looked, I had to trust him.

I tried once more to leave the carriage and join in the fight. Wait, the hobgoblin was approaching the adventurer!

“Gyagh!” The apparent leader of the goblins suddenly shielded its eyes in pain.

“Huh?” Had something happened? Was it magic? But the boy hadn’t recited an incantation. And it didn’t seem like he’d used a wand either.

The boy moved swiftly to close in on the hobgoblin and then stabbed him with the dagger.

*But an attack that weak won't defeat a monster,* I thought. The boy would prove me wrong.

The hobgoblin's body jerked up high before falling right to the ground. The boy was emotionless and calm, as if he saw every nook and cranny surrounding him without even having to look.

*Wait, whaaaaaat?! I thought. Wh-What just happened?!*

The goblins that surrounded my dad now charged at the boy adventurer. They must have viewed this interloper as a real threat. The boy ran off in the direction of the river, clearly intending for the goblins to follow. But he shouldn't! Taking on that many goblins alone would be suicide!

"Dad!" I shouted as I hopped out of the carriage.

"Darn it, kid!" he shouted back. "I told you to hide!"

"But we have to help him!"

"I know... But I'm sure he's already..."

I heard the sound of water splashing wildly as well as the wails of goblins amidst them. Was he okay?! I was worried, but I surely wouldn't be any help even if I were there.

A while later, the boy returned—unscathed.

*Whaaaaaaaaaaa?! I thought. He defeated that entire band of goblins by himself?! He must be one heck of a fighter...*

"Are you all right?" the boy asked my dad. "Oh, you had someone else with you."

"Y-Yes, you saved us. This is my daughter."

"Th-Thank you very much!"

That's right—he saved us.

Now that I was free from such dire stress, my body limply gave out. I looked up at the black-haired boy adventurer. Even though he'd effortlessly dispatched

a swarm of monsters just moments ago, he had the face of someone who wouldn't hurt a fly.

The incongruity made my heart skip a beat or two.

### ◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"Thank you ever so much! I owe you my life!"

"I don't know what we would have done without you..."

The merchant and his daughter sure thanked me a lot. The dad looked like a pretty nice guy, and the girl looked like she was in sixth grade or so. Did kids around here start working this young? Fantasy worlds were rough, huh?

Apparently, some pretty bad things happen to girls if they get caught by goblins. Hearing that made me feel like I'd made the right choice in saving them.

"It might not be much, but please take this as thanks," said the merchant.

"Uhh, a hundred thousand gold? Seems like a lot." I didn't know the economics of saving people, but that sum was quite the fortune.

"Well, I'd like for you to accompany us to the next town."

"Ah, so this covers escorting too." I could accept that. It was pretty rare for monsters to show up at all on this highway, so it shouldn't be too hard.

The merchant talked about all his problems as we traveled. That reminded me, Fujiyan was a merchant too. I wondered if he had the same problems.

"I think we should set up camp soon," suggested the merchant before the sun set.

The highway we were traveling on had a number of open spots perfect for camping. Apparently, the local landowner had prepared them so that merchants and adventurers could have a rest.

"Apologies for such a simple meal," the merchant said bashfully.

That said, he brought out a stew which had been kept cool using magic—in other words, refrigerated food. We put it over a fire, brought it to boil, and made an outdoor meal of it with some hard bread. Tasty.

“Okay, I’ll go patrol the area,” I told them. It was after dinner, and I had just laid the sleeping bag they’d lent me out on the ground.

“Sorry for the trouble,” apologized the merchant. “I’d join you if my leg hadn’t gotten injured.”

“I’m your escort, so you can just let me handle it.”

With that, I stepped away from the carriage that the family slept in, leaving it behind.

I walked a little ways beyond the campsite and used my *Scout* skill to ensure that no monsters were nearby. With that done, I finally turned off the *Calm Mind* skill that I had left activated this whole time.

“Pheeeeeew...” I let out a big sigh. The backs of my hands started dripping with sweat as my pulse quickened. “I never thought I would come across monsters before reaching the first town...”

I opened my Soul Book and saw that my reverence points had increased. And so had my lifespan, a little. By three days or so.

“I was seriously nervous... Good thing I managed.” My knees were shaking.

“I figured my first monster would’ve been something lower level...” Like a horned rabbit or a giant rat or something. I hadn’t been expecting my first fight to be against an entire band of goblins!

“But...I won, right?” I gave a grin and a raised fist to the starry night sky.

“All right!” I pumped my arms ever so slightly. I remembered how disappointed the Water Temple staff had been with my bottom-tier skills. Classmates had pitied me, children had comforted me, and even the teacher who’d treated me like family had been worried as she’d seen me off. Like they’d been apologizing to me for having to live in this world.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

I’ve got this. *Calm Mind*, *RPG Player*, and *Water Magic (Low Rank)*. I was gonna make it in this world with these three skills. Like hell was I gonna die in the nine years I had left.

My thoughts turned to the weapon lying on the ground by my waist. What would I do with the blade that I'd taken from the hobgoblin? I took another look at the rusty, beat-up dagger. It probably wouldn't sell for anything. Or be useful as a weapon.

"Maybe I could keep it as a memento of my first victory. And maybe it'd be usable if I removed the rust."

For now, I decided to hold on to it, so I wrapped it up in a cloth. It was about time to go back and sleep anyway.

And so, my first day leaving the Water Temple had ended. The excitement made it hard to fall asleep, though.



When I awoke, I found myself in an empty, wide-open space. I was dreaming...right? Crap, I hadn't meant to sleep that deeply. But where was I? This felt like something I'd seen in a game before...

As my mind wandered, I felt a chill run down my spine.

Like I sensed a presence not of this world.

I swung around and saw its form before my eyes.

"Greetings, Makoto. I've been awaiting our encounter."

In front of me was a girl with a face so gorgeous that the phrase "one in a million" seemed like far too low a ratio. My breath stopped for a moment.

"Wh-Who...might you be?" I asked shakily. The beauty of the girl in front of me was simply inhuman.

*Well... I'm not a human.*

The girl smiled.

"I'm a goddess." Those were the words that came out of her mouth.

"You're...a...a goddess?"

The girl's lovely face belied a hint of madness. She had shining silver hair

tinged with blue, and her eyes were like sapphires. Her skin was fair and clear. I noticed that her limbs were girlish, still keeping a bit of their childish charm. And yet, she exuded a bewitching maturity.

She was built so much like a doll...that I found her scary. Scarily beautiful.

“Uhh, do you have business with me?” I asked.

The gods who ruled this world were very real. If the girl in front of me really was a goddess, then I’d better not even attempt to disobey her. Thank goodness my *Calm Mind* skill allowed me to stay cool and collected, even at a time like this.

“I’ve watched you this whole time. Saving that merchant from those goblins while paying no heed to the dangers—it was a wonderful deed. I welcome you to become my acolyte.” The goddess gave a smile filled with divine grace.

“A goddess’s acolyte...”

Those words brought back memories from one year ago...



Shortly after I’d come to this world, someone calling herself “The Priestess of Water” visited the Water Temple. The priestess was a special position within this country’s theocracy. It was said that the priestess could hear the voice of the goddess that the people of this land worshipped.

That’s why they treated the word of the priestess as equal to the word of their god.

Her duties were typically handled within the church, but she went out of her way to visit these otherworlders. The goal was to scout talent; the priestess had the power to grant new believers the blessing of the goddess. The powerful stats and rare skills of these otherworlders must have caught her interest.

The person who’d appeared before us introduced herself as Sophia Eir Roses, the priestess of the Goddess of Water. She was also the princess of Roses, the Nation of Water—a real VIP among VIPs, and the one who served as the crux of her country. The fact that someone of her caliber personally came all the way out to the temple spoke to just how exceptional the stats of Class 1-A were.

“Ah, so you’re an ultra rank mage, are you? How wonderful. You shall be granted the blessing of the Goddess of Water. In order to receive it, you’ll become an acolyte of the goddess we worship, will you not?”

“Oh my, you possess the *Golden Knight* skill. You shall be granted the blessing of the Goddess of Water. In order to receive it...”

And just like that, she convinced classmate after classmate. Mainly the ones with rare skills. But when she saw my Soul Book...

“So, you have *Water Magic*. Low rank, at that. Well, I wish you the best.”

And with a cold look, she passed me over.

...Um?

“I-Is that all?”

“Hey, the priestess is busy!” shouted a knight as I tried to question her. I later learned that he was the priestess’s personal knight.

“I’ll become a Water Goddess believer! So can I get her blessing?” I’d been panicking over my weak skills at the time, so I’d felt desperate to get anything I could. Gaining the Water Goddess’s blessing would have bestowed me with plenty of perks, so I wanted it no matter what. I begged for it. But the priestess’s response was as cold as ice.

“You need a bit more training. Perhaps next time.” The Priestess of Water Sophia said no more and left without turning back.

But no matter how hard I’d trained since then, I never received the goddess’s blessing.

It hadn’t just been my classmates who’d looked at me with pity; the Water Temple staff had as well. Once I’d finished crying into my pillow, I’d begun to harbor a hatred for the priestess, her church, and even the goddess they worshipped.

It was a painful memory. Even now, thinking about it puts me in a sour mood.

*Calm down... I’m over that now. I’m over it.*







“Your encounter with the water priestess was horrible, wasn’t it? Well, you don’t have to believe in that goddess of theirs.”

She spoke as though she’d read my mind. I wondered if she actually had. Or wait, if she knew about the water priestess thing, then she must have been telling the truth about watching me.

“I’d rather not remember, so let’s put that behind us,” I said. “So, Goddess, could you tell me your name?”

The deities of this world all had names. The Hero of Light, Sakurai, had received something called the “Favor of the Sun Goddess, Altena.” Given that it multiplied all of his stats, it was less a blessing and more of a cheat code. For real, how does one guy get all the luck?

My ulterior motive for asking the goddess’s name was to set my expectations for any future blessing. Even if her boon wasn’t as broken as the one given to Sakurai, I could at least expect a nice blessing if she were famous enough.

“Tee hee. Well, I’m a bit of a minor goddess, so you might not have heard of me.”

“Well, perhaps, but I’d still like to know the name of the goddess I’ll worship.”

“Then I shall tell you in due time,” said the goddess, playing it off. I didn’t know why she’d deflected, but I gave up and changed the subject.

“Do you think I can make it as an adventurer in this world?” I asked.

“I see you’re concerned with your low stats.”

“I can’t say I’m not,” I admitted. My magic wasn’t even strong enough to defeat a lone goblin because my attack power was just too low. And my mana always dried up in an instant to boot. Could I even make it as an adventurer?

“But, Makoto, you have some rather convenient skills.”

“You mean *Calm Mind* and *RPG Player*? Sure, they’re convenient, but they can’t hold a candle to strong mage or warrior skills.” I was practically griping at this actual goddess, but it was the truth.

Suddenly, the goddess changed the subject. “Do you know your classmates Suzuki, Yamashita, and Endou?”

Well, of course I knew them. We’d been transported to this world together. Not that we’d been close; I’d only had two friends in that class. But as far as I could recall, they had high rank warrior and mage skills.

“Well, those three classmates of yours have gone missing. Perhaps even perished.”

“Huh?” *Did... Did she just say...*

“Perhaps they placed a bit too much faith in their powerful skills. They fought monsters too high in level and braved dungeons too great in difficulty only to find that they’d bitten off more than they could chew.”

“Oh... I see...” I couldn’t believe it. I’d spent a whole year cooped up in the Water Temple, so I had no idea.

“It’s because the land of Japan that you all hail from is a peaceful country,” she explained. “Your classmates may have been gifted with powerful skills, but the strength of their nerves was the same as ever. Your *Calm Mind*, however, stabilizes yours. What’s more, it protects you from overconfidence and carelessness. A wonderful skill, indeed. And your *RPG Player* skill is unique to otherworlders. It’s one I find quite intriguing.”

“Doesn’t it just change my point of view?”

“Being able to see yourself in third person protects you from sneak attacks. And by viewing in 360 degrees, you can observe from quite a distant vantage point. It also automatically maps out the places you’ve visited. I’d consider that rather convenient.”

Well, *RPG Player* didn’t sound so bad when she put it like that. Guess it all comes down to how you use it. Now that I felt a bit better, I decided to ask a different question.

“You said you’ve been watching me this whole time. If so, why did you wait until now to speak to me?”

“Because the Water Temple is under the purview of the Water Goddess, Eir. I

felt it prudent to refrain.”

“There were believers of other goddesses who came by the Water Temple to scout, though,” I pointed out. Sakurai, the Hero of Light, had become an acolyte of the Sun Goddess.

“Well, good for them.” The goddess’s answer was vague. “So, Makoto, will you become my believer?”

She was really laying it on. I had to think hard.

At first, her beauty had taken my breath away. But now that I’d come to my senses, I honestly couldn’t deny that this goddess was kinda shady. My stats were meager and my skills were weird, so why would she want someone like me as a believer? I’d played plenty of RPGs that gave players these seemingly sweet deals early on. In my experience, choosing “Yes” typically came back to bite you.

That’s what my gaming senses told me—however, unlike a game, this choice couldn’t be undone by the reset button.

“I think I’ll sleep on it.”

“What?!” The goddess’s previously refined demeanor quickly gave way to panic. “H-Hold on. You could be a goddess’s *acolyte* here! And you’re hearing it right from the goddess herself! That’s an honor and a half!”

This was true. Goddesses pretty much never appeared directly to people. Even the priestesses who I brought up earlier only heard their voices. I’d never heard of anyone seeing or speaking to a goddess, even in a dream like this one.

*Well, an actual goddess, anyway,* whispered my brain as *Calm Mind* kept it collected. *So, is this goddess as real as she claims?*

“Of course I’m real!” she protested.

“Huh?”

“Uh, oops.”

So she *was* reading my mind.

“I guess that’d be a piece of cake for a goddess,” I concluded.

“You really are calm...”

Thanks, it’s my one redeeming quality.

“H-Hey, listen,” pleaded the goddess. “Coming to the human world as a deity is a *huge* pain in the butt. Do you think I could get a contract tonight?” She sidled up to me, held my hand, and gave me puppy dog eyes.

Okay, personal space. The goddess’s flawlessly sculpted face was right before my eyes. Her mannerisms reminded me of the customer service in a hostess club I’d seen on TV a long time ago. Her eyes sparkled with a faint golden glow. My mind went blank as I reeled back a bit.

*Wait, I realized. Is she using charm magic?*

I’d learned about the existence of charm magic from my studies at the Water Temple. Women who worked at brothels used it pretty frequently. There were many types of charm magic, but the fundamentals were to look your target in the eye, give them some sweet talk, and make physical contact with their body.

There was no shortage of stories about wet-behind-the-ears adventurers getting charmed by lady merchants and going into debt over the money they’d spend on their presumed sweethearts. Was my story about to be added to the list?

But I had perspective: specifically, the third-person perspective granted to me by my *RPG Player* skill, which I always left active. I could see the reactions of both myself and my conversational partner from a few meters away. Because of this, the requirement of making eye contact would never get fulfilled. Incidentally, this skill also made her voice and touch feel like they were for someone else. To top it off, my *Calm Mind* skill kept my heart from swaying.

My teacher at the temple had once told me that I’d be hard to persuade with charm magic. I remember thinking it’d be useless in combat at the time, but hey, guess you never know what ends up coming in handy.

“Goddess, please step away from me. You’re a bit too close.” I calmly put some distance between the two of us.

“H-Huh? Wait, why didn’t that work?!”

*O Goddess, I thought, you might not want to say that out loud. Using charm magic to secure followers seems like it'd be frowned upon. That's the practice of a shady cult.*

"For crying out loud, I'm not shady!"

"So you *are* reading my mind!" I declared. Since there wasn't much point in leaving things unsaid, I cut to the chase. "If you can read my mind, then you can understand why I'd be skeptical. I suggest you cut your losses and call it a day."

"I don't wanna! This is my first chance to nab an acolyte in a thousand years! I'll make you my believer if it's the last thing I do!"

The goddess had finally been reduced to rolling on the ground in a tantrum. The authority she'd displayed at first sight had long vanished. I could almost see her underwear from beneath the skirt of her short dress...but not quite. Were these the defenses of a deity?

"Would you become my acolyte if I gave you a peek?" asked the goddess while my thoughts were occupied by absolute idiocy.

"That sure is a sentence."

The goddess sat on the floor while looking at me with tears in her eyes. Cute. But sadly, that wasn't the standard on which I based my religious choices.

"Please, please, please! Please become my believer. I'm begging you!" She was now gripping my shoulders and physically shaking me. Once again, personal space.

*Hmm, I thought, what should I do?*

To be honest, I didn't know what she was after. But I knew she was serious. Either way, I had no intention of worshipping any of the six major goddesses of this continent. Even though that was just because the water priestess gave me a bad first impression.

At the end of the day, this goddess was telling me things that nobody else had. All to get *me*. I decided to just hope I wouldn't get taken advantage of.

My *RPG Player* skill displayed a choice.

Become the goddess's acolyte?

►Yes

No

"I understand. I'll become your believer."

"Wait, really? I-I did it!" The goddess hip-hip-hurrayed as she bounced up and down. "So, can I borrow your Soul Book?"

I wasn't sure I even had it in this dream, but I found it in one of my pockets after a bit of searching. "Here you go."

"All right, let's see here..."

The goddess traced over my Soul Book with her finger. For a moment, it looked like the page's surface lit up. When I looked over the text of our contract, I saw "The Goddess's First Believer" written on it.

"Uh, are there any acolytes besides me?"

"Yes, there used to be. But you're my first one in a while! You should be honored!"

I was instead concerned. This was beyond just being "minor." How does a goddess get to be this unpopular? Still, there was another question that needed answering first.

"Do I get anything for having your blessing?" It might have been a bit disrespectful to ask that the moment I became her follower, but it was important.

The goddess, however, just gave a dismayed frown in return.

"You see, I'm a minor deity, so I can't give believers my blessing at the drop of a hat. But if you offer me prayers every day, you might get your blessing soon."

She had to be kidding.

"But don't you worry! I can give you this instead." She handed me a dagger. "As proof of our contract, I present you with a divine treasure. It's really cool!"

"Is this a weapon?"

“You *can* use it as a weapon! This blade was forged by divine hands, so it won’t break too easily! Also, make sure you have it while you’re praying.”

I guess it was like a cross.

“Anyway, I gotta get going,” she said. “If you get into any trouble, just rely on your good ol’ goddess!”

“Wait, do you have any orders or anything?” I scrambled to make sure I wasn’t being left without something important, but the goddess just looked dumbfounded.

“You don’t want me bossing you around, right? You’d prefer your adventure to be open-world.”

She really did know everything.

“I mean, I would, but goddesses usually start you off with a fetch quest or something at times like this.”

“You’re asking for an errand? My, aren’t you a considerate acolyte.” She thought for a moment. “Well, I do have one: become strong.”

“Is that an order?”

“It’s not an order—just a simple request,” she clarified. “You’re the only believer I have, so you’d better not die that easily! I have high hopes for you.”

The goddess gave me a wink, a thumbs-up, and a “Go get ’em, champ” before vanishing.



When I woke up, an unsheathed dagger fell next to my pillow.

Yikes, close call!

“Wait, isn’t this the dagger I stole from that hobgoblin yesterday?” The once-rusted hunk of metal had been reborn into a beautiful blade. I cautiously reached out and picked it up. Its weight was just right; not too light, not too heavy. The hilt fit perfectly into my hand and I felt the sensation of mana pouring into me.

It must have been a magic weapon. The blue-tinged steel emitted a

mysterious glow.

“Thank you, Goddess.” I gripped the dagger with both hands and prayed.

Afterward, I opened my Soul Book and saw the words “The Goddess’s First Believer” written on it. Was it really not a dream?

“Um, Mr. Takatsuki?” came a voice. “What’re you holding a dagger for?”

Shoot, I hadn’t noticed that the merchant’s daughter had woken up. “Oh, you know, just praying to the Goddess.”

“I’ll join you,” she said. “O Ira, Goddess of Fortune, thank you for allowing us to meet Mr. Takatsuki.” I felt like she was being a little over-the-top, but I *had* saved their lives, so maybe the excess was warranted.

“All right, let’s get going. I think we can reach the city by the afternoon.”

### *The City of Water, Macallan.*

I’d heard it was around the twentieth-largest city on the continent. The river from the Forest of Elementals and the Great Forest flowed here to become a canal. It then emptied into Lake Chimay, and the beautiful city of Macallan was built on the shore. There were many water channels running throughout the city, with people traveling atop them via rowboat. The city was also famous for its bustling breweries, and Macallan-made flaming cocktails were adored the continent over. Or so the merchant and his daughter had told me.

“We made it, safe and sound. Mr. Takatsuki, thank you for everything.” The merchant’s daughter gripped my hand tight. I blushed a little before wishing that her father would tone down the death glare he was shooting me.

“Really, I should be thanking you for everything you’ve taught me.” During the trip here, they had given me info about the town’s government as well as where to find the adventurer’s guild, cheap items, good food, and solid lodging.

I had them look at the dagger I’d received from the goddess while we were traveling together, but unfortunately, they’d said that they couldn’t figure out much using their *Appraisal (Low Rank)* skills.

Before we parted ways, the merchant said that he’d return to his company. I



chose to head for the adventurer's guild in the shopping district.

Incidentally, there was a church at the center of the city. The churches held quite a bit of power in Roses, so towns here were always built with a church in the center.

However, the object of worship in Roses was the Goddess of Water, with that water priestess Sophia being the core of their theocracy. You weren't gonna catch me goin' there. I swore to myself that I'd steer clear.

I found the adventurer's guild in no time. It was a larger building with much sturdier stone construction than I had imagined. I went inside to find a wide-open space lined with food stalls and open-air weapon shops. This must have been the entrance.

"Hey there, how 'bout a pint? I got some ice-cold ale for ya!"

"We got imports from Caol Ilan that came in just this morning! Act now and you'll get ten percent off!"

"This here's a shield made from a dragon's scale! First come, first serve!"

Business was clearly booming. There were even people holding feasts atop simple tables here and there. I took a look at the directory board and saw that there was a rest stop (which allowed overnight stays separated by gender), a training ground, and a storehouse for captured monsters.

The adventurer's guild was the place that issued adventurer's licenses. I imagined it to be pretty close to a driver's education school, but it felt more like a sports gym with a side of recreational facilities. Thankfully, the line for licenses wasn't very long, so I made it to the counter pretty quickly.

"Hello. What can I do for you today?"

The receptionist was a beautiful woman. I glanced around at the other receptionists and noticed that their looks were all at a pretty high level.

"Can I register as an adventurer?"

"Ah, so it's your first time using our services," she said. "In that case, fill out the necessary information on this form. Also, you have your Soul Book with you, correct?"

I handed my Soul Book to the receptionist. I then wrote down my name, work history, skills, and current job on the form.

“Here, I’ve filled it out.”

“Perfect, thank you very much. I’ll look it over.” The receptionist seemed to raise an eyebrow at my name and the fact that “otherworlder” was written in my work history, but she didn’t say a word. What a pro.

“No problems with your information. Are you okay with leaving your job as ‘apprentice mage’?”

“Yes, leave it as is.”

“It’ll take some time to have your license printed, so please take a number and wait until called.”

I glanced around as I walked away just in case there were any unsavory adventurers who saw newbies to the guild as fresh meat, but thankfully, there were no such thugs. Not long after, my adventurer card finished printing.

“Here you go,” said the receptionist as she handed it to me.

Makoto Takatsuki: Apprentice Mage

Level: 2

Adventurer Rank: Stone

Unique Skills: *Calm Mind, Water Magic (Low Rank), RPG Player*

Normal Skills: *Sense Danger, Stealth, Scout, Mapping, Dodge, Flee, Clairvoyance, Listen, Throw, Gut, Cook, First Aid, Ignite*

Strength: XX

Stamina: XX

Spirit: XX

Agility: XX

Defeating those goblins had bumped me up to level 2. Everything after looked to be the same unimpressive stats I'd seen over and over at the temple.

Damn, I'm weak. Not exactly news, though.

"Oh well." Thanks to my *Calm Mind* skill, I didn't need to dwell on it.

I pocketed my adventurer's license card and left the building. On to my next destination, a place I'd specifically asked the merchant about: Fujiwara Trading Company.

That's right. My old classmate Fujiyan already had his own store.

## Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Reunites with Fujiyan

Fujiyan was a friend I had met in class during my first year of high school. Our seats had happened to be close to each other, so we frequently had lively discussions about games together. I liked RPGs, and Fujiyan liked waifu games. We may have preferred different genres, but we'd maintained a friendly relationship by lending each other our favorite titles.

I'd been separated from Fujiyan at the Water Temple nine months ago, and now he had his own store. That guy had made it big in no time.

*Even though we're both high school students,* I couldn't help but think.

Then again, I had another classmate who had the *Hero of Light* skill and was nominated to be captain of the Highland Knights, but he was a special case. I needed to avoid comparing myself to him. Nonetheless, maybe all my other classmates were out finding huge success while I slacked off and got left behind...

Thinking that way soured my mood, but I reached my destination despite my depression. I spotted a large sign with "Fujiwara Trading" written on it. This was the place.

*I hope Fujiyan's still the same guy I always knew,* I thought. I'd spent the past year in this world training in magic and adventuring. As an otherworlder, the Water Temple had exempted me from all clothing, food, and education fees. Which is to say, the government took care of me and gave me a cozy, unchallenging life. I was a state-recognized NEET.

Fujiyan was the opposite. Sure, he had some useful skills, but he was still young enough to be considered a minor back in Japan. Even so, he'd been scouted by a trading company and had obtained a store of his own in under nine months. I couldn't imagine where his life had taken him since our last meeting. Would we still be on the same wavelength after I'd spent a whole year cooped up in the Water Temple? I had to admit, I was nervous.

“Pardon me...” I murmured as I slowly entered the store.

“Welcome’h!” A lady employee shouted a greeting at me. When I looked her way, I saw...

*A woman with bunny ears?!*

Yes, behind the counter was a bunny-eared beastwoman with a small frame and ruffled brown hair. Her wide-open eyes were rather adorable.

“Are you an adventurer, sir? We’ve got plenty of items and armor for ya’h!”

The employee helped me with a smile. She had a bit of an accent at the end of her sentences, so I wondered if she had come to Roses from a different country. But still, a store with bunny-eared staff? Fujiyan’s tastes were on full display.

“Umm, is Mr. Fujiwara here? The store owner.”

“Ah, so you’re a merchant.” Her tone suddenly changed. “Preliminary business discussions go through me’h.”

“Oh, no, it’s not like that. I’m, uh, a friend of Fujiwara’s, so...”

“A friend of the boss’s?” questioned the employee. She sized me up with a piercing gaze. “Could I have your name’h?”

“Um, it’s Makoto Takatsuki.”

“Wait! Could you have perhaps come from another world?”

“Ah, yes, I did.”

“Please wait just one minute! I’ll be back in a moment’h!” She hurriedly disappeared into a back room and returned with a small device about the size of a cigarette box. The woman held one of the numerous buttons arranged on its surface and brought the device to her mouth. “Boss! Mr. Takatsuki is here’h!”

“What did you say?” came a familiar voice. “Has he truly arrived?!”

The woman handed me the device that was apparently a receiver. “Mr. Takatsuki, here you go’h.”

“Fujiyan, are you there?”

“Ooooooh! That nickname! That voice could belong to none other than my esteemed Tackie!”

“It’s been a while,” I said. “I figured I’d come to visit since I made it to Macallan.”

“Oh, how I’ve waited! I’d like to return to the store right this moment, but I’m afraid I have negotiations to attend to. Could I ask you to meet your humble compatriot at my shop by nightfall?”

“Yeah, got it. See ya then.” I handed the receiver to the employee and told her that I’d be back.

*Fujiyan hasn’t changed a bit*, I thought. If he was still talking that way, then I figured we’d be able to chill like old times. I was kinda relieved.

I had some time to spare until I’d meet Fujiyan, so I decided to explore outside the city. The employee told me about a forest to the south where weak monsters like giant rats spawned.

*I want to take the dagger the goddess gave me for a test cut!*

“Wow, this is pretty nice.”

I had stopped a giant rat in its tracks with *Water Magic: Ice Arrow* and used my dagger to strike the final blow. There was almost no resistance; the blade cut through the monster like butter.

“I got one heck of a weapon,” I remarked. Yep, this called for some thanks to the goddess.

“O Goddess, thank you for this blessing.” I brought my hands together the way people prayed back home and offered my appreciation to the goddess.

*Told ya*, came the goddess’s voice ever so faintly. *Be grateful*.

A vision came across my mind of the goddess puffing her chest out with a smug look on her face. Was she so invested because I was her believer now? Either way, the goddess was cute, so I couldn’t complain.

I skinned the rat and went to an item shop to sell it. The adventurer’s guild would have bought it too, but I wanted to see as much of the city as I could!

“That’ll be three thousand gald.”

They bought three rat pelts off of me. Using the money I received for them, I then bought a sheath for the sword the goddess had given me.

I left the item shop and strolled through the city. The heart of Macallan was bustling and lined with shops selling food, clothing, weapons, items, and more. There was even a pet shop for familiars. This was a fantasy world, all right.

Once I left the shopping district’s road, I found myself in a culinary district lined with restaurants and bars. Behind that was a street filled with inns, and behind even that was a brothel district filled with questionable establishments. Not that I’d have the money for anything of the sort, of course.

I looked at a number of weapon shops that piqued my interest. The goddess’s dagger would suffice for now, but I wanted to set my sights on becoming a spellsword.

Despite my affinity for the mage class, I didn’t have the Strength to wield normal swords, so I couldn’t become a swordfighter. However, I’d heard rumors about the existence of sacred and demonic swords which allowed their users to master any job. I’d like to find one of those magic swords for myself.

While I was perusing blades, I had my goddess’s dagger appraised.

“Sir, can I ask where you found this dagger?”

“Uhh, an acquaintance let me borrow it,” I answered vaguely. “All I know is that it should be valuable.”

“Well, it certainly has some magical properties. Can’t say just what without inspecting in detail, though. So, any plans to sell it?”

I wouldn’t dream of selling it! But it looked like the shopkeeper had his eyes on it, so I took my dagger back in a hurry.

I looked around the store to see if there were any magic swords. I noticed that a lot of customers seemed to be adventurers, all of them properly equipped for their jobs.

“Please, Jean, you don’t need a sword *that* expensive yet.”

“Maybe, but hey, I’ll need it for the stronger monsters, won’t I?”

I peeked over to see a man who looked like a warrior talking to a cleric-ish woman. Were they a couple?

“C’mon,” the woman protested, “buy *me* some equipment for once!”

“All right, Emily. How about I give up on the weapon and order you some new clothes?”

“Hooray! You’re the best, Jean!” The woman started clinging to the man’s arm.

*Die in a fire, normies.*

As I continued to wander, the time for our meetup came closer. I made it back to Fujiyan’s shop right on time and saw a familiar stoutly figure pacing around the showroom. It was a face I hadn’t seen in nine months.





“Fujiyan!” I called out.

“My esteemed Tackie!” Fujiyan shouted back as he lumbered over. “It’s been quite the while indeed! How reassuring it is to see you in good health!”

“Glad you’re doing all right too.”

“Now then, I’ve made reservations, so let us be off!”

The reservation was at a restaurant in a back alley behind the large district of eateries. It was quiet, almost like a hideaway. Fujiyan knew all the best places, huh?

As soon as we entered the store he’d picked out, Fujiyan and I were taken to a private booth in the back.

“Cheers!” we both shouted as we clinked our glasses together. Fujiyan was drinking a pint of ale while I had a fruit cocktail. This was my first time drinking alcohol in an actual restaurant.

Also, you only had to be thirteen to drink in this country, so this wasn’t illegal.

“How does your drink find you?” asked Fujiyan.

“Tastes kinda like juice.”

“Would you prefer an ale?”

“Hmm, I’ll pass on that,” I said. “I tried it at the temple, but it’s just too bitter for me.”

“You’ll find it to be delicious in time.”

“Really? If you say so.”

Our food was delivered plate by plate as we talked: thick steaks, fried shrimp, freshwater sashimi, cheese-drenched pasta, and hearty soup. What a feast! I dug into the fried shrimp.

“That’s good!” I exclaimed.

“It suits your tastes, I take it?”

“It’s super good. Especially after all the bland food they served at the temple.”

“Indeed, I don’t recall if it even had flavor.”

We spent a while complaining about the Water Temple's simple cooking as we feasted upon everything the restaurant had to offer.

"But I must say, I was quite worried. I hadn't heard a word of correspondence from you for the entire year."

"That's because I stayed until the very end of the otherworlder lodging period," I explained. "I was the last one left. Nobody besides Sakurai invited me to join their party."

"How unfortunate..." Fujiyan looked like he was sorry for me, but I just gave him a cheerful grin.

"But hey, I did a solo run yesterday where I saved some people from a band of goblins."

"Great Scott!" Fujiyan exclaimed. "They say that one would need to be a mid rank mage or swordfighter to defeat a band of goblins alone. Was it not dangerous?"

"Maybe, but I didn't sweat it. Turns out the skills I've got actually have their uses." I tried repeating the reasoning the goddess had given me about my skills. Fujiyan seemed to listen intently and was impressed enough to give me an "indeed."

"Well, I finished registering with the adventurer's guild, so I'm gonna take it easy and grind up from stone rank."

"An adventurer, you say? I'm afraid it's not the path for your humble compatriot, but as a gamer, I've much respect for the profession."

"C'mon, Fujiyan, you're already making it big as a trader," I assured him.

"Oh, far from it. I had to take on debt to create my store."

Ah, I didn't know that. But still...

"I saw that you've got a bunny-eared employee. You're living your best life out here."

"Pffft!" spouted Fujiyan as ale sprayed from his mouth. "Ah, of course, you've met my employee, right."

“Sure is a cute one, that employee.”

“W-Well, perhaps,” he stammered, “but I’ll have you know that by no means did I hire by appearance.”

I doubted this.

“Fujiyan, this was your dream. You hired a cute bunny girl to work for you, so you practically won at life.”

“That girl is someone I met in Great Keith and hired as a bodyguard. She’s a silver rank adventurer, I’ll have you know.”

“Huh, she didn’t look that strong,” I remarked in awe. “So, she’s a first-rate adventurer on top of being cute?”

“Do ho ho, she was a pricey purchase, mind you... Oh.”

“Oh?” Purchase? Fujiyan, what word did you just use?

“F-Forget I said anything.”

“No way, I can’t let that go. What do you mean by ‘purchase’?”

It couldn’t be. He’d never. But what else could a “purchase” be?

“Sh-She was a slave. The employee I hired.”

“Yikes...” *Fujiyan actually hired a sex slave?!*

“She’s not a sex slave, I’ll have you know!” Fujiyan retorted as though he’d read my mind. “Our relationship is strictly business. I even pay her wages.”

“Ah, I see. So you’re an employer to her?”

“Indeed, an employer.”

But she was one cute employee, so...

“Made any moves?”

“How dare you! Animal-eared girls are not to be defiled!”

Yep, I still don’t get what he’s into. That said, it was impressive that he had a silver rank adventurer under his employment. He’d clearly been braving the hardships of adult life out here; he seemed like he’d experienced a lot in his time.

Speaking of experience, I wanted to ask one other thing. We'd both gotten a bit inebriated by now, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to get a little unsafe for work.

"By the way, Fujiyan—you're still a virgin, right?"

"Pfffffft!" Fujiyan spat out his ale yet again. "Wh-What would possess you to ask something like that?!"

There's an urban legend in Japan that says if you keep your virginity until you turn thirty, you'll become a wizard. Fujiyan and I had often called ourselves the "Virgin Alliance" as we motivated each other to obtain wizardhood. I also remembered how Sasaki had called us idiots as she'd shot us frigid glares. The good ol' days. I hoped that Fujiyan hadn't forgotten...

"Fujiyan?"

He looked uncomfortable as he avoided eye contact. *No, don't do this to me...*

"My trading has brought me in contact with many people... And, well, there are establishments offering those services..."

E-Establishments? I recalled those questionable stores I'd seen while exploring the city.

"I-I'm afraid that your humble compatriot has lost all claim to the title of wizard..."

"Y-You traitor!" I ordered the most alcoholic drink on the menu, a flaming cocktail, and gulped it down. Or, I tried to, before immediately spitting it out. My throat was burning! What the heck was in this? Did they serve poison here?

"C-Calm yourself, my esteemed Tackie!"

"I am calm. My *Calm Mind* skill keeps me cool as a cucumber."

"You don't appear that way..."

"Well, now that I think about it, I'm a virgin *and* became a mage, while you lost your virginity and didn't get any magic powers to show for it. Therefore, I win."

"I can't help but feel there are some leaps of logic in there..." said Fujiyan.

Yeah, I was aware. It didn't erase my sense of defeat though, so I figured it'd be best to drop the subject there. But still, I'd left my buddy for just a moment and he'd already climbed a step toward adulthood...

"Anyway, Fujiyan, what've you been up to since leaving the temple?" There was no doubt he'd been successful, but I still wanted to hear the details.

"Ah yes, listen well. Your humble compatriot began as a member of the Franz Trading Company." The Franz Trading Company was the largest trade organization on the continent. I remembered that they were the ones who'd scouted him back when we were at the Water Temple together.

"Indeed, at first, I was made to transport cargo day in and day out using my *Storage (Ultra Rank)* skill." Fujiyan sounded nostalgic for his earlier days, but it sounded pretty stressful to me. "Some days, I'd stock up on weaponry and depart for Great Keith. Other days, I'd take ores and metals and travel to sell them in Cameron. And yet other days, I was tasked with loading up a massive amount of clothes from Springrogue and delivering them to Highland. I scarcely had any breaks, with very little time wasted on sleep."

"That must have been rough," I sympathized, but Fujiyan just smirked.

"Fortunately, I was also blessed with the *Appraisal (Ultra Rank)* skill." He meant that in his travels to numerous countries, he'd explored the markets and bazaars in search of bargains. Selling items in other nations was how he'd built his capital.

"After that," he continued, "I found someone within the company whom I could trust and requested their assistance in becoming independent. Truly a debt I've yet to repay."

Wow. Where'd he get all the motivation and communication skills from? That stuff was way beyond me.

"I'm impressed that you found someone trustworthy...and that you knew you could trust them so soon after meeting them," I said.

I had nothing but garbage skills, so nobody even gave me the time of day. But Fujiyan had a ton of useful skills, so I could imagine a lot of people would want to get close to him and use him for their own ambitions.

“There’s a reason for that,” began Fujiyan as he lowered his voice. “My esteemed Tackie, you remember my skills, do you not?”

“Uh, you’ve got *Storage, Appraisal*, and then...” I took a moment to think. “*Waifu Game Player*?”

“Indeed. It was that last one that presented a problem.”

I remembered that the skill allowed him to read logs of conversations, but Fujiyan explained that there was more to it.

“As that skill’s mastery rose, it allowed me to read the minds of others.”

“What?” For real? That sounded wild. “Guess you’re just like the goddess.”

“Hm? Pardon?”

“I’ll explain later,” I said. “But do you mean to tell me you’ve been reading my mind this whole time?”

“As curious as I am about that statement of yours, I shall oblige and explain my skill.”

*Waifu Game Player* was a bizarre skill that, put simply, allowed the user to record the conversations of people they spoke to as text. Every time they talked with others, a message window would appear to them that displayed the text of what the other person said. It was a mechanic you’d find in tons of Japanese adventure games or visual novels. You could say it suited someone who loved waifu games as much as Fujiyan. Incidentally, the text it displayed was in Japanese.

It hadn’t seemed too valuable at first, but it’d proved convenient in his work as a merchant, since he didn’t need to take notes while talking to the many different business partners his travels had taken him to. As a bonus, people were impressed by what they perceived to be his incredibly good memory.

“I was merely searching through my conversational log, of course,” chuckled Fujiyan. “But around half a year ago, I noticed something peculiar.”

The skill that previously just displayed the text of spoken words had now begun to display the text of peoples’ thoughts (within a pair of parentheses).

As an example: “Top of the mornin’ to ya, Mr. Fujiwara. Workin’ hard, or

hardly workin', eh?" (This moneygrubbing otherworlder oughta stay in his lane.)  
"Wow," I said, "that sounds kinda overpowered for a merchant, doesn't it?"

"Yes, well. I can't argue the contrary," began Fujiyan. The skill allowed him to see when people spoke poorly of him behind his back or if they held a grudge. It also proved invaluable for finding allies. Made sense.

"However, I find it hard to stop worrying," he continued. It didn't seem like he'd ever told anyone that his skill had gained this power.

"Are you sure you should've told me?"

"Well, I've nobody else I could imagine sharing this with. Besides, it's the sort of thing I'd have to reveal either immediately or never at all." He snickered, but I understood where he was coming from. It'd be pretty uncomfortable to tell someone that you'd been reading their mind the whole time.

"My esteemed Tackie," Fujiyan asked cautiously, "are you, perhaps, perturbed by my ability?"

"You're not the only person I know who can read minds, so no big deal."

"Yes, that! Right there!" exclaimed Fujiyan. "What was that 'goddess' you spoke of?"

Well hey, I figured it wasn't worth hiding. He was a mind reader anyway.

"So last night..." I began, explaining how I had become a goddess's acolyte in my dream. Once I finished, I showed Fujiyan my Soul Book.

"Hmmm," Fujiyan pondered. "It does indeed say 'The Goddess's First Believer' on this page, but I find it curious that no name is given."

"Yeah, it sure is. Hard to recruit more followers without a name."

"Might I ask how legitimate this goddess is?" Fujiyan looked concerned. It must've been like meeting a friend for the first time in a while and finding out they'd joined a cult. Yeah, I'd be concerned too.

"Come to think of it," I said, "the goddess gave me a dagger when I became her believer. Think you could appraise it?"

"Well now! The Dagger of the Goddess! It appears rather impressive. Please,



allow me to do the honors.”

*Oh, wait, crap,* came a voice to my head. What was she on about?

“This is it, Fujiyan.”

“Whoooooa! Its simplicity belies its beautiful engravings. It appears to be mithril at a glance, but further inspection reveals it to be a metal I’ve never encountered before. It’s clearly a rare material imbued with mana! An impressive piece of work, I must say!”

“I was told it had some kind of anti-appraisal magic cast on it.”

“Resistance is futile! It shall kneel before the might of my highly trained *Appraisal* skill!”

Glad to see him having fun.

Fujiyan excitedly looked over the dagger. He breathed heavily as he inspected every nook and cranny until, all of a sudden, he froze. He stopped speaking and just stared at the weapon with suspicion. The friend I’d known for being all smiles now had his eyes open wide. I was kinda scared.

“Fujiyan? What’s up?”

“H-Hmmm. Tackie. My esteemed friend. You said you received this dagger from the goddess, correct?”

“Yeah, I did.” Weird question. I had to wonder what could have possibly turned up in his appraisal. “So, uh, Fujiyan? Mind telling me what you found?”

Fujiyan looked hesitant to say it, but he opened his mouth and told me the truth.

“Tackie, I’ve finished appraising this dagger of yours. It’s the Dagger of the Wicked God Noah...”

I stared in silence.

I guess I’d wound up worshipping evil incarnate.

...Damn, that’s crazy.

For a moment, my brain locked up.

“T-Tackie?” asked Fujiyan.

“Well,” I said after a pause, “this might be a problem.”

My excitement at being reunited with a friend was quelled in an instant. Sure, that goddess was a little suspicious, but a wicked god of all things?

I got *got*.

“Come to think of it,” I wondered, “what *is* a wicked god, anyway?”

“Hmm,” said Fujiyan. “According to the myths, they’re the old gods who were defeated in the Divine War.”

The Divine Plane rested atop the highest point of this world. According to mythology, its ruling body had changed three times.

The first ruler was the one who built the world, the Creator. That deity eventually left this world behind.

The next rulers were the Creator’s sons and daughters. They went by a few different names: the Old Deities, the prior rulers, or the Titans. Their reign lasted for a long time.

However, the Old Deities became arrogant. They scorned and neglected all creatures that they perceived as being beneath them. It was our current rulers, the Sacred Deities, who eventually revolted against the Titans.

Soon after, war broke out between the two factions; this was the Divine War, Titanomachy. After a long, arduous battle, the Sacred Deities came out victorious. As such, they became the current rulers of the Divine Plane, while the Old Deities became branded as wicked gods.

Or at least, that was the mythology I’d learned at the Water Temple.

“So, I guess that means the goddess I believe in is one of those Old Deities. If memory serves, the Old Deities are locked away somewhere while they plot their recapture of the Divine Plane or something, right?”

“And it would seem that the goddess you entered a contract with is one of them.”

“Well, that’s probably bad.” I didn’t realize that my goddess was such a menace.

“Tackie,” asked Fujiyan with concern, “do you intend to continue being her believer?”

“Hmm...”

To be honest, I was still taking it all in. I couldn’t come up with any words, but thankfully, Fujiyan changed the subject.

“But I must say, this dagger is exquisite! I’ve finished appraising its abilities beyond its mere name!”

Oh, good to know. It felt pretty nice to cut with. Since the weapon shops I visited couldn’t appraise it, I was curious.

“So,” I said, “what *are* its abilities?”

“It’s forged from the legendary metal, adamantite. The endurance is god-tier. It’s imbued with a divine power that grants it a number of effects, such as *Smite*, *Indestructible*, *Demon Slayer*, *Mana Resonance*, *Elemental Transfer*... I must say, I’m unfamiliar with many of these. And what’s more...”

“Wow,” I remarked as Fujiyan continued to explain the dagger’s many abilities to me. What was this, a cheat weapon?

“Fujiyan, you’re making this dagger sound pretty strong.”

“Strong? Oh no, this dagger warrants far more than a word so banal! It is undoubtedly the most powerful dagger I’ve ever laid eyes on. It deserves to be treated as a national treasure!”

“Wow...” Guess that goddess wasn’t kidding about the “divine treasure” bit. Either way, I finally had my first cheat since coming to this world. And all it took was a deal with the devil.

“O Goddess,” I said as I brought my hands together in prayer, “I humbly thank you for this gift.”

“Are you not concerned about her identity as a wicked god?” inquired Fujiyan.

“Yeah, guess I gotta ask her about that.”

“But it must be difficult for you to meet her, is it not?”

“I’m not so sure,” I replied. “She might have been watching this whole conversation.”

“Goodness! Is that true?” Fujiyan looked to his sides in a panic. Probably because I’d said she was always watching.

*You are watching, aren’t you, Goddess?* I thought.

I waited, but she stayed quiet. Guess I’d figure that mystery out later.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I’ll think about whether I want to keep being her believer.”

“I see. I’d like to be of some assistance if I can. There may be little I can do against a god, but I’d be more than happy to listen.”

“Thanks.”

Fujiyan bottomed out his pint of ale which, incidentally, was his third glass. Then he ordered a flaming cocktail on the rocks.

“Wow, Fujiyan, you can really put that stuff away.” I was only halfway through my first glass.

“A merchant is always being wined and dined,” chuckled Fujiyan. The look in his eyes made it clear that he was talking from experience.

“Guess a merchant’s life isn’t for me,” I said, taking the tiniest sip of my drink. There was no way I could keep up with that. “I’m fine with being a laid-back adventurer.”

But then, Fujiyan seemed like he remembered something.

“Incidentally, while this may not be the time or place for a subject so grave, they say the Great Demon Lord will be resurrected within the next ten years.”

He’ll what?

“I had no idea,” I said. “Is that true?”

“Rumors have been spreading, at least. The priestesses of the six goddesses besides the moon goddess have all received revelations to that effect.”

“That’s news to me. Guess those people recruited as heroes have their work cut out for them.” People like Sakurai.

But still, the Great Demon Lord, huh? Kinda wished I were stronger so I could challenge him.

“And just between the two of us,” whispered Fujiyan, “the rumors also speculate that we otherworlders may have been called here to combat this threat.”

“Well, that *is* how the cliché goes. Makes me wish I had some stronger skills, though.”

“Oh no, I’m certainly no fighter either. I’m perfectly content with my chosen profession.”

“Ah. Well, good thing you got the right skills for that, Fujiyan.” I still wished that I had some stronger combat skills, though.

“For now, all nations appear to be gathering forces to prepare for a battle with this Great Demon Lord.”

“Ah, that’d explain why the Water Temple had so many scouts coming by.” Fujiyan sure was well-informed. I definitely wasn’t, so I appreciated the help.

“Now, my esteemed Tackie, what are your plans for the future?”

“Just keep adventuring and leveling up for a while,” I answered.

“Would you perhaps be interested in forming a party with your humble compatriot?”

“With you?” I didn’t know merchants could battle. Didn’t he just say he was no fighter?

But I heard him out, and apparently merchants sometimes hired adventurers to explore dungeons that they couldn’t fight through themselves. That employee of his was a silver rank adventurer too. Fujiyan could hire me out of his own pocket, and I’d get to adventure with a little more peace of mind.

But still, you know? That’d just make it too easy. I’d be relying on Fujiyan too much.

“Thanks for the offer,” I said, “but I’m gonna see what I can do solo. That’s what I spent all my time training at the temple for.”

“Ah, I see. Well, don’t hesitate to call me if you face any trouble.” I appreciated that offer too. Making classroom friends can pay off.

We spent the rest of the night chatting about anything we could think of, from memories of our old world to fun activities in this one.

Of course, the thing we remembered most fondly from our old world was video games. It’d been a whole year since we’d left Japan behind, so there were probably tons of new releases that we were missing.

In his travels, Fujiyan had tasted local cuisines from all across the continent. He said that a lot of it was surprisingly delicious. His one complaint seemed to be that they didn’t have ramen, so he talked with passion about his plans to open a ramen chain someday.

Personally, I could’ve gone for a burger. All I needed in life were games, cheeseburgers, fries, and soda. Ah, just the thought takes me back.

“My esteemed Tackie, you pay far too little mind to your health. Going three sleepless nights fueled by nothing but burgers and fries sounds like a death sentence.”

“Says the guy who eats ramen or curry for breakfast,” I retorted.

“Well, not lately, mind you.”

“Anyway, I got healthier when I came to this world. All I ate at the temple was bland vegetable soup and porridge.”

“Indeed. I’d prefer if I never recalled that temple’s cooking again. It would do you some good to visit the Nation of Commerce, Cameron. It’s a wealthy nation, so the cuisine is exquisite.”

“Huh, you don’t say. I bet it’s expensive, though.”

We talked late into the evening. By the time we agreed to head back, it was well past midnight. Fujiyan invited me to stay the night at his place countless times, but I figured it was asking too much and so I turned him down. He’d already paid for both of our tabs, so I’d have to treat him next time.

I returned to the adventurer's guild, curled up with a blanket in a corner of the large rest area, and made it through my first night as an adventurer. The snores and mumblings of the other sleepers distracted me a bit, but I was so tired that I quickly nodded off.



That night, I had another dream. I found myself in an empty, wide-open space. It'd been a whole day since I'd last seen this sight.

"Uh, Goddess? What are you doing?"

The goddess was pleading on her hands and knees. Her back was outstretched and her forearms were crossed in front of her. The casually exposed nape of her neck was pretty hot.

Wait, no, focus.

"O Goddess Noah," I gently called out. The goddess's shoulders jerked up and shuddered. "That's your name, isn't it?"

There was a long pause.

Until finally, in the faintest of whimpers...

"Yes," responded the goddess, Noah.

"So, you're actually a wicked deity?"

This time, there was no response.

"That's enough," I said to break the silence. "Just lift your head. It's kind of uncomfortable to talk while you're begging."

"Are you going to quit being my believer?" asked the goddess. Her face stayed firmly planted on the ground.

I paused to think, but...

"C'mon, say something!" the goddess suddenly shouted. She shot up and gripped my shoulders. "Look, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to trick you. I just left out one teensy detail."

*I think that's what people call a scam.*

“It’s not a scam!” she said, responding to my thoughts. “Besides, I’m still a goddess either way!”

“But you *are* an Old Deity, aren’t you?”

“Hey, listen. That ‘old’ stuff’s a little uncalled for, don’t ya think? Gotta say, I’m not a fan. Also, I’m one of the younger Titans, so, just an FYI.” The goddess pouted and kicked the air a bit.

*Still as cute as ever.*

Wait, she just started grinning. She must have read my mind.

“Well, my cute goddess,” I said, “good luck finding your next believer. I’m out.”

“No way, no way, no way!” the goddess pleaded. “I waited a thousand years to get my first acolyte! And a deity without believers is stuck being powerless. I almost never get any followers in this world since everyone treats me like the root of all evil, so asking otherworlders is the only chance I’ve got!”

Well, that made sense. And the rest of the otherworlders had already pledged belief to one of the six main goddesses. Maybe as a minor goddess, Noah had to recruit last or something.

“C-C’mon, Makoto, that dagger was pretty nice, right?”

“You mean this thing?” I looked down at the weapon on my hip. According to Fujiyan, it was indeed pretty nice. Definitely not something I’d come across as an honest adventurer. “It is, but the whole wicked god thing came out when I got it appraised, so you kinda slipped up with that.”

“I didn’t! A normal appraisal isn’t supposed to catch that part!”

Meaning that Fujiyan’s skills were far from normal. Guess he didn’t have an ultra rank in appraisal for nothing.

Wait, didn’t that mean she was planning to deceive me the whole time?

“Uh, well, about that,” the goddess stammered. “The thing is, er...”

The goddess was fidgeting. It looked like she couldn’t come up with a good excuse.



Though to be fair, even if she'd faked her identity, the stats on the dagger were the real deal. The Water Temple hadn't given me a weapon, so the adventure I'd be having with this blade would be very different from the one I'd have without it.

If nothing else, she deserved to hear as much.

"O Goddess Noah, I thank you for the gift of this dagger. Rest assured, I'll treat it well."

"Good, I'm happy you like it." The goddess grinned. She didn't look remotely wicked with a smile like that. "No, you see, the whole 'wicked' thing was just something the believers of the Sacred Deities came up with. I'm a goddess, for real."

She pursed her lips and pouted as she griped. That reasoning made a bit more sense to me; she certainly wasn't lying about her divinity. With that in mind, our first conversation seemed a little less like a scam.

"Okay, I'll continue to be your believer."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Since I'd come to this world, this goddess here was the only person to ever say that they had hopes for me. Everyone else laughed at me, pitied me, or feared for my life. I had to admit, those supportive words of hers warmed my heart.

*Oh yeah, I remembered, that's right, she's a mind reader. Maybe it's pity after all?*

But as I lost myself in thought, the goddess suddenly came up to me.

"Makoto."

And then, she hugged me.

"I treasure my acolytes, and that means you. I have high hopes for you, so please, grow strong at whatever pace you choose."

"Now you're being so obvious that it makes me even more suspicious."

"H-How rude! I worked hard on that one!" The goddess battered her fists

against my head. Sorry, I couldn't help that *Calm Mind* and *RPG Player* turned out to be such first-rate skills.

It felt a little embarrassing to watch myself get hugged by the goddess from a third person perspective. Either way, the contract was still on. Guess I'd just keep on trucking as a believer in the goddess Noah.

"Since we're here, do you still have no orders for me?" I asked.

"Why do you desire divine revelation so much?"

"I mean, getting to the goddess cutscene and just receiving a dagger seems a bit lacking. Usually the player would be given some impossible quest, like defeating the Great Demon Lord. It's just how the genre goes."

"You're one strange acolyte," Noah remarked with a befuddled look. "Okay, how about this? I'm locked up as punishment for defying the Sacred Deities—why not come and rescue me?"

Ooh! Now that's a classic. Save the captured goddess? I couldn't have asked for a better plot. Yep, that'd do nicely.

"So, are you trapped where all the other Old Deities are?"

"Oh, right. No, that's somewhere else. The Old Deities are locked away in a place called Tartarus, far beyond any destination a human could hope to reach. But since I'm a younger deity, I'm being held somewhere else. Somewhere that a human should *just* barely be able to find."

Ah, it figured that there were some details I wouldn't learn from the myths alone.

"I'm being held in the Abyssal Seafloor Temple," revealed the goddess.

"Pardon? Could you repeat that?"

"The Seafloor Temple."

So, a dungeon at the furthest depths of the sea.

There was a labyrinth said to exist at the lowest point in the ocean. The final destination at the exit of this labyrinth was known as the Seafloor Temple. The goddess Noah had just brought up one of the top three hardest dungeons in the

world.

A dungeon that humanity had yet to reach.

“Ah, figures,” the goddess said with a smile. “Wanna quit yet?”

Quit? Me? The man who gets pumped when he’s told that a game is brutally difficult?

“I’ll go,” I said. “That’s gonna be my goal. I promise I’ll save you as thanks for this dagger.”

I was being serious, but the goddess just gave me a perplexed chuckle.

“The dagger was to thank you for becoming my acolyte, so you don’t have to worry about being even. And since you might get my blessing or additional skills if you pray every day, being my believer is a bargain!”

*Yes, my goddess comes on as strong as a used car salesman.*

“Hey, that was uncalled for,” the goddess chastised. “Anyway, time for you to wake up.”

My vision started to blur.

“If you feel up to it, come and rescue me. I’ll be waiting patiently.” Noah waved goodbye with a smile.

Patiently? I hope she realized that I had nine years left to live. For now, my focus would be on leveling up and increasing my lifespan.

“If you free me, I’ll do anything you want!”

Bold offer, Goddess. Unless you’re just being careless.



When I awoke, I looked at my Soul Book. I saw that it’d been updated to say “The Goddess Noah’s First Believer.” I was relieved that it didn’t call her “wicked.”

*Just you wait, Noah,* I thought. I held the dagger in both hands and offered a prayer.

“All right, let’s get going.”

Today would be my first day working as an adventurer in Macallan. I left the adventurer's guild's rest area and headed for the front desk. It was early in the morning, so the reception area was barren.

"Hmmm... I think these would suit your level and adventurer rank, Mr. Takatsuki."

- Capture Horned Rabbits in the Great Forest (3 Units)
- Transport Cargo to Great Keith by Carriage (Pay includes two meals + board)
- Transport Cargo to Highland by Carriage (Pay includes three meals + board)

Yep, these quests all looked pretty dull.

"Are there any, like, monster hunting quests?" I inquired.

"You're solo, aren't you? The hunting quests we've been getting lately have all asked for parties."

"I see... Well, I'll take the horned rabbit one, then."

"All right, I've got you assigned to it," confirmed the receptionist. "By the way, if you come across any goblins or ogres, be sure to either eliminate them or report their presence. That's an open quest, so you'll be rewarded."

"Huh." I had no idea.

"I think elimination might be beyond your level, though. I suggest you run if you see any."

"Oh, right..."

Of course. Then again, I'd never seen an ogre before, so maybe I'd decide whether or not to fight it once I came across one.

"Do you have any questions?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Oh, well then, good luck. Next in line, please!"

I left the adventurer's guild and headed for the eastern gate. When I showed

the guard my guild license card, he let me through without a hitch.

He even told me “good luck.”

I lowered my head a bit and walked toward the forest. My destination would be within its depths.

And so, the Great Forest. Much of the area between Roses and the neighboring nation of Springrogue was covered by this massive woodland. Within the great forest were many dangerous regions, such as the naturally formed dungeon known as the Wayward Woods, or the breeding ground of powerful monsters known as the Forest of Fiends.

Incidentally, the part of this forest that was behind the Water Temple was called the Forest of Elementals. It was a sanctuary that monsters almost never approached.

Today’s quest centered on a creature that lived all throughout the Great Forest: a horned rabbit. Like a normal rabbit, except with a single horn sprouting from its fluffy head. Though they might’ve looked like cute critters, make no mistake, these were monsters.

For reference, a monster’s threat level was divided into classes:

- Class 0 (Harmless): Anyone could defeat them.
- Class 1 (Danger: Low): Recommended for stone rank adventurers.
- Class 2 (Danger: Medium): Recommended for bronze rank adventurers.
- Class 3 (Danger: High): Recommended for iron rank adventurers.
- Class 4 (Catastrophe: Village): Recommended for silver or gold rank adventurers.
- Class 5 (Catastrophe: City): Recommended for platinum rank adventurers.
- Class 6 (Catastrophe: Nation): Recommended for mithril rank adventurers.
- Class 7 (Catastrophe: Continent): Recommended for orichalcum or hero rank adventurers.
- Class 8 (Catastrophe: World): If you’re not the Savior, give up.

Or something like that. The horned rabbits I was after today were Class 0, so

anyone—by which I mean me—could handle them. They didn't attack humans, but they *were* pests who ruined farmland, hence why this turned out to be a hunting quest. Their meat was even considered a popular protein.

"Found one."

The brown rabbit I saw had small horns growing out of its head. I heard they'd grow bigger as the horned rabbit matured.

"*Water Magic: Ice Arrow.*"

I approached using my *Stealth* skill and cast *Ice Arrow* before I was noticed. My magic was too lacking in power to take it out alone, so I struck the final blow with my dagger.

I finished hunting the requisite three horned rabbits in no time. As I was about to head home, my *Sense Danger* skill gave me a reading.

Was this feeling a goblin? There was probably a goblin settlement nearby. I didn't know my way around the Great Forest very well, but according to the research I'd done beforehand, the spot where I was hunting should've been near the Forest of Fiends, inside which lived many strong monsters. It made sense that weaker monsters would hang around the entrance to this dungeon.

I decided to use my *Scout* skill.

*About forty of them*, I thought. Four times greater than what I'd fought last time. The calm, rational idea would be to run away.

*But some of them are acting alone*, I realized. If I could use my *Stealth* skill to isolate and eliminate the stragglers, I could cut their numbers down.

Fight the goblins?

►Yes

No

My *RPG Player* skill took the hint and presented me with an option. I could report them to the guild, but hey, why not take a few of them down while I'm here?

*Don't start jinxing it!*

I felt like I'd just heard a voice. Guess the goddess was watching.

I used my *Stealth* skill to silence my footsteps as I carefully snuck toward a goblin that was walking all alone.

### ◇ A Particular Guild Receptionist's Perspective ◇

A strange newbie adventurer came by today. His name was Makoto Takatsuki. He was one of those otherworlders who'd taken the world by storm not long ago. But his stats were the real surprise.

At the time, all I could think was, *Damn, this guy's weak*. Forget the average adventurer, his stats were low enough that he'd lose to children. Was he cut out for...

*No, stop*, I thought. *I'm a guild employee. I mustn't say that out loud*.

I noticed one other thing as I continued to skim his Soul Book: this boy had nine years left of his lifespan. He needed to adventure and build up a catalog of good deeds if he wanted to live...

*You poor thing... Good luck*, I thought, cheering him on in my heart.

And then came the next day.

*It's that kid again...*

He accepted the horned rabbit hunting quest and set off.

*I know I warned him to run if he saw any goblins or ogres, but...*

The most fatal mistake that newbies tended to make was having overconfidence in their strength. Even low-danger monsters like goblins could prove fearsome if they were present in great enough numbers.

But when he returned, the newbie told me how he'd been unfazed.

"What? You defeated a goblin?!"

"Sure did," said Makoto with a bit of pride as he whipped out his adventurer card. I looked the card over and sure enough, the goblins he'd defeated were recorded on it. Yes, plural; he'd somehow managed to take down five of them.

“Well, I see that you have. But still, you shouldn’t push yourself. You’re in stone rank and this is your first day adventuring.”

“Hey, it’s nothing to me,” said the boy named Makoto Takatsuki as he bashfully scratched his cheek. He was seriously trying to act like a big shot. I’d seen this every now and then with young, newbie adventurers. They’d defeat a monster by the skin of their teeth and then brag about how easy it had been to the ladies at the reception booths.

“Fine, but listen,” I said. “You’re a newbie, so the standard is that you run if you see any monster besides the ones you’re hunting. Got it?”

“Yeah, I get it...” The black-haired and black-eyed boy didn’t inspire confidence, but he nodded with an absolutely heartrending look on his face.

I breathed a sigh of relief, positive that at least some of that had gotten through to him.

And the next day...

“You defeated ten goblins?!” How did it increase?!

“A-Are you okay?” I asked. “Ah, did another adventurer help you defeat them?”

“No, I beat them alone.”

You’ve gotta be kidding me! Even a whole party of bronze rank adventurers wouldn’t make it through a fight against ten goblins unscathed!

But there it was on his adventurer card: “**Hunt Goblins (10 Units): Complete**” The records of an adventurer card were absolute. There was no way to fake this.

“Well, that concludes my report, so...” Makoto attempted to leave. This was bad. I’d seen plenty of adventurers come and go, so I could tell this one was rushing it. One day, he’d be given an injury that people can’t recover from. And that day could come very soon.

“Lucas!” I called out to a guild veteran.

Lucas was a gold rank adventurer. His remarkable skills had earned him the nickname of “Lucas the Dragonslayer.” He’d cleared dungeons across the



continent in his younger days; by the time he'd conquered the massive maze Labyrinthos, his name had been known throughout the land.

He'd taken a step away from the front lines since then, however. He was now living out his days leisurely here in Macallan while he showed newer adventurers the ropes. I was certain that Lucas would be able to keep Makoto from putting himself in harm's way.

Phew. Nothing to worry about now, right?

And so, the next day arrived. Lucas and Makoto returned from completing an adventure together.

"Hey, Mary, this fella's somethin' else!"

Mary was, incidentally, my name.

"So, Lucas, did you give Makoto some guidance?" I asked the two what'd happened on the day's quest.

"This Makoto kid defeated fifteen goblins all on his own."

"Whaaaaaaaaa?!" I exclaimed. "Lucas! Makoto's a newbie! What are you making him fight for?"

Fifteen! That's like a whole goblin platoon!

"Where were these goblins?" I asked. We could have a problem if there was a goblin's nest so close to the city. I didn't want to think about what could happen if we let them be!

"Oh, don't worry. All the goblins that this kid hunted were by the Forest of Fiends," said Lucas, as though that was something I didn't need to worry about.

"Th-The Forest of Fiends?! Makoto, is *that* the place you've been going to this whole time?!"

The Forest of Fiends was one of the most dangerous dungeons near Macallan. The cursed trees that grew inside emitted mana, making it home to a massive amount of monsters who fed on that mana...as well as carnivorous beasts who fed on the monsters. It was a dungeon only recommended for adventurers silver rank and higher.

“Absolutely not! Makoto, you mustn’t go there!”

“No, I didn’t,” explained Makoto with an awkward expression. “I’ve never entered the Forest of Fiends. Just like you told me.”

“Yep, this fella only hunted the goblins who hung around the outskirts of it. Lone goblins, at that.”

“Ah, that explains it.” Lone goblins. Ones that had left their pack to create a new nest. Most lone goblins wound up hunted by adventurers, but some became strong enough to create their own massive pack. In that case, Makoto was doing the right thing.

“All right, let’s get to drinkin’! Listen here, Makoto. You’re only a real adventurer when you can handle your liquor.”

“Uhh... I’m not great at drinking.”

“Aw, don’t sweat it!” boomed Lucas. “Tonight’ll be on me.”

“Um... Lucas?” I interjected. “I wasn’t finished talking...”

“I know a place with skewers that are to die for! I hear they call it ‘yakitori’ where you’re from.”

“Huh? You mean, chicken?” Makoto asked, before making an immediate decision. “I’m going.”

“Good to hear! The chef’s an ol’ buddy of mine, and nothin’ beats their ale and chicken together!”

Lucas was taking yet another newbie out for drinks.

Gulp.

I, uh, might be feeling a bit parched myself. Maybe I’ll join them later...

After that, Makoto spent every day hunting goblins. His daily count of slain goblins peaked at around twenty. Apparently, he felt that was a good number.

“Like they say, Mary—everything in moderation, including moderation.”

“Like who says?”

“It’s a saying from my old world,” Makoto explained calmly. “It means that you shouldn’t overdo stuff.”

I wanted to tell him that there was no world in which a solo apprentice mage killing twenty goblins a day *wouldn’t* be considered overdoing it, but I gave up.

He never formed parties, just hunted goblins every single day. Before I knew it, he’d set a guild record for the quickest rise to bronze rank. More and more adventurers were taking notice of him, and I’d grown curious myself.

He really was a strange boy...

## Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Forms His First Party

“Well now, it’s our rising star rookie, the Goblin Cleaner!”

“Good job sweeping up all those grunts!”

“Hey, how’s about you fry some bigger fish sometime!”

“Come now, he’s just an apprentice mage.”

“And he’s solo to boot!”

“Please, there ain’t no apprentice mage dumb enough to go solo!”

Raucous laughter filled the room from all sides. The moment I got back to the adventurer’s guild, the hecklers got going.

How did it come to this...

Three months had passed since I’d first become an adventurer. I’d turned in the horned rabbits with no problem at all. As a bonus, I’d also reported that I’d slain five goblins. The guild lady had remarked that she couldn’t believe me and that I could’ve gotten myself killed.

I mean, I hadn’t put myself in *that* much danger.

I’d felt a little smug after surprising the guild workers, so I spent every day after that hunting goblins. Somehow, this became a hot topic around the adventurer’s guild.

When asked, I told them I’d hunted the goblins near the Forest of Fiends, and they seemed to accept that answer. The Forest of Fiends had plenty of goblins loitering around its edges, so there wasn’t any cause for concern. They said it’d only be a problem if there were goblins living near any human settlements.

The guild lady had warned me that the Forest of Fiends was too dangerous for someone in stone rank though; she said that I should wait until I was silver rank before going anywhere near it. They must have thought I was in such a rush to rank up that I was risking my life for it.

My actual goals were to level up and extend my lifespan. I wasn't too concerned with my adventurer rank. Even if I did raise my rank, I'd still be an apprentice mage, which would give the rest of the adventurers even more ammunition for their jokes...

Every time I leveled up, my stats would slightly increase. That is, my Strength, Stamina, and Magic. Sadly, they were really slow to rise. Man, I just wasn't getting any stronger...

While those rewards were meager, goblins were dangerous, human-attacking monsters, so defeating them awarded reverence points. This was much appreciated since I didn't earn a single point from those horned rabbits or giant rats. Gaining reverence points extended my lifespan, which was now slightly under ten years. I just had to grind a little at a time.

The act of leveling up was fun in itself too. Level-ups were always the most exciting part of an RPG, and that went double for this fantasy world. There wasn't an accompanying victory theme, though. You'd think *RPG Player* would pull through for me there.

Hunting goblins was pretty easy once you got used to it. They were low-risk fights that gave steady experience. When I saw lone goblins near the Forest of Fiends, I didn't hesitate to slay them. As a result, people started calling me the Goblin Cleaner.

*Man, I thought, what a lame name. I wish they would've given me something a little slicker.*

"C'mon, fellas," began one conversation I'd rather not have heard, "we oughta show a little more respect to goblin huntin'. The kid's doin' all that work alone!"

"You first. Why not invite him to your party if you think he's so great?"

"Whoa, hold it there. Whaddya expect me to do with an apprentice mage who can barely cast water magic?"

"Hah, that's what I'm saying."

I decided to ignore them.

There was a bench near the skewer stall in the guild entrance and I settled down there to order food.

“Hi, Chef,” I said, “I’ll have the skewer platter.”

“Comin’ right up. Anythin’ to drink?”

“Apple soda.”

The staple meal from this stall was skewers and beer. I wasn’t great at handling my alcohol, so I instead opted for soft drinks.

“One rice ball too.”

“Comin’ right up.”

I munched on the perfectly salted rice ball as I waited for my skewers to get grilled. The rice was a bit harder than what I was used to in Japan. The scent of burning sauce tickled my nose.

The guild had other stalls, but this one was my favorite. The food here tasted pretty similar to chicken skewers back in Japan. What’s more, I’d heard it was an otherworlder who’d spread this recipe around the world. It made me wonder if that otherworlder came from Japan too.

“Skewer platter, order up.”

The chef set down a five-skewer meal in front of me. The cooked meat actually came from the horned rabbits I’d captured in the Great Forest; yes, the client for my first quest had been this very shop. I’d been a regular ever since.

I bit into a plump thigh cut that was drenched in a sweet and spicy sauce, and its juices flowed across my tongue.

“As good as ever,” I told the chef.

“Thanks. By the way, how’d the day’s hunt go?” The chef and I were pretty well acquainted, so we could talk with each other casually.

“Twenty-two goblins and five horned rabbits. I told the guild to let you get the meat in stock.”

“Looks like I owe ya again,” said the chef. “Your drink’s on the house.”

This exchange was also one we’d gotten well acquainted with.

“But I gotta say,” continued the chef, “I’m amazed you don’t get bored with hunting nothing but goblins. What level are you at?”

“Level 14, I think.”

“You’re a strange fella. 14’s the level of a full-fledged adventurer! Why, back in my day...”

The chef here used to be an adventurer like me. I’d heard that he’d even hit level 40 as a warrior, but then had to retire after he’d injured his leg. These days, he spent his time running this food stall, but the old adventuring stories he occasionally told had some valuable lessons to teach.

“Ah, the old timer’s fired up again,” said an adventurer as he approached. “Chef, I’ll take an ale and a skewer of whatever you got.”

“There ya are, Lucas,” said the chef. “Just got back?”

“From slaying the sand dragon in Great Keith,” said the burly, middle-aged warrior as he dropped down on a seat next to me with a thud. “They made me stay sober the whole trip. The pay was good, but man, was it rough. Oh, Makoto, haven’t seen you in a while.”

“It’s only been five days, but yeah, good work out there.”

“Welp, I’ll drink to that,” said Lucas after getting his pint. “Whew, that’s the stuff!”

Lucas was one of Macallan’s veterans and a gold rank adventurer. He and the chef seemed to go way back. He’d also been tasked with guiding the rookies, which had included me in my earlier days.

“By the way, Makoto, ain’t it about time you try a dungeon on for size? You’re almost level 15.”

“I was planning to give a beginner dungeon a try once I hit level 20,” I stated.

“The recommended level for those dungeons is around 10, though...”

“Well, I’m weak. I’d rather be careful.” I didn’t think I’d said anything strange, but Lucas and the chef still gave each other a look.

“Y’know, any other rookie would be itching to take this stuff on,” remarked

the chef.

“Guess there ain’t much for a veteran to warn you about...” added Lucas.

Was it so strange for me to take things slow?

“Well now, got a party going on here?” A beautiful blonde lady came and sat between Lucas and me.

“Oh, hello, Mary,” I greeted her. “Did you just finish work for the day?”

“Hey! Mary, you don’t gotta butt in like that!”

Mary was a receptionist for the adventurer’s guild. Since I often accepted quests, I saw her all the time. She’d been a great help over the last few months.

She was also a lover of all things alcoholic, so she’d always come to the guild for drinks after work. Because of that, hanging out together had become part of my daily routine...although I preferred to eat dinner while sober.

“I’ll have an ale,” she ordered. “And fry up whatever veggies you got!”

“Comin’ right up.”

“All right, cheers!” She took a sip of her ale. “Whew, nothin’ beats a cold one after a hard day’s work!”

“C’mon, Mary, you can do better than drinking at a dinky food stall. Why not find yourself a nice man and go out to a fancy bar?”

“You nuts, Lucas?! You know how hectic a guild receptionist’s job is! And monsters have been going nuts lately, so I don’t have any time to find a man!” She turned to the chef. “Pops, gimme a refill!”

“Try to pace yourself, Mary,” the chef cautioned.

Mary really was beautiful until she opened her mouth. But when you sat her in front of alcohol, she could drink any adventurer under the table.

“Wow, Makoto, still drinkin’ your juice?” remarked Mary. “After all the cash you made today, you oughta let loose with some real drinks!”

“Hey now,” said the chef in exasperation, “that ain’t something a guild employee should say out loud.”



“I drink every now and then,” I assured her.

I could order alcohol whenever I liked since the drinking age in this country was thirteen, but I just didn’t like the stuff. That first ale I’d tried tasted bitter, while that flaming cocktail on the rocks had made me convulse and spit it out the moment it’d touched my tongue. I could only stomach cocktails made from apple soda; however, I limited myself to a single glass, since even those got me drunk in an instant.

Lucas had taught me that, while I didn’t have to chug ales by the barrelful, adventurers treated peers who couldn’t drink as targets for mockery.

“Why just every now and then?” asked the chef.

“Lucas told me that adventurers make you the butt of their jokes if you can’t drink a single pint,” I explained. Really, Chef, how do you forget these things...

“Ah, now that you mention it, they do! Ha ha ha!”

“Gee, what a responsible kid!” remarked Mary. “Another round, Chef!”

“Comin’ right up. But how ’bout you learn from the kid and drink less than every day? Not that I’m one to lecture ya.”

“F’real, how’s this kid so responsible at his age?! Be a kid! Like...this!”

I found myself in a headlock. One where Mary’s sizable chest was being pressed against my back.

Oh dear. *Calm Mind*, activate! Play it cool, Makoto! Play it cool.

Mary was a popular figure within the adventurer’s guild, so I could feel the heat of their jealous glares scorching in my direction. Some of them belonged to the people who’d been making fun of me earlier.

“Tch!” “Lucky bastard...” “More like an ‘ain’t shit’ mage.”

I could hear their curses from here. None of this was my fault, by the way!

“Mary, you’re drunk,” I told her.

“C’moon, I ain’t even tipsy! I got room for more!”

She was now hugging me from behind!

“How many goblins did you get today? Twenty two? Good boy, good boy...”

And now she was ruffling my head while still hugging me. Mary had a tendency to get a little touchy-feely when drunk, so there were many adventurers who’d misread her intentions and fallen hard for her.

She was a witch, but I was the man who could resist the temptations of a goddess. This didn’t even faze m— *Boing*.

Something very soft was being pressed into my back. I shall not waver! But oh, so soft...

“Ha! You’re just a goblin hunter. Don’t let it go to your head!”

I turned toward that voice and saw a young man dressed like a warrior facing me. I think his name was Jean. He was one of Macallan’s rookie adventurers, just like me. He’d become an adventurer around six months ago and was currently in bronze rank, also just like me. People said that rising to bronze from stone rank in just six months was pretty impressive, but it was clear that he didn’t take kindly to the fame I’d garnered in my three-month career.

“Cool it, Jean. You oughta get along with your fellow rookies.”

“Lucas! Why haven’t you helped me train lately?” asked Jean.

“I guide people while they’re in stone rank, but once you’re bronze, you’re treated as someone who can fend for themselves.”

“Now, now, Jean,” added Mary. “Makoto’s such a delicate boy, you’ll scare him.”

I wasn’t particularly scared... Well, maybe. I couldn’t speak too soon; Jean had a mage and a cleric standing behind him. Guess they were in a party. Three on one? Yeah, this situation called for some delicacy.

“I don’t see what the big deal is, Jean. He’s just an apprentice mage. What’s someone with *Swordfighter (Mid Rank)* worrying about him for?”

The voice reasoning with Jean belonged to the red-haired mage behind him whose dress erred on the skimpier side. She was beautiful and undeniably bold about it.

“Yeah, we should be completing more hunting quests so we can hit iron

rank,” said the cleric. She was more the cute, baby-faced type.

That’s a lot of girls. Was he running a harem party or something?

Well, screw you, Jean! A real man quests solo in silence!

“Well now, a hunting quest!” said Lucas in an effort to change the subject.

“What’s the target?”

“We’re hunting a lone ogre! It got spotted by a traveler not long ago.”

“Hunting an ogre at bronze rank?” commented Lucas. “That there’s a rite of passage, so good luck.”

“Thanks! We’ll show you what we’re made of! You hear that, Makoto? I’m the one who’s gonna hit iron rank first!”

Jean got the last word and left us behind. The cleric girl bowed her head a bit to apologize. She was a good girl. The mage, well, didn’t seem to care.

“Hey, don’t let it get you down,” said Mary as she tried to comfort me. I wasn’t down at all, though.

“I’m just taking it easy,” I said. My only plans for tomorrow were to kill more goblins.

“Yeah, uh, I wouldn’t call killing twenty two goblins in a single day all on your own ‘taking it easy.’” Lucas stated the obvious, but hunting goblins really was the safest, easiest option for me. I was the type to max out my level before taking on a boss, so I planned to keep this up for a while.

After wrapping up my goblin hunt the next day, I found myself walking on the path back to the city. I was thinking about hunting a horned rabbit so I could get more stock for the chef’s store, when suddenly— *BEEEEEEEEEP!*

All of a sudden, my *Sense Danger* skill blared a warning siren at maximum volume in my head. Was there a deadly monster nearby? I checked to see if my *Stealth* skill was activated, and sure enough, it was. I was fine; I hadn’t been found out.

*Something’s there*, I thought. Within the haze ahead, about fifty meters in front of me, I saw a massive human-like silhouette. Was this the lone ogre? Its

figure was stout with what appeared to be horns growing from its head, but...were these monsters always so enormous?

The average ogre was usually about two or three meters tall, but this guy was over five. Every one of its steps thudded heavily and made the ground tremble beneath my feet.

There were normally other monsters roaming around this area, but right now, I couldn't spot a single one. They all must've run away. No chance I was getting that horned rabbit, then. Guess I'd give up on that for the day. Just go home and report this beast to the guild. I started to quietly sneak toward safety when...

"Eeeeeeeek!" shrieked a woman's voice.

"Damn you!" shouted a man's voice.

*Wait a minute, I thought, are people getting attacked?!*

When I looked closely, I saw several people who looked like adventurers. A three-person party with a swordfighter, a mage, and a cleric. They were all young; they didn't appear to be veterans.

"Wait, it's just them." It was the same party that had gotten in my face just yesterday—Jean's.

They did say they were going to hunt an ogre. And right now, they were in trouble. Served 'em right. Or, so I would've liked to say, but I'd be in a lot more trouble if I got entangled in this fight too. I stayed to observe while I kept my *Stealth* skill active.

*They are going to run, I hoped, right?*

The golden rule in adventuring was to value your own life. If you were faced with an enemy stronger than yourself, the first priority should be escape. Lucas warned me about that over and over back when I was in stone rank. These people should have heard the same things.

*Hmm, I thought. I think the mage and the cleric...are going to get caught.*

I wasn't sure if it was due to fear or panic, but they couldn't quite seem to escape. The ogre was going to catch up.

“Emily!” shouted Jean as he grabbed the cleric’s hand and ran off with her.

“Hey! What about me?!” cried the mage. Guess Jean prioritized the cleric above her. The truth’s gotta hurt.

Oh, the mage tripped. The ogre was fast approaching. She was in trouble.

Save the mage?

Yes

No

My *RPG Player* skill displayed an option. I was a bit stunned; it was asking for a lot from a bronze rank apprentice mage!

*You could leave her behind*, suggested the goddess. Simple and concise. I considered it, but...

Save the mage?

Yes

No

The text box continued blinking. Could it quit annoying me and give me some time to agonize over this decision?! It’d be game over if I died!

“Eek! D-Don’t come any closer!”

The mage’s legs gave out. The ogre was right in front of her. Jean was screaming at her to run...but it looked like he wasn’t coming to help. He ought to. The cleric looked distraught as she covered her mouth.

Ah, screw it. There went my time to think.

“N-Noooo! Help me!”

The mage screamed in vain as the gigantic ogre reached out its hand.

*Fine!* I resigned myself. *If nobody else will...*

*“Water Magic: Ice Cutter!”*

Two blades of ice were stabbed into the ogre’s eyes.

“Gyaaaaaagh!” The ogre screamed as it covered its eyes in pain.

“Hey, run while you can!”

“Uh, er, wait, what?” The mage was clearly confused. I put myself between her and the ogre and drew the goddess’s dagger.



*Hey! I told you, no dying on my watch!*

The goddess didn't seem to approve. Sorry, but I wanted to play the hero.

The languishing ogre was so large that I had to look up at it. Its arms were each as wide as tree trunks and coated in a coarse fuzz as thick as wire. This guy was way too big. How was I going to fight something like this?

As an aside, my mana reserves were almost completely drained. I wouldn't be generating any more water.

"Hey! Start running already!" I told the mage one more time.

"R-Right!"

And with that, she took off just like I told her. Good. But while she was making her escape, the ogre was pulling the ice blades from its eyes. The wounds in those areas were healing quickly.

"Oh c'mon, give me a break!" I knew ogres had regenerative abilities, but I didn't know they were so fast-acting. Even a cut from my dagger would probably heal in no time.

"Hey, ugly! Over here!" I shouted at the ogre. I didn't know if it could understand words, but I tried to draw its attention toward me. The ogre blinked, aimed its glare at me, and quickly raised its foot to squash me like a bug. This was bad.

Quick, *Dodge* skill! I activated the skill from my *Thief* training to evade the giant's attack. The foot came down close enough to graze my nose and ruffle my hair, but it did pass me by. I continued to dodge, dodge, dodge, and dodge some more as the giant's foot continued to slam against the ground with a THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!

Getting stepped on would mean instant death. However, I used *Calm Mind* to subdue my fear and continued spamming my *Dodge* skill.

I glanced around to see if that mage had made it far enough away.

Yep, she had. Which meant it was time...

For my *Flee* skill!



I activated my skill and distanced myself from the ogre. But the ogre gave chase, its face red with rage.

Ooh, scary stuff. Seeing a giant monster make a beeline for you sure has an impact. Good thing my *Calm Mind* skill kept the terror from paralyzing me. Didn't change the fact that I'd be dead meat if the ogre caught me, though.

I was no match for the monster in raw speed, so I moved into the brush of the forest and weaved through the trees. After a bit of running, I found my destination: a marsh.

*Water Magic: Walk on Water.* With that skill active, I waited for the ogre atop the marsh's surface.

*Water Magic: Fog.* I controlled the fog to obscure as much of the ogre's vision as I could. That beast wouldn't see the marsh coming.

"This way, stupid!"

The moment of truth. Would it go well? If not, I'd run.

The ogre charged straight ahead. Good, just like that. I'd continue walking on water until the perfect moment. The ogre waded into the marsh to catch me; it probably didn't think the marsh would be too deep.

*Sorry, but in a few more steps, the floor falls out,* I thought. *It'll get much deeper soon.*

With a sudden splash and a large spray of water, the ogre lost its balance; its leg sunk into the marsh. Of course, its first reaction was to paddle for the surface.

"Oh no you don't!"

*Water Magic: Flow.* I used my water-controlling magic to create a whirlpool in the marsh. The ogre was caught by the leg and became ensnared in its depths. I used the marsh's water and the sludge lining the bottom to suck the ogre in even deeper.

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh AAAAA..." The ogre let out pained wails as it sank beneath the surface.

I waited a while after that to make sure the ogre would drown. For ten whole

minutes, it struggled and flailed underwater without catching its breath once. How tough was this guy?

“I hope that worked...” I finally began to break out in a nervous sweat.

“Heeey! Are you okay?” shouted Jean. He came along with his party. Looked like they were all safe.

“Yeah, I’ve just about defeated it,” I said as the ogre’s lifeless body floated to the surface.

“W-Wait... You’re telling me *you* defeated that huge ogre?!”

“W-Wow...”

Jean and the cleric expressed just how astonished they were.

“Th-Thank you,” the mage said to me.

“Uh, well, guess we should take its head back with us,” said Jean as he scratched his neck in annoyance. He swiftly beheaded the ogre I’d taken out.

After that, we avoided the rest of the monsters and returned to the guild. Phew, I was beat. I decided I’d be going to sleep early that night.

“Hey, fellas, take a gander at this ogre! This big guy makes any other look like a runt! And guess who slayed it?”

Lucas was in the area of the guild where adventurers showed off the day’s hunts, and he was shouting with an ale in his hand. He was surrounded by other adventurers, all of them drunk. I was told that the ogre I’d fought today was no ordinary ogre, but instead a rare species known as a big ogre. Lucas had chewed me out earlier by saying that fighting a big ogre alone was an act of suicide, but he didn’t seem too angry about that right now. Flip-flopping wasn’t a new phenomenon for him.

“Well, who killed it?” asked Mary.

“None other than our rising star rookie, Makoto! He ain’t no Goblin Cleaner anymore!”

The audience erupted in cheers and awe. For the third time, I might add.

“We gotta give him a new nickname!” “How about ‘Ogre Killer’?” “He’s only

killed one.” “Yeah, but it was a big ogre he took on solo!” “Man, that’s amazing!” “Mary’s already got a thing for him too.” “Yeah, that pisses me off...”

I watched the hubbub from a distance as I sat on my familiar skewer stand bench.

“Well, if it ain’t the man of the hour,” laughed the chef.

“Tired. I want sleep.” I wanted to pass out, but the place where I always slept was the guild’s rest area, so I couldn’t fall asleep in this racket even if I wanted to.

“Well, nothin’ wrong with that either. How about a drink?”

“After all the ale they gave me, water.”

“Comin’ right up.”

The chef brought out a pint glass filled with water. It was lukewarm.

*“Water Magic: Freeze.”*

Drinking the cooled water sip by sip helped me sober up.

“Hey, is this seat open?” asked a voice from beside me. It was that mage I’d saved earlier today.

“Sure, go ahead.”

The mage sat down next to me. She had red hair and ruby, upturned eyes that gave off a fiery impression. Oh yeah, and she was beautiful too.

Now that I’d gotten to really look at her, I noticed that she had pointed ears. An elf? Huh, I didn’t know she was an elf. This was my first time seeing one since coming to this world, but they’re a staple of fantasy. I quietly got a bit excited.

But that didn’t explain why her hair and eyes were red. The books I’d read in the temple said that elves had blonde or silver hair and blue or green eyes. Maybe she was from a different race? I’d have to ask Mary about it later.

“Hey, Pops, can I get a cocktail?” asked the mage.

“Comin’ right up.”

He placed a soda-mixed cocktail on the counter.

“Thanks again for today,” she said.

“You’re welcome.” We lightly clinked our glasses together.

“Anyway, my name’s Lucy. And I owe you my life, Makoto.”

“You don’t have to sweat it. The guild already rewarded me plenty. I built up a ton of reverence points too.” When I checked my Soul Book after slaying the ogre, I saw that my lifespan had extended by about a week. Emotionally, though, I felt like my lifespan had shortened by the same amount. I think I’d be happy not to fight another ogre any time soon.

“But I gotta say, I’m impressed. You’re in bronze rank, right? And you still took down that big ogre all by yourself.”

“I was just lucky,” I responded.

“Yeah, well, I can cast high rank magic but still wound up being totally useless...”

Ah, so Lucy could use high rank magic. I couldn’t be more jealous. Too bad I didn’t get to see that magic for myself today.

“Hey, that’s impressive too. I wish I could trade my skills for yours.”

“That’s not what matters!” Lucy said emphatically. “Sure, I’ve got strong skills, but I can’t control them at all. How do you use magic so quickly? You were able to cast spells without an incantation.”

“Yeah, technically.” My magic relied on my meager amount of mana, so I had limited ammo. I had to overwhelm my opponents to stand a chance, which I couldn’t do if I had to wait for an incantation to finish. “You can cast without incantations once you reach mastery level 50.”

“I know that much, but I can’t imagine how long it’d take to get there...”

“Well, it’s been a year and three months since I started learning magic from scratch.”

“What?” spouted Lucy. “Y-You’ve gotta be kidding!”

“I’m not, though. I came from another world, after all.”

“An otherworlder...” she mused. “Those heroes who came here one year ago...”

“I mean, I’m no hero... Well, to be fair, some of my classmates are.” My classmates who possessed strong skills had gone on to make quite the name for themselves over this past year. Lots of them had been assigned top positions in countries all over. They might have broken this world’s game balance a little. Not that I’d know anything about that!

“I knew it, you otherworlders really are something else!”

Lucy had sparkles in her eyes. Yep, there was definitely a misunderstanding here. She knew how low my stats were, right?

“U-Um,” began Lucy as she set down her glass and took my hand. She then brought her body in close and whispered into my ear. “Would you like to form a party with me?”

Hey. Lucy? Your face is getting kinda close there. I didn’t have *Calm Mind* or *RPG Player* active either—I couldn’t use my skills correctly when drunk. Which forced me to gaze into Lucy’s eyes at point-blank range. Having her lovely face look back at me was making me panic.

*C-Calm*, I thought. *Stay calm. I’ll turn on Calm Mind.*

Unfortunately, I was too drunk to activate the skill that had become my old reliable standby.

*Crap*, I fretted, *I drank too much. Stop! Don’t bring that face any closer!*

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!”

A loud voice brought me back to my senses. It was that cleric who was in Jean’s party. Jean was right next to her.

“What’s it to you, Emily?” retorted Lucy.

“Oh, it’s a lot! You only just got with our party! And *you* were the one who asked to join us in the first place!”

“Yeah, and? You two left me for dead, so I’m done with you.”

Ooh, it seemed like Lucy was still holding a grudge about how her party had

escaped the ogre without her. But hey, Jean *did* tell her to run for her life, right?

“Look, Lucy,” said Jean, “I’m sorry about before. But I just couldn’t save the both of you.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you two are lovebirds,” responded Lucy as she shut down his apology. “I don’t need a leader who I can’t trust.”

“Who do you think you are?!” shouted Emily. She came up to grab Lucy by the collar.

“Aw, can it, slut. I know that you slept with Jean back when I first joined your party since you were worried about having some competition. Or was it just a coincidence that you two disappeared that night?”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” Emily sputtered.

Uh, okay... This conversation was getting a little too spicy for a virgin like me. I guess parties got *very* close in fantasy worlds...

Meanwhile, Jean was paralyzed as he watched the two women fight. Was he not going to stop them? C’mon, you’re the leader here.

“Hey, what’s all the commotion?”

“Ooh, is this a fight?”

Lucas and Mary had come over to watch.

“Just a drunken quarrel.”

“All right, then. Emily, Lucy, break it off.” Mary got in between the two girls’ glares. She seemed used to this. “Jean. I believe you have something you’d like to say to Makoto, no?”

Did he? I looked over to Jean, but he turned away from me and started fidgeting uncomfortably. What, was he about to ask me on a date or something?

“I-I’m sorry, Makoto!” said Jean suddenly as he deeply bowed his head. “Thank you for saving us!”

“Uh, it’s no big deal,” I responded, “but sure, you’re welcome.”

Was he worried about that? He might’ve been more responsible than I

thought.

“What a magnanimous heart you have...”

I didn’t really know how to respond to him getting so emotional...

“Makoto, please, can you find it in your heart to forgive Jean for what he said before?” Even Emily, the cleric, was apologizing. I wasn’t really sure what I was supposed to forgive either...

“All right, Makoto, roast their useless asses!”

“Cram it, Lucy!”

*A valid suggestion, I thought. Lucy, that verbal boomerang you just threw came back to wack you. It’s sticking out of your head right now.*

“Makoto, can we call you and Jean even?” Mary asked.

“I mean, it’s not about being even,” I responded. “I never cared in the first place.”

“Rookies should get along,” said Lucas to wrap up this issue. “That should settle things with Jean. Now then, Lucy...”

“Wh-What?”

“You’re going to form a party with Makoto?”

“Y-Yeah, I am!” answered Lucy with her chest held high. Wait, did I even agree to this?

My *RPG Player* skill displayed a choice.

Add Lucy to your party?

Yes

►No

Hmm. What was I going to do? Lucy was beautiful. But a negative thought crossed my mind—wouldn’t she be disappointed when she saw my stats or skills?

“No” seemed like the safe option here.

“Makoto,” asked Lucas, “are you going to form a party?”

“Hmm, I was thinking I’d stay solo.”

“Huh? Come on!” Lucy cried.

“Hah! Look who got dumped!” sneered Emily with a smug look on her face.

Hey, Emily? You’re gonna start another fight.

“B-But why?” asked Lucy as she stumbled backwards.

There wasn’t any complicated reasoning behind my rejection—I just didn’t know the girl. Lucas didn’t seem to approve of my answer, though.

“Makoto. I think you’re going to have a lot of trouble in the long run as a solo apprentice mage,” said Lucas.

“I was just gonna take it slow. I’m fine with staying at bronze rank for a while.”

“No, see, you didn’t ‘take it slow’—that big ogre was way beyond what bronze rank adventurers should be able to handle in the first place...”

“Anyway, my stats are low too,” I added. “Lucy’s gonna get disappointed.” I showed Lucy my Soul Book to prove my point.

“What the heck are these stats?!” Lucy exclaimed.

“M-Makoto... You’ve really been adventuring like this?” asked Jean, dumbfounded. “You can’t even swing a sword...”

Emily was similarly shocked: “Wait... A 3 in Magic? Are... Are you even a mage?”

Aw, can it. Also, Jean and Emily, I never said you could read my Soul Book too. Eyes to yourselves! I’ll sue.

“See? Aren’t his stats awful? But widdle Makoto’s been doing his best solo. Good boy, Makoto.” Mary patted my head to comfort me. Was this supposed to be a compliment?

“You’ve got no Strength, no Stamina, and no Magic,” noted Lucas as he



chugged a beer. “All ya got is a stupid high magic mastery!”

“Whaaaa?! You’ve got a 90 in water magic mastery! H-How...” Lucy looked at me like I was some sort of freak. Kinda rude.

“I don’t have a lot of mana, so all I can do is get creative with how I use what I’ve got.” I’d been training my mastery like crazy this past year for a reason.

“So that’s why you led the big ogre to a body of water to defeat it?” asked Jean, sounding a bit impressed.

“Anyway, Lucy,” I continued, “I think you get the point, so you oughta ask someone else.”

“H-Hold on! I don’t mind, really!” Well now, I didn’t expect her to persist even after I showed her my stats.

“Think about it, Makoto,” pleaded Lucy. “My *Fire Magic (King Rank)* skill would totally come in handy!”

“King rank, huh? That’s impressive...” Even my classmates rarely had skills that strong. Her magic was something rare, all right.

I turned the idea over in my mind. To be honest, I’d given up on ever forming a party back when I was training at the Water Temple. After my stats had been mocked so many times, I was prepared to stay solo forever.

“But, Lucy, aren’t there plenty of others who’d take you?” She was a mage with a king rank skill. I figured other parties would be tripping over themselves to add her strength to their team, but Lucy just looked down.

“Th-That’s not the issue. At my level, I can choose which party to join myself.”

“Since when?” butted in Emily. “You don’t last a month in any party you join before getting kicked out. You’re famous for being nothing but trouble.”

“Do you *ever* shut up?!” Lucy snapped.

“Hey, it’s the truth!”

Lucy and Emily stood their ground like cats hissing at each other.

“All right, you two, I think you need some drinks.” Mary took Jean and Emily away.

Thank you, Mary.

“Lucy has powerful skills,” Lucas explained, “but she still can’t quite control them.”

“It’s true that I haven’t been able to stick with a party before, but I think I’d feel comfortable if I were with you,” Lucy clarified.

Hmm. Comfortable, huh? An apprentice mage with dumpster-tier stats and a mage who couldn’t control her skills. It sounded pretty unbalanced to me—we’d be a two-person party with two magic roles.

“You do realize that I’m an apprentice mage, right?” I asked dubiously.

“Don’t worry! We can train together!”

Lucy was being persistent about this. I’d always wanted to train with a fellow mage, though. I’d been surrounded by toddlers at the Water Temple, so it had never really felt like I was practicing with my peers.

Add Lucy to your party?

Yes

No

Hm? The choice came up again. Didn’t I select “No” on this already? Were these choices just for aesthetics? Talk about useless.

“Why not, you know?” suggested Lucas. “Just give the party thing a try and see how it goes.”

“It would be good for you, Makoto,” said Mary as she came back. “You ought to spend more time with your fellow adventurers.”

“A partner’s a special thing, Makoto.”

Even the chef was pushing me into this. They were making it really hard to refuse. Come to think of it, yeah, I’d seen this in RPGs before.

The ol’ forced party member cutscene.

I took another look at Lucy. She was a strong-willed mage with large, sharp

eyes. I'd taken a glance at other adventurers, so I knew she was one of the most beautiful girls in the guild. And she had *Fire Magic (King Rank)* on top of it—she'd be wasted on me. Getting greedy would probably come back to bite me. But my *RPG Player* skill made it clear which option it wanted.

Add Lucy to your party?

►Yes

No

*Fine, I thought, I get it.*

I extended my right hand toward Lucy.

"I'd be happy to have you."

"No, the pleasure's all mine!"

Lucy shook my hand with a beaming smile.

And so, I gained my first partner since coming to this world.

◇ A Fujiwara Trading Company Bunny-Eared Employee's Perspective ◇

"Heh heh heh. It is merely a matter of time before my esteemed Tackie invites me to his party."

The boss had been in a pretty good mood ever since he'd met that otherworlder friend of his the other day. Seeing the boss happy made me happy too, but I had some doubts.

"Uh, Boss? Speaking of Mister Takatsuki, do you think he'll be fine as an adventurer? He's adventuring on his own despite only being an apprentice mage, no'h?"

He didn't look too strong. The boss said his abilities were pretty weak all around too.

"If it wouldn't be a hindrance, I could provide him my assistance'h."

I *was* a silver rank adventurer, so I knew how brutal this line of work could be. I didn't want to see the boss cry if his dear friend were injured by a monster, or

potentially even killed.

“No, that’s quite all right,” said the boss with a grin. “Tackie’s playstyle is the definition of cautious.”

“I see...”

Guess the boss had faith in his friend.

“Perhaps I should invite Tackie to the Catgirl Cantina next,” murmured the boss. I just happened to overhear.

“Boss? Might you be visiting that store a bit too frequently?”

The Catgirl Cantina was a pub where all the waitresses were feline races. The boss was a regular there. The feline women who worked there were all beauties. I wondered if the boss had a favorite...

“Oh my, you heard that? Well, that shop would surely instill within Tackie an appreciation for the wonders of catgirls.”

The boss was grinning ear to ear. I found myself reaching for my own bunny ears. I didn’t like this conversation much.

“Worry not, my dear Nina! Rest assured that your bunny ears are magnificent!”

Ah, did that show up in my expression?

“Th-Thank you very much.” Hearing the boss compliment me made my cheeks loosen and my temperature rise. I was happy to hear the boss compliment bunny ears.

Other humans made beastmen out to be imbeciles, but the boss was always a gentleman to us. That made him incredibly popular among the beastmen of Macallan, which in turn made me a bit uneasy.

“I merely patronize the Catgirl Cantina due to its excellent food. I’d like to obtain the rights to manage it myself one day...”

“It’s not quite that simple... You’ll fail if you invest without a plan’h.”

I’d never worried about this stuff in my days as an adventurer or a fighter. But I was different now. My perspective had completely shifted to that of a

merchant's.

“Fortunately, those paintings I stocked for a nominal price seem to have caught the eyes of some nobles. They must have quite a bit of money to spare given the sum they wish to purchase them for.”

“Is that your *Appraisal (Ultra Rank)* skill at work? It never ceases to amaze’h.”

Many of the people who’d come from another world possessed powerful skills. The boss’s stats were no better than normal, but his skills were exceptional. *Appraisal (Ultra Rank)* and *Storage (Ultra Rank)* were incredibly rare skills. A single one of them would be considered hitting the jackpot in life.

*But I get the feeling that those aren’t all he has’h*, I thought. It was just a hunch, but I didn’t know how deep the boss’s powers ran. Well, I just had to stick with him.

*Though I’m still worried about the boss’s friend...*

I watched the boss gleefully take inventory of his products and kept my concerns to myself.

And so, time passed.

One day, I heard rumors of someone incredible—he’d set the adventurer’s guild record for the quickest rank up from stone to bronze *and* defeated a big ogre solo: it was Makoto Takatsuki, the adventurer.

## Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Trains with Lucy

“Morning, Makoto. Did you wait long?”

“I just got here.”

“Great, then let’s get going.”

When Lucy and I met up this morning, the conversation we had almost made us sound like a couple. Maybe it would’ve felt different if our choice of locale had been anywhere other than the guild entrance.

Still, I found myself looking at Lucy’s face again: Her large eyes, red and sharp. Her slim, smooth nose. Her fair skin and that fiery, elegant hair. She was an exceptionally beautiful girl. And right now, she was in a party with me.

Maybe this fantasy world stuff wasn’t so bad after all! There was just one thing I was curious about...

“Aren’t you cold in that?”

Sure, it was spring now, but the mornings were still a bit chilly. I was wearing a jacket over a long-sleeved shirt, but Lucy was dressed as lightly as ever. All she had on was a top that looked like a camisole and a short skirt. She was technically wearing a cloak too, but I wouldn’t say it provided much in the way of thermal protection.

“I get warm easily, so don’t worry about it.”

“Huh...”

Lucy didn’t sound like it was a big deal to her, but as a growing teenage boy, I had a hard time knowing where to look. To be honest, any style of fashion that showed off a girl’s shoulders or thighs got me hot and bo— Ahem. I casually turned my *Calm Mind* skill up to 80%, allowing me to tune out all of those sensual urges. It was then easier to act like I didn’t care. I changed the subject and we made our way to the guild’s bulletin board.

“Any good quests?”

“Hmm, nothing’s jumping out at me.”

I quickly skimmed the board and saw a lot of high-level quests like “Hunt the Griffon,” “Hunt the Minotaur in the Great Labyrinth,” and “Collect Scales of the Fire Dragon.” That stuff was way too daunting for us. The only others were beginner quests like “Gather Herbs” and “Collect Horned Rabbit Meat.”

“Ah, if it isn’t Makoto and Lucy,” said Mary as she clocked in. “Looking for your first quest as a new party?”

“Good morning, Mary,” I said. “Seen anything good?”

“Hmm... Something good for a party of two mages? That’ll be a tough one...” Mary looked like she was having trouble coming up with something. Oh well.

“Guess we’ll go goblin hunting,” I suggested. “It’s a safe way to farm a bit of cash.”

“You’re the expert there,” said Lucy.

“Anyway, Mary, we’ll be heading out, so can you handle the paperwork?”

“Sure, take care. Though I’m sure *you’ll* be fine, Makoto.”

“What about me?” asked Lucy.

“Just try to listen to what Makoto tells you. And no bickering, okay?”

“What? Where’s this coming from?” Lucy seemed to resent that. Had she forgotten about the infighting that broke up her last party? It was only natural that people would worry, given Lucy’s track record.

We got our paperwork in order with Mary and left the guild. Once we’d walked a ways outside, Lucy asked me something.

“So, Mary’s got a thing for you, eh?”

“Huh?” What in the world was this girl talking about? “There’s no way.”

“You sure? She seems to act *pretty* nice to you. And *only* you.”

“That’s just because I’m a rookie.” And probably out of concern for my abysmally low stats. I remembered the shocked look on her face when I’d initially shown her my Soul Book and she’d seen those pitiful stats.

Lucy didn't seem to accept that excuse.

"Mary doesn't coddle other adventurers once they hit bronze rank. But I hear talk that she's been helping you this whole time."

"Huh? Really?" Hold on, wait—I didn't know anything about these rumors. "I- It couldn't be..."

"She hangs out with you every day for dinner, doesn't she? Before you came around, Mary only drank at the guild once every other day."

"O-Oh... You don't say..."

Mary had a thing for me? Mary, the hot older woman? I gulped as I recalled the sight of her large chest. Would she possibly...take the lead for a virgin like me?

No, stop! I must've been feeling the pressure after hearing that Fujiyan managed to lose his v-card. Getting this thirsty wasn't my style.

"Stop being ridiculous," I deflected. "We've got work to do!"

"Hey, you're dodging the question!"

"Whatever..." I attempted to change the subject back to our quest. "Just make sure that you at least focus on the goblins."

"Fine, I get it. So, where are we headed today?"

"The same place I always hunt goblins: the outskirts of the Forest of Fiends."

"Wait, isn't that kinda far?" Lucy asked. "It's like a half day's walk just to get there."

"Don't worry, trust me."

"You sure?" Lucy seemed concerned. Well, she'd understand once she got there for herself. We greeted the guards at the western gate, left the town, entered the forest right outside, and began walking along the beaten path through the trees.

"Come to think of it," I began, bringing up something I'd been curious about for a while, "Lucy, are you an elf?"

I had an elf as my first party member. Was this something I could brag to



Fujiyan about?

“Wh-Why, yes!” Lucy stammered. “I do hail from a village of elves after all.”

“Ah, I had a feeling. Guess there are elves around with red hair and red eyes.”

Lucy looked away when I said that.

“Well, I...have mixed blood. I’m not a pure elf...”

“Huh?”

Ah, guess I’d stepped on a landmine there. Maybe that mixed heritage had caused her trouble growing up, like being ostracized from the elven community or something. If so, then I might have pried a bit too deep...

“Well, my grandpa’s the chief of an elven village, so anyone who tried to get in my face about it...I just told them that I could get ’em kicked out.”

Guess she turned out all right, then.

“But, Makoto,” she continued, “are you worried about me not being a pure elf?”

As she looked at me, I saw her expression of concern. She sure had a wide range of emotions.

“I only ask because you’re the first elf I’ve met in this world.”

“Ah, right, so that’s all.” Lucy looked relieved.

Hmm. This whole “conversing with your party” stuff was pretty hard. Knowing when to drop a line of questioning was difficult for the socially deficient.

After a bit of walking through the forest, we turned to face a creek that flowed by the side of the road. This would do fine.

“Hey, where are we going? You know that’s a river, er, creek, right?”

“Don’t worry—this is the way,” I assured her.

I casually strolled atop the creek’s surface. This was my *Water Magic: Walk On Water* skill.

“No incantation either, like it’s nothing,” remarked the impressed Lucy.

“Here, this way,” I said, inviting her along.

“I can’t use *Walk On Water*... Wait, what would you do even if I could?”

“Quit worrying. Just stick out your hand.” But instead of waiting for an answer, I grabbed the sleeve of her cloak and pulled her onto the water’s surface.

“Eek!”

“Don’t let go now,” I warned. “The magic’ll stop working if you do.”

“Hey, it’s scary when you yank people all of a sudden!”

My bad, I guess. Even if a person can’t cast the magic themselves, they can still receive the effect of a support spell like *Walk On Water* as long as a part of their body touches the magic user. If they let go, the effects will vanish. While I could’ve just cast it on both of us, this way saved more mana.

“I didn’t know the water’s surface could be so fluffy. It feels weird.”

“Hang on tight. We’ll be speeding up.”

“Uh, what does that mean?”

*Water Magic: Flow.*

“Whaaaaaa?!” Lucy raised her voice in shock. We were floating forward on top of the water. “Are you moving only the water around our feet?”

Heh, she was surprised.

“So, what is this?!”

“You can think of it as an arranged version of *Water Magic: Flow*,” I explained. “I call it *Water Magic: Moving Water Walkway*.” It was inspired by the moving walkways you’d see in train stations and airports. There probably wasn’t anyone else in this world who’d use magic like this, making it a Makoto original spell.

“That’s a weird name...” said Lucy.

“Hey, it works. Anyway, we’re going faster.”

“Whoa, wait! I’m not mentally prepa—”

I rapidly accelerated. This was the best part.

“Eeeeeek!” Lucy’s screams echoed throughout the forest.

“Heeeeeeey, keep your voice down!” I cautioned.

“How do you expect me to do that?!”

We blew through the forest in one swift go.

“Let me rest for a second... I think I’m a little woozy...” Lucy stumbled around and clung on to a nearby tree.

“Sorry, I might have gone a little too fast.” Maybe I went a bit overboard with that practical joke. Guess I’d learned my lesson.

“No, it’s fine. I’m just amazed that we got here so quickly. So this is how you’ve been traveling, huh?”

“Sure have. Fast, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Lucy before changing the subject. “So, we’re on the outskirts of the Forest of Fiends?”

“We are, which is why I told you to keep your voice down. We’re surrounded by goblins.”

“We’re what?!” Lucy panicked and tugged on the sleeves of her cloak. “How many are there?”

“About forty-four. The usual.”

“That many?! That’s a lot!”

“Well, that’s just how this area is,” I remarked. “The closest goblin is still pretty far off, though. And given how thick the fog is today, odds are that we haven’t been noticed. We should be fine.”

“Y-You’re used to this.”

“I *do* come here every day.”

“Yeah, that’s the Goblin Cleaner for you.”

Lucy, please don’t call me that nickname again. It’s embarrassing.

“Anyway,” I said, “let’s just get to hunting whatever is close by.” Clearing out

the nearest monsters would give Lucy some breathing room to recite her spell incantations.

### ◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

"All right, just wait right here," said Makoto before he disappeared into the fog. He was probably using his *Stealth* skill to conceal his footsteps and presence. I couldn't tell where he'd gone at all.

"Whew... The Forest of Fiends, huh?" Now that I was alone, I suddenly felt uneasy.

Abruptly, something caught me by surprise.

I heard a sound from far away. As an elf, I had powerful ears, but the noise was faint enough that it could've just been my imagination.

*Even so... Wh-Wh-What was that?!* I waited in shivers, but Makoto returned before long.

"I defeated one."

"Okay, but I still can't see," I retorted. My voice came out a bit poutier than I'd intended.

Just then, I heard a rustle. Was a small goblin watching us?! Oh no, it was going to call its allies!

"Makoto!" I whispered forcefully. Lone goblins were weak monsters, but they could be overpowering if they attacked as a group.

"Don't worry," Makoto responded. His voice was as calm as could be. He flicked his wrist ever so slightly toward the goblin, and then all of a sudden, something white smothered the monster's mouth and eyes. It attempted to hack out a scream, but no sound came out.

Was Makoto...controlling the mist?

The goblin was baffled by its inability to speak. Makoto silently approached and stabbed it in the heart with a dagger. Despite how cleanly the blade was thrust into the goblin's flesh, there was no ensuing splash of blood. And when Makoto withdrew the sword, it was sparkling clean. The goblin then fell flat, but there was no noise when it hit the ground. Was the sound being silenced with

Makoto's *Stealth* skill?

*So he's using water magic to contort the mist and also to prevent any of the monster's blood from spilling, while simultaneously having a skill active the whole time? All without a single incantation? There is just no way...*

This guy was doing superhuman stuff like it was second nature.

"See?" he said. As though it were easy as pie! Except it totally wasn't! Was this what mages were capable of when they trained their mastery? I was in awe.

Makoto's style felt less like a hunt and more like an assassination.

"I'm gonna go hunt some more." With that, Makoto once again disappeared into the fog.

"Here're today's results."

Makoto had hunted around ten goblins. His standard tactic was to first approach the monster from behind using *Stealth*, and then use his dagger to dispatch it in silence. If he was unlucky and a goblin noticed him, he instantly covered its eyes and mouth with *Water Magic: Fog*.

Not once had he called for me, his partner.

"There's a lot of fog around here," Makoto explained, "so I can use all the water magic I want."

"Yeah, the Forest of Fiends *is* covered in fog year-round."

Everyone within the guild had wondered why a rookie like Makoto would choose to hunt in a place as dangerous as the Forest of Fiends, but I guess I'd found the answer.

"It's because I don't have a lot of mana. I can only rely on gimmicky spells like these."

"I don't think they're gimmicky..." If anything, they were impressive. His magic might have been at an apprentice's level, but he made up for that disparity with hard work and ingenuity.

“Anyway, Lucy, can you show me your magic next time?”

Oh boy, here we go.

“V-Very well.”

“If I remember correctly, you said that your magic incantations take time to cast.”

“Yeah...” I confirmed. “At least three minutes per spell.”

“That’s, uh, pretty long.”

*Oh no, did he give up on me already?*

“Well, no big deal. I defeated all the goblins nearby, so the rest probably won’t notice your magic in time to retaliate.”

“You thought that far ahead?” I asked.

“I mean, we came all this way... And I wanna see what king rank magic looks like.”

Makoto had sparkles in his eyes. I guess it was like the look of a really hopeful kid? Wait, did Makoto always have this side to him? I’d always clocked him as being a bit more subdued.

“Well, I’ll get prepared,” I said as I set up my staff.

I couldn’t afford to screw this up. After I had my public blowup and left Jean and Emily’s party, there wasn’t a single person remaining in the Macallan Adventurer’s Guild who’d still adventure with me.

I began my incantation, though it was for nothing more than a low rank fireball.

“Wow,” Makoto murmured. Phew, that managed to surprise him. The ball of flame grew ever larger. Eventually, a fireball as large as a house was floating above my head.

“Uh... Don’t you think that’s a little big?” Makoto looked slightly nervous, but I had to focus on my magic and couldn’t answer him.

My hands were shaking. It was all I could do to keep this raging inferno molded into a spherical form.

*“Fire Magic: Fireball!”*

I unleashed the gigantic ball of flames forward. Bang! It crashed into the ground and rocked the soil beneath our feet with a deep rumble.

“Gyaah!” “Gweeergh!” “Gyaaaaaaaaaargh!”

I heard a number of goblins cry out with their dying breaths. A flaming pillar roared skyward as though it intended to scorch the heavens. With my body drained of mana, I felt a bit tired. But man, that was a relief!

“Phew... Whatcha think, Makoto?”

“Amazing. The Great Forest’s trees are supposed to be strong against fire, but they’re being burnt to cinders.”

Makoto sounded impressed. It’d been a while since I’d used a fireball at a whole ten percent of my strength. And damn did it feel nice! But uh, I think those flames might’ve been going a little harder than I expected. Was it just me?

The evil trees of the Forest of Fiends were notoriously difficult to burn. And yet, here they were, lighting up like matchsticks.

Um, uh? Wait, I might’ve overdone it.

And so, we had a forest fire on our hands.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Chef, get me a soda cocktail.”

“Same here. Make it extra hard.”

Lucy and I wearily took our seats at the same old skewer stand.

“Comin’ right up. Don’t see you orderin’ drinks too often, Makoto.”

“Well, I’m exhausted. I wanna get drunk.”

“Somethin’ happen?” asked the chef.

Well, the magic Lucy had unleashed started a wildfire in the Great Forest, so we had to scramble all over to extinguish it. A job that mostly fell to me, by the way. Lucy had just run around in a panic the whole time. Also, the flames had

eventually drawn out a lot of tough-looking monsters from the Forest of Fiends, which definitely hadn't helped our nerves.

We'd returned to the adventurer's guild to find pandemonium—everyone was talking about how they'd seen smoke over the Forest of Fiends. They were worried that a powerful new monster had shown up, since those notoriously hard-to-burn trees were on fire.

Mary and Lucas had really laid into us over the incident, and they'd banned Lucy from using fire magic in the Great Forest ever again. We'd just been let go from an hour-long lecture, finally.

The chef chuckled. "Ha ha, sounds like a mess."

"Well, we're not laughing. Coordinating as a party's tougher than I expected. Isn't that right, Lucy?"

Lucy didn't respond. When I looked to my side, I saw her slumped over in gloom. But then, she cautiously opened her mouth.

"Hey, Makoto...are you mad?"

"Huh? Mad? At what?"

"Well, you got wrapped up in this all because of my magic..." she said, trailing off.

"I don't really mind."

"You don't want to disband the party?"

"On our first day?" I told her that it was unthinkable, but apparently, Lucy had numerous first-hand experiences of being kicked out of parties on the first day. I didn't know people could be that short-tempered.

"Well, I think you'll be fine if you just lower your magic's firepower."

"...That was my lowest," she responded.

"Um?"

"I can't contain its strength any more than that."

So, that ridiculously huge fireball was the minimum for her.



“That wasn’t even a *Mega Fireball*,” she explained. “It was just *Fireball*.”

A line from a manga I’d read long ago crossed my mind. This was only ten percent of her power? Was Lucy actually the Great Demon Lord? No, probably not.

“Well, maybe you could cast spells other than fire magic?” I said, suggesting a different direction.

“I-I can’t use anything else...”

“Come again?”

Lucy showed me her Soul Book. Unique Skills: *Fire Magic (King Rank)*, *High Wizard*, and *Elementaler*.

“I’ve heard that the *High Wizard* skill lets you cast magic from the water, fire, wood, and ground elements,” I pointed out.

“I’ve only done fire magic training...”

Fire magic was the gold standard for offensive magic. People typically learned that branch of magic first unless they could only use one element like me. After all, fire magic was strong and worked well on just about any type of monster. However, not being able to use anything but fire magic felt like such a waste. She was making her poor little *High Wizard* skill cry.

“What’s this *Elementaler* skill, then?” I asked.

“It’s a skill that a lot of dwarves and elves have. The elementals are important to our religion, after all.”

“So, you can’t use elemental magic?”

Lucy stayed silent and looked away... Guess I didn’t need to press further. Oh well, I kinda figured she couldn’t.

“Elemental magic is hard, you know,” she explained. “Sure, you use the elementals’ mana instead of relying on your own, but controlling it takes a lot of work.”

“Ah, that’s gotta be a tall order when you can’t even control the spells you make with your own mana.”

“Guh! T-True...”

It was a shame. And she had such powerful skills too. Heck, I wish she could've lent me one, though saying that out loud wouldn't accomplish much.

“Well, how about we focus on training your fire magic?”

“Yeah...” We clinked our glasses and nibbled on our skewers. Lucy gave a slight nod before sluggishly dropping her head to the desk. She might have drunk too much. She did ask for an extra hard cocktail, after all.

Our early days of coordinating as a party were ones of trial and error. Lucy had a few constants: her magic incantations took a long time, but the resulting spells were deadly if they struck the target. As such, our core strategy was to use me as a decoy to lure enemies out while Lucy provided the finishing blow.

However, in practice, we came across one more constant: Lucy's magic was incredibly unstable. Sometimes, the ball of flames would fall apart; other times, the ball would fly off in a random direction; still other times, it would just explode and nearly burn us both to a crisp.

“*So what about other magic?*” you might ask. Well, we tried it, but her complete lack of practice showed in the astronomic length of time it took to complete an incantation for anything other than fire magic.

“It's not happening. I can't do it.”

I'd been playing cat and mouse with a giant rat in the southern forest for around ten minutes, but Lucy's ground magic just wasn't activating. At that point, I gave up any hopes for its combat potential.

“*Water Magic: Ice Arrow.*”

The giant rat's feet slipped and it tumbled with a flop. Then I finished it off by hurling my dagger at it. The blade sliced into the rat and ended its life.

My magic wasn't strong enough to defeat even a lone rat, so every time I fought, I had to go through this process: stop monsters in their tracks first, and then finish them with my dagger. It was a hassle, I swear.

But then, I felt a gaze on me. What did Lucy want?

“Makoto, I know you skip incantations because of your high magic mastery, but I think your spells activate too quickly even for that.” Lucy was clearly discontent as she stared me down.

“Well, anything seems fast compared to magic that doesn’t come out after ten minutes of incantations.”

“Guh...” Lucy instantly teared up.

*I wasn't bullying you! Please don't cry!*

“So,” I asked, “has your magic mastery gone up?”

“By one point in a whole week...”

“So, your mastery should be at 11 now, right?” The required mastery level for incantationless casting was 50, so she still had a long way to go. “By the way, I’m at 91 now. I went up by a level.”

“Now that’s just messed up! I heard that mastery rarely ever increases once you hit 50! How is your mastery rising at the same pace as mine?!”

Beats me. Maybe because we’d been training together the whole week? Or maybe it was because I always trained from just after waking up in the morning until I fell asleep at night?

I sighed as I skinned the giant rat. As always, my dagger sliced through things like butter. It felt satisfying to use. I owed the goddess my thanks.

“That dagger sure cuts well,” Lucy perceptively pointed out. “Are you using some kind of skill on it?”

“This is a magic weapon.”

“Hmm. So you use a dagger despite being a mage?”

“Is it that big of a deal?”

I preferred to keep the origin of this weapon a secret—the fact that I’d gotten it from a goddess, that is. Even Fujiyan warned me that I should “indeed refrain from telling a soul.” Though it’s not as if I was dying to let people know that I was a believer in a wicked deity.

“Let’s call it a day. I’m gonna go out to hunt some goblins, so let’s meet up at the usual place.” I couldn’t make enough money to eat if I gave up my farming to train, so I’d been keeping up my goblin hunting. Still, the training meant that I had less time to hunt, which cut into my earnings. Yeah, this was kind of a pickle, huh?

“Okay... I’ll be practicing magic back in Macallan...” Lucy dejectedly dragged her feet toward the town.

Hmm, she looked really down. What did people do to cheer girls up at times like these? Maybe I should ask someone with the *Waifu Game Player* skill. Someone like Fujiyan.

*Same day, that evening.*

“Good work today, Lucy,” I said.

“Yeah, same to you, Makoto. Sorry I’ve been making you do all the hunting.”

“I told you, don’t worry about it. We’re a party, so we’re supposed to help each other.”

As usual, we were at the stall area in the guild’s entrance. But unlike usual, all the seats at the skewer stand were full, so we ate dinner at a different store for a change of scenery. Tonight’s entrée was a chicken and vegetable sandwich that Lucy said she loved, with a side of soup. I also ordered what I thought was a juice, but for some reason, the drink I actually received was alcoholic. The old lady running the store said she gave me “a little something extra” and shot me a wink to boot, but I absolutely didn’t need any extras.

“For cryin’ out loud, why doesn’t anything work?!” Lucy turned her second glass bottoms-up and furiously scratched her head. She was taking her failure rough, but I guess it was better than getting gloomy about it.

“Well, it’s a marathon, not a sprint,” I said as I nibbled on my sandwich and levitated the ice in my glass for fun. I then popped one of the floating ice cubes into my mouth. Ah, cold.

“Are you showing off your incantationless magic to twist the knife or something?” Lucy asked bitterly.

“I’m just training.”

“I swear, the casting speed for your magic is almost godlike. I’ve never met anyone who could pop out spells that quickly, even in the elven village.”

“Maybe, but my magic’s power is almost nothing. That’s something I was kind of hoping you could balance out...”

Lucy didn’t respond. Instead, she made a bizarre whining sound before gulping loudly to chug the rest of her drink. Guess she was a bit gloomy after all.

“Heyyy, Makotooo...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Refill, ma’am.” Another drink was given to Lucy.

“Hey,” I said, “don’t cut yourself off. Finish your sentence.”

She must’ve been drunk. Lucy seemed to like alcohol, but she couldn’t hold it well. Once she’d gotten halfway through her fourth glass, she continued speaking.

“My goal is to be like my mom,” she admitted.

Hm? This was the first I’d heard of this.

“Well now, what does your mother do?”

“She’s a mage. A super-strong mage.”

“Oh, neat,” I said. “Is she a famous mage?”

“Uh... Yeah.”

“What’s her name? Is it someone I’d know?”

Lucy stayed silent. Did she not want to say her name?

She answered me with a question instead. “Makoto, do you have a goal?”

A goal, huh? Well, I did technically have one. It was a bit embarrassing, but I figured it’d be weirder to hide things from your party.

“Clearing the Seafloor Temple,” I answered honestly. Lucy, however, blanked out the moment she heard those words.

“Uh... You mean the absolute hardest dungeon? The as-yet-unreached dungeon?”

“Yep. I guess I’d say that’s my goal for starters.” The goddess was in the Seafloor Temple, after all.

“F-For starters?! You’re nuts!” exclaimed Lucy. “They call that place the Last Dungeon!”

“O-Oh... I, uh, didn’t know that.” C’mon, Goddess, you had to pick the final level?

“Why *there* of all places? You could pick any other unreached dungeon! Celestial Tower is said to grant eternal life to those who complete it, and Hell’s Gate is said to have priceless treasures and powerful weapons sleeping within. But nobody knows if the Seafloor Dungeon even has anything worth the risk!”

Wow, this place was getting trashed. Hey, Goddess? Might wanna work on your dungeon’s PR.

*Oh, shut up! I can’t interact with the human world, so cut me some slack!*

A vision of the goddess pouting appeared in the back of my mind.

“Well, the Seafloor Temple is underwater. I figured that I might be able to make it there if I raised my water magic mastery enough.”

Incidentally, this conversation doubled as information gathering for my final destination. If adventurers only avoided this dungeon because it was underwater, that’d be pretty convenient for me. I had no problem with the stuff.

“Maybe... But the Seafloor Temple is in the Central Sea. There are monsters all throughout the ocean surrounding the dungeon too, like water elementals who twist the tides, water dragons, sea monsters, and even the Ruler of the Ocean, Leviathan. A mere human would be swallowed whole.”

“Well, I could always use *Stealth* to get around any monsters.”

“You’re not sneaking around the elementals. They’re everywhere, and they *love* their mischief.”

“Hmm, didn’t know that.” I gulped down the last of my berry-flavored

cocktail. Damn, it was a little too sweet for me. “So, what are these elementals?”

“Fire, water, wind, and ground. Those are the four elements that make up our world. Or, so go the teachings of the Old Deities.”

“Hm?” I just heard a phrase that caught my attention. “The Old Deities?”

“Uh, they’re considered wicked gods by you humans, I think. Do you know the Titans?”

I did. I was a believer of one, in fact.

“The Old Deities got along well with the elementals,” Lucy continued in an uninterested tone, “but the ruling gods nowadays hate ’em. That’s why elemental magic isn’t widely practiced.”

“Guess I gotta do something about those elementals if I wanna make it to the Seafloor Temple, then.”

“Well, that’s just what they say. I don’t know what it’s really like. They *are* folk tales. But really though, an apprentice mage aiming for the Seafloor Temple? You’ve sure got a death wish.”

“Hey, might as well shoot for the stars.”

“Y-Yeah! You gotta shoot for the stars!” Lucy vigorously agreed all of a sudden. “Let’s hit the grindstone again tomorrow, Makoto!”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

We spent the rest of our meal eating, drinking, and chatting. Just like we normally did.

The only unusual moment was when someone actually came to talk to a party of two troublemaker mages.

“Hey, Makoto. Got a minute?”

We turned to see the two people from Lucy’s previous party—Jean and Emily.

## Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Forms a Temporary Party

“Hey, Makoto. Do you want to take on a quest with us?”

That’s what Jean came to ask. Next to him was Emily, a cleric.

“Are you bozos nuts? I dunno what rock you hit your head on, but get lost.”  
Lucy was drunk and feisty.

*Wait, Lucy, are you speaking for the both of us now?*

“We were asking Makoto, not you!” objected Emily. “What’re *you* turning us down for?!”

Please, you three, don’t start a bar fight...

“So, why us?” I figured I should at least hear them out.

“We’re actually planning to take on a raging bison hunt soon.”

“Huh.”

Raging bison were Class 2 monsters that posed medium danger. To give a rough idea, they were beasts that looked like bison, but giant, like three times the size of a regular one. They were normally quite docile, but they’d go on a rampage if you angered one. Seeing the color red only made them madder. You know, *that* kind of monster. They were herbivores and as such didn’t attack humans, but they’d often make travelers miserable by ramming into carriages.

A quest like this was at just the right difficulty for a party of bronze rank adventurers. The monetary reward wasn’t bad either; raging bison meat was delectable, so it fetched a high price. It was a popular quest for any adventurer trying to make a buck. That said...

“I’ll pass.”

“Why? Wh-What for?!”

“Raging bison make meadows their turf. The meadows around Macallan don’t



have any bodies of water. I'm an apprentice mage who can't do a thing without water nearby, so I wouldn't be any help there." I gulped down the rest of my cocktail.

"But aren't you good with your *Scout* skill?"

"Wouldn't *Scout* be kinda useless?" I pointed out. The meadows that these bison lived in were wide open. You didn't need a skill when you could just use your eyes. "Like I said, I won't be much help."

On that note, I finished up my sandwich and attempted to leave the conversation.

"Please, wait! We'll give you first dibs on the rewards, so please, won't you come with us?"

"What do you want me to come with you for?" I asked.

"Bet they wanna apologize for last time," answered Lucy. *Was that really it?* I looked at Jean and Emily. They seemed to feel a bit awkward.

"Part of it is an apology, but really, we just want to get along as fellow rookies," answered Emily. Get along, huh? I wonder.

"For real?! There ain't no way we're getting along after that bullcrap!" Lucy snapped.

"What the hell are you so hostile for?!"

Sparks flew as Lucy and Emily glared at each other. They looked like they were one step away from a catfight. Please, you two, at least try to make up...

"So, Jean, if you wanted to adventure with us, couldn't you join me on a goblin hunt?"

"I considered that, but you always hunt goblins in the Great Forest. I heard Lucy was forbidden from using fire magic there."

"Ah, yeah, that's true." Lucy was banned from using fire magic in the Great Forest until she could control it. And that was the only offensive magic Lucy could really conjure up, hence our recent days of intensive training.

"We figured Lucy could use all the fire magic she wanted in the meadows."

“Well, you’ve got a point there,” I agreed. “What do you think, Lucy?”

“Ugh, adventuring with *these* two?” Lucy didn’t seem all that receptive. On the other hand, she was surely sick of the constant training. Plus, we were poorly balanced as a two-person party of mages; having a frontline warrior like Jean and a support healer like Emily would help a lot in that regard. That just left one burning question...

“You know I won’t have anything to do, right?” I’d be useless without a body of water. *Scout* and *Stealth* wouldn’t serve much purpose either.

“Well, maybe you could slow them down?” Emily strained herself to come up with something. So, I’d be a decoy. I could probably make something work with *Stealth* and *Dodge*.

“Well, okay then. I assume we’ll be getting most of the rewards.”

“Yeah, a seven-three split,” they assured us.

I hadn’t been farming much lately, so that would do.

“Well, Lucy, they did go through the effort of inviting us, so why don’t we take them up on their offer?”

“For real?” Jean’s face lit up.

“Well, if you’re cool with it, fine, I guess.” Lucy wasn’t thrilled, but she agreed.

The next day, I woke up in the adventurer’s guild’s rest area and washed my face with water from the nearby well. Once I’d freshened up, I took the goddess’s dagger in both hands and offered a prayer.

“Here’s to another day of becoming stronger, Goddess.”

*Remember, Makoto, safety first.*

I finished my daily prayers and left to meet up with Jean’s party. We gathered at the eastern gate and set out for the plains beyond it. The weather was lovely—not a cloud in the sky.

But, of course, this was the worst weather possible for a water mage like me. I wish that we could’ve at least gotten a drizzle. Thankfully, that was the only

aspect of this quest that came down to luck.

I talked with Jean as we walked to our destination.

“Oh,” I said, “so you and Emily are childhood friends?”

“We both grew up in the same orphanage in Highland,” Jean responded. “I’m aiming to become a knight, and Emily plans to become a High Priest. But first, we’ve gotta make names for ourselves as adventurers.”

“Pretty noble goals.”

It was a fairly average career plan by this world’s standards, but the many dangers of adventuring had caused plenty of people to lose their nerve and give up. Couldn’t blame ‘em.

Also, it turned out that Jean and Emily weren’t lovers at all. Lucy had only said that to piss them off. Still, Jean had one heck of a beautiful friend. I was jealous.

“What’re you aiming to be, Makoto?”

“Hmm, I guess my plans are to level up and try my hand at a difficult dungeon.” I chose not to mention that my choice of dungeon was the Seafloor Temple, the hardest one in existence. Given how dumbfounded Lucy had been, it didn’t seem like the type of place that a bronze rank should even be thinking about.

“Ah, committed to the adventuring life?” Jean asked.

“I just can’t do anything else.” My classmates might have been hired by far-off countries and be living in luxurious palaces, but those weren’t options for someone with abilities as weak as mine.

“Let me guess—you wanna take on the great maze, Labyrinthos?”

“The largest dungeon on the continent?” I asked. “Well, I’d like to visit eventually.”

Labyrinthos was a massive underground labyrinth that spanned across the territories of Springrogue, Roses, and Great Keith. Its enormous size meant that there were still plenty of uncharted areas left inside, and because of this, there was no shortage of adventurers willing to explore the maze.

“You gotta get to iron rank before that can happen.” Jean chuckled.

“Yeah, I sure do.” It was recommended that an adventurer be iron rank or above before taking on the great maze, so that task was a bit too much for us at the moment.

Lucy and Emily were tagging along closely behind us. Were they getting along? I decided to use my *Listen* skill to check on them.

“So, girl,” said Lucy, “how far have you two gone?”

Lucy was getting into Emily’s personal space. *Hey, Lucy, you’re not trying to start a fight, are you?*

“Wh-Where is this coming from?” asked Emily, bewildered.

“C’mon,” Lucy pressed, “you like Jean, don’t you? So you’ve totally made some progress, right?”

“Excuse me, but I’ll have you know that we’re just good friends.”

“Oh please, you were giving me that ‘mortal enemy’ look the whole time I was with you two.”

“No, I—look...that was because your clothes are always so skimpy!” Emily exclaimed. “You were bothering Jean. And you’re wearing the same stuff today too.”

“It’s hot! What do you want from me? And hey, maybe Jean could just get over it. After all, my clothes haven’t bothered Makoto a bit!”

*Uh, they kinda do,* I mentally corrected her. I was just using *Calm Mind* to hold back those urges.

“Honestly, that’s even more bizarre,” remarked Emily. “Could it be that he’s not into girls?”

*Wow, rude. I’m highly into girls, for the record.*

“Oh no,” Lucy fretted. “If Makoto likes men, then where does that leave me?”

Lucy was worrying about something absolutely outside of the realm of possibility. Dumbass.

“Well, how about you?” shot back Emily. “How far have you and Makoto

gotten?”

“Huh? Nowhere, of course! We only formed our party a few weeks ago.”

“I dunno, you two seem awfully close for a party that new. Rumors around the guild say that you’ve been training together until late at night—just the two of you.”

“Wait... You really think so?”

*Wait, she really thinks so?*

“I do. And I think that the next victim of Lucy the wicked witch may end up being our poor little otherworlder mage.”

“I’m gonna hit you.”

“You’re the one who made it weird first!” huffed Emily.

I decided to refrain from listening any further. Too much danger involved.

After a bit more walking...

“Isn’t that it?” asked Lucy as she pointed to something. We all looked in that direction.

“Where?” questioned Emily.

“I can’t see anything,” said Jean as he squinted.

“Guess I’ll use my *Clairvoyance* skill,” I said. When I investigated using the skill, I did indeed see a small bovine-looking dot. It was beyond the range of my *Scout* skill though, so I couldn’t tell if it was the exact monster we were after.

“I’m impressed that you can see that far,” I commended Lucy. Not even my *Clairvoyance* skill could totally pinpoint our target.

“Elves have great eyesight,” boasted Lucy, puffing out her chest.

“So, what do we do?” I asked the party.

Lucy crossed her arms and declared, “I’ll chargrill it with magic!”

“It’s five hundred mels away. Can you even hit it?” Jean sounded doubtful.

“No way she can,” said Emily decisively.

“What are you talking about?” shouted Lucy. “I’m the only one here who can use long-range magic!”

“Yeah, but you’ve got zero control over it,” I told her. I’d seen my share of Lucy’s spells. I knew that this distance was way beyond her abilities.

“I’ll be a decoy,” I said as I unsheathed my dagger and prepared for a fight. “It’s not like I’ll be of any use when it comes to damage.”

The weather was still lovely; there wasn’t a cloud in the sky nor a puddle on the ground. All I had was my dagger and my weak spells, so I couldn’t hope that any attack of mine would make a raging bison even flinch.

“Will you be all right, Makoto?” asked Lucy with a look of worry on her face.

“I can be pretty tricky with my skills. I’ll draw it over here. From there, Lucy can weaken it with her magic, and Jean can finish it off with his enchanted sword.”

“I’ll cast some support magic to increase Lucy and Jean’s attack power,” suggested Emily.

“Sounds like we’ve got a plan,” I said. “Okay, Lucy, start your incantation.”

“Wait, Makoto!” said Emily. “Let me put a defense spell on you.”

I let Emily cast a buff on me. Okay, here goes.

I cautiously approached the raging bison; to be safe, I made sure to activate my *Stealth* skill beforehand. As I drew closer, the monster’s massive size became more and more apparent. The raging bison was about as long as a mid-sized bus. If that thing decided to ram into a human, they would get launched away like a leaf.

Given that it continued to lazily graze on grass, it seemed like the bison hadn’t noticed me yet. I figured that Lucy’s incantation should’ve finished by now, so I turned back to my party. Jean had his hands raised, which was the sign that they were ready.

*All right, I thought. Let’s get started.*

I turned off my *Stealth* skill.

The raging bison gave me a small glance. It noticed me, but it wasn't on guard yet. I picked up a stone from the ground and activated my *Throw* skill. This was one of my *Traveler* skills, and it made sure that anything I threw would always hit its mark. Unfortunately, the damage it dealt was almost nothing. There was pretty much only one thing the skill was good for: catching an opponent's attention.

"Heave-ho!" I threw the stone with as much force as I could muster.

"Strike!" The stone hit the raging bison right on the nose with every ounce of force that I put into it. The bison bellowed out a furious roar and glared at me.

*Here we go!* I thought. *Now I just have to lead it toward the party.*

Time for my *Flee* skill! I ran back to my teammates at full speed with the raging bison hot on my tail. Wait, was this guy faster than I expected? It was chasing after me even more quickly than the big ogre had. And unlike in the forest, there was nothing I could use to obstruct its path. It was gonna catch up to me soon.

I turned my head to check and saw the raging bison stirring up a cloud of dirt and dust as it charged straight at me. Whew, this fella was really coming. If it hit me, I'd end up in a hospital bed with every bone in my body broken. If I didn't die on impact, that is.

Time for my *Dodge* skill! I activated it right before the bison would've struck me. A black mass of pure destruction passed by before my eyes with a *whoosh*. I felt like a matador. Looking over to the bison, I tried to plan on when I should use my *Dodge* skill again.

The bison was coming right for...

"Hm?"

Not me?

"Wha?!" Lucy blurted out in complete surprise.

Uh oh. The color red tends to trigger a raging bison's rage... And Lucy had red hair *and* a red cloak.

"Oops."

Guess it acquired a new target.

“It’s coming this way!” shouted Jean.

“Eeek! *Fire Magic: Fireball!*” Lucy activated her spell. The giant ball of flame hurtled toward the beast.

“That was too early!” I screamed. Raging bison can’t change direction once they start running; if you were to cast a spell once it had already started charging, your attack would be a guaranteed hit. But if a bison hadn’t started its rush, then it could obviously dodge the spell.

The raging bison evaded the fireball with ease. It was now kicking up its hind legs in preparation for another charge right at Lucy.

“Aaaaaahhh!!!” she screamed.

“Lucy, cool it! Just start incanting again! Hurry!!!”

Lucy panicked; Emily tried to calm her down. But they didn’t have enough time. The raging bison was already tucking its head, making its intentions very clear.

“Here it comes!” Jean warned. He set up his shield, but that wouldn’t stop this monster. I had no choice, so I concentrated my mana.

“*Water Magic: Ice Floor!*”

I froze the ground where the raging bison stood, causing it to slip and tumble over. It made a somewhat dumbfounded moo as it crashed to the ground.

“Makoto,” asked Jean as he rushed over to me, “was that your magic?!”

“Yeah!” I answered. “Don’t expect a second one, though! I don’t have the mana for it!”

“You serious?! How is your mana *that* low?!”

“Quit whining!” I barked.

Jean turned to Lucy. “Hey! Do another *Fireball!*”

“O-Okay, got it!” Lucy responded.

“*Wind Blade!*” Jean swung his sword and hit the raging bison in the side with



a magical slash. It sounded like the strike had dug deep, and the bison did start bleeding, but...

“Doesn’t look like it had much effect,” I noted. The bison hadn’t lost a bit of its rage. It snorted heavily, readying to charge at us yet again.

“It’s supposed to be a close-range attack,” Jean explained with a hint of frustration. “It loses a lot of force if I use it as a projectile.”

Lucy’s incantation wasn’t even halfway complete.

“Okay, let’s split up,” I said. “I’ll be the bait and dodge its attacks. Jean, you strike it from behind.”

“G-Got it. But how are you going to get the monster to focus on you?”

“Hmm, I was thinking like this.” I drew my dagger and started running toward the raging bison.

“A-Are you nuts?!” Jean screamed in bewilderment from behind me.

The raging bison was glaring daggers at me. Then suddenly, it started charging!

*Dodge skill! Followed by...*

*“Water Magic: Ice Cutter!”*

I tugged out the last of my mana, using a spell to pierce through one of the bison’s eyes. Its roar of pain could be heard across the plains.

“Ooh, you did it!” shouted Jean a bit too optimistically.

“I didn’t do anything but make it mad!”

The raging bison, still furious, charged right at me. It seemed to stumble a bit now that it had lost half of its vision—at least it would be a little easier to dodge now.

“My mana’s completely dry!” I yelled. “Jean, it’s up to you!”

“You seriously call yourself a mage?! All right, fine! I’ve got this!”

Jean used his large shield to tackle the raging bison from the side. The shield bashed into the monster with a deep ringing noise and caused it to stagger.

That must've been a shield skill. This guy had some pretty nice tricks up his sleeve.

"The incantation's finished!" Emily yelled. Jean and I scrambled to get as far away from our enemy as possible.

*"Fire Magic: Fireball!"*

Lucy let her magic burst forth. The raging bison was still staggered from Jean's shield attack, so it couldn't dodge this. The ridiculously huge ball of fire enveloped the raging bison's body before a pillar of flame erupted toward the sky.

The raging bull's anguished final bellow echoed around the plains as it became immolated in flames, ensuring that it never made another noise again.

"Wow, Lucy," Emily remarked in awe, "your magic sure is strong..."

"I didn't even get to do anything," Jean muttered in disappointment. He'd been poised to strike the finishing blow, but there was no need. He shouldn't have worried though—he'd fought well and done a great job.

"I did it!" Lucy was certainly satisfied.

"Will we still be able to sell our hunt when it's charred black?" I asked Jean. We were supposed to be making a quick buck here, but I think we might've gone overboard.

"Yeah, pelts are off the table," Jean answered with uncertainty. "But the organs and bones can be used to make materials, so someone will buy it. Probably."

Probably? C'mon, give me a straight answer...

"Whew, I'm starving," said Lucy. "Hey, can I take a little bite out of this guy?"

I didn't realize that Lucy had such a wild side, but the bison carcass *did* smell like a well-done steak.

"You're gonna ruin your stomach," said Emily, pointing out the obvious. "We'll report this to the guild. We need to put in a request for collecting the monster, as well as selling it."

If an adventurer hunted a large monster, the guild would handle transport and valuation of the prey once it was reported to them. Jean had what appeared to be a communicator on him, so he took care of the report.

The rest of us stood watch to make sure that no more monsters came by. It looked like we were going to be in the clear, since there were almost no strong beasts in this area. We looked over the plains as we waited for a guild worker to come by and retrieve the bison.

I noticed something wrong about ten minutes after we'd defeated the raging bison and reported it to the guild.

My *Sense Danger* skill started blaring in my head. The high-pitched beeps going off between my ears almost made me grimace in pain. I'd never heard a siren this high or this loud before. It was a stronger warning than even the one for that big ogre.

"Hey, guys! There's a powerful monster around here!" I warned the others.

"Huh? Where, Makoto?"

"Makoto, is that true?"

"Just watch your surroundings!" I shouted. "I know there's something here!" I activated *Scout* to see if I could locate it.

"Ah, look over there!" Lucy called out. I peered in the direction that she was pointing.

Something was charging at us, and fast.

"No way!" Emily cried. "A griffin?!"

The monster heading for us was a Class 3, and a high-danger enemy: a griffin.

Ah, the griffin. It was probably the most famous fantasy-world monster next to the dragon. It possesses the chest of an eagle and the legs of a lion, but everyone knows that.

I've always had a soft spot for the griffins that showed up in RPGs. Mostly, they were ranked as powerful mid-game opponents. I'd never seen a game with

a griffin as its final boss, but plenty of griffin boss fights were massive hurdles to overcome for RPG players.

Most importantly, they're cool monsters.

But, uh, are we really encountering one this early on? Look, griffin, I need something called "mental preparation." Have you heard of it?

Anyway, this staple fantasy monster was charging toward us at an absolutely ferocious speed. We could hear the sonic boom of its wings and the low rumble of its growl from where we were, a good distance across the plains.

"That thing's big..."

The griffin's massive figure was an order of magnitude larger than even the raging bison's. Light reflected from the sickle-like talons that extended from the griffin's thick front legs. I sure didn't wanna get sliced by those things...

"Everyone, run!" Jean shouted. "It's probably after the raging bison!"

The griffin must have been drawn by the scent of cooked meat.

Jean grabbed Emily's hand and started running.

"Let's run, Lucy," I said.

"O-Okay," she responded.

Gusts of wind caused by the griffin's flapping eagle wings reached even where we were standing. As we expected, the griffin landed right on top of the raging bison's corpse. And then, it started eating chunks of meat.

"But...our prey..."

Sorry, Lucy, but we'll have to give up on this one. Can't do much adventuring if you're dead after all. We cautiously kept our distance from the griffin, making sure not to startle it.

*We're giving it our prey, I thought, so I hope it can leave us be and just go somewhere else...*

But it seemed like my hopes were to be dashed. The griffin soon locked its eyes on us. They had the glimmer of a predator. And its target was...Lucy?

"Wha?" Lucy stammered out, utterly shocked. For the second time today, I

might add.

“Wow, Lucy, you’re a hit with the monsters.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” Lucy said as she nervously backed away.

I wondered if there was a reason for this. I’d heard that strong monsters prefer prey with high mana, but could this monster be drawn to Lucy’s mana? Well, that was something I could think about later. You know, after getting us out of this alive.

“Jean!” I called out. “You up for more?”

“You got it!” Jean responded. “Okay, Makoto and I will buy you some time!”

“Wait!” said Emily, with tears already welling up in her eyes. “You can’t do this! You’ll die!”

With one whoosh, the griffin flapped its wings and took flight, soaring to the skies above.

“Here it comes!”

And just like that, it dove right for Lucy and me.

*Dodge!* I pulled Lucy close and activated my skill to dodge the assault. We managed to avoid the griffin’s talon by a hair, but it wasn’t long before the monster was airborne and looking down upon us again.

“It’s coming back!” screamed Lucy. It was persistent, huh? Well, *Dodge!*

“Ow!”

It seemed like Lucy had scraped her foot against the ground when I’d used my *Dodge* skill. Guess my mastery for using the skill on two people was still pretty low.

“Lucy,” I asked, “can you do your incantation while we’re evading?”

“I can try, but probably not,” Lucy tearfully admitted.

“Yeah, I figured...” It usually took three whole minutes when she had nothing to distract her, and it was probably much harder to incant while dodging.

Meanwhile, the griffin was swooping down for its third attack. Oh, for crying

out loud, *Dodge!*

“Ouch!”

I managed to dodge again, but this time, the griffin’s talon just barely grazed my shoulder. Its aim was getting more accurate. Up it went into the air again.

This was bad; its strategy prevented us from using any close-range attacks. Jean had his back to Emily as he prepared to strike, but it seemed like he was having trouble predicting the exact moment he could land a hit.

The griffin suddenly screeched in a high-pitched shriek.

*Wait, was mana gathering around it?*

The griffin descended for a fourth attack. I had a bad feeling about this one, but there were no other options besides dodging.

*Dodge!*

An impact struck my body.

“Gagh!”

“Eek!”

I thought I’d dodged that attack, but for some reason, I was being blown away! The force of the gust was too much—Lucy’s hand was pulled from my grasp in midair.

*Crap, was that wind magic?* The griffin was now surrounded by wind. Are you telling me that monsters could use magic too?!

“Makoto! Lucy! Are you okay?!” shouted Jean.

“Y-Yeah, we are,” I answered. “Jean, take care of Emily.”

I held my spinning head in place as I stood up. Then, I slowly approached Lucy. Before I could make it, Jean drew his sword and stood in the path of the griffin.

“Jean!” cried Emily. This was getting really bad. But what more could I do? Lucy didn’t seem to be out cold, but she wasn’t standing up. I heard Emily incanting some healing magic from a distance, however, the spell wasn’t strong enough to fully recover Lucy. This griffin was smart; Emily would be its next target if it found out we had a healer among us.

I heard Jean swear out of panic and frustration. Every time that griffin swung its front leg, it sent Jean flying, shield and all. It was only a matter of time before he'd be done for. My mana had run dry, and attacking with my dagger was definitely not an option. I wanted to run, but our opponent probably wouldn't let all four of us escape.

What was left? Should I leave Lucy and run? Nah, not doing it.

*Makoto, put your own life first.*

Goddess, I won't leave my partners behind.

*...Fine.*

The goddess sounded exasperated, but I ignored her. I was maxing out my *Calm Mind* skill to barely maintain my composure, and I wracked my brain for some way out of this.

There had to be something... Just remember it, Makoto! There had to be a secret trick to defeating this thing.



One year ago, I was taking a class in the Water Temple.

"Now, class," said the elderly instructor, "the first step to learning magic is to feel the mana."

"Yes, teacher," my toddler classmates all said vigorously. I sighed.

"Put your hands forward and repeat after me," the teacher began. "O Goddess on high whom we so revere, I offer you my prayer..."

"I thank the Holy Goddess from the bottom of my heart," the children followed.

*I-Is this that spell incantation thing?* I thought. I was a bit too embarrassed to follow along. But still, incantations were the standard spell-casting method in this world, so I'd just have to deal with it.

"Well, class?" the teacher asked. "Did you all feel the mana?"

"Not much..." I mumbled.

The kids around me were all raving about how they'd felt warm or seen this

strange light, but I hadn't experienced a thing. Uh, was this a problem? Was I already falling behind actual children?

Seeing the pale look on my face, the teacher came to check up on me.

"You're older, Makoto, so it's only natural," she explained. "It's the sort of thing that the younger ones are more sensitive to."

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Oh, don't look so glum about it. Try it with me." The teacher then grabbed my arm. "Concentrate on the feeling of your palms."

"O-Okay."

Suddenly, I felt some sort of tingly chill in my hands.

*I-Is this it?* I thought.

"Feel anything, Makoto?"

"I think...I'm feeling something."

"That's because I synchronized with you. It's a technique that lets a mage affect another mage's mana by touching them."

"Wow... Didn't know you could do that."

"All high rank mages can do it. Mages of that caliber take on many disciples, after all, and it's the quickest way to show someone how to use a spell."

"Could I do it too?"

"You can, if you raise your magic mastery to 50. But be careful, though. It might not work well if both casters don't have an affinity for the same element."

"So you were able to synchronize with me because you can use water magic too?"

"Yes. I can use all of the elements, besides moon."

It was a conversation that had made me realize how amazing my teacher was. And for some reason, that memory popped into my head at that very moment. I was also reminded of something else she'd told me: if nothing else, my water



magic was high rank in terms of mastery.



*There's a first time for everything, I thought. I'm gonna try synchronizing!*

I ran over to Jean and Lucy.

"Jean! Buy us some time! I'm gonna cast a huge spell!"

"Uh, sure! Got it!"

Jean tossed his sword aside to grip his shield with both hands, and then dug his feet into the ground. The griffin's talons came right for him. He held out somehow, and I hoped he could continue.

"Lucy, concentrate on your mana."

"Do what?!" Lucy blurted. "Why?"

"Put your right hand out and just generate something with mana! I'll control it for you!"

"What do you mean, 'something'?! I can't use anything but fire magic!"

"Good enough. Just focus on it!"

I gripped Lucy's right hand and wrapped my other hand around her waist, just like my old teacher once had.

"Eek! Wh-What are you doing with those?!" shouted Lucy.

"Don't worry, just hurry up!"

"Uhhhh? O-Okay, fine, but you're getting too handsy!"

I ignored the sight of Lucy's beet-red face and focused on my magic. I was winging it on the exact method, but I envisioned myself gathering mana from the points of connection between Lucy's body and mine, rather than just pulling from my mana pool alone. With this technique, I could try to synchronize with Lucy's mana.

Suddenly, the sensation of being swallowed up by a gust of wind rushed over me. Shortly after, I realized—this feeling was flowing into me from Lucy.

*So...this is Lucy's mana, I thought.*



Typically, you can't do anything with an element if you don't have an affinity for it, but it seemed like I was managing her fire just fine; the alternative was being this griffin's dinner.

"Ngh," Lucy moaned next to me. It sounded sensual, but I had no time to spare thinking about it.

Lucy's massive amount of mana was nothing like mine—if my mana was a tuft of dust, then hers was a thunderstorm. Was this what it meant to have a king rank skill? Was this torrent of power what Lucy had to control every time? It must be exhausting. I made a decision right then to lighten her training regimen going forward.

Lucy's mana was still flowing within me. I tried my hand at converting it into something a bit out of my comfort zone—fire magic. All of a sudden, a choice dialog from my *RPG Player* skill appeared.

*Oh come on, I was kinda busy here!*

Cast the *Synchro* spell with Lucy?

►Yes

No

No duh, that's what I was there for.

Are you sure?

►Yes

No

...What was it being so persistent for? It wasn't like I had any other options, so of course I was gonna cast it. I continued to gather Lucy's flood of mana into my right hand.

*"Fire Magic: Fire Storm!"*

A tornado of flames appeared before my eyes.

“It actually worked!” Lucy exclaimed. “And with a high level spell too!”

“I’ll lose control if I relax for a second, but man!” I felt as if I was pedaling a bike like mad through a hurricane, and I broke out in a sweat that wouldn’t stop.

My body was heating up! I felt like I was on fire!

“Jean, take cover!” I yelled.

“Got it!” Jean retreated back to Emily’s position. The griffin growled as it cautiously stepped back.

“Oh no, it’s going to dodge!” Emily cried. The fire storm wasn’t going to reach the griffin; it had already flapped its wings and taken to the sky.

“Makoto! It dodged! What do we do?!” The tornado of flame had just grazed past the griffin’s side.

*Just imagine it, I told myself. It’s just like water magic. The griffin thinks it’s safe—which means now’s my chance to strike!*

“Expand!” I commanded. The flaming twister suddenly transformed into a huge whirlpool. I felt the blasts of heat washing over me, even at the distance where I was standing.

“GYAAAAAAWRK!” the griffin cried as the flames consumed it.

“What’s going on?!” shouted Lucy. “Did you just change the magic’s form?!”

“Looks like that trick I’ve been practicing has come in handy!” I said. Not that I ever expected to test it out on magic of this scale.

The griffin struggled to escape the heat, but I wasn’t letting it get away; the pillar of flames chased the beast wherever it went. I was now getting used to the turbulent rush that was Lucy’s mana.

*But man, this stuff’s hot, I thought. I’m probably gonna smell like ash for a while.*

I started feeling a bit prickly all over. Had I stopped sweating?”

“H-Hey, Makoto!”

“Dude!” shouted Jean. “Your whole body’s on fire!”

“Huh?” I hadn’t noticed due to the flames of *Fire Storm*, but uh, was I on fire?  
“When did this get here?”

“Makoto, turn off the magic!” Lucy frantically yelled. “You can’t handle any more of this!”

“So you’re fine, Lucy?”

“I’m totally fine! Just turn off the magic already!”

*Fire Magic: Cancel.*

“Hm? Strange, I appear to still be on fire.”

“How are you so calm, Makoto?! You’re literally burning alive!”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” I appreciated the concern, but my *Calm Mind* skill still kept me from panicking. Once again, it’d come in handy.

“The griffin’s falling!” Emily said. I looked over to where she was pointing and saw that the griffin had crashed down onto the ground. Its wings were scarred from the flames, with parts of its body even reduced to ash. It was on the verge of death.

“Jean!” I shouted. “Go for it!”

“Got it! But put yourself out already!”

Jean’s sword shone bright.

“Maximum output: *Wind Blade!*”

His blade became bathed in a green light before it fell upon the griffin’s neck.

“I-Is it over?” Jean asked, relieved.

Next to me, Lucy had begun to stagger. Too much mana must’ve been drawn from her at once.

“That was amazing!” Emily exclaimed as she ran up and hugged her childhood friend. “Jean! We did it! We just beat a griffin! *Us!*”

“Phew, thank goodness.” Now that the griffin was defeated, I sighed in relief. With that done, I turned off my *Calm Mind* skill.

Okay, I'll admit it. I got a little careless. I relied a little too much on *Calm Mind*. That curious warmth I'd been feeling? Turns out that it was coming from a fatal wound.

"Ah... Aaaugh..."

Intense pain surged throughout my body. My field of vision quickly closed in.

"M-Makoto!"

I heard Lucy's voice, but all I saw before me was black. It was no use—I couldn't stay conscious.

So I'd cast a *Synchro* spell with Lucy. We'd pulled it off with zero prep and managed to soundly defeat the griffin that was about to send us to our graves. That spell was a pretty darn powerful attack for bronze rankers like us. But in exchange, my lack of affinity for fire magic had caused Lucy's mana to set me aflame.

I guess that was what my teacher had meant when she'd said you couldn't synchronize with an element you had no affinity for. I really should've asked her to explain back then...

Guess we wouldn't be using this attack again. A shame. I thought it was pretty good.

And so, I passed out.



I found myself in a dream, a space of absolute nothingness. How many times had I been here? I was starting to get used to the scenery, but it looked a bit different this time.

The goddess who usually greeted me with a beaming smile was now glaring at me with her hands on her hips, not speaking. Was she, uh, mad?

"So." Noah's voice was as cold as ice. "Care to remind me? What was the first thing I asked of you?"

"Uhhh," I wondered. I was pretty sure I remembered. "Was it...to become

strong?”

“Correct.”

*You know, having someone as beautiful as this goddess staring daggers at me is kinda hot.*

“Dumbass,” she remarked at my internal thought. “Now then, do you remember what I told you *after*?”

“Uhh, yeah, totally, I remember.”

Was it the “go get ‘em, champ” bit? Or did she say she had “high hopes” for me before that?

“You don’t remember at all!” the goddess squealed as she swung her fists around. “Well! I’ll tell you then! I said that you were the only follower I had, so you’d better not die that easily!”

“Ohhhhh,” I said. So that was it, now I re—wait.

“You don’t mean...” My blood ran cold at the thought. “Am I...dead?”

“Jeez, you really need to know your limits.” The goddess sighed. With a snap of her fingers, a monitor appeared in the air beside her. “Here, take a look.”

Neat magic. Anyway, the monitor displayed everyone from my party.

“Right now, your cleric is doing her best to heal you.”

“Makoto! Hey! Is Makoto okay?!”

“Lucy! Stay calm,” said Emily. “He’s lost consciousness, but he’s still breathing. We need to give him some first aid right now, but we’ll take him to a hospital the moment we get back to town!”

“Makoto, don’t die on us! The town’s just a little further ahead!”

Jean was carrying me on his back while Emily was casting healing spells. Lucy looked like she was in a complete panic.

*Sorry for making you worry, guys.*

“It was *your* magic that defeated the griffin,” explained Noah, “so they’re just

trying to save the person that they owe their lives to.”

Ah, that made sense. Well, I was glad to see everyone safe at least.

“I’m sorry, Noah. I pushed my luck too far today. I nearly got myself killed.”

“You *really* don’t get it, do you? The damage you went through today normally *would* have gotten you killed!”

“Huh?” *What did she mean by that?*

“Look at this,” the goddess said as she pulled out a single Soul Book.

“Wait, isn’t this mine?” I asked. “Don’t take my stuff when I’m not looking.”

“C’mon, what’s a little property sharing between friends? Anyway, look right here.”

The goddess grabbed my shoulder and held me close. *Um, again, personal space.*

“Stop sweating the small stuff already,” she griped good-naturedly, while clinging to me even harder. I activated my *Calm Mind* skill and looked over my Soul Book. It was there that I found a line of words I hadn’t seen before: *Blessing of the Goddess Noah.*

“W-Wait, is this...”

“Tee hee, ya did it, Makoto!” the goddess cheered. “Thanks to your daily prayers, you gained my blessing! Looks like it allowed you to endure that griffin’s attacks and the fire magic.”

A believer with their goddess’s blessing can gain anything from awesome power to unbreakable defenses. Guess that was what saved my life.

“I see...”

It had been a long time. One year and several months since I’d come to this world, in fact. But now, I felt like I was finally catching up a little to my classmates.

“Oh, well look who’s pleased with himself,” the goddess teased. “Get ready, because there’s more!”

“What else is there?”



“Look right here!”

I followed Noah’s index finger to find another word that I wasn’t too familiar with.

“Elementaler?” If I remembered correctly, that skill was something that elves and dwarves had. Lucy had it too, I think.

“Yes, indeed! We Titans are friends to the elementals! This is what we call a ‘gift skill’ from yours truly!”

“Elementaler... So, elementals, huh?”

The Water Temple didn’t have any practitioners of the skill. In fact, the whole human race didn’t have any practitioners anymore. It was a niche branch of magic that only elves and dwarves used every now and then.

“What, are you disappointed?” the goddess questioned.

“Oh no, not at all, I assure you!” That was close. I wasn’t disappointed per se, I just wasn’t sure if this skill was going to be strong or not. The goddess must have picked up on that concern. “I’ll use it with the deepest of gratitude, O Goddess!”

“Heh. Well, go forth, my believer.”

The goddess gently patted my head. A light then began to envelop my body.

“Looks like it’s about time for you to wake up, Makoto.”

Noah was beaming, and her smile was absolutely stunning. But looking at her face gave me an idea.

“Thank you very much, Goddess,” I said. “By the way, could I invite Lucy to become your acolyte?”

“Hmm... More followers, uh...”

That was strange. She didn’t seem very excited.

“The truth is,” she explained, “part of my punishment for going against the world of the gods was that I could only gain a single new believer every ten years.”

“Aw, really?” I couldn’t invite anyone at that rate.

“I’m fine as long as I’ve got you, Makoto,” Noah said with a thumbs-up and a wink. She seemed a little too carefree about this.

“Don’t worry, it’s no big deal,” she assured me. “Anyway, make sure you mind your limits out there!”

“I will. Take care, Noah.”

“See ya around!”

And with that, the light washed over me.



“How are you feeling, Makoto?”

I awoke in the guild’s infirmary. When I looked up, I saw Emily’s face.

“Morning,” I said. “How long was I out for?”

“About half a day, I think. It’s nighttime now.”

“Ah, got it.” I slowly sat up. My body felt heavy.

I asked Emily what had happened after we’d defeated the griffin. According to her, when the death of the beast had been reported to the guild—that is, when my party had reported the fact that four bronze rank adventurers had taken down a high danger (Class 3) monster—the entire guild had flown into an uproar. Everyone seemed especially impressed with how Lucy had weakened the griffin using her powerful fire magic, and how Jean had struck the finishing blow.

The two had become instant heroes.

Right now, there was a raucous party being thrown at the guild entrance. Given their reactions to the ogre hunt a while back, maybe these adventurers just liked making noise. Meanwhile, my burns were being treated with Emily’s healing magic. I was completely wrapped up in bandages; I looked like a mummy.

“I feel itchy all over,” I complained.

“That’s a sign that the magic is working, so you’ll just have to bear with it,” Emily said. I couldn’t argue with that, so I did as I was told.

“Can I move?”

“You can,” Emily responded, “but you really should be resting. You sleep at the guild, right?”

“Yeah, though it might be hard to doze off with this racket. I’m gonna go say hi to everyone.”

“I’ll go with you, then. I have to see Jean anyway.”

“Makoto!”

Lucy came running up to me as soon as I set foot in the entrance of the adventurer’s guild. Her face was red, so she must’ve been drinking pretty heavily.

“So?” Lucy asked. “Are you feeling better? Sure you don’t need to sleep?”

“It’s too loud here for that.”

A massive banquet had taken over the guild’s entrance hall. Jean was surrounded by adventurers treating him like the man of the hour. There were even a few lady adventurers who were trying to get in good with the newfound hero. Always a hit with women, huh?

“Jean, you dog!” Emily said, grabbing him by the collar and tearing him away from his admirers.

*Must be rough. Not that I can relate...*

“Hey, Makoto?” Lucy asked. Her eyes were watering as she gripped my hand. “Are you sure you feel okay? You were unconscious all this time, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, I just woke up. But hey, you’re a hero for the day. Go over and have some fun.”

“I’m fine! I really just wanted to be by your side, but Emily told me that I wouldn’t be of any help, and Lucas said that they couldn’t really throw a party without a person to celebrate. So instead, I got forced to drink like a fish!” Lucy made a show of her displeasure, but she didn’t seem to think it was too bad. After all, before now, she’d never gotten this much attention from her peers.

“B-But, uh, Makoto,” Lucy asked sheepishly. “Are you, umm...mad about today?”

“What about today?” I asked.

“I mean, my magic nearly killed you...”

“Oh yeah, that was my fault. I learned at the temple—don’t cast a *Synchro* spell for an element you lack an affinity with.”

“No, that’s not it. Sure, synchronizing with magic you’re not attuned to usually doesn’t work, but it should never be so bad that fire magic burns your entire body...”

Lucy looked really glum and I wasn’t sure why. However, I got the feeling that her guilt came from something beyond the fact that I’d gotten injured.

“Lucy?” I asked.

She raised her head, then murmured a response. “I think it’s because of the demon blood inside me...”

“Demon?”

Lucy was now wearing an even more somber look, and she paused before continuing her explanation.

“Yes... It’s true.” she admitted.

“But aren’t you an elf?”

“I’m an elf on my mom’s side...but my dad’s side is different. My mom married a demon somewhere and had a child—me.”

A hybrid of elf and demon? Yeah, no wonder she’s so strong.

“According to my mom, my dad was a demon whose entire body was covered in flames. She told me that his bloodline gave my mana a strong affinity for fire.”

“How did she make a baby with someone whose body was on fire?”

“That’s not the part you should worry about!” Lucy snapped. I thought it was a pretty natural thing to wonder, though.

“I can endure flames and cast powerful spells thanks to the mana of that fire demon, but I can’t use weaker fire magic,” she explained. “As for the spells I *can* cast, I’m bad at controlling them. I’m butterfingers. Something always goes wrong. Also, my body temperature is abnormally high, so I tend to get hot quickly.”

“Ah, so that’s why you always dress so lightly,” I said. Guess that mystery was finally solved.

“Anyway, I think that’s why the *Synchro* spell gave you burns all over your body; it was because you synchronized with *me*, specifically. This never would’ve happened if you’d tried it with anyone else...”

Lucy looked dismal. She must have been really depressed about it.

“Well,” I said, “if that’s how it is, then so be it. We’ll just have to try something different next time.”

Lucy perked up and looked at me with wide eyes.

“Makoto... You still want to keep me in your party?”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t?”

“Why *would* you?!” Lucy objected with tears in her eyes. “I was useless on our hunt, I attract monsters, and to top it all off, I got you immolated!”

“You were plenty useful.” I couldn’t really deny the full-body immolation, though.

“But look at how badly you were injured!”

“Hey, no worries about that,” I said. “We all make mistakes.”

“But...even with your training, I haven’t been growing at all. I just don’t know what to do...”

Hmm, Lucy was really down in the dumps. How could I comfort her?

“Are you *sure* you don’t think I’m a nuisance?” Lucy fretted. “Or maybe... Maybe you’re just keeping me in your party because Lucas or Mary put you up to it?”

Wow, this was some serious self-deprecation. I didn’t think of her as a

nuisance or anything like that. In fact, I enjoyed looking for a way to utilize Lucy's powerful magic. It was like solving a puzzle. Although, she'd probably get mad if I told her she was fun to have around because I was treating her like a game. Quite the conundrum.

"Lucy," I whispered. She was still holding my hand, and I squeezed back. "I need you, Lucy. Let's work through this together."

I looked her in the eyes and spoke as solemnly as I could. However, the part of me that was watching from a distance using *RPG Player* thought my line was pretty darn cheesy.

"Wh-Wha?! O-Oh, I see, yeah. Got it, yeah, we'll work through this!"

Lucy's face turned beet red as she stumbled over her words. Did I exaggerate too much? I didn't do anything I'd regret, did I?

*Hoo, boy.*

Did I just hear the goddess sigh? What'd I do wrong?

For a while after that hunt, I focused on my recovery. It, well, didn't amount to much more than lying around the guild's rest area.

I was bored.

Lucy was training hard to raise her fire magic's mastery. I had her teach me about my newly acquired *Elementaler* skill in between her training sessions.

"Elementals can't be seen by the naked eye," she explained.

"If you can't see them, how can you use their magic?"

"The same way you use any other magic: with an incantation. But you need to say it in the language of the elementals, Elemanti."

Another new language? This was gonna be a pain to remember.

"Guess I'll just have to start learning from the basics," I said. "I'll check out the used book store later."

But Lucy shook her head at this idea. "They don't sell textbooks on elemental magic in Macallan."

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because there aren’t any human elementalers.”

Ah, right. I’d heard that back at the temple. There weren’t any *human* practitioners of it, right?

“So, how do I start learning it?” I asked.

“Hmm, that’s kind of the problem...”

“Man, I just wanna go adventuring again...”

“Oh no, you need another week of rest!” Emily warned as she happened to pass by.

“Hey, Jean,” I said, raising a hand to greet him.

“Hey, Makoto,” Jean responded. I heard that he’d been training to take down a raging bison on his own. Sounded like fun.

“Ugh, it’s torture to be stuck in the guild all day when I can’t go adventuring.”

I was using my magic to float seven water balls in the air, and I juggled them like beanbags. This sort of training was all I’d been doing lately.

“You sure are performing some high-level tricks for someone who’s supposedly bedridden,” Lucy remarked. But after a pause, her expression grew serious. “Hey, Makoto?”

“What is it?”

“Have you been sleeping in the guild’s rest area this whole time?”

“Yeah. I feel like it’d be a waste to spend my money on lodging. Also, I don’t have much money to blow right now anyway.”

Hunting goblins paid peanuts, and the few peanuts I had left were dwindling by the day, since I couldn’t go out and farm for cash. I probably had enough to last for another week, but after that... Phew, making ends meet in a fantasy world sure wasn’t a cakewalk.

“Listen, the chief of the elf village I come from is part of my family,” said Lucy. “The allowance they send to me isn’t exactly small, so I have a contract for a

long-term rental.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” One of those rich kids. I was jealous.

“S-So, anyway... W-Would you, um...” Lucy was fidgeting.

“Lucy?” I asked.

“Makoto, don’t you think you ought to heal up in an actual room? M-Maybe you could, um, stay in my room...”

“Makoto, dearie! Healed up yet?”

Mary came up and hugged me from behind. She was uncharacteristically sober too. Then again, it was still daylight.

“Mary, don’t be so rough with a burn patient!” Emily scolded.

“For crying out loud, Mary!” Lucy snapped. “We were having a serious conversation here!”

“Come now, are you sure you want to be so cold to me?” Mary teased with a grin. She then handed over some kind of book.

“Wait... What?! *My First Elemanti*... How did you get it?” I thought Macallan didn’t have anything like this.

“Well, sweetie, I heard you got a new skill, so I ordered it from the guild in Springrogue.” Mary then explained that it was a real hassle.

“The Springrogue adventurer’s guild...” Lucy said as she crossed her arms to ponder it. “If I recall correctly, plenty of elves and dwarves go there, so that makes some sense...”

“Mary, thanks a bunch!”

“Tee hee, don’t you worry about it. Good luck, Makoto!” Mary patted my head.

Lucy was sulking next to me. Oh right, our conversation.

“Oh, Lucy, were you saying something earlier?” I inquired.

Lucy didn’t answer or even look my way.

“Uh, Lucy?”



“No, it was nothing,” she responded. What had gotten into her?

“Anyway, Mary,” I asked, “what do we owe you for the book?”

“Aw, you don’t need to pay me,” she said. “But it *is* guild property, so make sure you return it. This is just a rental copy.”

“Got it. Thank you very much.” What a relief, especially since I didn’t have much money on hand. Mary said her goodbyes and waved as she returned to work.

“Well, that’s a big help,” I said to Lucy. “Now I can start training my elemental magic!”

Lucy didn’t respond. In fact, she seemed to be a bit disgruntled for some reason.

“Uh, Lucy?”

“...Hey, Makoto?”

“Y-Yes?”

“You jerk!”

And with that, Lucy ran off.

Later, over that night’s dinner, I had a rough time consoling her.

### ◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

Darnit... Thanks to Mary getting in the way, I couldn’t ask Makoto to stay at my place...

But maybe that was for the best. I only tried to invite him because adventurers in the same party tended to share a home base. Besides, Makoto’s a boy. If we *did* stay in the same room, our relationship would wind up being a bit less than professional, wouldn’t it?

*I-I’m not ready for that kind of commitment*, I thought. As a species, elves disliked premarital intimacy and were pretty reserved in romantic affairs.

Then again, Emily and Jean from my old party were living together. But that was just because they’d grown up in the same orphanage. Those two were different.

*How do I feel about Makoto, anyway?* I wondered. My feelings were certainly positive—unlike all those jerks who'd invited me to their parties because of my king rank skill or my wardrobe, he never made fun of me, not even after discovering how I could barely control my own magic.

Heck, he even helped me train. Well, technically, I just tagged along with the training he'd already been doing, and he worked with me whenever he had a moment to spare. The look in his eyes as he trained was as stern as they come.

Though on second thought, he appeared to enjoy it, at least a little. And he always kept up that training for hours.

"I'm impressed you can maintain concentration for that long," I'd remarked on one occasion.

"I can pull triple-nighters to grind in an RPG," he answered.

When I asked him, he explained that a "triple-nighter" meant staying up for three nights in a row. Okay, maybe he just had a screw loose.

He *was* a really hard worker. Of course, that didn't mean he was likeable, or even particularly strong. If anything, his stats and skills were weak. Incredibly so. Like, to the point where anyone else in his position would've been better off giving up their adventuring dreams. But Makoto kept it up against all better judgment, and he'd managed to earn the unspoken respect of those at the guild.

*He's a strange one*, I concluded. Especially the part where he'd never once tried to form a party until we'd teamed up. It was unthinkable—if you're a mage, you practically *have* to find a party. And Makoto was just an *apprentice* mage, to boot.

"A real man quests solo in silence," he'd say. Except I'd never heard that saying in my life. Maybe otherworlders were just like this...

"Morning..."

"Good morning."

I met Makoto at the guild entrance and found him looking rather sleepy.

“Were you up late training last night?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Remember that you’re still supposed to be resting,” I said, reminding him of Emily’s warning yesterday.

“Oh, I am, don’t worry,” Makoto said with a grimace. “That’s the only thing the doctors have been telling me.”

*Does he really want to train that much?* I wondered.

Well, I had my own improvement to work on! I couldn’t rely on Makoto to do everything forever. I tightly gripped my staff, a memento from my days at the elven village. It had served me well ever since.

“Lucy, let’s go to the southern forest today!”

“Sure, got it.”

Our training ground for the day was the forest to the south of Macallan. It was a wide-open place with almost no monsters who’d pose any danger.

“There’s no water around,” I pointed out with concern. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“It rained last night, so I should be able to make a smokescreen out of mist.”

The ground was moist and hard to walk on, but Makoto was having a leisurely stroll atop this uneven terrain.

*Is he using Walk on Water?* I wondered. His magic activated quickly, without needing an incantation, so it was sometimes hard to tell.

Couldn’t he wait for a second? My stride wasn’t keeping up with him!

After I followed Makoto for a bit longer, he turned around and brought a finger to his lips as though to say, “Wait, there’s something here.”

“What is it, Makoto? A monster?”

As I looked, I saw a small beast with the head of a dog.

“A kobold?” I asked. “It might’ve strayed from its pack.”

“Ah, that’s a new one to me. Guess they show up in the southern forest.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Run away,” he said.

“What? We’re not going to fight it?” I asked, but Makoto pulled my arm back. “It’s just a kobold, though. They’re only about as strong as a goblin.”

Makoto was the Goblin Cleaner, wasn’t he? Still, he didn’t seem to have any intention of fighting it, so we ran off without looking back.

“Phew,” Makoto said with relief. “We barely made it out of there...”

“Hey... I’m covered in mud, you know...” Running on top of such saturated soil had left me drenched in the huge splashes of mud I’d kicked up.

“Ah, sorry about that,” Makoto apologized. He may have seemed remorseful for what he’d done, but...

“You could have beaten that thing without running, right?” I asked. “It was *just* a kobold.”

“Hmm... Still, it’s a monster that I’ve never seen before, so fighting it on the spot would’ve been kinda risky.”

He sure was cautious. Especially for an adventurer who’d recently taken down a griffin.

“Fine, but I don’t want to go back to town looking like this!” I complained, patting down my filthy hair and clothes.

“How about we take a detour?”

“You want me to wash my clothes here?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Makoto. “I’ll keep watch to make sure nobody comes by.”

We had stopped by a small spring in the southern forest. Makoto had led the way using his *Mapping* skill.

“W-Well, you’d better not look!” I warned.

“Yep, gotcha. I’ll keep my eyes to myself, so take your time.”

Right now, I wasn't wearing a thing. I hid behind a boulder by the side of the lake as I tried to scrape the muck off my skin and out of my hair. I'd already washed my clothes and underwear in the spring, so all that remained was to get Makoto to dry them. The water was a bit chilly, but I sucked it up and bathed neck-deep.

"Makotooo, are you there?"

"Right here."

Makoto's voice from the other side of the boulder was as calm as ever...even though I was as nervous as could be. I splashed some water on my face to rinse the mud off. Yikes, still cold.

*Makoto's just around that boulder, I couldn't help but remind myself. Well, he's probably not the type to peek.*

Yep, he wouldn't blink no matter what he saw me wearing—or not wearing. He was probably just doing his water magic training right now, anyway.

*THUD.*

A ripple ran across the water's surface. The nearby birds suddenly took flight.

"Makoto?" I asked, curious if something had happened.

"A monster just appeared! And it's an ogre!" he warned. "Crap, there sure are a lot of stragglers today!"

"What?!" I said. I could see the horns of an ogre peeking out above the boulder. No way!

"W-We've gotta run!" I cried. B-But...I wasn't wearing any clothes. Still! I gripped my staff tight and jumped into the fray.

*"Water Magic: Ice Cutter."*

"GYAAAAAARGH!"

Makoto's magic caused the ogre to cover its eyes in pain, just like when he'd fought the big ogre.

*"Water Magic: Ice Floor."*

Makoto calmly froze the ground beneath the ogre. It lost its footing, then

tripped. The beast was soon scrambling to stand up again, but...

*“Water Magic: Ice Needle.”*

What just happened? The ogre’s arm had just stopped moving. Had Makoto pierced its nerves with ice needles? When did his magic get so accurate?!

*“Okey dokey. Water Magic: Freeze.”*

Makoto stabbed the ogre in the chest with his dagger. The monster’s body shuddered, then soon stopped moving.

“Phew,” Makoto said. “Talk about a surprise... Luc— Haaah?!”

W-Wow. He defeated it. An ogre! It was recommended that bronze rank warriors only take them on with a party. And he’d slayed it all on his own, like it was nothing!

But... Hm? Why did Makoto have such a look of surprise on his face?

“Luhhh... Lucy, u-um! C-Clothes!”

“Huh?”

I had the sudden feeling that I’d forgotten something very important...

And that something was...the fact that I was naked!

“E-Eeeeeeeek!” I shrieked. A rush of embarrassment washed over me, alongside a flood of mana...which soon spiraled out of control.

In an instant, a massive pillar of flame roared toward the sky!

“Jeez... You *do* know that I almost got roasted alive for a second time...”

“S-Sorry, Makoto! Anyway, did you...see anything?”

An extended silence elapsed before he finally spoke. “...Nope, didn’t see a thing.”

He was lying! He definitely saw it all!

“Ugh...” I whimpered. I couldn’t bring myself to blow up at him. Urgh... How could he be so calm after getting to see me naked?!

“Anyway,” I hurriedly said, changing the subject, “why did you fight that ogre

when you ran away from the kobold? Especially when you defeated the ogre like it was nothing!”

“Because I’ve fought an ogre before,” he responded. “This one was small too.”

“No, the other one was just a *big ogre*... Besides, the one you just fought was plenty large!”

Something was definitely wrong here—he had it all backwards! You’re supposed to run from the ogre and fight the kobold!

“Well, it’s already defeated, so I’d say it all worked out. But seriously, I thought the southern forest was only supposed to have weak monsters. Maybe they’ve been getting more active lately?”

He didn’t seem all that concerned about the fact that he’d just defeated an ogre. Anyone else would’ve been jumping for joy or bragging. In fact...

“Hey, could you keep my fight a secret from Emily?” he pleaded. “You know, since she said I needed rest and all.”

“Uhhh, sure.”

He didn’t seem to want anyone to know that he’d killed an ogre all by himself.

“Makoto,” I sighed, “you really *are* weird.”

“Why’s that?” He looked at me with those puzzled eyes, but that expression wasn’t changing my mind.

*You’re downright weird!*

## Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Studies Elemanti

*The elementals can't be seen.*

*The elementals' voices can't be heard.*

*The elementals are whimsical.*

*The elementals are everywhere. Even now, they dance right under your nose.*

*There is but one way to speak to them. A way that harkens back to an age long ago, when the Titans and the elementals conversed freely. It is an ancient tongue hailing from the age of myths. A language that survived, only in part, thanks to this very book: My First Elemanti! Learn Right Away in Just One Minute a Day!*

“...You’d think they woulda put some effort into that title, though.”

I flipped the pages, reading through the textbook Mary had lent me as I chilled on the surface of a canal that flowed behind the adventurer’s guild. The guild used it as a training area, but I was here because the book said that water elementals were found in greater numbers near the water.

“Might as well give some of this a try,” I figured.

The sounds of the Elemanti language were pretty complex, so it was hard to get the words to come out right. Without proper pronunciation, the elementals wouldn’t even hear you. However, when they did, the effects were extraordinary—you could change the weather and bring about a downpour large enough to cause a flood. There’d been plenty of human elementalers a thousand years ago, so I wondered why the practice had died out.

“Ah, Makoto! What are you doing?!”

Emily had found me. I remembered that she might’ve said something about me needing to spend another week resting. Which I hadn’t really been doing.

“Just readin’ a book.”



“You’re clearly using your *Walk on Water* spell!” she said, pointing out that I was lying on top of the water’s surface.

“C’mon, is this really that big a deal? And where’s Jean?” I asked the second question in an attempt to change the subject.

“He has the day off from adventuring. Pretty much nobody but you could stand hunting goblins every single day. Now get out of there!”

No fooling her. Oh well. I gave up and returned to solid ground.

“I could’ve sworn that I told Lucy to keep you out of trouble,” she said with exasperation.

“Lucy’s out training.” She’d been putting in a lot of work lately. Guess she also wanted to adventure together again as soon as we could.

“Ah, I see,” Emily said. She then peered forward. “By the way, what book are you reading?”

“A book on Elemanti.”

“Neat. Think you can get the hang of elemental magic?” she asked. “Oh, but don’t go testing it out any time soon. Wait until you get better.”

“I just started studying the other day, so I’m not gonna learn it that quickly.”

“Hm. Still, elemental magic is a pretty niche field. I’ve never met anyone who uses it.”

Sure is, yeah. There wasn’t a single practitioner in the entire Macallan adventurer’s guild. I’m still not sure whether I should be impressed by that or not. Either way...

“The pronunciation is really complex. That’s probably why it’s a dead language.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. For example, take something like ‘*Water, Flow*’. Even a phrase that short would be pronounced as ‘#@||?&!^\*}{{\*\*#%~\$&%+!! <*Water, Flow*>’ in Elemanti.” I casually read an incantation from the book aloud.

“...I’m sorry,” Emily said, “I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I know, right? I’m tellin’ ya, this is gonna be a pain to lear—”

I didn’t get the chance to finish that sentence. A giant splash of water poured over my head, interrupting me. Once the dripping rivulets had cleared, Emily and I were left standing there, sopping wet.

“Hey, uh, Makoto?” Emily asked. She was glaring at me. Her bright chestnut hair was now drenched to a dark brown, and her billowing cleric garments were soaked, revealing every curve of her body.

*Whew, lookin’ good, Emily. Wait, no, Makoto, don’t get sidetracked!*

“Sorry...” An apology was probably a good start. I definitely didn’t expect the elemental spell to activate that easily.

“Argh, what’d you do that for?! Jean just bought these clothes for me! And now they’re drenched!”

“Er, really, I’m sorry. Just wait, I’ll dry them off in a second.”

“Come on, you can’t dry them off that qui—”

*Water Magic: Evaporate.*

I gently touched Emily’s clothes and drew the water from the fabric. Overdoing it could damage the material, so this magic had to be used with care.

“Wh-What was that?!”

A few seconds later, Emily’s outfit was dry.

“How?” Emily asked in confusion.

“I dried you off with water magic. Simple stuff.”

“There’s no way that was simple! I’ve never seen a spell like that in my life. Wait, whoa. Even my underwear feels like it’s fresh off the clothesline.”

That was an announcement I didn’t need to hear. Now I was starting to blush.

“Phew,” Emily said, “your magic really is something.”

“Uhh, sorry for whatever that something is?”

Emily just sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Whatever you say. Anyway, you can keep reading, but no practicing magic!

You're going to take this week to rest."

And with that, Emily left. Apparently, she let me off the hook for getting her soaked. That was a relief.

Now that I was alone, I gave it some thought. A large flood had dumped itself on our heads. Where had it come from? The volume of water had been far beyond anything I was capable of generating, but at the same time, I hadn't been controlling the water from the canal either. The makeup of that water also seemed different from the stuff found in Macallan.

"Did I use mana from the elementals?" Just like that? With a single sentence?

I peeked around. Emily was long gone.

"#@|/?&!^\*}{\*\*#%~\$&%+!! <Water, Flow>"

In an instant, a huge expanse of water appeared above my head.

"*Water Magic: Control Water.*" I grabbed it with my magic and formed a giant waterball.

Then an idea flashed within my mind.

C-Could I really use this in the way I was hoping? Could the elementals generate water for me to control with my magic? If so, I might be able to fight without any water nearby! O-Okay, I was definitely trying this out on my next adventure!

"O Goddess, thank you for this blessing."

*No need to thank me. Now go forth, young one.* A vision of the goddess wearing a self-satisfied grin popped into my mind.

Lucy stopped by as I was praying.

"Makoto? What're you doing?"

"Praying to the goddess."

"...Huh." Lucy seemed to be in a bad mood. Was she still holding a grudge about what happened yesterday?

"What's wrong?" I asked.

“So, something *funny* happened,” Lucy said coldly. “Emily was telling me you used your magic to get her dripping wet. Care to explain?”

“What?!” Emily? Didn’t you let me off the hook?!

“Listen... You’re too old to go around splashing water on girls as a prank.” Oh no. Lucy didn’t have anger in eyes. She looked disgusted.

“It’s not like that!”

It’d been a while since my *Calm Mind* skill wasn’t strong enough to keep me from panicking.

### ◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

“Good morning, Mako—”

I was behind the guild building. Makoto had been training here often, so I decided to say hi. However, I stopped myself when I saw him holding his dagger with both hands and kneeling in prayer. I decided to wait for him to finish.

*Don’t want to disturb him*, I thought.

Makoto was a devout believer in his goddess. Every time he defeated a goblin or did well on a quest, he’d always be sure to thank her. That said, I’d never once seen him go to church.

“After all, Makoto,” I’d asked one time, “you believe in the water goddess Eir, don’t you?”

“Huh?” he’d answered with a scowl. “Heck no I don’t.”

I must’ve brought up some unpleasant memories. He’d never told me what had happened, though.

“Good morning, Lucy,” Makoto said once he’d finished his prayers and turned my way. Every time he did that, I wondered how he always knew where I was without ever looking at me.

“Morning, Makoto. Emily told me to keep an eye on you. Just so you stay out of trouble.”

Well, I was also there because I wanted to spend some time with him.

“I’m already back to normal. Totally fine,” Makoto said with a half-hearted

smile. He liked to train during every spare moment he had, so he must have been pretty unsatisfied with the cleric's orders.

"Why not give your body a break every now and then? I'll bet you're not hurting for money now that your reward for hunting that griffin has come in."

"Hmm... Well, maybe I could go shopping," he conceded.

"Can I tag along?"

"Sure, of course."

*Oh? Could this be a date? No, no, we're a party, so this is perfectly natural!*

"So," I sighed, "I guess we're at the weapon shop..."

The first stop on Makoto's shopping trip was indeed a weapons store.

"Something wrong with that?"

"Well, nothing's *wrong* with it..."

Makoto looked around at all the items, but didn't actually buy anything. He said that window shopping was plenty of fun on its own.

I'd hoped we could go to a café or a clothing store. When I asked, Makoto actually agreed to check some out. We spent a while loitering around the city, then after, we left through the northern gate and strolled along the bank of Lake Chimay.

"Lucy, you're from Springrogue, right?" Makoto asked. This surprised me a bit—he rarely asked questions.

"Yeah, my hometown is one of the little elf villages in Springrogue."

"Think you could show me around some time?"

Where was this coming from?

"S-Sure," I agreed, "but it's a rural place with nothing to do."

"But there are a bunch of elves there... It sounds like a dream!"

Ah, I realized. His usually calm expression had vanished, and there was now a fire in his eyes. Makoto had a side to him that rose to the surface every now

and then—a *weird* side.

“Let me be clear: you’d better not make any moves on the elf girls. Unlike you humans, elves have something called *modesty*.”

“C’mon, I’m not some pickup artist.”

Well, I didn’t think he was one either, but it was rumored that some otherworlders exhibited the bad trait of being womanizers. When I brought this up to Makoto, he pressed his palm to his face.

“Ah, yeah, I could see Kitayama or Okada being like that.”

It seemed like he knew some people who fit the bill.

That aside, it felt a bit strange to be a newbie mage in a party with a real-life otherworlder. News that the Hero of Light had come from another world, accompanied by a large group of outsiders, had caused quite the commotion a little over a year ago. At the time, rumors of the Great Demon King’s revival had blanketed this world in doom and gloom, but the arrival of the otherworlders had blown all of that away.

Even though Makoto acted humble, I thought he was extraordinary. He’d slain powerful monster after powerful monster, though he’d only been in this world for slightly over a year. He was even setting records for the quickest rise through the ranks of the Macallan adventurer’s guild. I glanced over to that calm, composed face as he manipulated seven waterballs in the air...

“Hey!” I scolded. “Emily told you not to do magic training!”

*I take my eyes off him for one second...*

“Too bad! I’m tired of walking!”

Makoto ran atop the surface of Lake Chimay. Hey, walking on water is cheating!

“Get back here, you!” I shouted.

“Just a little bit! Only a little!” Makoto pleaded as he blew massive water splashes into the air, forming a beautiful rainbow. And he did all of it without uttering a single incantation. What do you even *say* to that?

“A ha ha ha ha! Yahoo!”

He was striking at the surface of the lake with massive bundles of water generated via elemental magic, which was a technique he’d apparently learned just the other day.

The aloof adventurer I knew was long gone; in his place, I saw a child with a new toy.

“Maybe it’s stress relief for him?” I wondered, staring at his playtime from atop a ridge. Looking at him long enough somehow infected me with a little bit of his joy.

“Were *either* of you two listening when I said that Makoto had to rest?!”

Word had spread quickly about the pair of mages partying like idiots by Lake Chimay, so of course, Emily gave us an earful that night.

*Um, I didn’t do anything, though?*

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“My not-so-esteemed Tackie!”

An empty beer mug slammed onto the table with a thud.

Y-Yikes... My mild-mannered Fujiyan was actually angry. When was the last time I’d seen this side of him? Oh yeah, it was the time I’d erased his save data by accident. Ah, that takes me back... Wait, this is no time for nostalgia.

How had it come to this?



“Is Mr. Makoto Takatsuki here today’h?”

It was a typical afternoon on a typical day. I was eating lunch in the cafeteria of the adventurer’s guild when the bunny-eared clerk I’d met at Fujiyan’s shop came by.

“Makoto? He’s over there,” Mary answered as she guided the girl over to me.

“Well, well, well, Makoto, I didn’t know you were friends with such a cute bunny-eared girl,” said Mary once they’d arrived. *Why is she suddenly sitting*

*down at our table? Doesn't she have a job?*

“Hey, it’s been a while,” I said, greeting the girl with the rabbit ears.

“Hi there, Mr. Takatsuki, friend of the boss’s. I’m Nina from the Fujiwara Trading Company’h.”





Ah, so her name was Nina.

“You got business with Makoto, or what?” asked Lucy.

*C’mon, be a little friendlier.* Lucy could learn a thing or two from Nina’s smile!

“Oh! You must be Mr. Takatsuki’s partner, Lucy’h! The one with the amazing fire magic skills.”

“Oh? Wh-Why yes, that would be me. You’ve got quite the discerning eye.” The sudden compliments made Lucy turn bashful. Yep, she was easy to please.

“Oh, making the acquaintance of a future high sorceress? The honor is all mine. Here, I brought a gift to commemorate the occasion.” Nina then handed over some kind of candy. She’d even brought some for Mary.

“Whoa! What is this? It’s delicious!”

“It’s so sweet! I’ve never tasted something so wonderful!”

Lucy and Mary were gushing between themselves about the flavor. I had a feeling it was chocolate. Well, I suppose there’s nothing a merchant like Fujiyan wouldn’t have in his inventory.

“So, what are you here for?” I asked Nina.

“Oh, right! I came with a message from the boss. He wants you to come to the Catgirl Cantina tonight for dinner!”

“Ah, the usual,” I responded. It was a restaurant where everyone had cat ears, so Fujiyan was a regular there.

“Will it fit into your schedule’h?”

“Well, I haven’t seen him in about a month, so I think I’d like to say hi again. I’ll be there.”

“Great to hear. The boss’ll be thrilled’h.”

“Wait, then what am I supposed to do?” Lucy pouted as she turned to me. I figured that having different plans every now and then wouldn’t be a big deal, but that look of hers didn’t seem to agree...

“If she’d like, your friend Lucy is welcome to join us,” Nina suggested.

“I wanna go tooooo,” said Mary. Even she was butting in.

“Mary, don’t you have work?” I asked.

“Overtime, even...”

“Well, are you sure that joining us is a good idea, then?”

“Oh, Makoto, how could you be so cold?!” Mary whined as she returned to her desk.

“All right then, I’ll be waiting at the shop,” Nina called out before leaving.

Lucy tugged on my sleeve. “Hey, hey.”

“What?”

“I never knew you were friends with the president of the Fujiwara Trading Company!”

“Lucy, you know Fujiyan?”

“Who doesn’t?” she gushed. “Word on the street is that he’s closed countless deals in only a year and even has connections with the lords of Macallan! He finds dirt on any dealer who gets in his way and shuts them up, plus he knows the town’s seedy underbelly inside and out. He’s the number one man that you don’t want to cross!”

“Wow...” I had no idea. Fujiyan had never said anything beyond “Oh, it’s nothing much!” whenever I’d asked him about how he was getting on in Macallan. I guess he’d been using his cheat skill to steadily climb the social ladder.

“Anyway, how about we train until the evening?” I suggested.

“Aww, can’t we get a break today?” griped Lucy.

“Hmm, guess I’ll just train alone.”

“I was just kidding! I’ll work hard too!”

And so, we both trained intensively until nightfall.

“Cheers!”

It was evening at the Catgirl Cantina, and we all raised our glasses and shouted a toast. I had brought along Lucy today. Nina, the store clerk, was also here. Was she being courteous by showing up, just so Lucy wouldn't be the only girl here?

This restaurant had delicious food and many varieties of drinks. Also, everyone working here was cat-eared (specifically, they were beastmen). I didn't quite see the appeal of cat ears, but I had to admit that the waitresses were all cute, with or without them.

The restaurant was as packed as ever, but we were guided to a large table in the back. Fujiyan was apparently such a regular customer that he'd earned VIP status.

"A-A pleasure to meet you. I'm Lucy, a mage." This was a rare sighting of Lucy actually embarrassed.

"A pleasure to meet you as well," Fujiyan responded. "I am the man known as Fujiwara, but you may call me 'Fujiyan' as my esteemed Tackie already does."

"Nina's my name'h. I work for the Fujiwara Trading Company, but I'm also an'h adventurer'h. Silver rank, for the record." Nina flashed us her silver-colored badge as proof.

"That's amazing..."

"Oh no, it's nothing much'h."

On the contrary, it's said that the one obstacle to climbing adventurer ranks was the silver rank. You could make it up to around iron rank if you kept at it long enough, but reaching silver and beyond required defeating a specific amount of highly dangerous monsters. She might have been humble, but Nina was undoubtedly strong.

"We're both bronze rank," I said. "Got a lot to improve on, huh, Lucy?"

"I-I have a king rank skill, by the way!"

*C'mon, no need to dig in your heels over it.* There was no information that didn't make it to Fujiyan's ears, so Lucy had to know she wasn't fooling anyone, right?

“Ah, but I must commend you, my esteemed Tackie,” Fujiyan said. “I’m impressed that you formed a party with such a beautiful elven mage.”

“Now, now, this way, Ms. Lucy,” ushered Nina.

“What? Ah, thank you.”

Fujiyan settled into his seat as Nina began pouring a drink. Lucy was soon downing anything she was offered; oh dear, she wasn’t gonna last long.

Meanwhile, I was stuffing my face with everything on the table: bone-in cuts of meat, pasta drenched in tomato sauce, garlic toast, and more. Yep, this place had some good food.

“Makoto, I’m tellin’ ya, you’re as cold as ice!”

Lucy was drunk. Her reddened cheeks and nose were quite alluring. Usually, her drinking sessions ended in one of two ways: she’d either fall asleep or get aggressive. Tonight appeared to be the latter.

“Every day, every *single* day, you just train and train like you never get bored of it. That’s why you got Mary chattin’ you up.”

“I, uh, don’t think she has anything to do with this.” Mary was just being nice.

“But I’ve been hearing rumors about you two!” Nina chimed in. “Defeating a griffin as a party of bronze ranks is an achievement—a first in the Macallan adventurer’s guild’s history!”

“Nah, that was just a fluke,” I said. “Besides, I got burn wounds from it.”

“Burn wounds?! I had no idea this world had griffins that breathed fire!” Nina exclaimed.

“There sure are. Scary, huh?”

“Makotooo, don’t lie to herrr.” Lucy interjected to refute the excuse I’d made up on the spot. I thought it would’ve come off as lame if they knew I’d been burned by my partner’s own magic.

We spent the night having fun chats just like that, but when the subject turned to the recent friends I’d made, Jean and Emily, Fujiyan’s expression grew grave. *Wait, did I say something I shouldn’t have?*

Fujiyan swiftly chugged the remainder of his ale. He remained silent.

“B-Boss?” Nina probed with a concerned look.

“Uh, Fujiyan?” I asked my suddenly reserved friend.

Lucy...was asleep. Guess she’d passed out.

“My not-so-esteemed Tackie!”

An empty beer mug slammed onto the table with a thud.

“Y-Yes?”

“Why have you not invited your humble compatriot to join your party?!”

“What?” Was *that* the reason he was mad?

“I’ve been waiting all this time! You said you would form a party once you grew strong, did you not?!”

“I-I might have...”

“The boss’s been fretting all this time, wondering when his Tackie would come around’h!” Nina joined in.

Whoops. Yeah, that’s definitely my bad.

“I must say, all the waiting has made me quite lonely!”

“Sorry, sorry,” I apologized. “I was thinking I’d go for it once I leveled up just a little bit more.”

“Mr. Takatsuki, your level is high enough to clear a simple dungeon’h!”

True, fair enough. I guess I’ve just been gathering experience out of habit.

“Fujiyan,” I said, “welcome aboard. Let’s form a party together.”

“Well now!” Fujiyan responded, giving me a firm handshake. “Just the words I’ve been waiting to hear!”

Oh, I kinda made this decision without asking Lucy. I hope she won’t have a problem with it...but hey, it’ll work out.

“My head hurts...”

Lucy was clutching her forehead as she battled a hangover. She definitely drank too much last night.

“Think you’ll want to rest for the day?” I asked.

“I’m good... I can...head out...”

She sounded like she could barely finish a sentence. Not sure I’d call that “fine.”

“You can just take it easy.”

“I don’t wanna!” she whined. “Cause then you’re gonna say it’s more fun to party with Fujiyan and Nina, and then you’re gonna throw me away!”

Lucy shook her head as she complained. I’d already told her that I wouldn’t do that, though...

“Okay, then, let’s get going.”

“Augh...” Lucy groaned. She walked alongside me like a zombie on the way to our meeting place.

Today, we were assembling at the southern gate.

“This way, my esteemed Tackie!”

“Hi there, Mr. Takatsuki, Ms. Lucy. Looking forward to adventuring with you’h!”

Nina and Fujiyan had arrived before us. Fujiyan was dressed in his typical merchant attire, while Nina was lightly armored. There was just one thing I had to ask: “Nina, do you not have a weapon?”

“My trusted Nina here is a brawler. Her fists and legs *are* her weapons.”

Ah, that made sense. Beastmen had superb physical abilities, so I’d heard that they were plenty strong, even when unarmed.

“Anyway, hope we have a good adventure out there,” I said.

“Adventure...” Lucy repeated with absolutely zero energy. She was definitely hungover.

“Okay then, let’s get going’h!” Nina said.

And with that, we began walking. Today's course took us through the southern forest. Unlike the Great Forest, the monsters in the southern forest were weak, so we proceeded while swatting away the odd giant rat or horned rabbit that came along.

"So, Nina, you're from Great Keith?"

"Yes, I am'h. That's where the stars aligned and I met the boss."

"Indeed. She'd lost a bet and was subsequently forced to be a gladiator in their colosseum. As a slave, I might add."

"Hold on! Boss, you promised you wouldn't talk about that'h!"

Nina was now frantically waving her hands. *Did she have a gambling problem?* I had to say that I wouldn't have guessed it; Nina seemed like the kind of person to have it all together.

"Oh, Nina..." Lucy looked at her with pity.

"And, let me guess: Fujiyan bought you because he can't resist bunny ears," I said. Putting the situation into words made it sound kinda seedy.

"Hey, he really saved my behind back then'h! Great Keith doesn't treat slaves too kindly."

"So, Mr. Fujiyan," Lucy asked, "why *did* you pick Nina? That country has plenty of beastmen slaves, doesn't it?"

I didn't know much about Great Keith, so I had no idea about its population. Huh. So, I guess there were a lot of slaves there. Not that I'd ever buy one. Incidentally, I didn't see too many slaves here in Roses. Maybe there was a difference in culture?

"I know, right'h?" said Nina, appearing to share the same question. "We'd never met before, but he took a liking to me at first sight. He won't tell me what it is that he saw in me either. But when the boss bought me and freed me from slavery and my debt, I decided to follow him for life'h."

"Ha ha ha... Well, it was pure coincidence, you see." Fujiyan tried to dodge with a vague answer, but I was certain he'd read Nina's mind back then. Yeah, that part of his *Waifu Game Player* skill sure was handy.



“By the way, Fujiyan, where are we headed?”

“Wait and be amazed!” Fujiyan exclaimed as his eyes lit up. “You can choose to believe it or not, but there’s an undiscovered dungeon in this area!”

“Really?” Lucy said in surprise. “Macallan has a dungeon this close that nobody’s ever found?”

“Is it that much of a surprise?” I asked.

“I mean, Macallan has the Water Temple and good beer, so it’s known for having a ton of adventurers, from beginners to veterans. They say that every dungeon in the vicinity has been picked clean.”

“Ah, really? I’m impressed you found it, Fujiyan.”

“I simply had a dream that good fortune would come my way if I investigated the southern forest.”

“A dream? You trusted a dream you had?” I asked. It sounded pretty fanciful for the Fujiyan I knew.

“Since becoming a merchant, I’ve taken to investigating everything my intuition and curiosity lead me to,” Fujiyan boasted. “I must admit that I’ve had many misses, but it appears that we’ve hit the jackpot with this one.”

“But won’t a dungeon that nobody’s entered be dangerous, since we won’t know how difficult it is?” Lucy asked. She seemed concerned. Honestly, so was I.

“No need to worry about that’h,” Nina reassured us. “I took a look at it myself beforehand’h.”

“You did, Nina?”

“Yep. I explored it on the boss’s orders’h. I didn’t see any tough-looking monsters, so I bet two bronze rankers like you could handle it alone’h.”

“Really rollin’ out the red carpet for us, huh?” *I was right—having Fujiyan around was gonna be like playing on easy mode.*

Just then, Fujiyan’s eyes met mine.

“Well, nothing wrong with playing on easy mode every now and then, eh?”

Your adventure has seemed quite challenging, after all.”

*Oops, he read my mind.*

“You’ve got a point. It’s been rough taking on ogres and getting attacked by griffins out of nowhere.” Guess I was gonna let Fujiyan give me a breather.

After walking a bit farther through the forest, I saw the entrance to a small cave, hidden by boulders and trees. Yeah, something like this would be hard to notice.

“So, this is the dungeon?” I asked. At a glance, it looked like a regular cave.

“Oh, you’ll have your answer once you step inside. Onward!”

Fujiyan was pumped. For whatever reason, the inside of the cave was lit with lamps.

“I wonder what these lamps are for,” I said, voicing a concern.

“Oh, Makoto,” sneered Lucy. “It’s basic adventuring. The entrances to dungeons are made to be easy to progress through, in order to lure parties deeper.”

“Huh, I see.” *What can you say? It’s a fantasy world.*

“In the event of a living, naturally formed dungeon, that is,” Fujiyan corrected. “This dungeon, however, appears to be man-made.”

“What?”

*C’mon, Lucy. Are you really gonna be wrong after acting so confident?*

“It’s probably a research facility made by a mage long ago or something’h,” Nina explained. “The owner might not be around, but the facility is alive enough to be a hideout for monsters’h.”

Once we proceeded deeper into the cave, a passage appeared, made entirely of crystal.

I had just entered my first dungeon since coming to this world. After just about a year and a half. I wasn’t actively avoiding them per se, but I’d just never given one a shot.

Macallan had plenty of dungeons in the vicinity. There was the Nest of Kobolds, containing nothing but weak monsters, and the Wayward Woods, which was a forest so deep that it became a dungeon on its own. Another was the Forest of Fiends, which housed monsters many times stronger than those in the Wayward Woods, despite the two dungeons being right beside one another. Also nearby was the Cavern of Tundra Tigers, a dungeon that was blanketed in ice and had plenty of water-type monsters. And the list went on.

These were all dungeons that adventurers between stone and iron rank would consider attempting. Since we were bronze rank, we'd probably be fine in a dungeon like this, so long as we didn't advance too deep. But still...

*I've heard the stories, I thought. There are tons of beginner adventurers who never return from the first dungeon they enter.*

"Oh, Makoto, you worry too much," Lucy would say. "Makoto, you could totally handle this," Mary would say. They were a little sick of how excessive my caution was. Well, so what? I was still a beginner. Or, so I would half-heartedly protest. But now... I had the feeling that maybe I should have come here sooner.

"What a view," I remarked.

"It's so pretty," Lucy followed up.

After a bit of walking past the cave's small entrance, we were met with a dungeon that was covered—floor, walls, and ceiling—with crystal. I had been expecting some dark cavern, but those expectations were suddenly upended. The entire dungeon emitted a faint light, giving the interior a surreal aura.

"My, this is quite something."

"Is this rare for you too, Fujiyan?"

"Indeed it is. The typical dungeon tends to be rather dreary."

Apparently, my first dungeon was actually a rare find.

"This must've been made by a powerful mage'h," Nina said. "All the enemies in here are magical creatures."

"Magical creatures?" I repeated. *For real? That'd be a problem.*

Magical creatures were, as the name implied, creatures created by magic. Think golems and the like. And a lot of them had a high resistance to magic.

“Will my beginner magic work on any of them?” I wondered. I had a feeling that weak spells wouldn’t even scratch these monsters.

“Don’t worry, Makoto. My magic’s enough to fry ’em!”

“Honestly, dealing with your magic inside a dungeon sounds just as scary,” I commented. I could see her losing control and frying all of us instead of the monsters.

“Excuse me, the way you worded that sounded a little rude to me!”

“Now, now, let us all settle down,” Fujiyan mediated.

“Oh, I see an enemy’h!” Nina exclaimed as she pointed. Just ahead was a group of wooden, human-shaped monsters.

“Wood golems?”

“Indeed they are,” Fujiyan said. “From what we ascertained during yesterday’s investigation, this dungeon appears to be a nest of them.”

“Fire burns wood, so this looks like a job for me!” said Lucy, brimming with confidence.

“Wait, you idiot! Stop!” I wrapped my arms around Lucy and covered her mouth as she began her incantation. I’d already told her—fire magic was gonna cause more problems than it would solve in this tiny cave!

“Pha! What’s the deal, Makoto?!”

“Nina seems to have it under control.”

“Hm hm hmph!” Fujiyan chuckled. “You two are free to relax now.”

“Here I go’h!” While we were talking, Nina was busy hopping right into the center of their swarm with a single leap. Did she just jump ten meters or so without a running start?

“Nina’s amazing...” Lucy said. Her jaw dropped. Mine did too.

Nina launched a roundhouse kick, the impact of which was powerful enough to sound like a car crash. The golems she’d targeted were sent flying before

they slammed against the walls and burst into pieces. However, Nina's enemies weren't willing to merely stand around and be her training dummies—they quickly surrounded Nina on all sides and attempted to overwhelm her.

“Should we help her?” I asked Fujiyan.

He answered without a hint of fear. “Oh no, worry not.”

“Hiya!” Nina shouted as she stomped her foot on the ground. A shockwave and an ensuing rumbling noise radiated outward from that central point. The force was enough to blow back every single golem around her.

“Was that ground magic?” It looked like Nina was integrating magic into her martial arts. Were these techniques part of that spellfist thing? She knew some high-level stuff.

“Wait, that's *magic*?!” Lucy shouted in surprise. *Did she not know what it was?* “Oh... So, Nina can cast magic without incantations too...”

I hated to interrupt while Lucy was processing this shocking news, but that wasn't quite the case. I decided to offer a correction.

However, Fujiyan answered before I could. “The magic my trusted Nina uses is by no means lacking an incantation.”

“It's not?”

“That's a spellfist technique. It activates magic automatically once the user performs a specific action,” I added. “Like using a ground stomp to send shockwaves.”

“Ah yes, exactly! I didn't expect you to already know.” Fujiyan sounded impressed, but, well, I *was* a mage. I'd done my research way back in the Water Temple. Not that I could ever use that technique myself...

“Th-Then do you think I could do that too?” Lucy asked. Was she hoping that she could trim down her three minute incantations?

“Lucy, you have to equip your aura to pull off that technique.”

“My...what?”

The power that we mages called “mana” was known as “aura” among

swordfighters and brawlers. At their cores, they were both the same power, but physical fighters utilized aura by enveloping their swords or bodies with it.

All warriors at mid rank or above used this technique, so I figured that Jean did as well. And of course, this ability required training to master, so it wasn't something that just anyone could pull off. So went the explanation I gave Lucy.

"I think Jean's *Wind Blade* was the same sort of technique, just via spellsword skills," I said.

"Huh? That wasn't just a magic weapon?"

"Nope, that was a spellsword skill," I confirmed.

"My trusted Nina was made to practice the same technique tens of thousands of times by her spellfist teacher."

"Figures. Learning to use both physical and magic attacks at the same time is a level of difficulty that typical magic can't compare to."

"...O-Oh, right, yeah," Lucy sighed. Hey now, there were no shortcuts on the road to success.

I'd wanted to be a spellsword too, you know. But after all my research to that end in the Water Temple, I'd concluded that using my low mana as aura would leave me out of gas within five minutes. I could apparently use aura to strengthen my body enough to actually wield a sword, but five minutes wouldn't be enough time to do anything useful. It was only after many nights of crying myself to sleep that I'd finally given up on that idea.

"I'm finished here'h!" Nina said a few minutes later. Her berserker brawling had ground the wood golems into sawdust.

"That sure was decisive," I said. This was what silver ranks were made of.

"Nina, that was amazing!" Lucy cheered with a round of applause.

"Very well done, my trusted Nina," Fujiyan added.

"Aw, this is a piece of cake'h!" Nina hadn't even broken a sweat. "These fellas seem like they're spawned by the dungeon itself. There'll be more soon enough, so let's get goin'h."

“I’m kinda wondering if we even needed to tag along,” I said.

“Come now, no need for self-deprecation,” Fujiyan comforted me. “One never knows if a different sort of enemy could be right around the corner.”

“I dunno about that...”

This dungeon’s layout was pretty simple; the path was effectively a straight line with barely a curve in sight. Every now and then we came across a nook along the side that monsters poured out of. Probably because they respawned endlessly. Nina dispensed with them all easily enough, but there sure were a lot. There were more types than just wood golems too: there were dog golems, armor golems, lizard golems, just nothing but golems! Was this the dungeon maker’s idea of a healthy hobby?!

“Hoiya!”

*BWACK! KERRACK! BUFFOOM!*

Nina kicked nearly all of those enemies to the curb. I have to say, the way she dispatched entire crowds of monsters with each kick looked pretty satisfying.

Every now and then, an enemy slipped past Nina’s onslaught of kicks and made its way toward us. I tried attacking them with my magic after generating water with my newly obtained elemental skill, but my spells weren’t very effective at damaging them. It was quicker to let Nina land a single kick than it was for me to hit a golem with ten ice arrows.

“This would’ve been impossible if it were just us, Makoto,” Lucy said as she kicked a golem herself. Fortunately, every one of these golems had sluggish movement, so we could handle them when it came down to a one-on-one fight.

“Sure would’ve,” I agreed. “My magic can’t beat them and you can’t fire more than one shot. We’d have been overwhelmed by sheer numbers.”

It was something to keep in mind for the future. Dungeon exploring was more complex than I’d thought.

“But man, there sure are a lot of these things,” Lucy said. She hadn’t cast a single spell yet and looked pretty bored.

“Generating and controlling this many golems must indeed require quite a bit

of mana. Whatever it is that powers this facility could be quite valuable.” Fujiyan was looking at it from a businessman’s point of view. Glad he was enjoying himself.

“Nina, how far into this dungeon did you scout?” I asked. We had just finished felling yet another swarm of monsters.

“Hmm... There’s a big staircase a little further down, so I stopped just short of there’h.”

True to her word, there was a large set of stairs right down the corridor. The staircase seemed to continue for quite a distance, but no enemies appeared along the way. Once we’d completed our descent, we arrived at a small clearing that faced a giant metal gate. There was definitely something beyond.

“The only problem is that thing in front of it,” I noted.

“Indeed.”

The alert on my *Detect Danger* skill had been blaring for quite some time. And, well, right in front of that door was a giant monster, just as large as the griffin I’d fought the other day, lying on its side.

“A chimera?” Lucy whispered in surprise. The beast was giant and four-legged, and the fur coating its entire body was a deep gray. It had two heads in front, one of a lion and the other of a goat, as well as the head of a snake that formed its tail. It seemed to be sleeping for now, but it gave the impression that it’d awaken if anyone approached. In other words, it was this gate’s guardian. Was it also a magically created creature?

“So, do we start fighting’h?” Nina asked. Zero hesitation, huh?

“Now, now, let’s not be too hasty,” Fujiyan interjected. “Allow me to examine this monster using my *Appraisal* skill.”

“It looks pretty strong, so take it away, Fujiyan,” I said.

“By all means, I shall... Hm, hmm. Our foe is undoubtedly a chimera. And it appears that its weakness is fire!”

“My time to shine!” Lucy suddenly said with gusto.

“Incidentally, its year of manufacture was 10 Before Salvation. This chimera



was made quite long ago indeed.”

“What?!” Nina and Lucy both raised their voices in surprise at Fujiyan’s deduction.

“Wow... It’s a thousand years old’h. Close call there’h.”

“What’s the deal? This monster’s cheating!”

Nina and Lucy both seemed a bit panicked.

“Lucy, what’s cheating about that thing?” I asked.

“My trusted Nina, do you mean to say that this monster is strong?”

The otherworlder duo, however, didn’t quite make the connection.

“Boss, Abel the Savior rescued the world a thousand years ago. And you’ve heard that monsters from the dark age before salvation were way stronger than the monsters are now, right’h?”

“Why yes, I do believe I have heard that.”

I knew that too.

“According to the legends,” Lucy continued, “the monsters from a thousand years ago were so savage because of the Great Demon Lord’s influence.”

“So, because this guy’s lived for over a thousand years, he’s gotta be pretty tough?” I asked. “Compared to a regular chimera, how tough are we talking?”

“They say that the monsters from back then were about three or four times stronger’h,” Nina said.

“Are they even the same monster at that point?” *C’mon, gimme a break.* Who knew these thousand-year-old monsters were so deadly?

“All I can say is that I’ve heard the tales—entire parties of veteran adventurers have gotten decimated after challenging what they’d mistakenly assumed to be modern monsters.”

“So, do we give up and leave?” Honestly, I didn’t want to risk it.

“No, we should try’h,” Nina suggested.

“My trusted Nina, do we have any hopes of victory?”

“It’s pretty common for monsters like this to be stuck to their posts’h. If we can’t win, we can just run.” Nina grinned.

Fujiyan considered that with a nod. “I do possess an item known as an Escape Card that will allow us to retreat from any dungeon. I propose that we flee should our odds seem unfavorable.”

“All right, I can agree to that.” It sounded like a safe enough strategy. I preferred cautious playstyles. “I’ll provide support for Nina. #@||?&!^\*} {\*\*#%~\$&%+!! <Water, Flow>.”

I generated water using my elemental magic.

*“Water Magic: Control Water.”*

Then, I molded the water I’d generated into a huge waterball. It took a bit of time compared to doing it all with my own mana. It wasn’t something I’d be using in battle, sadly.

“Lucy, you start your fire magic incantation.”

“Got it.”

We wouldn’t have won our previous fight with that griffin if Lucy hadn’t hit the beast with her magic, so I had a feeling it would be key to our victory here as well.

“Also, Fujiyan. I need you to have your plan B ready to use at a moment’s notice.”

“Roger that, compatriot.”

This time, we were prepared. Partners sure help to keep your bases covered.

“All right then, I’ll make the first move’h.”

With a light hop in her step, Nina began to approach the chimera. I followed slightly behind. Fujiyan and Lucy were on standby near the base of the staircase, and Lucy had begun her incantation.

The chimera awoke, gradually lifting its hulking body and letting out a guttural growl.

It figures that a guard beast wouldn’t be asleep. This was a dungeon boss, all

right.

“Hiyop!”

Nina instantly closed what distance remained and drove a kick into the chimera. Her impact made a loud, heavy thud, causing the beast to stagger just a little bit—and unfortunately, not much else. As though to return the favor, the chimera swept its front leg with a *SWOOSH*.

“Yikes!” Nina said as she dodged.

“*Water Magic: Ice Arrow.*” I let loose a spell in the hopes that I could slow down the chimera. My arrows all stabbed into their marks, but...

“Guess that didn’t affect it’h...” Nina’s ears drooped.

The chimera didn’t even dodge my spell. It seemed to pay the attack as much mind as one would a fly.

*Man, that stings.*

Nina used this chance to circle around to the rear of the monster and attack from there. However, this chimera had few blind spots: its goat, lion, and snake heads were all transfixed on Nina and kept tracking her every move.

“Yep, this chimera’s a lot stronger than a usual one’h,” Nina said with concern after backing off a bit.

“Is it really?” I asked.

“My kicks are enough to take down a normal chimera, but this one won’t budge’h.”

“Meanwhile, it doesn’t even bother dodging my spells...” I finally could access elemental magic, but it seemed like I had a long way to go before I’d master it.

“Then I’ll enter the fray!” I heard Lucy shout from afar. She seemed excited to finally have a spot in the limelight.

“All right, Lucy! Take it away!”

“You got it! *Fire Magic: Fire Arrow!*”

“That’s...an arrow?” Fujiyan mumbled.

A shaft of flame that was far too thick to be called an arrow shot toward the chimera. My magic might not have even gotten the monster's attention, but this projectile made its eyes open wide.

And then, it leaped out of the way.

The flames collided with a crystal wall, scattering fire in every direction. All sizes of blazing bits rained down upon the chimera...as well as Nina and me. The chimera snarled with malice, but that was the last thing on our minds.

"Wah wah wah yah!" Nina shouted as she ran around in disarray.

"Eeeeeeeeeek!" Meanwhile, I'd been so traumatized by third-degree burns that I made a beeline for the staircase where Fujiyan and Lucy were waiting. Yikes, I think the hem of my shirt got singed...

Once my panic had subsided, I noticed that Nina was making her way over to us as well. For some reason, the chimera wasn't giving chase. Maybe it was being cautious of any additional shots from Lucy's fire magic. Too bad it took three minutes for her to cast each spell.

"Hey, Lucy? You there?"

"H-Huh? Oh, whoopsie."

The mage who had just rained fire and brimstone upon the entire room moments earlier was now adorably tilting her head. *This girl, I swear.*

"I must say, Madame Lucy, your magic is incredibly potent. Nina, are you unhurt?"

"Whew, I got a little rattled there'h," Nina laughed. She didn't seem the slightest bit angry.

"I-I'm really sorry," Lucy apologized. She had to draw the line somewhere.

"Well, guess we oughta be a bit more careful next time. It looks like the crystals in this dungeon reflect magic'h."

"Indeed, the tactic of spraying and praying could prove dangerous."

"Hmm... So what *do* we do?" We were lacking a real path to victory at the moment.

“Fujiyan, it’s time for plan B,” I said.

“Ah, as we discussed. You wish to use it so soon?”

“Well, we can’t pretend like we have other options.”

“Point taken. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” Fujiyan extended both of his arms forward.

“*Storage skill: Withdraw!*”

At that moment, water rushed out of Fujiyan’s right hand as though a levee had broken. The volume was far greater than my elemental magic could produce, and the water level of the now-flooded floor rose with each passing second. We were eventually knee-deep in water—along with the chimera.

I had once asked Fujiyan how much water he could carry with his *Storage* skill. When he answered that he could haul the volume of a fifty-meter pool with ease, I knew I’d found my secret weapon.

“Yep, the boss’s *Storage* sure lives up to its name’h,” Nina said with an impressed tone.

“*Storage (Ultra Rank)* is one heck of a skill...” Lucy remarked with surprise.

“You certainly have some curious ideas,” Fujiyan said to me.

“Gotta try everything I can.” After all, I was an apprentice mage, the weakest of the weak.

The glow from the crystals along the dungeon’s walls reflected onto the water’s surface, making the atmosphere seem even more dreamlike. And smack-dab in the center of that atmosphere was the giant chimera glaring at us. It didn’t look too happy now that its bedroom was flooded.

Well, it was now or never.

“Nina, I’m going to cast *Water Magic: Walk On Water* on you.”

“Oh, don’t worry. That’d probably make it harder for me to distance myself, so I’m fine’h.”

“Oh, really...” Oops. Did I accidentally make things harder for Nina?

“Mr. Takatsuki, I’m counting on you for support’h.”

“Got it.” Yeah, I had to just focus on doing what I could. All this water gave me plenty of options.

“I’m going in, Lucy. Think you can get another spell ready?”

“I can... But it might get dodged again.”

Lucy seemed a bit bashful. She looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes and held her staff close to her chest. *Cute.*

“I’ll slow it down. You’ve got plenty of room to work with here, so don’t hold back.”

“G-Got it!” Lucy nodded in affirmation.

“Should we find ourselves in danger, let us play it safe and return to the exit,” Fujiyan said. He took out his dungeon escape items and handed one to each of us.

“All right, here I go’h!” Nina shouted as she charged forward. This woman had zero hesitation!

The chimera was wary of Nina’s kicks. It also seemed to be cautious of Lucy’s magic. Meanwhile, I was in third place. Man, that stung. Then again, it meant that I had a chance of landing a sneak attack.

*“Water Magic: Fog.”*

I created a thick mist around the chimera. Though of course, overdoing it would mean that we wouldn’t be able to see the chimera’s position, so I chose my coverage wisely. This chimera had three heads: a goat head, a lion head, and a snake head for a tail. Its impenetrable defenses came from the constant view of its surroundings that these heads provided. So, I aimed to steal its vision. By covering its heads in fog, I could restrict one of our enemy’s greatest advantages.

“Hiyoh!” Nina shouted as she launched in with a kick. Her target was the goat head.

The chimera was shaking its heads furiously in an attempt to dispel the mist that had blinded it. Aww, the poor thing didn’t realize it couldn’t shake off *this* fog.

**BLAM!**

A forceful sound reverberated from Nina's clean hit to the chimera. The beast was knocked right on its side!

"Lucy!"

"Got it! *Fire Magic: Fire Arrow!*"

Lucy didn't miss a beat; she cast her spell.

"Yes! We got...it?"

"Looks like it's veering off course'h..." Nina shook her head and ears, seemingly disappointed.

Lucy's spell was headed in a straight line—just, not toward the chimera. The collapsed beast appeared to sense danger and hurriedly rose to its feet, but then seemed to relax once it saw that the spell would miss.

*Oh, chimera, don't get cozy just yet.*

Lucy's fire magic collided with the crystal wall.

"*Water Magic: Ice Floor. Water Magic: Flow.*"

I froze the floor beneath the chimera and then used water magic to slide the beast across the room. The chimera panicked and attempted to secure its footing, but it was too late for that. Lucy's butterfingers fire arrow reflected off the wall and engulfed the chimera in flame.

"Gyaaaaaaagh!"

"Byeeeeeeerh!"

The chimera's lion and goat heads cried out as its body writhed in agony.

"Looks like my chance'h," Nina said with a smirk. She then started reciting some sort of incantation.

"*Ground Magic: Boulder!*"

Ah, so she could cast typical incantation spells too. A giant stone that was several meters tall appeared above us. Then, Nina jumped high into the air.

"Goooal!"

And with that, Nina kicked the boulder down at full force—slamming it right onto the chimera with a massive thud.

“Gweeeh!” The chimera wailed in pain as it fell limply to the ground.

The monster soon stopped moving. Its fur smelled like charcoal.

“D-Did we defeat it?”

“Patience. Allow your humble compatriot to appraise it.”

Lucy and Fujiyan ran over to the chimera, and Fujiyan performed his appraisal while making sure not to stray too close.

“Why yes, it is indeed quite dead. Very well done, my comrades.”

Phew. We made it through that in one piece.

“So, Nina, that was mid rank ground magic, right?” I asked. “You can cast spells too?”

I’d figured that she was a melee-only martial artist, but it seems that she had some hidden techniques. Silver ranks were something else, all right.

“Oh, that was nothing. It wouldn’t have meant much without Ms. Lucy’s firepower and your support,” Nina answered with a smile. After tanking a chimera on her own and even striking the finishing blow, she was still this humble.

“Well, it’s a piece of cake for *my* magic!” Lucy boasted. I wished our butterfingere mage would take after Nina’s example.

“Do you realize that neither of your spells actually hit?” I commented.

“Guh.”

“And one of them even went the wrong way!”

“It basically hit in the end, so leave me alone! Ugh... Fine, whatever, I’ve got butterfingers anyway...” Lucy brought out the crocodile tears and started sobbing.

“Sorry, my bad, I didn’t mean it,” I said, trying to console her. It all worked out, so hey, no big deal. We could just keep training and get stronger at our own pace.



“Now then, ladies and gentlemen, onward!” Fujiyan said with excitement.

“Do you think a thousand-year-old facility will have some strong weapons?” I wondered. I had to admit that I was a little excited too. After all, this wasn’t just any old dungeon; it was a hidden dungeon! It had to have something good!

We left the chimera material harvesting for later and went toward the gate. It was built out of thick metal, but it wasn’t locked, so Nina started pushing. Slowly, with a heavy creak, the gate yawned open.

“Looks like a research facility,” I said.

The room beyond the gate was dotted with aging bookshelves and unknown machinery. Everything was rusted and beaten down by the sands of time. It was a far cry from the mountain of treasure you’d expect.

“*This* is all we get? lame,” Lucy complained.

“Hey now, we could still find some hidden gems’h,” Nina said. “How’s it lookin’, Boss?”

“Hmm... At a glance, there doesn’t appear to be anything of value,” Fujiyan replied.

He poured over the room with his *Appraisal* skill, but judging by his expression... What a shame. Guess we drew the short straw. Oh well, it’d be too convenient for us to find a legendary weapon in some dungeon that we stumbled upon by chance.

“Hey, it looks like the dungeon goes deeper,” Lucy remarked. She didn’t care about whatever research this place used to do, so she’d been searching around by herself.

“Hey, don’t go too far on your own. You don’t know what’s down there.”

“C’mon, we already beat the guard monster. Why would any more monsters be in here?”

Lucy just gave a carefree answer. What a headache.

“Listen, people who say stuff like that tend to get killed right after,” I explained. “You know, in movies and stuff.”

“Movies?” Lucy asked in puzzlement. After we got out of here I had to make sure to teach Lucy the importance of not jinxing herself.

“Oooh, this looks like the dungeon’s power room’h,” Nina said. Seemed like she tagged along with Lucy out of concern for her searching alone. *Sorry, our child’s such a handful.*

“Well now! A power room, you say? Powering a man-made dungeon for a thousand years must require a great deal of energy!”

Fujiyan made it sound like this could be big.

Nina reported her findings: “Boss, there’s a crazy-huge magicite in here!” She and Fujiyan made a good team.

“Fujiyan, did you find anything of value?” I asked. Incidentally, I walked last in our line because I kept my *Detect Danger* skill active. The metal gate had been closed behind us to keep any extra monsters from interrupting. I searched around for anything in hiding too; it seemed we were safe for the moment.

“Th-This is extraordinary!” Fujiyan remarked. “I never imagined a magicite could be so massive! This might be enough to power the entire city of Macallan!”

I guess we’d found our hidden gem. Hey, I wanted to take a look too.

“Wow... I’ve never seen a magicite this big before, not even in the elf village,” Lucy said. “Whoa, it shocked me a little.”

“M-Ms. Lucy?” Nina warned. “You probably shouldn’t touch it so casually...”

C’mon, Lucy, a little caution wouldn’t hurt.

“My word,” Fujiyan said. “If we returned with this, Macallan could be reborn into a brand new city. But how *does* such a massive magicite form natura— Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Boss?!”

“Mr. Fujiyan! What’s wrong?”

*Wait, did something happen?* Distressed, I rushed to the others.

“Fujiyan, what’s going on?! Whoa, this place is really somethin’.”

I entered the room to find a magicite that was larger than the chimera we'd defeated, shining like a rainbow, and gently undulating... Wait, why would a stone be moving?

"W-We must escape at once!" Fujiyan cried after going pale. "We may have awakened something far beyond what we've prepared for!"

"What? What does that mean?!" Lucy had, as usual, descended into a panic.

Nina glared ahead and prepared to defend Fujiyan against whatever might come.

I ran up to join the other three.

"Th-This is bad," Fujiyan fretted. "This is very, very bad..."

"Fujiyan, what is it?" I asked, bringing my face close to my muttering friend.

The rainbow-colored magicite gently stretched upwards, then wiggled in waves as it fully changed its form.

"A-A giant?" I heard Lucy say with a trembling voice. The magicite had shapeshifted into a gigantic human form.

And then, its large eyes and mouth jolted open. Those enormous eyes were looking down right at us.

This dimly glowing giant, which was maybe twice the size of that big ogre I'd once fought, was peering down at us with a sickening smile.

Yeah... This was kinda bad.

## Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Takes on an Ancient God

The radiant giant's mouth was contorted in apparent glee as it spoke to us.

"...Child of man, are you?"

The giant's voice was deep, resonating in my gut like a bass note from a subwoofer.

Fujiyan was still mumbling to himself and holding his head in his hands. Nina prepared for battle with her back facing Fujiyan. Lucy had just spaced out with her jaw on the floor.

Meanwhile, my *Calm Mind* skill was keeping me composed. Probably. I grabbed Lucy's hand and approached Fujiyan and Nina until we were all shoulder to shoulder. Fujiyan had the dungeon escape items, which we'd need to use while huddled up if we wanted to get everyone out of here safely.

But I decided to observe for a bit longer. An optimistic thought crossed my mind—what if this wasn't a bad guy? What if my *Detect Danger* skill was just giving me a false positive?

"You have my thanks. You all have freed me from my seal."

*Did we do something?* I glanced at Lucy, but she rapidly shook her head from side to side. She seemed to be pleading that it wasn't her fault, but wasn't *she* the one who'd touched the magicite first? I'd assumed that Lucy probably screwed something up, but that didn't turn out to be the case here.

"It was I," answered Fujiyan in a trembling voice. "It was my use of *Appraisal* on this magicite that proved to be our undoing."

"I was felled in the old war and petrified within this seal..." the giant continued. "The seal may have weakened... But I still could not break free of my own accord... I required the recognition of another."

I sighed.

“So, appraisals can actually break seals?” I didn’t know that kind of sealing magic existed. Still, that didn’t necessarily mean it was Fujiyan’s fault, right?

“Hey, anyone would’ve tried to appraise a magicite that huge. We can’t blame you for it.” I comforted my friend. No need to get so down on yourself, Fujiyan.

“No normal eyes could have broken my seal...” the giant boomed. “None besides those that could see through the disguise of a god, *Divine Eye*.”

“*Divine Eye*?” I asked. *Did Fujiyan ever have that skill? No, wait, he already said that he used Appraisal, so maybe this meant that his Appraisal skill was god rank?*

“The *Appraisal* skill I possess is by no means god rank,” Fujiyan said, shutting down my guess. Right, it was only at ultra rank.

“...Is that so? Still, my seal was broken... I need nothing more.”

So, I guess we saved this giant? Everyone spoke the same language at least, and it didn’t seem like it was going to attack us.

Or so I thought...

“...*I hunger.*”

...Until I heard those words. And saw how the giant’s gaze lingered intensely upon us. Hey, guy, we saved you, remember? Don’t give us that look.

I felt a chill race up my spine.

“D-Dungeon escape!” Nina shouted after swiping the items from Fujiyan and activating them. Phew! I sure didn’t know how to use them myself.

The four of us were enveloped in light. When it dissipated, we found ourselves standing in front of the cave entrance to the dungeon.

Were we safe? No, not yet.

“Let’s get away from here,” I said. Staying in this spot would keep us within the danger zone.

“W-Wait, are you sure we should just ignore that thing?” Lucy asked with fear in her voice.

“Let’s return and report it to the guild’h!” suggested Nina.

“Yeah, good idea,” I agreed. Nina was right about this. Fujiyan, however, was still feeling guilty. “Everyone,” I continued, “we’ve got to return to town. That giant could come to chase us.”

The rest of the party nodded, then we all made our way back to the path.

But...something started floating.

The ground before us expanded upward. With every passing second, the soil sculpted itself into a human-shaped figure.

And then, the mass of earth began to dimly glow.

“...And WHERE are you going?”

*Crap! What was with this guy?! We couldn't get away!*

“Boss, run!” Nina demanded, facing the giant.

“Y-You mustn't! Attacking it will—”

Fujiyan tried to blurt out his warning, but it was too late. The giant's head was already targeted by the arc of Nina's kick.

*GOOUNG!*

The impact sounded like the dull ring of a heavy bell. The giant did nothing beyond waiting for the kick to connect. Was it a slow mover?

“...Wait.”

The giant's hand extended.

“Huh'h?” Nina blurted. She must have been planning to hit and run, to land her kick and back off. Her hops were so swift that the giant looked like it hadn't even reacted.

The giant's movements *were* sluggish...until you suddenly noticed that its fingers were just close enough to caress Nina's skin.

Nina was sent flying.

“Ugaagh! HUUUGH!” She crashed into a distant tree with a thud and didn't get up.

What?! Nina was a silver rank adventurer! What did that giant just do? It had

sent Nina flying with an attack that I could barely comprehend.

“Fujiyan!” I shouted. “What is that thing?!”

“A wicked giant who was sealed away in a stone as punishment for angering the Sacred Deities... And because of my appraisal, its seal was lifted... I know nothing more than that.”

A wicked giant... Yeah, that phrase sure had an ominous ring to it.

“Fujiyan, use your items to heal Nina,” I said. “Lucy and I will buy you some time.”

“V-Very well! But please, do be careful!” With that, Fujiyan scampered away.

Lucy was standing next to me; she’d already begun her incantation. She wouldn’t have had nearly enough time against a normal enemy, but the giant before us seemed to move pretty lethargically. However, it still had that bizarre attack motion it’d used to strike Nina, so we needed to be on our guard.

*“F-Fire Storm!”*

Lucy blurted out her spell in time. The giant was caught burning inside of a swirling inferno, by a blaze even larger than the one that had incinerated the griffin.

“Good job, Lucy! You pulled off a high rank spell!”

“W-Well, I can succeed on one try out of ten!”

Uh, did she seriously just bet on a 10% gacha roll? No, let’s not worry. I’ll just think of it as Lady Luck being on our side. I couldn’t imagine that any normal magical being was capable of damaging this giant, but Lucy’s *Fire Storm* surged upward as though to scorch through the sky itself.

“Okay, at the very least, that had to have left a mark,” I said. “Let’s run away with Fujiyan and Nina.”

“W-Wait... I’m not used to high rank magic, so I might be a little manasick...”

Lucy was staggering. It was a sensation that I had no experience with given my limited mana—when people with vast mana reserves like Lucy cast powerful spells, the ensuing activation of the mana within their bodies inflicts a stupor.

I'd heard it was a feeling similar to being drunk on alcohol. I held Lucy's hand and walked toward Nina and Fujiyan.

When I found Fujiyan, he was using a healing item on Nina. Good, we had a shot at escaping.

*Ah, the innocent times when I truly believed that.*

The ground quaked with a roar.

Even the air itself trembled. Every bird in the canopy above instantly took flight. The distant howls of animals could be heard from far away. Unless those cries came from monsters instead.

I fearfully turned my head to see the giant trudging forward beyond the raging hellfire.

"It's...unscathed?!" Lucy said with a shivering voice.

Without my *Calm Mind* skill, my spirit might have just broken on the spot. This was an enemy unfazed by magic that had taken out a griffin. The four of us had no hope of victory. I wanted to run, but I doubted that we could escape the unpredictable movements that our enemy seemed capable of. What could we do?

Fight the ancient god?

Yes

►No

Oh come on, it was more than just a giant? I was against a full-on *deity*? What kind of game spawns enemies like this right at the start? This fantasy world had some busted difficulty balancing.

"Lucy, run away with Fujiyan and Nina," I murmured.

"Wh-What about you?"

"I'll buy you time," I answered. "#@||?&!^\*}{{\*\*#%~\$&%+!! <Water, Flow>. Water Magic: Fog."



I changed the elemental-generated water into fog. A mist blanketed our surroundings in an instant.

“...Well now, elemental magic,” came a deep voice. It sounded vaguely curious.

*So, it knows what elemental magic is?* I wondered. This giant was pretty well researched. Would my attacks work at all? My doubts grew by the second.

“Lucy, please, just go.”

“B-But—”

“Fujiyan’s a good friend of mine. I’ll catch up later.”

“...Don’t you dare die on me.” Lucy glared at me to drive the point home.

“I won’t.”

Funny how she had the same train of thought as the goddess. Speaking of which...

*O Goddess! Could you please bestow your wisdom unto me?* I thought. Despite her usual nagging, I didn’t get a response. C’mon, now’s the time I could really use some advice!

*Thud, thud*, signaled those unmistakable heavy footsteps as the ground quaked with each impact. The fog was too thick for me to see my hand in front of my face, but that giant was absolutely headed our way. Lucy ran toward Fujiyan—there was no visibility around here, but she had sharp ears.

All right, let’s do it.

*Stealth* skill.

My plan here was simple: cut off my enemy’s vision with the fog, slice into it with the Dagger of the Goddess, and then return to hiding via *Stealth*. This was a slapdash idea concocted in the hopes that the giant would slow down if it didn’t know where I was. It was all but guaranteed that my spells wouldn’t affect this giant since it was already immune to Nina’s kicks and Lucy’s magic, but perhaps the goddess’s dagger...

*Thud, thud*. The footsteps grew closer.

I held my breath and waited for the giant to pass me by. I planned to aim for the back—ideally, the ankle, somewhere around the Achilles tendon. That would slow down its walking speed. I just had to hold my breath, wait for the enemy to pass me by, and— “...What are you DOING?”

“Huh?!” I was shocked. The giant’s hands extended toward me.

What the heck! Why didn’t *Stealth* work?!

*C-Crap! It’s going to catch me!* I thought. That meant I wouldn’t be able to run! Or wait, was I going to get eaten?

*Dodge!*

The giant’s hand had come terrifyingly close, but I’d activated my skill in time and then slashed with my dagger like crazy. I felt no resistance at all.

My luck held out enough to avoid the giant’s grip. Thank goodness.

And then, I felt my feet sinking into something.

“What have you DONE?!” the giant suddenly bellowed. “YOU DARE...”

Its voice had sounded so civil before, but now it contained a distinct dash of fury. The ground shuddered, and with a single gust, my fog was dispelled.

“Huh?”

Was that giant’s hand...missing a finger? D-Did I cut that off? I seriously hadn’t felt a thing, though.

“...That dagger... Where did you get it?”

Hmm... I wondered if I should be honest and say that I’d received it from the goddess.

“That does not belong in human hands...” rumbled the giant.

“What?” The next moment, the giant was right in front of my eyes. Before I could even consider escape, it had grabbed me, and was now holding my body in a vice grip.

*Dodge!*

But I couldn’t run away. I was caught!

The giant brought its face close to me while it kept my body constricted in both hands. It looked me over with a pupil as large as my head.

I was gonna get eaten!

*So, this was how my adventure was going to end...*

“Wait right there!”

A beautiful voice rang down from the heavens. It was a dead ringer for the goddess’s, except I wasn’t hearing it in my head; I was hearing it with my actual ears. But what surprised me the most was...

“...This voice, could it be Lady Noah?”

The fact that this giant had heard it too. Its formerly blank expression was now contorted in surprise. Those hands were still binding me tight, though. I-It really hurt...

“Pops, stop this at once. That child is my acolyte.”

“...Oh dear. ...Is that so? ...My apologies.”

The giant suddenly released its grasp on me...while I was still in mid-air. So, naturally, I fell a few meters to the ground.

“Owwwch...” I’d landed flat on my ass. Well, hey, it could have been worse.

“O Goddess,” I called out after shakily picking myself up.

“Tee hee. Be grateful, Makoto. It’s quite fortunate that you’re *my* believer.”

“So, umm, what’s going on?” I asked.

“...We Titanea serve the more divine Titans,” explained the giant. “If you are Lady Noah’s believer, then you are as good as family to me.”

“O-Oh... Um, okay.”

This conversation was a bit too much of a curveball for me to follow, but it sounded like this old giant fella was part of this “Titanea” race *and* on the goddess’s side. Which meant that a single word from the goddess was all it took for the giant to settle down. That said, I wish she could’ve stepped in earlier

given how quick she normally is to chew me out.

“Thank you very much, Goddess,” I said. I figured she deserved some appreciation first. I seriously thought I was a goner there.

“Oh, Makoto, you’re such a scaredy-cat,” said Noah. “The Titanea don’t eat anything but plants that grow out of the ground. They wouldn’t ever eat a human!”

“Wait, is that true?”

“...Indeed. ...I do not eat meat.”

He was a vegetarian the whole time?! Well, I’d prefer it if he would avoid looking right at us while talking about how hungry he was. *You’re taking years off my lifespan, giant.*

“Wait, then why did you hit Nina?”

“...I was surprised to be attacked so suddenly. ...I only meant to give a light flick.” The giant was expressionless, but his voice sounded apologetic. Guess he was sorry for what he’d done...

But still, that level of force was his idea of a flick? Incapacitating a silver rank adventurer with a single blow before she could even react? This guy was on a heck of another level.

“Ah! Makoto, Pops, I’m out of time. You handle the rest, now.”

And with that, I no longer heard the goddess’s voice. *Wait, what was I supposed to be handling?* The giant was nodding for some reason.

“Heeeey! My esteemed Tackie!”

“Hey, giant! You get away from Makoto!”

Huh? Fujiyan and Lucy were supposed to have run away, but they were coming back. I’m pretty sure that I’d told them to run, though. Then again, I’d gotten caught like a dumbass after saying that I would catch up.

“M-Mr. Takatsuki?! You cut off the giant’s finger with that dagger!” Nina exclaimed in abject shock. Which reminded me...

“Oh, uh, sorry ’bout that,” I apologized. “You know, for cutting your finger

off... Is it the kind of thing that you can stick back on?"

"...It matters not. ...A new one will grow in a mere ten thousand years."

"U-Uh, cool, glad that works out." The conversation felt a bit dragged out, but I think he forgave me. Everyone else, however, froze at the sight of me having a leisurely chat with the giant they'd narrowly escaped from.

"Oh yeah, don't worry, the giant here's a good guy."

I explained the relationship between the goddess and the giant dude to everyone.

"My word!" Fujiyan exclaimed. "So this fellow is a friend of the goddess you worship?"

"Hold up, Makoto," Lucy demanded. "Nobody ever told me you were the follower of a wicked god!"

"M-Ms. Lucy?" cautioned Nina. "The giant is *right* there..."

Needless to say, everyone was surprised.

"...We Titanea are the guardians of the Titans. ...But once our masters lost Titanomachy against the Sacred Deities, the Titanea banded with the rest of the Gigantes races and challenged the Divine Plane."

"Ah, the other war... Gigantomachy, right'h?" Nina said.

"It all adds up," Fujiyan nodded. "Your race was branded as 'wicked' because the Titanea also fought against the Sacred Deities."

*Were we talking about myths again? How long has this geezer been around, anyway?*

"...I was petrified into stone about fifteen million years ago," he answered.

Yikes, he'd read my mind. Also, that was such a huge number that I couldn't wrap my head around it.

"Anyway, you mentioned that you were hungry, right?" I said to change the subject. Lucy bolted up in fear. She didn't have to worry though, since this guy only ate plants. "Fujiyan, do you have anything like bread or fruits?"

“Oh, why yes, I do.” Fujiyan used his *Storage* skill to pull out a handful of assorted snacks.

“...Ah, the nostalgia. ...To think the day would come when I could once again savor the blessings of the land.” The giant consumed his apples and loaves of bread with joy. Fujiyan brought out some wine as well, and gladly drank some alongside the giant.

“...I must thank you,” the giant said after finishing his meal. I would’ve thought that he was far from full given his size, but he seemed satisfied. He then looked down at us.

“...O, beastwoman child. ...I apologize for earlier.”

“N-No worries! I was the one who attacked first anyway’h!” Nina hastily shook her hands from side to side.

“...May you have the blessing of the Giant of the Land.”

“What?” For an instant, Nina was encased in a gentle glow.

“Oooh, I dunno why, but I feel pumped with power’h!” Nina glanced over her newly energized body. “Let’s see... Hiyo’h!”

Nina lightly kicked a nearby stone. With a *FWOOSH*, the rock instantly grew to the size of a boulder and flew off, leveling every tree in its path.

“Whew, that’s somethin’,” Nina remarked.

“My trusted Nina, might I ask what has happened?” Fujiyan asked.

“O-Oh, nothing. I just wanted to test stuff out for a bit, but wow, this is wild’h!”

Nina did some swift roundhouse kicks in midair. I was impressed that she could pull off a 1080 degree spin in a single jump. Oh hey, an impact crater formed in the ground right as she landed. Nina seemed impressed at the strength of her new techniques.

“Nina, were you not a believer in a goddess before?”

“Ha ha... We beastmen aren’t very religious,” Nina chuckled. Guess not everyone was an evangelical believer in the Sacred Deities.

“...Now to you, the one who so graciously offered me food.” The giant’s massive eyes turned to Fujiyan.

“In that case, O Giant, may I perhaps receive that severed finger?”

Fujiyan apparently wanted the giant’s finger that I’d cut off earlier. What could he possibly do with it? Lucy and Nina had vague looks of disgust on their faces, as though to say “what a creep.”

“...If that would be enough to satisfy you, then do as you please.”

“You have my gratitude!” Fujiyan wouldn’t accept something that had no meaning, so I was sure he had his reasons. He held the finger gently before vanishing it with his *Storage* skill.

“...Next shall be...the half-elf child, are you?”

“...Y-Yes.” Lucy seemed to still be a bit scared.

“...You’ve yet to gain control of your magic, I see.”

“Y-You can tell?”

“...When I see your mana surge like an explosion, I can.”

Ah, so I wasn’t the only one who thought of Lucy’s mana that way. It reminded me of the time we’d synchronized.

“...Lend me your staff.”

“This?” Lucy held up the wooden staff she always used and offered it to the giant. I hoped that it wasn’t going to break...

The giant plucked a single hair from his head and wrapped it around the staff. The strand of hair transformed into letters of light for a moment before being absorbed into the wood.

“...I shall return this. ...It should now be easier to perform ground magic.”

“G-Great...” Lucy accepted her staff and began chanting an incantation.

*“Ground Magic: Stone Shot!”*

A boulder that rivaled Nina’s shot from the end of Lucy’s staff.

“Yikes!” Nina shouted as the boulder grazed past her.

“S-Sorry!” Lucy apologized. Guess her butterfingers weren’t getting cured overnight. Still, she’d activated a ground magic spell in an instant, despite not ever succeeding during all of our training. Looks like she got a pretty nice boon.

“Phewww,” Lucy said. She gripped her staff and looked over it while shivering. It must’ve been a pretty emotional experience for her.

“...Now then, that is all.”

“Huh?” I blurted out. *What about me?!*

“Hey, what about Makoto?!” Lucy shouted on my behalf.

“...You have Lady Noah’s blessing and were even granted a divine treasure, yet you still want? ...Greed will come to bring you ruin...” the giant warned.

I was silent. When he put it that way, he was right. Guess he wanted me to be happy with what I had.

“...If you ever need rescue, ask for me through Lady Noah. I shall save you. ...Once.”

Ooh! I had a support summon now. I was going to be sure to call for him the next time I found myself in a sticky situation.

“...But if I am far away, I will not be able to arrive immediately. Ask in advance if you require me.”

Ah, that made sense. Guess I wouldn’t be able to ask for a lifeline when a strong monster was already at my throat.

“...And as a deity, I abide by the Divine Plane Doctrine. I do nothing that would upset the ecosystem of the physical plane... Should you ask me to destroy a nation, I would refuse...on the grounds of the Divine Plane Doctrine.”

This offer sure came with a lot of strings attached, O Giant. But if he was refusing *only* on the grounds of some rules...then that meant he actually *was* strong enough to destroy a nation. Yikes.

Tell the giant your wish?

Yes



No

Oh. *RPG Player*, were you already giving me a choice? If you wanted me to come up with a wish on the spot, then I didn't have—wait, yes I did.

"Could you possibly rescue Lady Noah from the Seafloor Temple?" I asked.

The old giant's expression shifted into one of surprise.

"...I'm afraid I cannot. ...For Lady Noah to regain her power, a believer must be the one to reach the Seafloor Temple. ...Even if I were to save her, Lady Noah's strength would not return."

This was sounding like an obligatory rule. *And by the way, Goddess? You never mentioned that part to me. I swear, she always leaves out the important bits...*

The old giant chuckled a bit.

"...You wish on behalf of my master before your own desires, eh? I like your spirit."

Oh, he complimented me. Guess I got a good charisma roll on that response.

"...I shall give you one piece of advice," the giant said.

"Advice?"

"...That Elemanti you dare speak...is the language of the gods. Cease it."

U-Uhhh... But I thought I couldn't use elemental magic without it...

"...Elemanti has meaning only because the Titans speak it. If you wish to use the power of the elementals as a human, then you must see the elementals, converse with the elementals, and befriend the elementals."

"Except the elementals are kinda invisible," I pointed out. It would've saved me a lot of trouble if they weren't.

"...Look," the giant said sternly as he suddenly gripped my head. *Again, give me some warning before you do that kinda stuff!*

I felt a strange mana flow into my body. Was this a synchronization?

"Wha—?" I said with surprise. Before my eyes, a dim stream of light began to

spread. I was surrounded by dots of luminescence glowing in green, blue, yellow, and white, varying in sizes from large to small.

“Amazing...”

This must have been what it was like to be surrounded by thousands of fireflies...not that I'd seen any in Tokyo. But suddenly, the lights were extinguished.

“Ah...”

I stretched out my fingers but grabbed at nothing. The giant had already retracted his hand.

“...Did you see?”

“I-I did.”

I'd seen them. So, those were the elementals. There were an astonishing number of them, and they formed a powerful flow of mana.

*And elemental magic existed to control them? No... Not quite. These beings didn't exist to be controlled by humans. The throngs of elementals constituted the mana of the natural world. At most, they might provide a bit of help as they pleased. To order them around would be an insult.*

“...I see you understand.”

“I do.”

I now had a new goal: learn to see the elementals. That was my top priority.

“...Those without the capacity cannot see. ...It seems the elementals have taken a liking to you. ...Elemanti is a language that the Titans use to command the elementals. ...And the elementals do not like being commanded by anyone else.”

“See the elementals, converse with them, and befriend them,” I recited.

“...Go forth, child.”

“Thank you very much.” I committed every stern word the giant had told me to my memory. After all, he'd given me such invaluable advice.

“...Now then, farewell.”

And so, the giant vanished into the ground.

# Epilogue: Idle Chatter Between Goddess and Giant

## ◇ The Ancient Giant's Monologue ◇

I bid farewell to the children of man and traveled along the leylines. My first taste of freedom in fifteen million years was satisfying indeed.

I floated to the surface. This must have been the western portion of the continent. I saw bountiful forests in all directions. And yet...

"...I do not like it."

The elementals were languid, as though they were holding their breaths. It was a far cry from the age when we Titanea had walked the surface. What I felt instead was *their* presence staring down from the heavens: the Sacred Deities.

I asked the elementals. They said that the surface had changed.

*Sickening, isn't it?*

"...Ah, Lady Noah." She was the youngest child of the Titans I served. The rest of her kin were long since captured by *them*, but she was the only one imprisoned above the surface. A tragic one, indeed.

*Could you not call me "tragic"?*

How rude of me.

"...I have only just now awakened after a long imprisonment. ...What a coincidence that one with eyes that could see through the Sacred Deities' seal just so happened to appear." That seal was not so feeble as to be undone by any normal human. And that dungeon had a spell of concealment cast upon it; it should have been difficult to notice.

*Of course that wasn't a coincidence. I made it happen. I gave that merchant a temporary divine power through my dagger. The effect's gone by now, though.*

Ah, so that was how. But if memory serves, that boy wasn't Lady Noah's believer. She said her acolyte was the one named "Makoto," did she not? Was that one truly suited to the task?

*Don't start that. I'll put that boy to work in due time.*

My, my. She seemed to have quite the expectations for this believer. I'd asked the elementals about Lady Noah's prior apostles, and indeed, they had all been powerful mages or superbly skilled swordfighters. Compared to them, this elementaler boy seemed rather weak and lacking in talent.

*Tee hee.*

"Lady Noah, is something the matter?"

*Rest assured, Makoto Takatsuki is the greatest.*

"...I beg your pardon?"

*Makoto Takatsuki is the greatest apostle I've ever recruited.*

"...He certainly didn't appear that way."

His mana reserves were scarcely enough to cast a spell or two before running dry, and his elemental magic was still untrained. Yet, despite it all, he was brash enough to challenge one of the Gigantes. This was not a combination well suited to surviving very long.

*That boy will turn this world on its head. Just you wait and see.* Lady Noah giggled, apparently quite pleased with herself.

"Incidentally... Lady Noah, the acolyte you used one thousand years ago brought chaos upon the world. ...The elementals told me about how poorly that attempt ended."

*...You know your stuff.*

"Even in my stone seal, the elementals brought me tidings of the world above... I'd heard that Lady Noah, despite being a lone Titan, had kept fighting the Sacred Deities every chance she got. ...Even if those fights rarely brought results."

*I screwed up last time. But this time, I'm taking it slow. I'll have those bitches up on Olympus crying at my feet.*

Her voice revealed, in bits and pieces, a dark thirst for vengeance. I was shocked that she could produce a tone so dripping with hatred. Oh, my cute

Lady Noah, how corrupted you've become.

*Hmph. I'm still plenty cute.*

"Yes, of course, right you are... Lady Noah, whose divine, dazzling beauty is hailed as the greatest of the Titans—your merest visage would entrance human, animal, and demon alike. I'm certain that the boy lost all reason the moment he laid eyes upon you and became your believer... He must be so smitten that he can think of nothing but my dear Lady Noah..."

*Uhhh, yeah, totally... Her response sounded stilted.*

"...Is something the matter, Lady Noah?"

*Nothing at all. By the way, what're you gonna do next, Pops?*

"...I plan to travel this world in search of my sealed brethren."

*Yeah, that's a good idea. If we want to bring the fight to the Olympian gods, we'll need to be completely prepared.*

"So, you've yet to give up on that... But for now, you can only command a single acolyte. You may have the temporary ability to control those who touch that dagger...but there's little you can do with that... Which reminds me... Strengthening the boy's friends...that was your order, Lady Noah, was it not? You secretly sent it the moment I was freed from my seal."

*Sure did. Good job, Pops. I already gave that boy my blessing, so all I can do now is make his party members stronger.*

"My...you're quite generous to this one. Particularly when you treated your previous acolytes like insects..."

*Rude. I did nothing of the sort.*

"Hmm... Which is to say...that this spectacle is a means to some end. You didn't give the believer in question a single order, did you? Though...it appears that he's aiming for the Seafloor Temple where you're imprisoned. To be honest, I can hardly imagine him being capable of it..."

*Don't worry, I've got a plan. Heh heh heh...*

Lady Noah really did seem to enjoy talking about this new follower of hers,

Makoto Takatsuki. I'd never heard such a voice from her before.

"...I suggest you not place too much hope in this believer." I was getting worried. Perish the thought, but could she have possibly fallen for this acolyte?

*Don't worry. I'll handle this.*

It seemed like she had every minute detail planned out, so I had no choice but to follow her lead.

"...Take care, Lady Noah."

*Be sure to tread with caution. You don't want them to notice.*

And with that, I heard no more of Lady Noah's voice. Now then, I had my brethren to search for.

### ◇ Makoto Takatsuki's Perspective ◇

"I must say, my esteemed Tackie—that giant was quite the fine fellow!"

We were on our way back to town. Fujiyan was certainly energetic.

"Oh yeah, Boss, why did you ask for that giant's finger'h?" Nina inquired.

"Ah, I was curious about that too," I said.

"Do ho ho, I'll have you know that this giant's finger is a magicite containing incredible energy. The amount of energy stored in this digit alone could level an entire nation were it to be used as a weapon."

"What?" Lucy exclaimed, distancing herself from Fujiyan. "Isn't that kinda dangerous?"

"Worry not, it's perfectly safe when handled carefully," Fujiyan assured her. "But I must say, this adventure has yielded quite the return!"

"Sure did!" Nina agreed. "I got a powerful blessing out of it'h!"

Fujiyan and Nina were all smiles. When I glanced at Lucy...

"Tee hee hee..."

She was cuddling her staff which the giant had modified. She'd tested out her new ground magic spells earlier, and from the looks of it, that weapon was shaping up to be pretty useful. She said that, for now, she could activate magic

just by concentrating mana inside of the staff. It was far from fuel-efficient, but that method was a good fit for somebody with as much mana to burn as Lucy.

Everyone seemed pretty satisfied.

I looked over the Dagger of the Goddess. Considering the day's adventure, I couldn't help but find her behavior suspicious. She'd normally warn me well in advance to be careful or to run away. But this time, she intervened *directly*, with timing that almost seemed calculated. And who did we find at the end of that dungeon? None other than an ally of the goddess.

*It was all just a little too perfect.*

I was the first believer of a goddess who had zero. But—and this is something I'd only found out recently—I can see and even converse with her, which makes our rapport something different.

There's a word for our bond, and it's "apostle." The priestesses were a sort of apostle too.

*An apostle sees their god's form.*

*An apostle hears their god's voice.*

*Should an apostle worry, their god will give advice.*

*Should an apostle become lost, their god will show them the way.*

*Should an apostle pray, their god will grant them their blessing.*

Pretty sweet deal for the apostle. Except for one thing:

*An apostle can never defy their god's orders.*

If a revelation were given from on high, the apostle had to carry out their god's decree, even if it cost them their life. That was just how it was.

Now, what did the goddess tell me, again?

"Become strong."

"You'd better not die that easily."



“Go forth.”

But of course, those were “requests.” They weren’t orders. And besides, I was weak. An apprentice mage with lower stats than most people you’d find on the street. As I am now, I probably couldn’t hope to carry out the goddess’s orders.

But I should be able to one day.

Whatever her true “request” is.

And so began my journey of full clearing this world with my goddess.




## Afterword

Hello, my name is Isle Osaki. To any readers who became familiar with my work via the “Let’s Become a Novelist” website, thank you as always. Reading many different web novels gave me the idea of writing my own fantasy world adventure, and before I knew it, I had the support of countless people, and I somehow even made it to the point of receiving a print run.

I don’t have anything special to write, so instead, have some background info. I think many of you might have already realized, but your author’s choice of names in this story is a bit on the lazy side. The very first town, Macallan, was named after the brand of my favorite whisky. The seven magical elements are named after the Japanese words for the seven days of the week. Incidentally, the reason that dark magic is assigned to the moon element is because I have a day job as an office worker. And what day could be darker for an office worker than “Mon”day? (I might be biased.) However, I didn’t make the protagonist a water mage out of any particular love of its associated day, Wednesday. Although I do like Wednesday Dow\*town. But I get the impression that water and ice are treated as jobber elements fairly often, so I figured, hey, why not give them to the protagonist? A bit of a cynical idea, I know.

Lastly, to my editor, Y, thank you for your many words of advice. To my illustrator, Tam-U, I give you a mountain of thanks for your outstanding character designs. And most of all, I’d like to offer my deepest, greatest gratitude to the people who have supported me since the web version. I hope you all enjoy the series from here on out.





"WOULD YOU  
BECOME MY  
BELIEVER IF  
I GAVE YOU  
A PEEK?"

Noah

Full Clearing  
Another World  
under a  
**GODDESS**  
with Zero  
Believers

1

The Weakest Mage in Class

Story  
Isle Osaki

Art  
Tam-U









"Y-YOU'D  
BETTER NOT  
LOOK!"

WE HAD  
STOPPED  
BY A SMALL  
SPRING IN  
THE SOUTHERN  
FOREST.  
MAKOTO HAD  
LED THE WAY  
USING HIS  
MAPPING  
SKILL.

# Bonus Short Stories

## Lucy and Emily's Crush Competition

◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

I had agreed to meet up with *somebody*.

"Well? What'd you call me out for?" I asked.

I'd arrived at a posh cafe in the guild near the Macallan church and was now staring at my former party member.

"Oh, come on! Enough with the hostility, Lucy. I'm *trying* to be friends with you."

Emily's tone sounded like I'd already gotten on her nerves, so it didn't seem like she was trying very hard. Regardless, I took a seat across from her, propped my chin up on my arm, and ordered a black tea.

"Not with Jean today?"

"He's...out training," Emily replied.

"Huh, just like Makoto."

The moment Emily heard my response, she snapped and glared at me. "Yeah, he is!" Emily declared, slamming her hand against the tabletop. "Jean's completely taken after Makoto, so all he does anymore is train!"

"O-Okay..." I said nervously. "So, did you invite me here because you were feeling lonely?"

"Got a problem with that?" Emily shot back. She was in a *foul* mood.

"Well then, what'd you want to talk about?" I asked.

Emily took a long pause before answering.

"Lucy... You're dating Makoto, right?"

“Huh?!” I blurted out loudly. “Wha-Wha-Wha-Wha... What are you talking about?!”

“Ah, right. You’re a wuss, so I suppose not.”

“Oh, it’s *on!*” I announced. “I’m gonna ask out Makoto right now! You can keep having cold feet for all I care!”

“Excuse me? Jean and I grew up in the same orphanage! You’d better believe I’ll get a ‘yes’ out of him before you do!”

Emily and I glared and growled at each other from point-blank range.

“Hey you two, no fighting in the guild!” Mary scolded as she drove us out.

“All right then, whoever asks out their crush first in the next three days wins,” Emily said, throwing down the gauntlet.

“You’re on! Loser has to pick up the winner’s tab!”

And so, we were now competing to see who could ask out their crush first.

Wait... How did it come to this, again?



“Not feelin’ hungry, Lucy?”

I didn’t answer. Across from me was Makoto, who had just finished his train— No, he was still training during his meal. There were shards of ice floating around him.

“Hey... Are you free later?” I asked.

“Besides the part where I train until I fall asleep, yeah, totally free,” Makoto answered. *Did this guy have some disease that would kill him if he wasn’t training?*

“Wanna go for a walk?” I asked.

“Sure thing.”

I led Makoto outside.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Uhhh, let’s go to the park!” I suggested. I figured that the park would have



just the atmosphere I needed at this time of night. It'd also be quiet enough for us to have a conversation.

"Huh?" Makoto responded with a contorted, confused look. I didn't understand his response at the time, but I got it once we arrived at the park ten minutes later.

*What the heck?! I thought. What're so many lovey-dovey couples doing in the park at night?!*

Just being romantic would've been one thing... But couples were going, uh, *well* beyond that in plain view.

"So, um, Lucy?" Makoto asked. He was visibly nervous. I probably was too.

But, for real? Was I really going to ask him out in a place like this? Wouldn't it insinuate that I expected our night to go...a certain way?

"H-Hey, uh, Makoto..." I began.

"Y-Yeah?" stammered Makoto, his face actually showing an emotion for once. But just then...

"Aaah!" came a woman's moan from behind some nearby bushes. Makoto and I shared a look of panic. His face was beet-red. Mine probably resembled a tomato.

*Nope, nope, nope! There was no way I could ask him out here!* I grabbed Makoto by the hand and we hastily left the park.



Emily and I heaved heavy sighs.

"How'd yours go?" I asked.

"Do I need to spell it out?"

Ah, things weren't going well. Our lonesome ladies' night out continued late into the evening.

## **The Guild Receptionist Is a Heavy Drinker**

“Hey, mind if I join you?”

I was at my regular skewer stand when, suddenly, a woman appeared behind me and asked me a question.

“Oh, Mary, done with work? By all means, go ahead,” I answered.

Mary was a receptionist for the adventurer’s guild, and I’d talked with her a lot ever since I’d accepted my first quest. Speaking with people I didn’t know made me nervous, so I always stood in the line for Mary’s counter whenever she was working. As of now, she was one of the few women who I could hold a conversation with.

“So, what did you get on today’s hunt?” she asked.

“Just goblins, as usual. Also a few horned rabbits.”

“Thanks again, by the way,” the chef interjected with a laugh. He also placed a glass right in front of me. Wait, had I even ordered anything?

“It’s on the house!” added the chef with a smile.

“Why, thank you,” I said as I brought the glass to my lips.

*Damn, this is strong!* I thought. Uh, did the chef mean to serve me something *this* alcoholic? Guess I just needed to take smaller sips!

“Whew!” Mary exclaimed. “Chef, gimme a refill!”

Yikes, she downed that glass in an instant!



“Guhhh... I got so drunk...”

Mary was currently clinging to me and wouldn’t let go. Every one of the guild’s stalls had already closed. I’d wound up having to guide Mary back to her home, but I didn’t even know where that was.

“One more spot! I’ve still got it in me!” she cheered.

“Really?” I questioned. “I think you oughta call it a night. Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Aww, I’ll be fiiine!”

Unable to resist Mary's arm-twisting, I followed her to a large pub that was open until sunrise. The place was packed with all kinds of folk, from adventurers and merchants to townspeople who'd just gotten off work. Mary and I took seats in the corner.

"Yeah, cheers!" Mary shouted.

"You sure are a heavy drinker," I remarked.

"Awww, no I aaain't," she said while casually leaning into me. Agh, she smelled nice. I tried to focus on the food to distract myself from my pounding heart, until...

"Hey Mary, that you?"

"How 'bout joining us instead?"

"Sure is one young fella you got with ya, eh?"

A handful of adventurers had called out to Mary. Were they acquaintances of hers? These men clearly weren't rookies. My knee-jerk reaction was that I didn't want to drink with people I didn't know, but Mary...

"Sorryyy, but toniiight, it's just me and Makoto," she said, turning them down before I got the chance.

"Aww, oh well."

"C'mon, let's go."

"Some other time, then!"

The men didn't persist any further and left.

"Mary, are you sure about that?" I asked.

"Totally sure," she said. "Those guys will hit up aaany woman they see around here. Look, they're already onto their next shot over there."

I peered in the direction she was pointing and, sure enough, saw that the group was chatting up a pair of women. Man, was I gonna act like that someday?

"Makotooo, you better not end up like that," Mary said.

“Huh?” I blurted out. Had she read my mind?

“You’re puuure, Makoto. You’re better off that way.”

“Maybe, but I kinda wish I had a girlfriend...”

“Want me to do it?”

“Ha ha... Yeah, sure, wouldn’t that be nice.” Even if it’d been just a drunken joke, I did appreciate the sentiment.

“Come onnn, I’m not even joking... Oh, I know! Makoto, when you hit gold rank, I’ll be your girlfriend!” Mary announced with a grin.

“Gold rank, huh...” My adventurer rank was currently stone, the lowest of them all. In other words, she was asking for the impossible.

But, hey, I’d take it.

“Guess I’m aiming for gold rank now,” I stated.

“Tee hee, good luuuck,” Mary said as she patted my head.

...Even if gold rank was out of reach, I could at least aim for iron rank—the point at which adventurers were finally considered mid-level.

## **The Clerk at the Fujiwara Trading Company**

“Oh? Well hi there, Mr. Takatsuki’h!”

A girl with bunny ears hopped toward me.

“Oh, hello there, Nina,” I greeted her. She was carrying some big boxes in both hands that looked fairly hefty.

“Let me help,” I offered.

“Uhh... They’re pretty heavy’h,” Nina responded.

Perhaps, but I couldn’t let a girl hold them alone while I walked empty-handed — “Urgh, this *is* heavy!” I stood corrected... I couldn’t handle this.

“A ha ha, that’s what happens when you pack fifty bottles of Macallan flaming cocktails in a box,” Nina chuckled. “I think it’d be a bit too much for a human.”

Ah, right. Nina was a beastwoman, a race many times stronger than any human.

“You’re a nice person, Mr. Takatsuki’*h*. You actually offered to help a beastwoman like me.”

“That makes me nice?” I asked.

“Sure does. A lot of humans wouldn’t blink at the sight of a beastman doing hard labor.”

Guess it was a difference in otherworld culture. I could never treat a cutie like Nina or any of the cat-eared girls as nothing more than some hired muscle.

“The boss is just like you. You people from the otherworld are all so kind,” Nina said. Her expression mellowed. Fujiyan sure had one dedicated partner.

“I see that Fujiyan isn’t around today,” I noted. Nina’s responding expression was somber.

“He...said he had an appointment with the daughter of a Macallan lord for some business negotiations today.”

“Wow...” He was already meeting people *that* high up? Fujiyan sure had connections.

“By the way, will he be available today?” I asked. I figured that Nina would have a general idea of his schedule.

“No... I’m afraid he has a *banquet* to attend with that noble lady!” Nina pouted. She seemed jealous.

*That darn playboy...*

“Well, it’s a shame, but some other time, then,” I said.

“Mr. Takatsuki! You’re free today, ain’t ya’*h*?”

“Huh?”

“Please, could ya give me some company’*h*?”

And so, for some reason, I wound up having dinner with the clerk of Fujiyan’s shop.

◇ In the adventurer's guild, near the stalls by the entrance ◇

"The noblewomen, those Catgirl Cantina waitresses, the boss is always actin' sweet on everyone! He doesn't pay a bit of attention to how I feel!"

Nina followed her complaint up by downing a tall pint glass in one gulp. She could really handle her drinks.

"Hey, uh, Makoto?" Lucy whispered into my ear. "Don't you think Nina's drinking a bit too much?"

"Hmm..." I pondered. "I mean, I thought that beastmen are all pretty good at handling their liquor."

It was something I'd heard from Fujiyan. Incidentally, I was way too shy to handle a dinner with Nina alone, so I'd called Lucy for some backup.

"Mr. Takatsuki! How do I tell the boss what I feel'g?" Nina asked.

"Uh, well, let me think..."

I was the only one who knew that Fujiyan's *Waifu Game Player* skill allowed him to read minds. Meaning that there was a one hundred percent chance that Fujiyan knew about Nina's affection.

*But what do I tell her?* I wondered.

"Don't worry, Nina," Lucy consoled her. "You're cute, so you'll be fine."

It was kinda rare to see Lucy being so considerate.

"Wahhh... You really think so, Miss Lucyyy?" Nina asked before suddenly collapsing onto the table with a thud. She was now drawing the deep, slow breaths of someone fast asleep.

After a brief silence, Lucy and I glanced at each other. Since we couldn't just leave her behind, we decided to wait for a while. But I couldn't help noticing that...

"Fujiyan sure is popular, huh," my tongue slipped with unsubtle jealousy.

"I-I mean, you've got people who like you too..."

"Hm? You say something, Lucy?" I asked.

“Nope, not a word!”

For some reason, I was now being smacked on the head. *What’d I do?* Well, no big deal—I’d just drink in silence. And maybe keep Nina’s gripes in mind the next time I felt like pulling Fujiyan’s leg.

“Anything you wanna eat, Lucy?”

“Hmm, let’s see...”

The stalls at the guild entrance were flooded with liquored-up adventurers. The night was still young.

## **My First Trip to the Catgirl Cantina**

“W-Whoa...”

The moment I walked through those doors, my jaw dropped. Fujiyan had just taken me into a place I’d never been before: the Catgirl Cantina. The staff all had cat ears. And they were cute.

W-Wait, was this some kind of adult shop?

“My esteemed Tackie...” Fujiyan explained with disappointment. “This is no brothel. They don’t offer *that* sort of service...”

“...You just read my mind, didn’t you?” I accused. *Please don’t, it’s embarrassing!*

“Think of it as a maid cafe.”

“Oh, I see.” So the point of the place was just to *look* at the cute girls.

“Welcome to the Catgirl Cantina!” A wide-eyed cat-eared waitress greeted us before showing Fujiyan and me to our seats. Her skirt was short. And underneath that skirt swayed a cat tail.

I-I was being tempted... No, keep it together. *Calm Mind* skill, activate!

“Oh, my esteemed Tackie...”

“Got a problem?”

We were led to a luxurious table in the back.

“Thanks for everything, Meowster Fujiwara! Is it your companion’s first trip here? By all means, take your time!” The cat-eared waitress welcomed us with a smile, took our drink orders, and disappeared into the kitchen.

“So they *do* make cat puns,” I remarked.

“Heavens no! She’s the only waitress here who does so.”

“Huh?” *For real?* Our drinks were delivered as we continued this discussion, and we said our cheers. Entrees were soon brought out plate by plate.

“This is some good food!” I exclaimed.

“Indeed it is,” Fujiyan agreed. “The impeccable quality does not stop at the service staff—the food is exquisite as well!”

“But it must be expensive.”

“Oh, my friend, you’ll be quite surprised by what they charge...”

Fujiyan slipped me a number.

“Wow, that’s pricey!” I couldn’t help but remark.

“What?”

“...What?”

Fujiyan and I stared at each other. Ah, we’d just hit upon a difference in perspective; of course a rookie adventurer and a successful businessman would think about the value of money very differently. Things got a little awkward.

“Er, may I ask what you typically dine upon, my esteemed Tackie?”

“I guess I just go to the food stalls in the guild every day,” I responded. “I can get a full stomach for a few hundred gald.”

“That is indeed cheap... But I’ve heard that almost all of the stalls in the guild primarily serve drinks.”

“Yep, it’s all bar food.” But I liked junk food, so it wasn’t a problem for me.

“Well now, are you fellas talking about work? Mister Fujiwara, this friend of yours is an adventurer?” The cute, cat-eared waitress chatted along as she poured us drinks. A-A little too close for my comfort...





The time flew by, and before I knew it, I'd drunk *way* too much.

"C'moon, Mister Fujiwara, you can stay until morning, caaan't you?"

"Ah ha ha! But of course!" Fujiyan replied. "Come, my esteemed Tackie, we've much more drinking to do!"

Fujiyan was still partying hard.

"Uh... Sure..." I was tired. Honestly, I wanted to head back to the adventurer's guild and get some sleep. I couldn't handle my liquor as well as Fujiyan, after all.

"Mister Fujiwara, I want to drink that luxury wine..."

"Can I have some fruits?"

"I want to try that wine too..."

Fujiyan was surrounded by catgirls wearing skimpy dresses. Wait, weren't those skirts a little *too* short? It was starting to feel like the type of venue that wasn't *quite* a brothel... Right, a cabaret club.

At just that moment...

I froze. A shiver that I still struggle to describe raced up my spine.

"Hey...Boss? Didn't you say you'd come home tonight'h?"

I turned around to see a bunny-eared girl standing imposingly before us. The cat-eared girls instantly scattered away like mice.

"Er... Well, you see, about that... My trusted Nina, I have a perfectly reasonable explanation..." Fujiyan stammered as he tried to come up with an excuse.

"My apologies, Mr. Takatsuki, but the boss has some unfinished business'h. Would you mind wrapping up your evening here'h?"

"...Nope, go right ahead."

If anything, I was so sleepy that I appreciated the assist. But did Fujiyan really spend the night with me when he still had work to do? Then again, he was the one who'd invited me to go drinking. Oh well, good enough for me.

I returned to the adventurer's guild and fell fast asleep.

*Come to think of it, what was that bunny-eared clerk's name, again?*

## A Chat between a Goddess and Her Believer

"Hey, Makoto?"

"Yes, what is it, Goddess?"

I turned around while practicing my water magic.

"I think you could at *least* give the training a rest while you're dreaming. I mean, I'm *right* here!" The goddess pouted as she puffed out her cheeks in an adorable way.

"I just need one more level to top out my water magic mastery at 99. Then I can get my max-out bonus!"

"O-Oh... Well, have fun, then." The goddess was looking at me with disinterest. *But, why?*

Meanwhile, she seemed to be holding...ice cream?

"Wait, is that Haa\*en-Dazs?" I asked. *Where'd she get that?*

"Hmm, from a Japanese online store, I guess?" she responded.

"...They deliver here?" Was this the true power of the goddess? It was a mystery...

"Oh, I can do plenty more than this!" the goddess boasted before showing me...a copy of *Weekly Shonen J\*mp*?! I-I wanna read that!

"No can do," she declined, chucking the magazine away. It vanished into thin air.

"Aww..." I at least wanted to check out the latest chapter of *One P\*ece*...

"Wanna know how all the manga in your old world is going?" the goddess teased as a sneer snuck onto her face. She had a rotten personality.

"Well, yeah. Thinking about how I can never read them again makes me start to miss them," I said. But oh well, this was another world. Best to just give up

on it.

“Hey, you’re the one who’s got it good here!” the goddess said. “You can travel anywhere in the world you want. I, on the other hand, have been stuck here for hundreds of years, in case you forgot.”

“Here? This place with nothing in it?” I asked. This blank area where I met the goddess stretched as far as the eye could see.

“I meant the Seafloor Temple where I’m being held! In terms of places humans can actually reach, it’s located at the end of the dungeon at the deepest point in the world.”

“Guess I oughta start swimming, then.” It was hard not to have some compassion for someone who’d been all alone this whole time.

“Don’t worry, take your time. I’ll wait patiently for as many years or centuries as it takes.”

“Humans kinda don’t live that long, though...” I pointed out.

Come to think of it, how old *was* the goddess? She looked pretty much like a teenage girl, but was she actually an old lad— “Well now, is this believer of mine thinking something incredibly rude?”

“Ow, that hurts,” I pleaded as the goddess tugged on my cheeks. I guess asking about her age was heretical.

We both remained silent for a bit.

“Hey, Makoto, talk to me about something,” the goddess demanded.

“There’s nothing I hate being told to do more than that.” If I could come up with fun things to talk about at the drop of a hat, I would’ve had way more friends!

“Hmph. That’s what you get for asking my age.”

“Oh... I must have angered you,” I said before apologizing to the goddess.

“Okay then, it’s about time for you to head back,” she said. Her smile had returned, so maybe she wasn’t too mad about it.

“...By the way, what’d you call me for?” I asked. I hadn’t gotten any directions

or anything.

“Huh? I was just bored and wanted someone to talk to.”

I was speechless. *That was it?* Ah well, I could let it slide. The goddess I worshipped chose to spend her spare time with me, after all.

“Well, I’ve got a fantasy world to full-clear.”

“Indeed. Within your limits, of course. Your life comes first.” The goddess bid me farewell, waving her hand back and forth and using a phrase that I felt like I’d heard before.

Either way, tomorrow was gonna be another day of work here in Macallan.

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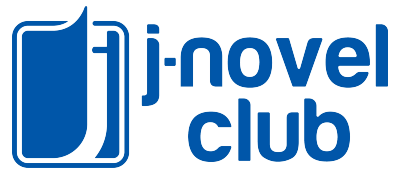
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