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Chapter 1

Act 1

The auditorium was full of new students chatting among themselves, faces and seats illuminated by magic lamps. Compared to last spring's entrance ceremony, the number of people seemed relatively small. Perhaps it was due to the demon incident back then, or perhaps it was just a coincidence.

A year had already passed since we'd enrolled at the academy. There hadn't been any more demon attacks, and life had continued peacefully. Yifa's study sessions seemed to have saved Amyu's steadily declining grades, and the three of us had advanced to our second year.

Today was the day of the entrance ceremony, which Amyu, Yifa, and I were attending because we were at the top of our class.

"This is really tasty, Amyu," said Yifa.

"Is it? Then I'll take one." The two of them were relaxing and enjoying the ceremony. They probably hadn't had the opportunity to truly experience the food last year due to the demons' interruption. I was monitoring the campus with my shikigami, but there was no sign of any uninvited guests this time around. The ceremony seemed likely to end without incident.

The main event had already concluded, and once the conversation time ended, the ceremony would come to a close. I had eaten my fill, so I was ready to head back soon. However...

"Seika Lamprogue." Somebody suddenly called out to me from behind, and I turned my head. An old man was standing there as straight as a cypress tree. He was tall, bony, and had a gaunt face. Although his slicked-back hair was entirely white, his perfectly straight posture showed no signs of his age.

I blinked in surprise. Though I had only seen him at events such as this one, I knew he was the academy's deputy headmaster. I hadn't seen him since the

ceremony's opening speech, so I'd thought he had already left.

Before I could say anything, the deputy headmaster spoke, looking at me with eyes that revealed no emotion. "Please come to the headmistress's office tomorrow night alongside Yifa." He said nothing else, turning around and leaving immediately after.

I furrowed my eyebrows. What was that about?

"What's wrong?" Amyu asked curiously, holding a plate.

"I was summoned by the headmistress."

"Come to think of it, I've never actually seen the headmistress."

Neither had I. I didn't expect to see her wandering around campus or anything, but even at ceremonies like this, all the speeches were delivered by the deputy headmaster. She hadn't shown up to this year's entrance ceremony or last year's. I had assumed she was just a figurehead appointed by the imperial government, but perhaps I was wrong.

"Getting called to her office doesn't sound good though. Is she gonna tell you to drop out?"

"Don't throw out such ominous assumptions so casually. Yifa was summoned too." *Jokes aside, what could have brought this on? Nothing comes to mind...* Something about it felt off.



The next evening, I met up with Yifa after our classes had finished for the day. She seemed nervous, even perturbed, as we headed to the headmistress's office on the top floor of the main school building.

"Pardon me." Knocking on the door, I entered the room. It had a high-class, relaxing interior. Two people were waiting for us inside—the deputy headmaster, his back as straight as ever, and an elderly woman.

She had a square face and a long, hooked nose, giving her the appearance of a witch. However, the most striking thing about her was her small stature, which was evident even as she sat in front of a fancy desk. She might well have been the shortest person at the academy. I heard Yifa gasp next to me.

"Thank you for coming, Lamprogue." Narrowing her eyes, the elderly woman spoke in a hoarse voice that suited her appearance. "This is a surprise. I was expecting a stuck-up brat, but you look rather insightful."

"Thank you. I'm surprised as well. I wasn't expecting the headmistress of the imperial magic academy to be a demihuman." Although I had only read about them in books, there was no mistaking it. Her short, stout figure likely meant she was a member of a race known as dwarves.

The short elderly woman's lips curved into a smile. "I've never liked that term. We aren't some sort of partial humans. Frankly, I'd rather be called a demon."

Strictly speaking, dwarves were technically demons. However, they held no animosity towards humans. During the great war long ago, races that had friendly relations with humanity, such as dwarves and elves, had broken away from the demon coalition and declared their neutrality, forming their own community. Though there had been some conflict at first, they were now valuable intermediaries who interacted with both humans and demons. Their territory lay between demon territory and the empire, serving as a buffer zone that prevented military clashes.

To differentiate them from hostile demons, the people of the empire called those races demihumans. Still, given that the term used humans as its basis, I could see how it might be considered disparaging.

"That's some attitude to take in front of the headmistress. I suppose that look on your face stems from your overbearing confidence. Hmph, you certainly are related to him."

"You know my father?"

"No, I'm talking about your uncle."

Huh, I didn't know my father in this life had a brother. From the sound of it, he must have been a student at this academy. Did he die young?

The headmistress exhaled, then continued. "Well, that doesn't matter. Let's get to the matter at hand. I'm sure we all want to get out of here."

I glanced over at Yifa, who was frozen with nervousness. Demihumans were rare outside of large cities or towns where adventurers gathered. That was

probably a normal reaction to seeing one for the first time. Maybe the headmistress didn't show herself in public to avoid inviting unnecessary trouble.

"And what is the matter at hand?"

"Have you ever been to the imperial capital, Lamprogue?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then you probably aren't aware of this, but every spring, the imperial court hosts a swordsmanship tournament," the headmistress explained. "The emperor personally attends, and the victor is awarded a large sum of money and allowed to enlist in the imperial guard. It's the largest tournament in the empire, and people from all over attend." I hadn't heard of it before, but that wasn't particularly surprising. The headmistress paused for a moment, then said one final thing. "I'd like the two of you to enter."

"Pardon?"

"Huh? M-Me too?" Yifa finally spoke out for the first time, her voice filled with astonishment.

I couldn't help but frown. "What do you mean? Neither of us uses swords."

"The rules have changed this year," the nearby deputy headmaster answered for the headmistress.

"How so?"

"The use of magic is now permitted."

As I remained silent, the headmistress went back to explaining. "Which means now you need only be strong to win. The empire has finally realized it was missing out by excluding people like magic swordsmen. And not only them—monks specializing in light-element buffing spells, puppeteers who utilize earthelement golems, and backline fighters who use fire and wind are all eligible. However, tamers and summoners who utilize monsters are not."

"That rule change sounds like it might get somebody killed." There was no equivalent to striking with the back of the sword when it came to magic. If someone was hit by a spell, it wasn't going to be pretty.

"The tournament already had the occasional casualty. I'm sure they have something in place. Back on topic, now that the magic ban has been lifted, our academy is eligible to participate. We're allowed to select two people to skip the qualifying round and participate directly in the main event."

"And you chose Yifa and me?" I asked.

"No, one of our participants has already been selected."

At that moment, I heard a knock on the door. Turning around, I saw a short girl open the door and enter the room. She had rust-colored hair and sky blue eyes. Despite her meek appearance, she showed no signs of nervousness, and her indifferent expression was unreadable.



The headmistress called out to her with a smile. "I'm glad you could make it, Mabel. Now, introduce yourself."

The girl glanced at Yifa and me, then emotionlessly gave her name. "Mabel Crane."

"Crane..."

"She's the adoptive daughter of Baron Crane."

I had heard of the Crane family before, but I hadn't been aware their daughter attended the academy. I had never seen her around campus before. Wait, we just had the entrance ceremony. "Is she a new student?"

"Yes. Did you not see her at the entrance ceremony?"

After falling silent for a moment, I expressed my doubt. "I'm not sure. To begin with, shouldn't you choose upperclassmen for this tournament?"

"The upperclassmen are busy with their research. This isn't a school for teaching combat techniques anyway. Our offensive magic lessons focus mainly on theory. There aren't many students who would be cut out for a combat tournament."

"So why do you think we are?"

"You survived that dungeon beneath Lodonea Forest last year. Additionally, you defeated a high-level elder newt in your territory a year and a half ago. We look into the histories of our exceptional students. You two both have excellent grades."

"U-Um, that was all Seika. I didn't do anything," said Yifa.

The headmistress had a smile stuck to her face as Yifa panicked. "I'm aware of that, of course. However, I think you're plenty capable, though perhaps not quite as much so as your master."

"And that goes for her as well?" I asked, looking at Mabel. The headmistress nodded, still smiling.

"Yes, Mabel's quite strong."

"How can you say that about a student who just enrolled?"

"Like I said, we look into our students' pasts. Her score on the entrance exam was also quite good."

"What has she done to warrant being selected for the tournament immediately after being admitted to the academy?" The headmistress only responded with a silent smile. I glanced over at Mabel, only to find her standing still, completely indifferent to our conversation. I sighed. "I don't get it. What I really want to know is, why didn't you call Amyu here?" The atmosphere in the room shifted slightly.

"She got the top score on the entrance exam. She got a perfect score on the practical exam, and her grades have continued to be good. She defeated a lesser demon and a dungeon boss last year, and she has combat experience from her time as an adventurer. Even among the upperclassmen, I can't imagine there's anyone more suitable than her." And most importantly, she was the Hero. Even people who weren't aware of that had to recognize her strength.

After a brief moment of silence, the headmistress opened her mouth. "I've taken all that into account and still deemed you two most suitable. That's all there is to it."

"On what basis?"

"Who can say? I suppose you could call it intuition. We old folks are perceptive when it comes to this sort of thing."

Old folks, huh? I laughed internally. I wasn't sure if that applied to me.

"So, what will it be?" the headmistress continued. "Will you participate, will the girl, or will you both decline?"

"What happens if we decline?"

"We'll simply only send one entrant. Two more people from the qualifying round will make it in."

Yifa glanced at me, her eyes asking what to do. *Hmm... There's more to this than meets the eye. Part of her explanation was definitely a lie. I'm curious what she's after, but there's no reason for me to stick my neck out.*

"Are we done yet?" The voice was a mixture of discontent and indifference. I reflexively turned my head towards it and looked Mabel in the eyes for the first time.

Finally turning back around, I sighed. "I'll participate."

"Oh, you will? I thought for sure you were going to refuse," the headmistress said cheerfully. I silently nodded. Yifa looked surprised as well.

My reason for deciding to participate was simple—Mabel reminded me a little of myself when I had been studying under my master, killing ayakashi and my fellow disciples. She clearly wasn't normal. I wanted to observe the tournament and see how the intrigue surrounding it unfolded.



Between classes the next day, I told Amyu about my conversation with the headmistress.

"Huh? What's that about?" she asked, her voice practically dripping with displeasure. "Why didn't she ask me?! It was a swordsmanship tournament, wasn't it? Magic aside, nobody at the academy can beat me with a sword!"

"So you would have wanted to participate?"

"Y'know, now that I think about it, not really. I don't wanna join the imperial guard, and I prefer fighting monsters to people." That was a little surprising to hear given she had said she liked fighting, but it was true that she had never shown much interest in fighting other people. It was also possible that she had just mellowed out. She didn't have as much of an attitude as she used to. "Still, I don't like that she didn't even ask me," she said, still unhappy.

"Maybe she didn't want somebody too strong participating. In a sense, the imperial guard is poaching talent. There seems to be a faction of academy graduates in the imperial court, so she might prefer that students go there." Amyu scowled at my possible explanation.

"Then why did she choose you?"

"Me? I'm not all that strong."

"Wipe that fake smile off your face."

"All right. I'm surprised to hear you rate me so highly though."

Amyu averted her eyes and tried to justify herself. "We escaped that dungeon together. Besides, adventurers are good at getting a feel for people's strength."

Hmm... I'll have to be more careful about lying low. Granted, I didn't have a choice back then.

"I just don't get it," Amyu groaned again. "You, sure, but Yifa got called too."

"Yeah, you're right..." Yifa smiled awkwardly.

"I'm not saying you're not talented," Amyu added. "But can you use your elementals on other people?"

"Well..."

"Fighting other people with magic is even trickier than using a sword. They could be seriously injured if you hit them. Some people are crazy enough to fire off a spell without hesitating, but usually, you need training and experience. You've never even defeated a monster, have you? You can't just suddenly jump into real combat."

"Is that how it works?" I grumbled to myself. I tried to remember my own situation. I killed a group of bandits and all their families my first time using curses, so I guess that makes me one of those crazy people.

"And that Mabel girl is a new student," Amyu continued.

"Yeah. I wonder who she is." I had been observing her via my shikigami since yesterday, but she hadn't interacted with anyone. Today she was just attending her lectures. Although she seemed to specialize in the dark element, she didn't do anything out of the ordinary, so it was hard to fully ascertain her skill.

"She's a noble, right? What's the Crane family all about?"

"They're a family of magic researchers like the Lamprogues, but I don't know much more than that," I answered. They weren't a particularly renowned family. I might have been better off asking my own family if they knew anything.

Amyu suddenly turned serious. "I think they used their connections."

"Ah, there's your prejudice against nobles again."

"It's not prejudice—think about it. Some noble kid who lived a cushy life isn't gonna be strong. I'm sure they're trying to get her appointed as a high-level official by having her participate in this tournament while she's in school."

"Maybe." It sounded plausible, but having seen how gloomy Mabel was, I had a hard time believing it was that simple. Although she was a noble, the fact that she was adopted stood out to me. However, Amyu, who had never met Mabel, seemed confident in her judgment.

"That's gotta be it. Anyway, I'm sure she'll drop out pretty quickly. Wouldn't wanna get hurt—"

"You're the one who's lived a cushy life." I turned my head to find the source of the cold voice. Behind us, a girl with rust-colored hair was staring at Amyu—Mabel Crane.

Amyu turned to face her and stared into her cloudy, sky blue eyes. "What're you trying to say?"

"You think you can get away with saying whatever you want despite how weak you are. You must have been spoiled." Mabel continued as though delivering a monologue. "You weren't chosen because you don't have the talent. Not with magic or with a sword."

"You've got a pretty big mouth," Amyu said, a smile filled with anger on her face. She called out to the members of the academy's fencing club who were gathering on the other side of the street. "You there. Lend us two of your swords." Amyu had apparently grown popular with them lately, and two male students handed her imitation swords with a smile. She threw one of them at Mabel's feet. "Fight me. If you've got so much to say, surely you know how to use a sword, right?"

"What's the point of this?"

"Funny how you say that after picking a fight."

Mabel silently picked up her sword and then faced off against Amyu. I was surprised—she looked every bit as comfortable with a sword in her hand as Amyu. Maybe she really did know how to use one.

"S-Seika, shouldn't we stop them?" Yifa asked, her voice filled with worry.

"It'll be fine." Neither side seemed particularly enthusiastic, so we could intervene if it really became necessary. *Besides, this might be my chance to see what Mabel is capable of.*

"Seika, give the signal," Amyu ordered.

"Sure." After waiting a moment, I raised my voice. "Begin!"

Right on cue, Amyu kicked off the ground and unleashed an accurate overhead slash. She was likely targeting Mabel's weapon from the start. Amyu came down on Mabel's sword with nearly all her strength, moving so quickly it was hard to keep track. I thought the Hero would end the match right there.

However, Mabel withstood the blow, taking only a single step back. Sparks filled the air as the blades connected with a loud clang, and Amyu's eyes went wide with shock. I could hardly blame her—no ordinary human would have been able to take that hit. As they clashed, Mabel emotionlessly fended off Amyu's overwhelming strength, eventually starting to push her back.

Amyu was the one who gave first, retreating to fix her posture. Mabel, however, didn't give her the chance. She pursued Amyu with a wide horizontal sweep. Amyu tried to block it with her sword, but she didn't make it in time. Her imitation blade was sent flying out of her hands. It slid across the ground a moment later, bent and warped.

Mabel relaxed her guard and threw her sword on the ground, mumbling something as she passed by Amyu. "Just sit back and be spoiled, cute little Hero."

I frowned. Did she just say...

"Wait," Amyu said with her hands on her hips. Mabel turned back around. "Weren't we fighting without magic? That's what I was doing."

Oh, so Amyu noticed too. I had felt a flow of energy within Mabel ever since she had withstood that first blow. It was difficult to tell since she hadn't used a wand, spellblade, or magic circle. I had thought it might have been a physical strengthening spell at first, but given she used the dark element, it had probably been...

"You think there'll be a next time. That's why you're weak," Mabel said. Then she looked at me. "That goes for you too. If you aren't serious about this, drop out now."

"Why should I do that?" I asked.

"This tournament isn't so easy that you'll get out unscathed."

I forced a smile. "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

Mabel silently turned around, then walked off.

What's with her? She got angry at Amyu and then warned me out of concern. She's more normal than I thought. More than I was at her age, at least.

"Are you okay?" I asked Amyu.

"Were you hurt?" Yifa followed up.

Amyu ignored our questions, folding her arms in thought for a while. Eventually, she lifted her head and spoke with a cheerful voice. "All right, I've decided."



Twenty days later, I was in a carriage provided by the academy, on my way to participate in the combat tournament in the capital. However...

"Why are you two here?" Yifa and Amyu were in the carriage with me.

"I-I'm your servant! Obviously, I have to come with you!"

"Yeah, I can understand Yifa being here, but..."

"What? You got a problem?" Amyu pouted. "What's the harm? I've never been to the capital before, and I'd probably never get to go without a chance like this."

So she said, but her real goal was probably to watch the tournament. She seemed curious about the fighting style of the one who had beaten her—she was a pretty sore loser.

"Are you sure you should be taking time off from the academy?" I asked.

"It'll be half a month at most. It's fine. The deputy headmaster tried to stop

me himself, but I didn't let him!"

"You shouldn't do that. Where are you going to stay?"

"I'll just sleep in Yifa's room." The academy had prepared another room for her, though I wasn't sure it had two beds.

"Anyway, are you all right in this carriage, Seika?" Yifa asked, worried.

"I'm already feeling sick," I answered honestly.

"That was blunt... Are you gonna be okay?"

"Absolutely not. So, Mabel, I'd appreciate it if I could have the seat by the window."

The girl with rust-colored hair glanced at me with her sky blue eyes, then looked away again and mumbled, "No."

Mabel was riding with us in the carriage. It was the obvious outcome, given we were headed to the same destination. It didn't make sense to split up into two carriages.

"You're pretty disrespectful to your upperclassmen," Amyu said. As a former adventurer, she was particular about establishing a pecking order.

Mabel answered as though only speaking to herself. "I was told ability was all that matters at the academy. Besides, I'm the same age as you."

Amyu's eyes went wide. "Huh, it's unusual for a noble to start school a year late. Guess that makes us all the same age."

"Um..." Yifa timidly raised her hand. "I also started a year late, so I'm actually a year older than all of you."

"Really?"

"You never told her, Yifa?" I asked.

"There was never a good time."

"So you're a year older. That explains a lot..." Amyu said.

"Where are you looking, Amyu?" Yifa asked, backing away from Amyu, who was feeling her own chest.

"You're all so annoying," Mabel grumbled, barely audible. She noticed me looking at her and sighed. "Everyone is like this at the academy."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Carefree children."

"That's because we are children. Is there something strange about that?"

Mabel paused for a moment. "It's strange that you don't think it's strange."

"It..." I paused.

"What?"

"Never mind." It was best not to say anything unnecessary. Mabel was correct—if the harvest was poor, we would starve and die. If a plague spread, we would catch it and die. That was the normal state of affairs for humans. There weren't many children who could live carefree lives.

Even in this empire, a far more prosperous land than Japan, it wasn't rare for the impoverished to be reduced to begging or selling themselves into slavery. Very few children could actually attend the academy. Still, I didn't like being overly negative—at the very least, I wanted the children within my reach to live happily. That was one of the reasons I had taken in orphans and trained them as my disciples in my past life.

"Just so you know," Mabel said, giving me a sidelong glance, "you're one of those carefree people."

"Maybe I am." I had been blessed from birth in this life. To an extent that would have been unthinkable in my old world. Mabel could tell, and I didn't get the impression she'd had such a luxurious upbringing.



The capital city wasn't too far to the west of Lodonea. After two days of being shaken up inside the carriage, we safely arrived at our destination—the capital of the Urdwight Empire, Urdnesc. It was the largest city in the empire, on a completely different scale from Lodonea.

"Wow. There's so many people." Yifa couldn't contain her wonder. The streets were crawling with people, as she had said, and they were lined with

rows of tall buildings. All the hustle and bustle felt somehow refined. "There aren't as many carriages as in Lodonea though."

"That's because outside carriages aren't allowed inside the city during the day," Amyu answered. "All the traffic would make the streets dangerous."

"Oh, so that's why we were let off outside the walls."

I listened intently to Yifa and Amyu's conversation. Come to think of it, I had heard that Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, had had a similar law. The two of them turned back to look at me.

"You doing okay?" Amyu asked.

"Should we head to the inn for the day?" Yifa followed up.

"I-I'm fine," I said as I leaned against the wall of a building, breathing heavily. I was already wounded before the tournament had even begun. I wanted to throw up. While I was thankful we had been dropped off outside the walls, I still hadn't recovered yet. This is miserable... Should I just fly home on an ayakashi for the return trip?

"You don't have to force yourself," Amyu said.

"No, I want to see my opponent first." We were headed to the arena where the tournament would take place. The names of the participants, their opponents, and the dates and times of the matches were to be displayed on a noticeboard there.

Mabel had disappeared immediately after we'd gotten off the carriage. She was apparently staying at a different inn, so we probably wouldn't see her again until the tournament. In the end, I still didn't know anything about her. I had sent a letter to Luft asking about the Crane family, but I hadn't been able to learn anything of note.

"We can go look, but it's a bit of a walk. What do you wanna do? Should we hire a carriage to take us?" Amyu asked.

"Are you trying to kill me?"



The arena was an elliptical shape, surrounded by spectator stands on all sides,

so the interior couldn't be seen from the outside. However, for the tournament, a large noticeboard had been set up outside.

"Let's see, where's my name...?" The tournament was set up so that the winner of each round would advance to the next. The noticeboard had branching lines from top to bottom, each ending in a name. There were thirty-two participants in total.

I soon found my name and Mabel's. We weren't in completely different blocks, which meant if we both won all our matches, we would meet in the semifinals. This is a surprise. I was quite certain the tournament bracket would be manipulated, yet this has students from the same academy facing off before the finals. Or is that also intentional?

"Do you recognize any of these names, Amyu?" I asked.

"Nope. No renowned adventurer would be participating in a tournament like this." I didn't see any names I recognized either. Not that there were many martial arts masters I would have recognized in this world to begin with.

After more or less memorizing the bracket, I turned my back to the noticeboard. "I've seen what I wanted to see, so I'm gonna head back to the inn and get some rest now."

"You are? Then I'll—"

I cut Yifa off. "It's fine. I'm just going to lie down. You two should do some sightseeing before it gets dark."

"But..."

"Yifa, men have times when they wanna be alone. Doing it when it's still bright out is a bit much though," Amyu said.

"H-Huuuh?!"

"Don't make things weird. I'm just still feeling sick, so I'm gonna take a nap." Of course, that was a lie.

"I'm just kidding," Amyu laughed. "Let's take him up on that, Yifa. We'll have to go straight back if Seika and the first-year both lose their first matches."

"O-Okay... I'll buy something on the way back, Seika."

"Thanks." Parting ways with Yifa and Amyu, I walked alone through the city. Now, how many rats, crows, and owls will I need? Figuring out the motive behind this odd tournament seems like it'll take some effort.

Act 2

Two days later, it was time for the combat tournament's first match.

"It's finally time for the Imperial Swordsmanship Tournament, now known as the Imperial Combat Tournament! The rules have been changed this year, and the use of magic is allowed! Around half of the participants are mages!" The host's voice clearly resounded through the arena, amplified by wind magic. Although the opening ceremony had been extremely formal, the tone of the actual event was much more relaxed, perhaps because it was meant to be entertainment. "The conditions for defeat are the same as every year: being unable to continue fighting, suffering a ring out, surrendering, and the referee's judgment. However, this year there's an additional condition—the destruction of your amulet!"

I raised the intricate metalwork hanging from my neck. Given to me by the tournament administrators, this mithril amulet was designed to protect its wearer from a limited amount of magical damage. When it reached that limit, it would make a sound and let out a bright light as it was destroyed, announcing its wearer's defeat. It was essentially a protective charm the same as in my previous world. Supposedly they would prevent casualties, but I wondered how effective they would really be.

"Now, allow me to introduce the combatants in our opening match! First, we have the son of the leading magic scholar Count Lamprogue, the prodigy Seika Lamprogue!" I stepped onto the arena platform to roaring applause. My match was the very first in the tournament. I wasn't sure if that was fortunate or not. "Participating on the recommendation of Lodonea Imperial Magic Academy, we're starting off with a mage! He took down an elder newt at the young age of eleven and got the third-highest score on the academy entrance exam! He doesn't use a sword or even a wand—just what sort of fight will this unusual combatant show us?!"

I looked around at the audience. The oval-shaped arena was surrounded by

tiered spectator seating that stretched high into the sky. It was overflowing with people. Yifa and Amyu were in there somewhere, but there was no way I could see them from where I was.

"His opponent hails from the Garz Mercenary Band! Known as the Swift Mad Dog, it's Dennis Regan!" Climbing onto the other side of the platform was a slender eighteen-or nineteen-year-old man. He wore leather armor and had a sword at his hip and a shield on his left arm. He also had a real nasty look on his face. "He may be a simple swordsman, but he's known as the Garz Mercenary Band's best! His speed is even a match for adventurers with the assassin job! He's a former noble, banished from the family by Viscount Regan for his poor behavior, but he still uses the family name! Is he trying to make them mad?!"

"Hey there, rich kid." The swordsman named Dennis spoke to me. "I get to kick a noble brat's ass first thing. Lucky me. You don't gotta say nothin'. As you can tell, I've just got a grudge."

"Mage versus swordsman—it's a match that exemplifies the theme of this tournament! Let's see what kind of fight they can show us!"

"Fightin' a mage is easy. They can't do nothin' without a front line. I can kill ya ten times over in the time it takes to chant a spell."

"…"

"I went outta my way to bring a blunt sword today. I'll make that pretty face of yours a little manlier before ya leave. If ya don't die, that is."

"I'm not feeling great."

"Huh?" He was clearly baffled.

"To be honest, I'm not feeling great right now. I've got a headache."

"What? Already makin' excuses for when you lose?"

How tiresome. "No. It just means I want to get this over with."

Dennis clicked his tongue and silently drew his sword.

"Now, let the first match of the first round begin!" A whistle was blown to signal the start of the match.

"Die!" Dennis kicked off the ground. It was no wonder he was so confident—he really was fast. He closed the distance between us in a flash. In an instant, he pulled his sword back and launched the swiftest attack he could—a thrust—right at my chest. It struck true, yet what it hit was not me, but rather a hitogata. "Wha—?!"

Having teleported behind Dennis, I stuck a hitogata to his back. "Goodbye." *Phase of yang: Discharge.* Dennis was instantly blown away. His body flew straight, crashing through a board with elemental resistance magic circles drawn that were intended to block stray projectiles, and came to a halt. He didn't move a muscle.

"Th-The match is over! Dennis is out of bounds! The winner is Seika Lamprogue! Wh-What just happened?! He dodged Dennis's thrust too quickly for the eye to follow, then instantly blew him away! It must have been some kind of magic!"

A rescue team rushed over to Dennis. With them around, he probably wouldn't die. That said, it looks like the amulets don't work on my exorcist spells after all. I might kill someone if I'm not careful. Discharge is a spell that just applies kinetic energy to a target, but I used more force than was necessary because I assumed the amulet would weaken it. Well, he seemed like he wanted to kill me, so I guess I don't really care. Cheers all around me, I stepped down from the platform and returned to the back area.

"Master Seika, how far are you planning to advance in the tournament?"

"Hmm..." I wasn't sure what to tell Yuki. Once I lost, I wouldn't be able to interfere with the tournament anymore, so I wanted to stay in for at least a little while. "I'll decide later."

"You can have some fun, but I don't think this is a good place to stand out. You've been getting too relaxed lately."

"I know, I know." I now knew that this world had a wide variety of magic, so I was beginning to think that I could show off a few exorcist spells without being considered odd. If anything, a person who accused me of reincarnating from another world because I used strange magic would be seen as the crazy one. That's why I didn't think it was a problem to show off a few weaker spells, but

Yuki's right. I should be careful.

"And also..." Yuki hesitated for a moment. "Don't you think you're using too many shikigami at once? I'm worried."

"No, this is necessary." In fact, it was more important than the tournament itself.



In a tournament, the first round had the most matches. I had three days before my next match, so I spent my time watching the other combatants' bouts. Many of them were competent, but I had my eyes on two people in particular.

The first was Mabel. In her first match, she had entered the arena with a two-handed sword almost as tall as she was on her back. The moment the match had started, she'd used it to shatter her opponent's sword. Then, when the veteran knight had abandoned his sword and tried to grapple her, she'd thrown him with a single hand. It was clearly unnatural for a girl of her short stature to swing around a greatsword and hurl a fully grown man—there had to be some sort of magic at work. I would have liked to learn more, so it was unfortunate that the match had ended in an instant.

The other was a knight in his twenties by the name of Reynus. Capable of using magic himself, Reynus easily grasped victory by overwhelming the exadventurer who had been his opponent with wind and earth spells. He had caught my eye because he seemed to be hiding the full extent of his strength. However, given the way he'd waved at the audience and hunted women at the bar after his match, I got the feeling he was just an ordinary man who happened to be strong.

The match that was about to begin was the final one of the day.

"It's finally time for the last match of round one!"

"Hey, Seika," Yifa said as she sat beside me. She sounded worried. "Are you really okay? You should get some rest if you have a headache."

"I'm fine. It's not a big deal," I said, waving the hand I had been pressing against my head. I knew what was causing it, and it was necessary.

"I don't think a headache's gonna bring you down, but don't push it," said Amyu.

"I know. Thanks. This is the last match of the day anyway." I looked down at the arena from the spectator stands. Once this match was over, I would have completed my cursory inspection of all the competitors.

"First up, we have the sage Ford's top student, Belen! Mr. Ford is famous for his many achievements as a user of water magic! What sorts of spells will Belen show us today?!" A young man wearing a robe and holding a wand stepped onto the platform. He looked like a standard mage.

"Facing him is Kyle from the Lugrock Company's guard unit!" I couldn't help but frown when I saw the person slowly climbing onto the platform. He was a boy who seemed to be in his late teens, wearing tattered clothing that didn't pass as armor or mage robes. He held a drawn sword in his right hand. There was no scabbard at his hip—he was dressed as though he had only brought a sword with him because it was necessary. Combined with his gray hair and lifeless gait, he almost seemed like a ghost. "We don't have much information on Kyle! At first glance, he doesn't look like a swordsman or a mage, so who knows how he'll fight! Pay close attention!"

The two combatants faced each other on the platform. The mage appeared to be somewhat shaken.

"Now, begin!" The moment the whistle was blown, the mage tried to point his wand at the strangely dressed boy, only to suddenly freeze up.

"What the...?" He was stuck with his wand halfway raised. Something was clearly wrong. The oddly dressed boy, Kyle, slowly walked up to the unmoving mage. I lowered the hawk shikigami I had flying over the arena. I wanted to get a closer look.

"What's going on?! Belen isn't moving a muscle! Kyle is casually closing the distance!" The murmuring in the crowd grew louder.

I brought my hawk close enough to see the faces of the combatants. The mage's face was warped with fear, but I was more curious about the boy. I turned the hawk around. The boy came to a stop a step away from his opponent, then slowly, as though it were an everyday occurrence, pierced the

age's neck with his sword. Blood overflowed from his mouth. At this poi e mage didn't offer even the slightest resistance.	nt,



The boy pulled out his sword, and the mage's body staggered and collapsed to the ground like it had suddenly remembered how to move. A pool of blood formed around it.

"Belen is unable to continue! The winner is Kyle! My goodness, that's the first casualty of the tournament! It was like he didn't even try to stop Kyle's sword! What a strange match!"

Amyu grimaced, and Yifa looked away with her hand over her mouth. It was good to see they were normal. The arena was in an uproar with a somewhat dark excitement—it felt like the audience had been hoping for this. It seemed death was viewed as a spectacle in this world.

I got a look at Kyle's face with my hawk. It was completely expressionless—without so much as a hint of emotion. They said he was a guard for the Lugrock Company, but there's no way that's true. A merchant company wouldn't keep a monster like him. He was probably sent by someone in the shadows. Something suddenly caught my attention—his eyes. His right eye was sky blue, while his left was a deep crimson.

"We just got some fresh news! Apparently, Kyle possesses the evil eye! What a twist! A bearer of heretical power has entered this illustrious tournament! What sort of chaos will arise in the second round starting tomorrow?!"

So they exist in this world too. Sorcerers who fill their gazes with cursed energy and place curses on those they glare at—wielders of the evil eye.



The evil eye was a form of sorcery that utilized vision. Whoever the wielder looked at would be cursed. It was an odd form of curse. While it required a special talent, in return, its effect was powerful and couldn't be reversed on the wielder.

It was said that an ordinary wielder could only make someone feel sick or have bad luck, but I had met witches in the West who'd glared hares to death and had them for dinner. Supposedly, there had even been a wielder of the evil eye who could turn living beings into stone in the past. There weren't many curses that powerful.

However, even amateurs found the evil eye easy to defend against. In both the West and the Islamic world, charms and symbols for warding off its effects were widespread. Even simple ones were said to be effective. However, all that only applied to my previous world.

This other world's evil eye seemed to be extremely feared. Though the effects, like binding the opponent's movement or making them sick were similar, the countermeasures weren't widely known. As a result, evil-eye wielders were seen as heretical. It might not have gone as far as persecution, but they certainly seemed to be disliked. They were similar to my previous world in that respect as well.

"The first match of the second round is here! First up, we have Seika Lamprogue!"

That aside, it was time for my second match. I stepped onto the platform without waiting for the announcer's lengthy introduction. Yifa had been horrified after yesterday's match and had begged me to withdraw, but I'd somehow managed to calm her. Kyle was in a completely separate block from me, so I wouldn't face him until the finals.

"Facing him is the 'Puppeteer,' Labinare!" The ground began to shake. The one stepping onto the stage wasn't a human but a stone doll approximately five meters tall. It was made of large rocks tinged with green and had characters and magic circles all over its body. "That's a different golem from last time! His opponent's mace was completely ineffective against his black golem in the first round! Will a mage fare any better?!"

"Oh ho ho, I'm honored to have an audience with the esteemed Count Lamprogue's third son." Following the golem, a tall, frail-looking man with long black hair stepped onto the stage. He reminded me of a eunuch from the Song dynasty—did this world have a similar custom?

"He's a little renowned, granted, but I'm still surprised you know the third son of a distant nobleman."

"Oh, I know all about you. I looked into everyone participating in this tournament, you included." The man's smile grew wider. "The son of a mistress, you were believed not to have any magical power for a while. I know you were

given a slave, and I know about your entrance exam."

"Entrance exam?"

"You used fire, earth, and water during your exam. An impressive talent, but that means you can't use any other elements, doesn't it?"

I kept my silence.

"Behold, my golem!" The man spread his arms and presented the golem standing next to him. "You've studied magic, so perhaps you can tell. This golem is resistant to five elements! Although adding more elements would normally weaken the effect, by making it extremely weak to one element, I managed to maintain its resistance to all the others."

""

"In this golem's case, it's wind—an element you can't use."

"So wind is its weakness?" I asked.

"Indeed. Do you understand how hopeless a situation you're in now?"

"Let the first match of the second round begin!" The starting whistle filled the air.

"How will you fight a foe your magic doesn't work on? If you're going to surrender, now's the time!" the man shouted as his greenish stone golem began to move.

I muttered to myself and selected my hitogata as the golem's massive body approached. "Wind, huh? Got it." *Summoning: Kamaitachi*. A gust of wind blew through the arena. A weasel ayakashi emerged from a spatial distortion and assailed the golem with tremendous force—instantly slicing it to pieces with blades of wind—then returned to the other plane at a speed too fast for the eye to see.

The arena fell silent.

"What in the world?! Labinare's golem was destroyed! Seika's powerful wind magic brought it down in an instant!"

"If you're going to surrender, now's the time," I said to the dumbfounded

Labinare.

The long-haired man gave a quiet chuckle, then turned to the referee and raised his hand. "I surrender," he declared with a grim look.



"That was a close one," I mumbled to myself, back in the arena's waiting room.

"H-Huh?! What part of that was close?!" Yuki asked in shock.

"Summoners aren't allowed to participate in this tournament. I could get disqualified if they find out I summoned an ayakashi." Kamaitachi usually hid their forms with supernatural power, and they moved too quickly for the human eye to see, so I would probably be fine. If someone had spotted a weasel with sicklelike claws riding on the whirlwind, I would have no way to explain it.

"Is that right?" I had expected her to scold me, but Yuki just mumbled in exasperation. That only made it sting more.



Mabel's second match was going to be held the same day, so I met up with Amyu and Yifa in the spectator stands.

"Good job. Hey, Yifa. Seika's back," said Amyu.

"Yeah... Congrats, Seika." She seemed unhappy.

Oh boy... "I made it back, Yifa. Look, I'm not even hurt."

"Yeah..."

"I'm surprised you could find us in this crowd," said Amyu. "I only told you the general location we'd be sitting in."

"I spent a while searching." From the sky, at least.

"So you can use wind magic, huh? You didn't take the class for it."

"More or less."

"You overcame that golem's resistance pretty easily. Your matches aren't very

exciting." Amyu seemed to remember something. "Are you planning on joining the imperial guard if you win?"

"No, I'm not interested. I'll be going back to the academy when the tournament's over."

"All right, then. Good."

"What's good?"

"N-Nothing! I-I just hope they actually let you refuse. They have their own reputation to uphold."

"I don't think that'll be a problem." I didn't expect the imperial guard to be eager to accept a mage. If anything, they would probably be hoping for me to decline.

"Hopefully you'll be able to just take the prize money. Though they might make you turn that down too."

"Why are we assuming I'm going to win the entire thing? I don't think it'll be that easy." I wasn't planning on winning the whole tournament.

Amyu gave me a puzzled look. "For some reason, I just have a hard time imagining you losing. Don't you agree, Yifa?"

"I don't know," Yifa replied, hanging her head.

She must have been worried about me this whole time. She doesn't need to be, but I'd feel bad just laughing her concern off. I got close to Yifa and looked into her orange eyes. "Yifa, I promise I'll be fine. Even if I lose, I won't die."

"Really?"

"Really." These matches were like playing with a puppy to me. In addition, I could die another ten or so times and be perfectly fine.

"It's a promise."

Yifa's worry was suddenly overpowered as the announcer's loud voice filled the arena.

"Thank you all for waiting! It's time for the next match of the second round!"

"Hey, enough flirting. The new student's match is about to start." I looked

down at the platform at Amyu's encouragement and saw the two combatants already standing there.

Mabel had her usual two-handed sword on her back, but this time, she also had two slender swords on her hips and a holster for throwing knives on her thigh. I tilted my head. What was she planning on doing with all those weapons? Judging from the staff he was holding, her opponent seemed to be a mage.

"Howlo is a talented earth mage! Mabel, a first-year at the magic academy, managed to overwhelm an orthodox knight with strength and movement you wouldn't expect from a mage, but how will she fare against a fellow magic user?! Let the match begin!"

The whistle blew, and the opposing mage was the first to move. He pointed his large staff at Mabel. "Rock Blast!" Shouting the name of his spell, he launched several rocks at Mabel. It was a mid-level earth spell that could have easily killed someone were it not for the amulets.

However, Mabel dealt with the rocks calmly. She had already drawn her two slender swords, and using the one in her right hand, she destroyed an oncoming rock. I furrowed my brow—her swords were clearly intended for thrusting. Using them to repel a rock was reckless, to say the least. Yet the stone had been shattered to pieces the moment the blade had touched it.

With a look of astonishment, the mage fired another barrage of rocks. But Mabel smashed them all to pieces, swinging the swords in both her hands like a graceful dancer. It was an odd sight. That was the only way to describe the short Mabel destroying such large rocks with her delicate-looking swords. No matter how strong the wielder, an ordinary sword would have broken or been deflected due to the lack of weight behind it. Mabel slowly advanced as she was pelted with earth magic.

The earth mage retreated, a panicked expression on his face. "Pulsating, roaring, and bursting yellow! Mountains steep, rugged, and unyielding—" He was chanting a spell. He had probably determined that mid-level spells weren't working, so he had distanced himself to cast a high-level one. His timing was perfect—he had left himself open, yet Mabel wouldn't be able to close the

distance.

Mabel seemed to have realized that. Discarding her twin swords, she quickly reached for the throwing knives in her holster. However, the mage was a step ahead. Cutting off his incantation, he pointed his staff at the ground and instantly created a wall of stone. It might have seemed excessive for dealing with throwing knives, but it also served to buy him time. The mage began chanting his spell once again.

Mabel, on the other hand, was undeterred and hurled her throwing knives. Small knives that seemed powerless against the stone wall cut through the air, then, with a booming crash, smashed right through it. The mage stopped his incantation in a panic, desperately trying to create more walls. Yet Mabel paid them no mind. Every wall that was created was immediately destroyed—they were completely ineffective.

Mabel's throwing knives were of ordinary size, and they were moving slow enough for the eye to see. It was clearly bizarre that they could penetrate such thick walls.

"What's going on?" Amyu grumbled in surprise.

"It's probably gravity magic. Mabel specializes in the dark element, after all."

Amyu looked at me. "I've taken a few of those classes. Gravity magic just increases or decreases something's weight, right? Is it really capable of what she's doing?"

"The academy's lecture didn't go into detail. There are two ways to make an object heavier—one is to increase the force with which a planet pulls the object, while the other is to increase the object's susceptibility to the planet's pull. The components are the same, so they both seem to be categorized as gravity magic, but the results vary greatly depending on which method is chosen. The latter metric also affects how difficult it is to move or stop the object, so—"

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry." Amyu was staring at me with her mouth hanging open, so I reluctantly stopped my explanation. "Uh, heavy things are sturdier and have

more force when they're thrown. She's doing all that by making her swords and knives several times heavier than stone." By making their weapon light and themself heavy, one could freely use as heavy a weapon as they wanted. On the other hand, by making their weapon heavy, they could increase the force behind it.

"I think I get it..." Amyu grumbled. "Isn't that pretty hard though? She wouldn't be able to swing them while they're heavy, so she has to increase the weight the moment her sword hits a stone or the knife leaves her hand. She's doing it with such precise timing without even using incantations."

I was curious about that as well. Turning my attention back to the match, I saw that the mage had given in to the pressure from the throwing knives and was coming out from behind his wall. Mabel had been waiting for that moment, and before he could point his staff at her, she swung her two-handed sword. She broke the mage's staff in half, then pointed her sword at his neck. After a moment of silence, the sound of a whistle filled the air.

"The match has been decided by referee judgment! The winner is Mabel Crane!" Mabel lowered her sword and emotionlessly stepped off of the platform as though she couldn't hear all the cheers around her.

Her swordsmanship interested me even more than her magic. I had dabbled in swordplay a little in my previous life, so I could tell her skills weren't something she had picked up in a day. She had mastered both her swords and her handling of throwing knives. How had the adopted child of a noble picked up those skills?

"Was that some sort of buffing magic?! Mabel just showed off some serious power! The red-haired Hero's sword is unstoppable!"

I frowned slightly. There it is again. The announcer compared Mabel to the Hero at the end of her first match too. I'm hearing it from the audience and around town too. I thought it might just be a common expression at first, but none of the other competitors are being called that.

"Why is Mabel the only one they're calling the Hero?" The words unconsciously left my mouth.

Yifa and Amyu both looked at me in confusion.

"Do you not know, Seika?" Yifa asked.

"Mabel has the same name as the second Hero," Amyu explained. "It's a pretty common name, but she's probably being compared because she also uses swords."

At that moment, something connected in my head. Now I see. That might be what's going on here.

Discharge

A spell that uses yang ki to apply kinetic energy to a target. The desired vector can be chosen regardless of where the talisman is attached.

Act 3

It was the early morning before the sun had risen. A man was briskly walking through an empty alley in the imperial capital. Stopping at the end of the alley, he silently opened a wooden box hidden by a pile of trash. Inside was a single pigeon.

The man carefully picked the pigeon up, pulling a leg band out of his pocket and tying it to the bird. He released it into the sky, and it quickly determined the direction of its destination, flying off without hesitation—only to suddenly be snatched out of midair by a hawk. Squirming in the hawk's powerful talons, the pigeon was carried off in another direction.

The man's eyes went wide with shock at his misfortune. Carrier pigeons being attacked by birds of prey wasn't uncommon, but the look on his face showed his displeasure that it had happened then of all times. "Tch... Shit!" the man cursed.

"I figured you'd choose the early morning if you were using a carrier pigeon," I said to him from behind.

The man turned around in surprise. He appeared to be an ordinary person in his mid-twenties. His face didn't have any distinctive traits that would have left a lasting impression. He was suited to this type of work.

"You're a demon spy, aren't you?" I asked with a smile.

"What are you talking about? Do you need something from me?"

"There's a lot I'd like to ask you. Like what was in the message you gave that pigeon, for example."

"Message? That was an invoice I was sending to our Lodonea branch. Now I'm gonna have to send it again thanks to that hawk. My shift's about to start, so I've gotta go. Sorry, kid," the man said, clearly annoyed. He averted his eyes and started walking in my direction. As casually as someone would pull out a work tool, he then grabbed a knife off his hip and ran at me. The tip of the knife was

before my eyes in no time.

"That makes things easier." *Phase of wood: Binding Vines.* Several thick vines pushed through the stone paving and coiled around the man, then turned to wood and held him in place. With a cry of pain, he dropped his knife.

"Damn it... How'd you know?"

"I overheard your secret conversation with the informant."

"Th-There was nobody else around!"

"No humans, anyway. Gathering information all over the capital with my shikigami wasn't easy. I've barely slept and have an awful headache. But I suppose it paid off since I caught one of you. I can finally take a breather."

The man looked at me as though witnessing something incomprehensible. "Seika Lamprogue... What the hell are you?"

"Figures you would at least recognize the faces of all the tournament entrants. Would you mind telling me what it was that you were trying to report?"

"Ha! Why would I tell you anything?" the man sneered.

"I expected as much."

"Gonna torture me or something? You don't know if I'll tell the truth."

"No," I said, floating a hitogata in midair. "I'll ask your soul directly."

Summoning: Satori. I called forth a monkey ayakashi from the other plane. Although its face appeared oddly human, it had an unsettling grin on its face.

The man looked at the ayakashi with an uneasy expression. "What is that—"

"'What is that monster? Is he a summoner?'"

"lt—"

"'It can talk? Did it just read my mind? Not good. How is it doing that?' Geh ha ha..." The man's face went pale as Satori spoke. Indeed, Satori was an ayakashi that could read minds.

"Now for the questioning. First, who are you reporting to?"

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"Like I'd tell you—"
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"Geh ha ha ha... 'Baron Bol Bophis... His Excellency... Black... Fortress...
Forest...'"

"Hmm. And who is above him?"

"'I don't know... I don't... Grand Duke El Edentrada... Prophecy... Danger...
Hero...'"

"There's too much interference. Try to think more clearly. Just to be clear, those are devils, correct?"

"'Yes... Yes, they are...'"

I'd figured as much from their names. Cordell had been a devil spy as well, so it wasn't a surprise. "Where was that carrier pigeon headed?"

"Lewick... Lew—demon territory. East-northeast, by the border with the empire. The commercial resources of the town on the outskirts are..."

"I get it. Don't think about anything unnecessary." Still, he was sending it directly to demon territory, huh? That's a long distance, but I guess it's doable if it's near the border. "As for the message's contents, I assume it had something to do with the birth of the Hero."

"'Yes. How do you know about the Hero? No, you must have found out from another spy. Very few people are aware. How much do you know?'"

"Enough about me. Tell me the name of the Hero you're investigating."

"'Mabel Crane.'"

"Why do you think she's the Hero?"

"'She was born the year the oracle said. Her gender and hair color are also correct, and she's strong. She's from the magic academy, where we received a report about a child who could potentially be the Hero from a spy who then disappeared along with the assassin who was sent. Her enrollment year is inconsistent, but the information could have been tampered with."

"You sure became obedient all of a sudden. What else?"

"'There are rumors that Mabel Crane is the Hero among informants. The

source of the rumors was traced back to the servants of Baron Crane, so their origins are natural."

Hmm, I see. "What else was rumored?"

"'She was officially adopted by Baron Crane only six months ago. The baron claims she's the granddaughter of one of his teachers back when he attended the academy, but there's no evidence of this. During the entrance exam..."

The man revealed everything he had discovered about Mabel to me, but it all seemed harmless. It was probably all information that had been spread deliberately—including the rumors that she was the Hero. "One final question: how likely do you think it is that Mabel is actually the Hero?"

"'Around ten percent. Up to twenty percent if she wins the tournament, otherwise—'"

"That's all? What about the other— No, do you believe the empire is hiding the identity of the Hero?"

"'It's likely. However, we're also wary of the possibility that the Hero hasn't been discovered yet, as most people regard them as things of the past. The Hero could be a merchant, a farmer, a slave...'"

It was certainly possible for somebody to grow up without ever touching a sword—especially if that person was a woman. If the empire had identified the Hero, it was very likely that they were hiding her, and if they hadn't, she was probably still undiscovered somewhere out there. It was unlikely that the Hero would conveniently show up at a tournament like this, but Mabel was strong and met the conditions, so they couldn't ignore her. Their point of view was logical.

"All right, that should do it. Thank you for your help. I've learned everything I wanted to know." The vines holding the man up rotted away. Having lost his support, he fell to his knees on the stone pavement. His face was pale, yet his expression remained full of determination. He reached for the knife he had dropped on the ground.

However, just before he could grab it, Satori stood right in front of him. I couldn't see it from where I was, but I was certain its face was twisted with

anticipation.

"Good work, Satori," I told the ayakashi. "I'll give you a reward. You may eat him."

"Wha--?!"

"'What?! Eat?! You can't be serious!' Geh ha ha ha ha!" Satori's head grew several times larger, then its wide-open jaw engulfed the man's entire head, and he swallowed the struggling man whole. He continued flailing inside Satori's stomach. "'Stop! Let me out!' Geh ha ha ha! 'It hurts! I'm scared!' Geh ha ha ha ha! Geh ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Eventually, the struggling died down. Satori's giant head had shrunk back to its regular size, and its distended stomach had contracted—it had returned to looking like an ordinary small monkey. There was no sign of it having just eaten someone. Satori turned and looked at me with a disturbing grin. "I feel bad for him. Oh well. Letting him go would have been too dangerous.' Geh ha ha!"

I glared at Satori, imbuing my voice with cursed energy. "Don't *ever* read my mind, Satori. I'll kill you."

"Geh..." Satori's grin froze on its face.

I opened the gate to the other plane before the cowering ayakashi. "Well done. You may return. Unless you still have something you want to discuss?" Satori leaped into the other plane as fast as it could. Closing the gate, I took a deep breath.

"M-Master Seika..."

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. That must have scared you." I reached my hand up to my head and petted the trembling Yuki with my finger. A weak youkai like that would have never taken me so lightly in my past life.

I heard the sound of flapping wings and saw that my hawk shikigami had returned with the carrier pigeon. Taking the pigeon with both hands, I removed its leg band and opened the folded letter. Then I couldn't help but sigh. "I should have asked him how to decipher the code." I burned the letter with fire ki.

After checking that the pigeon wasn't injured, I placed it on the ground and let it fly away. Although I hadn't been able to read the letter, I had at least learned that this tournament was being held so that Mabel could win. The goal was to have her take the place of the real Hero, Amyu.

I had thought it was strange from the very start. Allowing magic swordsmen in wouldn't make the imperial guard any stronger. Strength was in numbers, and uniformity was crucial in armies. They needed the same training, the same tactics, the same behavior, and the same abilities. Special skills weren't necessary. They wouldn't know what to do with a mage.

I suspected that the empire was aware that the Hero had been born. If they really did have spies in demon territory like Cordell had said, they would have picked up on that even if humanity had lost the ability to see the prophecy. When Cordell had discovered Amyu, the empire would have also learned of the Hero through the academy. Both sides had known about the Hero for a moment, but because I had dealt with their assassin and traitor, the demons were no longer aware of Amyu.

According to what Galeos had said, Cordell hadn't even told him Amyu's name. He had probably wanted to take credit for eliminating the Hero himself. As a result, all the demons had learned was that the Hero might be at the academy. Only Galeos and Cordell had ever known about Amyu.

Through their spies, the empire was likely aware of that fact. While it was fortunate that the human side had more information, it was possible that the demons would once again learn about Amyu if they continued to monitor the academy. That's why the academy set up someone else who seems like the Hero! Then they can turn the demons' attention away from the academy and onto the imperial guard! Whatever's going on in the background has to be something along those lines. That also explains why Amyu wasn't chosen for the tournament.

"Ah, I feel much better now." I'd like to learn more about Mabel since she's been set up to be the Hero, but that's probably not going to be possible. Mabel probably isn't her real name, and that rust-colored hair is likely dyed. There's no need for me to get further involved. If I can keep Amyu safe, that's good enough for me.

That man almost certainly hadn't been the only spy, so the demons would likely receive a report about Mabel. In fact, one of their spies disappearing might make it seem more legitimate.

Now, when should I head back to the academy? "Wait. It might be possible that Mabel's the real Hero... No, never mind." Somehow, I just knew. She didn't have the talent Amyu did.



Kyle, the wielder of the evil eye, won his second-round match just as he had his first. Although his opponent was a muscular warrior, he had no means of defending against the evil eye. Another corpse hit the ground, sending the crowd into an uproar.

Kyle's result had been within the realm of my expectations, but Reynus's had not. The young knight had used earth and wind magic in his first match, yet in his second, he used fire and water to obtain victory with ease. There weren't many mages capable of using four elements, and when combined with his good looks, he quickly became the talk of the town. He was the favorite to win the tournament.

The second round came to an end, and it was time for my third match.

"Seika Lamprogue takes the stage! He seems to have girls from his school here to cheer him on! How enviable!"

"Hey." Part of the crowd started booing. That was unnecessary.

"Now, let's see how he fares against Keedie's undead beasts!"

I looked at the opponent standing before me. She was a white-haired woman who somehow seemed both young and old—it was hard to tell her actual age. But that didn't matter. I asked her something that had been bothering me for a while. "Isn't that unfair?"

A pack of black-furred wolves spread out to protect the female mage. Their flesh was rotten and their bones were exposed in several places. "Hee hee. What's unfair?"

"Tamers and summoners aren't allowed in this tournament."

"Hee hee hee, I'm a necromancer! I don't use monsters, I use the corpses of animals! What part of that is against the rules?" she taunted.

How is putting a spirit inside a corpse any different from a monster? This seems like semantics to me. I don't buy it.

"Keedie has been winning her matches through sheer numbers! We've yet to see the full extent of what Seika can do—does he have a way of dealing with her numerical superiority? That's going to be the deciding factor in this match!"

"Hee hee. Fighting is all about numbers." The necromancer laughed. "It doesn't matter if you're a swordsman or a mage—they're all weak to numbers. No adventurer goes into dungeons by themselves."

I kept my silence and prepared myself.

"Do you think you can survive being attacked by a pack of wild beasts?"

Look, I get what you're trying to say, but—

"Let the match begin!" A whistle blew alongside the announcer's voice.

"Get him, undead wolves!" The wolf corpses fanned out and raced towards me.

Watching them, I folded my arms and grumbled. "This definitely shouldn't be allowed. Be good and sit still." *Phase of earth and water: Concrete.* A wave of gray sludge poured out of my hitogata, swallowing up the pack of wolves.

"Hee?" The wave continued on and engulfed Keedie as well, carrying her away. Then it hardened.

"What have we here?! Was that earth magic or water magic?! A wave of mud just swept Keedie and her undead wolves away! They're just barely still within bounds! However, the mud seems to be hardening into stone! They can't move!"

"Wh-What is this?!" Keedie shouted, only one of her arms and her head sticking out from the solidified sludge. As her wolves struggled, I walked on top of the mud and stood in front of her.

"It feels wrong to me that astral beings are considered monsters while spirits aren't. Anyway, you can't fight anymore, right?"

"The whistle has been blown! The famous count's genius son was too much! Seika Lamprogue will be advancing to the semifinals!"

As I turned around, Keedie panicked and struggled. "H-Hey! You aren't going to leave me like this, are you?!"

"Don't worry, I'll let you out." I stepped off the hardened sludge and poured cursed energy into the several hitogata buried inside. A moment later, cracks appeared in multiple locations and it fell apart. Still struggling, the necromancer fell off the platform. Her wolves were still moving, so hopefully that meant she hadn't hit her head. *Good grief*.



"That was a strange spell. I've never seen it before. You can create mud that turns into stone?"

"Not exactly. It was originally a construction material invented by engineers. I was just recreating their technique," I responded to Yuki with an awkward smile. Even without sorcery, water, volcanic ash, and limestone could be mixed in the correct amounts to produce that sludge. It was a man-made stone that hardened over time.

I had learned from Islamic engineers that this technique had once been used to make bathhouses and the giant circular arena in Rome. I had tinkered with the ingredients a little to make it harden faster, but the core concept was the same. Although it was sturdy enough to endure for centuries, the interior was weak to stress. By using the hitogata inside to apply force, it was easy to destroy.

"You know everything, Master Seika. You're probably the only sorcerer out there who would willingly learn about construction."

"I just enjoy learning." The world was full of knowledge that could come in handy in surprising places.



In order to clear out the remains of the mud I had created, the other matches were postponed for a day. All the booing from the crowd made me feel a little bad about it.

The next day, I was looking down at the platform alone from the spectator stands. Amyu and Yifa weren't with me—I didn't have a match, so I had left them at the inn. Kyle's third-round match was today, so Amyu aside, I didn't think it'd be good for Yifa to watch.

Other matches of note were Mabel's and Reynus's. Mabel had easily won against a massive spearman, while Reynus's opponent had withdrawn. He had decided there was too big a gap in their strengths and that he didn't stand a chance.

Now it was Kyle currently standing on the platform. However, there was no sign of his opponent. The announcer ran out of things to talk about and went silent, leading to the audience growing increasingly irritated. Maybe his opponent had gotten scared and run away. Despite the mood in the arena, Kyle simply stood there on the platform as emotionless as ever.

First was Reynus, and now it looks like this match isn't going to happen either...

"Seika Lamprogue." Someone suddenly called out to me from the side. I turned my head and saw Mabel standing there. She wasn't holding her greatsword anymore—she must have left it somewhere. It was impossible to tell she had just had a match from her calm demeanor. I smiled at her.

"Congratulations. I figured you'd win. But I'm not gonna go easy on you in the semifinals tomorrow."

"Withdraw," she said curtly. After a brief silence, I asked her a question.

"Why?"

"This isn't the kind of tournament you think it is."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, but my answer is no. If you want to reach the finals, you're going to have to win fair and square."

"I know you're strong." I held my tongue and she continued. "Stronger than any opponent I've faced until this point. So I might not be able to hold back."

I remained silent.

"I can't afford to lose. Please. You don't want to die, do you?"

After another short silence, the corners of my mouth curled into a smile. "No. If you aren't confident you can beat me, just say so. Although I still wouldn't withdraw."

"Don't be ridiculous. You—"

At that moment, the announcer's voice echoed through the arena. "After deliberating, it's been decided that Zagan will be disqualified! As a result, Kyle wins by default! He'll be advancing to the semifinals!"

Fierce booing erupted from the crowd. I couldn't blame them—they had paid the entrance fee only for two of the matches to be canceled. Kyle turned around and left the platform. I turned to Mabel next to me and saw her watching with a look of relief on her face.

That's odd. She mentioned holding back, so maybe she just doesn't want anybody losing their lives. Still, something's bothering me.

Mabel noticed I was looking at her and panicked slightly. "Anyway, withdraw. I don't know why the academy sent you here in the first place."

"Seika?" I heard a familiar voice and turned around to see Amyu looking at me in surprise. "I didn't expect to find you in this crowd. Oh, and the new student's with you too." Amyu looked at Mabel and put on a bold smile. "You won your third match too, huh? Not bad. But I gotta warn you, he's pretty tough."

Mabel looked at Amyu hatefully, then silently turned around and walked away. As she disappeared into the throng of people, I thought to myself.

If she's telling me to withdraw, she must have been ordered to win the tournament. Either by the academy or someone even higher up.

"Um, Master Seika..." Yuki whispered into my ear. "You aren't planning on beating that girl too, are you?"

"No," I answered quietly. I planned on losing to Mabel. I wouldn't get in the way of her mission. The only reason I had refused to withdraw was because I wanted to have a little fun. Her way of fighting was intriguing, so I wanted to see it up close. Once I was satisfied, I would just let myself get knocked out of bounds or something.

"Seika?"

"Huh? What?" I responded awkwardly as Amyu frowned at me.

"What are you spacing out for? So, what match is going on right now? Everyone's complaining."

"The handsome knight and the evil-eye user both won by default, so Mabel's match was the only one actually held today."

"Really? What's up with that?" Amyu grumbled in disappointment.

"What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you were staying at the inn."

"I wanted to see the matches after all, so I slipped out. I'd feel bad making Yifa come with me."

"It's too bad that you came all the way here just for everything to be canceled."

"Oh well. Wanna head back? You and the new student's semifinal match is tomorrow—"

Once again, the announcer's voice filled the arena. "Good news, everyone! As Reynus and Kyle both won by default, we'll be holding their semifinal match today!" This time the crowd erupted into cheers.

The semifinals and finals had originally been scheduled for tomorrow, but the tournament's management had probably decided that canceling two matches in one day wasn't good for business. Especially after I had made the other matches get postponed yesterday.

"That's lucky. I would've missed this if I hadn't come today," Amyu said, looking down at the platform. Although I felt bad for the people who had planned on coming tomorrow, I was grateful to be able to closely observe the semifinal match.

"First up is the handsome magic knight who's mastered four elements, Reynus Caybern!" A nimble-looking, slender man clad in golden armor stepped onto the platform to the cheers of the audience.

So he hasn't withdrawn even though he's up against Kyle. Maybe he has some kind of countermeasure for the evil eye.

"Facing him is this tournament's very own slaughterer! The swordsman with the evil eye, Kyle!" The ghostly-looking young man silently climbed onto the platform. Just like all his other matches, he had a drawn sword in his right hand. The spectators fell silent.

"These competitors have been the talk of the tournament! What sort of fight is about to unfold?! This first match of the semifinals is one you don't want to miss! Begin!" A whistle blew, and the young man raised his head, staring at the knight with his red left eye.

Reynus, however, had already started chanting a spell before the evil eye could take effect. "Shining white! Spirits of love and protection, grant me a bright aura capable of resisting the gaze of death! Evil Eye Tolerance!" A pale light covered his body the moment he finished his spell's incantation.

"And evil-eye resistance buff?! That knight can use light magic?!" Amyu cried out in shock next to me.

As the young man glared at him with his evil eye, Reynus, wielder of five elements, calmly drew his sword. "Ha ha ha! How's that? Your eye won't work now. Are you gonna surrender, or do you wanna face me in a match of sword skills?" Reynus asked casually.

Kyle didn't answer. Instead, he just took a step forward. Then another. And another. His sword hanging limply at his side, still glaring at the knight with his ineffective evil eye, Kyle silently closed the distance between himself and his opponent. There wasn't a hint of emotion on his face. He simply continued walking forward.

In the face of his odd behavior, Reynus seemingly lost the mental battle and pointed his spellblade at Kyle. "Fireball!" A ball of flames appeared at the end of Reynus's sword and flew at Kyle, who made no effort to avoid it. "Huh?"

The flames cleared, and Kyle reappeared unharmed. Not even his hair or clothes had any burns, let alone his skin.

"Tch, Fireball! Fireball!" More fireballs hurtled towards him. He made no attempt to resist, yet he continued without a single burn.

"What's going on? Is the amulet protecting him?" Amyu mumbled next to me.

"No, it would have broken a long time ago if that were the case."

"But he's getting hit with all those spells."

"The amulet only responds if the wearer is going to take damage. Which means..." Kyle was barely hurt at all by the fireballs.

"What are you?! Wind Lance! Icicle Lance! Rock Blast!" Reynus launched blades of wind, spears of ice, and massive stones at Kyle, who took them all head-on. Gusts of wind tore at him, and ice and stone shattered against him, yet he didn't react to any of it. Unharmed, he continued walking.

His footprints were leaving oddly deep impressions in the ground. He was resistant to burns as well as physical attacks, and that resistance even extended to his clothing and hair. I could only think of one explanation—gravity magic, just like Mabel's.

"What's the meaning of this?! Magic has no effect on Kyle! I thought he was in trouble when his evil eye was blocked, but it looks like he was hiding another ace up his sleeve!"

"What the heck?! How is he doing that?!" Amyu shouted, pulling on my sleeve.

"It's like what Mabel did. Although an object's tendency to be pulled towards a planet can be manipulated by dark element magic, that value is inherently tied to how difficult the object is to move or stop. Mabel used it to increase the force of her weapons, but at an extremely small scale, even phenomena like destruction and combustion are nothing more than physical movements. If you increase an object's weight within the bounds of what its physical structure can tolerate, you can likewise increase its resilience. The human body is capable of supporting a surprising amount of weight for short periods—and potentially even more depending on how the spell was devised."

"Huh?"

"Never mind." As Amyu stared at me, mouth agape, I was forced to simplify my explanation. "Uh, you know how a house made of bricks is harder for the wind to blow over than a house made of straw? Mass makes things harder to destroy."

"Most of your explanation went right over my head, but could I do that too?"

"If you put your mind to it, probably."

The announcer's voice cut through the air. "Reynus seems to be trying something new! Will he be able to make any progress this time?!"

"Damn it!" Reynus suddenly stuck his spellblade in the ground and began chanting a spell. Lumps emerged from the ground and transformed, turning into stone dolls. While smaller than humans, they were numerous. Stone dolls emerged from the platform's floor everywhere I looked.

Amyu cried out in shock once again. "He can make that many golems?! That knight's not bad..."

Although Reynus looked exhausted, he had a smile on his face. "You're pretty tough, but let's see if you can handle all these golems!" Reynus's golems started moving all at once. Perhaps it would be possible for them to overwhelm Kyle with numbers and stop him from moving.

Kyle stopped walking for the first time, and something strange happened—his shadow began writhing as though it were alive. It formed a circle from which countless thin, thornlike shadows emerged, rushing towards each golem with incredible force. The shadows crawled along the ground, then suddenly reared up like snakes when they reached the golems, piercing through the golems' stone bodies with their sharp points. Pinned in midair, the golems were rendered immobile and neutralized one after another.

"A dark element shadow spell. I guess that Kyle guy can use normal magic too," Amyu grumbled. She had probably learned about that spell in class.

Kyle's shadow magic closed in on Reynus himself next. Sharp, pointed shadows jutted from the ground and rushed towards him, yet the young knight gracefully avoided them. Maybe the golems had been a decoy all along. With movements refined enough to give that impression, Reynus closed the distance between himself and Kyle in an instant and raised his sword over his head. I was impressed. With his weight increased significantly by magic, Kyle's body was probably capable of repelling Reynus's sword, but if Reynus stopped just short of hitting him, he could still win by referee decision. It was his one shot at victory.

However, Reynus suddenly stopped moving. The young knight's sword still held over his head, his face was frozen in astonishment. The spectators began to murmur. He could win if he just thrust his sword, yet he showed no sign of moving. No—he couldn't move.

I looked closely at the platform and saw that part of Kyle's shadow had gone inside Reynus's. It was a curse. He had likely defined Reynus's shadow as a representation of his real body, then sealed Reynus's movement by piercing it with his own shadow. It was like hammering a nail into a straw effigy. Kyle raised his head and looked at the taller knight. His expression was void of any emotion—even bloodlust. He raised his sword.

Just as the spectators began to get riled up, sensing approaching death, a whistle blew announcing the end of the match. "The referee has made a judgment call! The winner is the swordsman with the evil eye, Kyle! He'll be advancing to the finals!"

Surprisingly, Kyle obediently lowered his sword. He silently turned around and left the platform. When his shadow returned to its owner, Reynus collapsed to the ground.

Personally, I thought it had been an interesting match, but the audience was quiet. They were probably overwhelmed, either by the content of the match or by Kyle's immeasurable intensity.

The announcer's voice echoed through the arena. "What an incredible match! All that remains for tomorrow is the other semifinals match, and then the finals! You don't want to miss the thrilling result of the first-ever Imperial Combat Tournament!"



That night, I extinguished the hanging lamp and slipped into bed at the inn. I was done sending my shikigami to spy and eavesdrop throughout the capital. I could finally get a good night's sleep. Despite how taxing my efforts had been, they hadn't wound up being terribly efficient.

Tomorrow I just have to lose as planned and my tournament run is over. Then all I have to do is return to the academy. Maybe I should do some sightseeing first. Unlike Yifa and Amyu, I haven't explored the capital very much.

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"Master Seika." Yuki's voice sounded uncertain.
  "Hmm?"
  "You're actually going to lose tomorrow, right? You aren't secretly planning
on winning?"
  "No, no. There'd be no point in that."
 "That's true, but somehow I just have a feeling..."
  "I know you're a kuda-gitsune, but have you ever actually predicted
anything?" I asked.
  "I've gotten the next day's weather right before!"
  "You just make random guesses. You're bound to get it right eventually." I
yawned and closed my eyes.
  "Are you going to sleep already?"
  "Yeah."
  "Then I'll go to sleep too. Good night."
  I felt something soft crawling along my left arm. Opening my eyes, I saw a
pale girl clinging to me. "Hey."
  "Yes?" Yuki asked, looking at me in her human form. It was too dark to tell for
sure, but she seemed to be trying to hold back a smile.
  "What are you doing?"
  "It's been a long time since we last slept together!"
  "You already sleep in my hair," I pointed out.
  "I mean next to each other. I feel like I never get to take my human form
anymore!"
  "That's true."
  "What's the harm? The bed in this inn is really big!"
  "Fine."
  "Eh heh heh!" Yuki clung to me.
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Come to think of it, she was so excited when I first gave her a human form that she crawled into my futon like this without turning back. By kuda-gitsune standards, she's lived a long time, but no matter how much time passes, I can only see her as a child. Maybe this is what happens when you don't give them a mate.

Yuki slowly reached out and touched my cheek. Bringing her face close to mine, she broke into a smile and giggled. "Your face is so cute. You're like a mini Master Haruyoshi."

"Knock it o—" That moment, I sensed a presence and looked through the eyes of an owl shikigami I had perched on the roof. *That's...*

"I wonder if this is how Master Haruyoshi looked as a child. H-Huh?! M-Master Seika?!" Yuki let out a startled gasp as I turned my body and grabbed her shoulder with my right hand. "W-We can't, Master Seika! E-Even in this form, I'm still a kuda-gitsune! I can't pair up with a human!"



"Be quiet for a second." Holding Yuki's slender body close, I leaned over her. Then I turned in the opposite direction and rolled off the bed, hitting the ground with a thud.

"Gwah!" Yuki groaned, having been dragged with me.

A moment later, a figure crashed through the ceiling, stabbing a dagger into the bed. The room shook, and the bed, unable to endure the impact, gave in like a carp pierced by a harpoon. I rolled again, grabbing hold of a hitogata as I stood up. I looked at the person standing in the middle of the destroyed bed.

"Ha ha, there are better ways to sneak into a man's bedroom at night, Mabel." She responded by throwing knives at me. I ducked to the ground to avoid them, and the knives left several large holes in the wooden wall behind me. Their force was clearly abnormal. I felt the cold night wind on my skin as it entered from the outside.

After throwing the knives, Mabel immediately rushed at me with her dagger. I grabbed the arm holding the blade and diverted it away from me, but that wasn't enough to stop the force of her charge. Her body collided with mine, pushing me backwards through a hole in the wall. Then we fell.

I saw the night streets spread out below me. We were only three stories up, so it was nothing I couldn't handle. I kicked Mabel as we fell to put some distance between us, then, focusing on my flow of ki, I righted myself in midair and landed on the ground. The would-be assassin landed with the lightness of a feather on the street in front of me.

In the empty night alley, we silently faced each other. Illuminated by the moonlight, the gravity-manipulating girl's face was expressionless. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. She threw more knives at me, and I made a hand sign as I rolled out of the way.

Phase of wood: Binding Vines. Vines burst from the ground beneath Mabel's feet. Although her eyes went wide for a moment, she was quick to respond. She cut the vines in front of her at the base, then leaped forward to avoid the rest. Using that momentum, she closed the distance between us in an instant. She thrust her dagger at my collar, but all it pierced was a hitogata.

Having teleported behind her, I stuck a hitogata to Mabel's back. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave." *Phase of yang: Discharge.* Applying kinetic energy to her via the talisman, I sent her flying through the alley—or at least, I should have.

She seemed to crouch over for a moment, then stabbed her dagger into the stone paving the moment I tried to blow her away. An ear-piercing screeching filled the alley as her blade forced its way through the stone. She rapidly lost momentum, soon coming to a halt. A burning smell wafted through the air.

Hmm... I used a decent amount of force, but I guess it wasn't enough. She slowed down her initial velocity a lot—she must have increased the weight of her body.

Mabel slowly stood up. She must have only barely been able to defend against that spell. She was breathing heavily.

I sighed. She's strong. It'd be a little dangerous to ignore her while she's after my life. I wish I didn't have to, but I guess I'll get rid of her—

"The hell's goin' on back here? Whoa!" I turned towards the voice and saw a middle-aged man who seemed like he was on his way back from a bar peering around a corner. He stared in shock at the gash in the stone paving and the wide hole in the wall of the inn.

"Can't have anyone interrupting." However, before I could cast a spell, Mabel threw a knife behind me. The thin blade cleanly struck the corner the man was standing at, sending dust and fragments of the wall raining down on him.

"Eek!" With a quick scream, the man ran away before the bulk of the debris could crush him.

I turned back around and found that Mabel had already disappeared. Silence had returned to the night alley. Collecting myself, I took a deep breath. "Hmm..." As my head cooled off, I felt my thoughts return to me. Thinking back over the fight, there were several things I realized.

Yuki timidly poked her head out of my hair. "Master Seika...what was that just now?"

"I guess we can call it a warm-up for tomorrow. All right, I've decided, Yuki," I

proclaimed with a smile on my face. "Since she came all this way to see me, I think I'll spend the night with her."

Binding Vines

A spell that binds the target with giant vines created with wood ki. The method by which the vines wrap around an object is known as thigmotropism. When something touches the stem, the cells on the opposite side grow rapidly, causing the plant to coil around the object. Lignification is the process by which lignin accumulates in the cell walls, making the tissue extremely hard and woody. This process is observed in trees, bamboo, and in climbing plants such as wisteria and chocolate vine.

Concrete

A spell that immobilizes the opponent with a massive quantity of liquid concrete. It was based on ancient concrete that was made primarily with a silica polymer, but the composition has been adjusted to accelerate hardening. In the real world, the concrete technology ancient Rome had during its peak was lost with the fall of the Roman Empire, but in this work, the details were passed down in the Islamic world before Seika reincarnated.

Act 4

Mabel stopped in a small public square near the edge of the city. Even during the middle of the day, it was never very crowded. She sat on the rim of a fountain, sighing as she looked up at the starry sky. She looked a little lonely.

"Hey," I called out to her.

Mabel immediately shot up, staring at me with her hand on her throwing-knife holster. I raised both my hands in the air. "Hold on. I'm not here to fight. We'll settle things tomorrow—how about that?"

"It doesn't make a difference to me whether it's now or tomorrow," Mabel said, glaring at me.

"You're not particularly good with daggers, are you?"

Mabel's eyes went wide. "What makes you say that?"

"You just seemed a little off when you were fighting. Your real specialty is heavy weapons, isn't it?" I sat on the fountain's edge and looked up at the sky as I spoke. "It's nice and quiet tonight. Just a shame there aren't any clouds."

"What's wrong with having a clear sky?"

"I prefer when the moon is covered by a cloud or two. The moon's light being too bright ruins the mood. Especially when there are two of them."

"The mood? Obviously there are two moons. Why wouldn't there be?" Mabel asked, sitting back down a short distance away from me. A refreshing night breeze blew through the small square. "If you don't wanna fight, why did you come after me?"

"I wanted to talk."

"Huh?"

"You really want to win, right? I'm not going to let you just because you ask, and I'm not going to give in to force either. But if you tell me what's going on, I might change my mind."

"You wanna talk after what I just did to you? Are you crazy?" she asked incredulously.

"You weren't trying to kill me, were you?" I countered.

Mabel remained quiet.

"And that guy who interrupted us—you let him get away before I could do anything to him, right?"

After a brief silence, Mabel sighed. "You looked like you weren't going to allow any witnesses."

"I wasn't planning on going that far." I'd just been planning to drive him off since he'd been in danger. Though I might have let a little animosity slip out.

"I was just trying to injure you so you'd withdraw from our match tomorrow," Mabel continued.

"It seemed a little extreme for just an injury."

"I was planning on taking two or three of your limbs. I figured I needed to be serious if I wanted any chance of injuring you. But as it turned out, even that wasn't enough. You'd probably be able to heal yourself if I had managed to injure you anyway."

"Who can say?" Naturally, I couldn't tell her that I could even revive myself from the dead.

"Still...if we fight for real, I won't lose. I can't afford to lose. So please, withdraw. You're not an opponent I can hold back against. I don't want either of us to die," Mabel said, looking directly at me.

"I already told you, I'm not going to let you win just because you ask." Silence fell over the square. It didn't seem like Mabel was willing to tell me anything. Guess I don't have a choice. "In that case, I'll just tell you my theory."

"Huh?"

"You're Amyu's replacement. Your mission is to win this tournament and pose as the Hero, drawing the demons' attention. That's why you were adopted by the Crane family and sent to the academy."

"Y-You knew?" she asked.

"No, it's just a theory. Am I wrong?"

"You're not, but...how'd you know she's the Hero?"

"I have my ways," I said, forcing an awkward smile. "But that's not all, is it? There must be another reason you're so desperate. Depending on what that reason is, I might consider withdrawing."

After a long silence, Mabel slowly opened her mouth. "One part of your theory is wrong."

"And that is?"

"I'm supposed to lose in the finals."

"Huh?" It was my turn to be surprised.

"I'm supposed to be killed by the swordsman with the evil eye. That's my role. That way the demons will think the Hero is dead."

"So Kyle was a plant as well," I said after a short pause. "I don't understand what the person behind this sloppy plan was thinking. Or what you're thinking, for that matter. First off, the demons probably aren't convinced that you're the Hero. Looking at it logically, it would be more likely that the Hero was living in a village somewhere unaware of their status, or that the empire was hiding them."

"Yeah..."

"The Hero just happening to show up at a major tournament is far too convenient. Then on top of that, she's defeated in the finals and doesn't even win? If they really think they can fake the Hero's death like that, the imperial court needs to get their heads checked."

"They don't have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"The terms for lending me out were that Kyle had to kill me in the finals."

"Excuse me?"

"The academy and those above them had to accept that. I'm probably the

only person out there who's the same age as the Hero, a girl, and capable of advancing to the finals. They gave up on having me win and take the Hero's place. Instead, they chose to make it seem like the Hero died, even if that does defeat the purpose a little."

"I'm sorry, I don't follow. The terms for lending you out? Who sent you?"

"The Lugrock Company. Have you heard of them?" Mabel asked.

"Yeah. The announcer said Kyle worked for them as a guard. Though I imagine that's a cover story."

"It's not. The guard unit is what they call the organization where spare personnel who aren't merchandise yet are left."

"Merchandise?"

Mabel paused for a moment. "The Lugrock Company's merchandise is people. Slave trading and mercenary work, mostly. They aren't like other slave traders. They identify slaves with potential and train them to be mercenaries. Especially children with a talent for magic—like me and Kyle."

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"The empire knows this, of course. That's the whole reason they came to Lugrock with the idea—they wanted to know if Lugrock had any strong children they could set up as the Hero. Then I was chosen. Although my hair color was wrong, my age and gender matched. But..."

"But?"

"I was originally meant to be used for a different purpose. I was supposed to be Kyle's opponent for his final test. Which is why the Lugrock Company gave conditions for loaning me out," Mabel explained. "Kyle had to also participate in the tournament and face me in the finals. And they couldn't be held liable for whether I won or lost. The company doesn't care if I lose to Kyle in the finals. The empire understood what that meant, so they gave up on making me win from the very start."

I waited for her to continue.

"As far as Lugrock is concerned, everything worked out perfectly. I was

supposed to be discarded, yet they got to make a profit off of me. Then the tournament can serve as Kyle's test, and it lets them advertise him as their masterpiece."

After thinking for a moment, I spoke up. "What exactly is the test about? You're merchandise too, aren't you? Why would they throw you out?"

Mabel shook her head. "I'm not official merchandise. To become an official mercenary for the Lugrock Company, you have to undergo the procedure."

"Procedure?" I asked. "Why would they do that? Are they implanting something in your body?"

"No, not exactly. They open up your head." Mabel traced a spot above her forehead with her finger. "They open a hole in your skull, then stick a blade in your brain."

"For what purpose?"

"To make you into the perfect soldier. They turn you into a soldier who obeys any order without feeling a thing. No fear, no anger, no hesitation. But it comes at the cost of feelings like happiness and sadness. It turns you into a different person." I remained silent, and Mabel looked at me. "Do you not believe me?"

"No, I do." I knew of similar cases. "So you didn't undergo that procedure, but Kyle did. No wonder he seemed so inhuman. What exactly is the test, then?"

"To see if the procedure was a success, you have to kill your friends. Slave children found to have an aptitude for magic and swordplay are sent to a training facility where they're raised in groups of four. The four are together for everything—including eating, sleeping, and harsh training. They might fight sometimes, but it's the closest thing to a family those orphans have. They encourage each other, working hard so that one day they might earn their freedom. The adults at the training facility urge them to support each other as well, but only one member of each group undergoes the procedure. The strongest one."

"Don't tell me..."

"The test is for them to kill the other three." As I was at a loss for words, Mabel continued. "If you can kill them without hesitating, you can become a Lugrock mercenary."

"Then you must be..."

"I'm a member of Kyle's group. The other two are already dead. The test was postponed for me because I was selected to serve as the Hero's substitute. Killing me is Kyle's final test."

After a long silence, I finally managed to speak. "That's the reason you want to win? So you can advance to the finals and be killed?"

"No." Mabel immediately rejected the idea. I felt something resembling emotion in her voice for the first time. "I don't care about the Hero or the test. The reason I can't afford to lose is because I have to kill Kyle in the finals. The empire and the company's goals have nothing to do with it."

"Why?"

"I had a brother—a brother by blood. He was my only family, and we were sold into slavery together. He and I both happened to have a talent for magic, so we were both bought by the company. We were even raised together. He was kind, he worried about everyone, and he would comfort me when things got tough... He was the first person Kyle killed. I want to avenge him. That's my reason."

As I listened to Mabel's words, the discomfort I'd been feeling finally took shape. "Kyle didn't kill your brother."

"Huh?"

"Kyle is your brother, isn't he?"

"H-How did you...?" Mabel muttered in shock.

I sighed and continued. "I can't really say how. It's just a feeling. The way you were talking about the one who killed your brother seemed off, and so did the way you looked at Kyle in the arena. Your eyes are also the same color as his nonevil eye, and your facial features are similar."

"Oh."

"Was your hair also gray like his before you dyed it?" Mabel nodded. She fell silent, and as I looked at her, I realized something else. "Is this what Kyle

wanted? To die by your hand?"

Mabel's eyes went wide. Then she hung her head and mumbled. "You see through everything, don't you? Have you lived a hard life too?"

"No... Not as hard as yours." At least, not this life.

"A little bit before his procedure, he told me that if he stopped being himself, he wanted me to put him to rest," Mabel mumbled quietly. "I didn't understand what he was talking about at the time, but I think he knew he'd turn out like this. Something was off about all the people who were merchandise, and he was most likely to become merchandise himself. He's had that evil eye since he was born, so he was always stronger than everyone else at the training facility."

I listened, unwilling to interrupt.

"That person isn't my brother anymore. My brother would never kill his opponents for no reason. And he definitely wouldn't have killed the two who grew up with us... I don't know what he's thinking anymore, but if my brother's still inside there somewhere, I'm sure he's suffering. I want to set him free."

After a short silence, I asked Mabel a question. "Do you think you can beat Kyle?"

"I don't know... No, probably not. But I have to try. This is something only I can do." Mabel gave a small, troubled smile. "I'm gonna die either way. Win or lose, and even if I run away. If he doesn't kill me, the company will just dispose of me. So I want to grant my brother's wish in the end."

It was the first time I had ever seen Mabel smile.

"Please," she said. "Let me fight my brother in the finals. I don't plan on losing to you, but I don't think I'd make it out unscathed. I want to fight him in perfect condition if possible. That's all I ask."

"I changed my mind," I said, looking down. "I was actually planning on losing to you in the semifinals. I didn't care about winning, and I'd figured out the purpose of this tournament. But not anymore. I'm going to beat you in the semifinals, and then I'm going to beat Kyle in the finals," I declared.

"Wha..." A moment later, Mabel's face warped with rage. "Why?! Why would

you do that?!"

"There's no reason for you to kill or be killed by your brother. Drop out of the tournament. You shouldn't have to kill your only family."

"What do you know?!" Mabel shouted. "Do you have any idea how I've felt fighting this whole time?! Being forced to attend the academy and watching privileged people flaunt their easy lives?! Having to reunite with my brother at this tournament?! Don't give me that crap now! I'm different! I'm not like those carefree noble kids, the sheltered Hero, or you! Don't take my final purpose away from me! What am I supposed to do after I lose to you without accomplishing anything?!"

"What you should do is obvious. Go back to the academy. You're a student and the daughter of a baron now. Go back and celebrate the fact that you made it to the semifinals. Then have a normal life as a student, studying with the other carefree kids, taking normal tests, and eventually graduating. After that, I guess it's up to you."

Mabel stared at me, wide-eyed, her lips quivering. "Stop... I can't do that. Once I fail and serve my purpose, there won't be any reason to keep me at the academy anymore."

"Hmm. This is just a guess, but I don't think you'll have to worry about that."

"Even if we assume that's true, the company won't let it happen. They can't ignore someone who knows their secrets like I do. They'll send assassins after me—Lugrock has a lot of merchandise even stronger than my brother. They'll kill me..."

"I figured as much. Still, assassins aren't an issue." I smiled at her. "So long as I'm at the academy, I won't let anyone lay a hand on you."

"Y-You can't guarantee that."

"I can. After all, I'm the strongest," I proclaimed simply.

"H-Huh?!" Mabel looked dumbfounded. Then, for some reason, she glared at me suspiciously. "Are you hitting on me?"

"Wha-?!"

"My brother told me to be wary of men who try to show off."

"N-No, I..." I started to feel awkward. *I shouldn't have made things weird...*"Th-That was a joke. I just meant I'm confident in my abilities. At the very least, I won't lose to Kyle or any of the so-called merchandise above him. So don't worry."

Mabel didn't respond.

"And if your brother had a wish, it wasn't for you to kill him. It was for his only sister to be free. That's what I think."

Silence blew over us with the night breeze until Mabel finally broke it. "Thanks," she said quietly, "but I don't believe you." She stood up and then looked at me with her sky blue eyes. "I'm gonna come at you with everything I've got tomorrow. And I'm gonna win."

I smiled at her. "Sure. I'll prove myself to you. I'll easily handle everything you throw at me, then put Kyle to rest without any trouble either. Let's start with that."

"All right." Mabel nodded, then turned to leave. As I watched her go, I finally let my mind wander.

I'm glad I chased after her. Now that I think about it, there's a prize for winning. I wonder how much it is. As I thought to myself, Mabel turned her head like she'd remembered something.

"Sorry about what happened at the inn. I hope that girl wasn't hurt."

"It's fine— Wait, girl?"

"Yeah. The one with the white hair."

Crap... Did she see Yuki? I decided to feign ignorance. "Wh-What are you talking about?"

"You didn't bring her to your room?" she asked, eyebrow raised. "You were in bed together."

"Huh?! N-No, I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you don't want me to tell your servant or the Hero, that's fine."

"No, no, no!" I appreciate the concern, but no! "I really don't know what you mean. Try to remember—was there anyone else in that room when we were fighting?"

"Now that you mention it, she did disappear at some point."

"The door was shut! She couldn't have just disappeared! I was alone the whole time. What did you see? Seriously, you're scaring me..."

"Are you saying it was an astral monster?"

"Uh..." She didn't seem to get why I'd said it was scary. *Does this country not have ghost stories?*

Seeing me tilt my head in confusion, Mabel relaxed her mouth like she was amused. "You're weird."



After parting ways with Mabel, I was walking through the city late at night.

"Looks like my prediction was right, Master Seika," Yuki suddenly said.

I fumbled over my words in response. "Uh... Yeah. You're incredible. You really have grown."

"I'm not looking for praise! What are you thinking?! You decided not to show off your power in this life!"

"But"—I couldn't stop myself from sounding like I was pouting—"I felt bad for her."

Yuki let out a long sigh. "You've always been like this. You'd take pitiful children as your disciples like you were adopting a dog or cat."

"What's the harm? They all grew into fine people."

"That's true. They did somehow all end up being brilliant. Even the ones with no talent for sorcery went on to distinguish themselves as government officials, warriors, or merchants."

"They all worked hard in their own ways. To be serious for a moment, winning this tournament isn't a big deal. Anybody truly strong isn't going to show up in a place like this, and people know it. Mabel said it herself—Lugrock has several

mercenaries stronger than Kyle."

"Hmm... So at what point does it become dangerous?"

"It'd probably be bad for me to wipe out an army single-handedly, stop a natural disaster, or revive the dead, I guess."

"Yeah, I would think so." Yuki fell silent for a moment after that. "But is what that girl said really true? I don't believe it."

"What part bothers you?"

"The procedure where they open their heads and change their personalities. Is that actually possible?"

"It could be. I've heard of asylums in the West—that is, facilities where the mentally disturbed are admitted—doing something similar. Surgeries where a blade is inserted into the brain. Surprisingly, there were cases where the person's severe fits and violent outbursts subsided and they were able to go on to live normal lives. However, most of them became crippled or even died as a result of the surgery. Even when it appeared to have been successful, sometimes they would end their own lives later on."

"In that case, making ruthless soldiers through some procedure can't be possible—"

"No, we can't say that for sure. From the records I saw, the surgical procedure used in Western asylums wasn't clearly defined. How the blade was inserted differed depending on the doctor, and naturally, so did the results. On the other hand, if you could establish a procedure with a consistently high rate of success through experimentation, that would change things."

"Experimentation?"

"Right. The Lugrock Company deals in slaves," I explained. "They have an effectively unlimited supply of experimental subjects. Some of those slaves will inevitably go mad or fall ill, and then they can't be sold. In addition, this world has healing magic, so they don't have to worry about them dying from the procedure."

"I-I see..." Then Yuki timidly asked a question. "Um...could you turn someone

who was changed by the procedure back to normal?"

"I doubt it," I answered without hesitation. "To restore an altered soul, you need to use a method similar to reviving the dead. It might be doable within the first day, but once multiple days start to pass, it becomes difficult."

"Is that right..."

"Having said that, I don't intend to kill Kyle."

"Huh?" Yuki cried out in shock. I deliberately hadn't told Mabel, but I hadn't been planning on killing Kyle to begin with.

"Although his personality has been changed, he can still form new relationships. I don't know if Mabel will accept him as he is now, but that isn't for me to decide. I'd also feel bad if he died while remaining a puppet."

Yuki let out another big sigh. "You're too nice, Master Seika."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Especially to children. It looks like that hasn't changed at all since your past life."

"Well, I've been alive for over a century. Reincarnating isn't enough to change old habits."

"Still," Yuki said, a hint of condemnation slipping into her voice, "you were the one who said you'd be cunning this time around. I don't think it's good to give that up so soon."

"Hmm..." After thinking it over for a moment, I gave my answer. "At the end of the day, I'm just trying not to repeat my past mistakes. I think it's all right for me to help others out a little so long as it doesn't interfere with that goal." Yuki fell silent, so with a small smile, I added one more thing. "Also, constantly thinking about how to deceive those around you is exhausting. Don't worry, I'll do my best to make sure things go smoothly," I said in a whisper, trying to console the ayakashi on top of my head.



Finally, it was time for my semifinal match.

"Now, facing Seika is his fellow representative from the magic academy, Mabel Crane!" the announcer loudly declared to the crowd.

As I watched Mabel climb onto the platform, I gave a small smile. "So that's your real specialty, huh?"

"It looks like Mabel has changed weapons! My goodness! It's a massive battle-axe!"

Mabel faced me holding a double-edged battle-axe nearly twice her height including the handle. "I'm done pretending to be the Hero," she declared, readying her weapon.

How much does that thing weigh? At the very least, it looks like it'd be too heavy for her to lift without magic. "Part of the reason I didn't want to withdraw was because I wanted to see more of your fighting style. I knew there had to be more to it. I'm glad we had that talk yesterday," I said, looking her in the eyes.

Mabel frowned. "Are you looking down on me? Just so you know, I intend to beat you."

"I'm not," I said with a smile. "I just wanted to get a more accurate reading on your strength."

"I still can't believe that you're strong yourself. No noble kid who's lived a peaceful life is gonna beat me."

"They may both be students of the magic academy, but they couldn't be more different! Who's going to end up winning the second match of the semifinals?! Now, begin!"

The moment the whistle blew, Mabel leaped off the ground. Holding her battle-axe above her head, she closed the distance between us in an instant. She brought her heavy blade down, but it lacked speed and its trajectory was predictable. I easily avoided it, and the battle-axe slammed into the ground to my left a moment too late. It didn't so much as scratch me. However, a moment later, the ground shot up beneath my feet.

"Wha—?!" Looking down, I saw stones exposed alongside the part of the platform that had been sent flying. Her attack had smashed through the stone

placed below the platform to serve as its base. *That's a lot of force*. A horizontal sweep from her battle-axe headed for me as I was knocked off-balance. I had no choice but to dodge it by teleporting, yet she predicted the location I would swap places with and attacked again. This time, I dodged by ducking under her weapon.

That battle-axe is massive, yet she's swinging it like it's a one-handed sword. She's probably making it extremely light every time she swings—it doesn't look like she's dealing with much recoil. That makes it easier for her to aim.

As I ran around avoiding her attacks, I stuck a hitogata to the newly exposed stone and made a hand sign with one hand. *Phase of yang: Discharge.* I applied kinetic energy to the stone and launched it at Mabel. She had just swung her axe, so she wouldn't have time to defend herself.

The way she responded was quite peculiar—the force with which her battle-axe should have been swung suddenly weakened. Instead, it was Mabel herself who was swung, as though all the recoil her axe should have had was suddenly catching up with her. Missing its mark, the stone flew through the air and smashed against a pillar supporting the spectator stands.

"Interesting." I couldn't help but comment. Mabel had just returned her battle-axe's weight to normal. When a weapon's weight was changed, the center of gravity between the weapon and its wielder changed as well. And when that center of gravity changed, so did the point around which it rotated. As a result, Mabel had become the one being swung.

Having created some distance between us, Mabel hurled throwing knives at me in a low arc. As I leaped back to avoid them, slender blades stuck into the ground one after another. Their weight must have been increased significantly, as they gouged out cone-shaped holes in the ground and kicked clouds of dust into the air. My vision obscured, I squinted my eyes and focused on Mabel. She had probably been intending to prevent me from following up on my attack, but she'd had to take one hand off of her battle-axe to throw the knives.

Phase of wood: Binding Vines. Vines sprouted beneath Mabel's feet. She didn't have her dagger with her today, and her battle-axe would be too slow. As a result...

"You think this'll stop me?!" Mabel swung her hand horizontally, tearing through several vines like they'd been struck by a metal rod. I couldn't help but smile.

"Nice." It looks like her matches up until now really were just the opening act. I think I'm satisfied with this. This is the point where I'd been planning to lose, but now I have to win. And I had to go and say I'd win easily too. I should wrap things up.

Mabel once again closed the gap between us, approaching me with a swing of her battle-axe. Using an invisible hitogata I had secretly stuck to the blade earlier, I activated a spell. *Phase of yang: Fallen Fruit.* The battle-axe's weight suddenly increased a thousandfold.

"What the—?!" With her center of gravity forcibly changed, Mabel was flung around. Once she was knocked off-balance, I made my next move.

Phase of wood and metal: Binding Mercury Vines. Slightly black-tinged vines erupted from the ground.

"This again?!" Mabel swung her arm once more, but this time, it didn't tear through the vines. They wrapped around her arm when it touched them, sealing off her movements as more coiled around her entire body. Mabel cried out in pain as her battle-axe fell from her hand. "How...?"

"These vines are filled with mercury. They're much heavier than ordinary vines." Even so, it might have been possible for her to tear them off if she'd used her full strength. But Mabel had already seen my Binding Vines twice—she'd thought she knew how much strength it took to break them, so she had gotten careless.

"This isn't enough to stop me!" Mabel shouted, grabbing the vines with her one free arm. Now hardened into wood, the vines began to crack. Seemingly being crushed by tremendous weight, the vines began to fall apart. Sap the red color of mercury compounds leaked out. They wouldn't hold for long. I grabbed the handle of Mabel's battle-axe, and she glared at me. "N-No way you can lift that."

"I beg to differ." *Phase of yin: Floating Leaves.* The battle-axe's weight disappeared. Making a show of lifting it with one hand, I placed the blade

against the captive girl's neck.

Mabel's expression twisted with anger. "You can't hurt me with an axe that light."

"I'm not trying to hurt you," I said with a smile. "I just need to win the match."

Just as I finished speaking, the whistle signaling the end of the match was blown. "The match has been decided by referee judgment! My goodness! It looked like Mabel had the overwhelming advantage in the beginning, but the tables were turned on her in a flash! Or maybe Seika had her in the palm of his hand the entire time! The prodigy Seika Lamprogue will be advancing to the finals!"

Taking a deep breath, I threw the battle-axe behind me. It spun through the air as I undid the spell, then stuck into the ground with a loud thud. I copied what Reynus had tried to do yesterday, and this time it was successful.

"Let me take care of Kyle," I told Mabel as she slumped to the ground amid the rotting vines. "It'll be okay. You get some rest."

Binding Mercury Vines

A spell that binds the target with heavy vines containing highly concentrated mercury. Plants known as hyperaccumulators actively store heavy metals absorbed from the earth. In Japan, hyperaccumulators include the rice plant and willow trees. Native to New Caledonia, *Pycnandra acuminata* is known to have sap with a concentration of up to twenty-five percent nickel. If one-fourth of the water content of a tree were to be replaced with mercury, which has a higher specific gravity, an extremely heavy plant with nearly three times the mass in the same volume could be created.

Floating Leaves

A spell that reduces the target's weight. The opposite of

Fallen Fruit. While the other world's magic can affect either of the factors that make up weight—gravitational acceleration or gravitational mass—Fallen Fruit and Floating Leaves can only increase or decrease the latter. Gravitational mass is linked to inertial mass through the equivalence principle, so when applied to a weapon, the spell changes both its handling and power.

Interlude: Mabel Crane in the Arena Waiting Room

Mabel was sitting in a chair in the arena waiting room, gazing out the window. Outside, workers skilled in earth magic were repairing the combat platform in a hurry. Because of the damage she and Seika had done to it, she had thought the finals would have to be postponed until the next day. However, the workers toiled along at a rate that made it look like the match would be held this afternoon.

However, that no longer concerned her. She had lost. An indescribably helpless feeling welled up inside her. Up until now, all she'd ever had to do was think about carrying out her mission. Even if death awaited her in the future, she had been able to steel herself. But now that it was all over, she had no mission to carry out anymore. Mabel didn't know what her future held—and not knowing made her anxious.

Mabel heard a clacking sound coming from the table next to her and looked over to see a crow that had somehow found its way inside walking on top of it. Its claws tapped against the hard wood of the table, making a racket. She found having the crow next to her strangely calming, then thought back on what Seika had told her.

"It'll be okay."

She had seen her brother in Seika when he'd said those words and felt relieved. He would say the same thing and pat her on the head.

Seika was strong. Mabel could tell that she hadn't managed to push him to his limit when they'd fought, yet she still wasn't sure if he'd be able to beat Kyle. Even after he had become someone else, Mabel had always been afraid of losing her brother. And now she was equally worried about Seika going to face him.

Act 5

"Sorry for the long wait, everyone! It's finally time for the final round of the first-ever Imperial Combat Tournament!" The announcer's voice echoed through the arena. "The first of the powerful warriors to make it to the finals has proved that the Lamprogue name isn't just for show! How many more tricks does the boy have up his sleeve? We still haven't seen everything he's got! It's the genius of the imperial magic academy, Seika Lamprogue!"

I stepped onto the platform to roaring cheers. Despite having been destroyed earlier this morning, it looked as good as new. They probably couldn't afford to delay the tournament any longer. Given that the foundation had been pulverized, it was probably just a stopgap measure, but it didn't seem like it would prove to be a hindrance.

"Facing him is an unusual, uncanny, unhinged, and seemingly unstoppable swordsman! Who is he and where did he come from?! It's the Lugrock Company's secret weapon, the slaughterer with the evil eye, Kyle!"

The gray-haired boy climbed onto the platform. His drawn sword was held loosely in his right hand, and his half-closed eyes were of different colors. He looked as ghastly as ever. I couldn't tell if he was really even looking at me.

"Hey," I said with a smile. "Sorry I'm not your sister. Mabel lost to me in the semifinals."

"Mabel?" the boy grumbled in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. "Mabel, Mabel... Oh." His eyes opened just a little in realization. "That isn't what we planned. Is she still alive?"

"Yeah, she is."

"Good," Kyle said, sounding half asleep. "That means I can still kill her."

I took a deep breath. "She's your little sister."

"Right. My only remaining friend, and my precious family." There wasn't a hint of emotion in Kyle's voice. "I was told to kill the ones precious to me."

"I'm aware of your situation, though I can't say I understand you. What are you living for?" I asked. "Is it not to find happiness? Is killing your sister going to help you reach that goal? I imagine the procedure didn't take away your ability to think logically if they're going to use you as a soldier."

"What do you mean by finding happiness? Happiness is being alive, isn't it? To survive until tomorrow. That's how it was for me—for everyone at the training facility. That's why we get stronger, and that's why we obey those stronger than us," he explained. "I was the strongest at the facility, so I was allowed to undergo the procedure. But there are people stronger than me with the company, so I obey them. Because I want to stay alive. Is there something wrong with that?"

"You would sacrifice your precious family in order to survive?" I asked.

"Yes. Happiness is being alive. Family or not, they're still other people."

"I don't imagine the old you would have said that. Have you forgotten?"

"I remember. But now I realize that this way of thinking is correct."

"That's even worse. I feel bad for Mabel."

"I don't get it. Mabel and I don't have anything to do with you. Why are you interfering?" Kyle asked apathetically.

"Why? Isn't it obvious?" I smiled widely. "Because I don't like it. You should cherish your only sister. You obey the strong, right? Then once you lose this match, apologize to Mabel."

"I really don't get it." Kyle lightly tapped his sword with his right hand. "Why do you think I would lose to you?"

"It's time for the grand finale! Let the final match of the first Imperial Combat Tournament begin!" The whistle blew, and Kyle opened his eyes wide.

However, I had already finished opening a gate before he could utilize his evil eye. *Summoning: Onbo-no-yasu.* Dense fog poured out of the other plane, filling the arena in an instant.

"Is this more of Seika's magic?! I can't see anything on the platform!"

"Did you..." Kyle mumbled.

"Now you can't rely on that eye of yours." Looking at Kyle head-on now that he was obscured by the fog, I flashed him a smile. The onbo-no-yasu was a fog ayakashi I had captured deep in the mountains inhabited by the Emishi people of northern Japan. It inhibited the cognitive abilities of people who entered the mountains, causing them to get lost. The effect was limited to things like being unable to find the way home or recognize the faces of those nearby, but to a user of the evil eye who relied on his vision to cast curses, it would certainly prove to be a nuisance. That said, the real reason I had summoned it was to hide us from the audience. I could resist an evil eye as weak as his without doing anything special.

I heard a creaking sound—it seemed like Kyle had taken a step forward. The footprints left behind after each step were unnaturally deep.

"Hmm." Phase of fire and earth: Oni Flame. A pale blue fireball slammed into Kyle, who looked totally unfazed. The phosphorus flames flickering around him didn't even spread to his clothes. I figured as much. Looks like he made himself heavier with gravity magic. "Then how about this?" Phase of wood and metal: Binding Mercury Vines. Black-tinged vines erupted from the ground beneath Kyle's feet. He didn't resist as the heavy, mercury-laden vines wrapped around him.

Just as I thought it was over, Kyle's shadow suddenly grew darker and began to move. It crawled its way up his body, cutting the vines binding him from the inside. Once he returned to the ground, his shadow split apart and raced across the floor. The ends of his shadow reared up, intent on piercing through me. However, that was as far as they got. The shadow was unable to penetrate my barrier and harmlessly disappeared.

Kyle continued silently moving forward, step-by-step, as though the previous exchange hadn't even happened. He displayed no emotion whatsoever.

I sighed. Come on, give me some kind of reaction. It seemed like he no longer felt the excitement, tension, or fear of battle. Fine, guess I'll stick to the original plan. I pulled out a hitogata and opened a gate to the alternate plane.

Summoning: Ushi-oni. An oni with the head of a bull emerged from the spatial distortion. He had black skin, a muscular body that was tall enough to force a

person to look up at it, and sharp horns sprouting from his bovine head. The foul look on his face contained pure loathing for the world and everything in it.

I faced Kyle and asked him a question. "Are you truly the perfect soldier now that you've lost your emotions?" Dragging his iron club, the ushi-oni took a step towards Kyle.

Kyle stopped in place. "A minotaur?" he mumbled emotionlessly. His shadow wriggled out from beneath his feet and bore down on the ushi-oni.

The ushi-oni didn't react, yet Kyle's shadow couldn't pierce him. Blocked by something unseen, it simply crawled along the surface of his black body. Kyle looked on in confusion.

"Personally, I don't think feeling fear is a bad thing." The ushi-oni took another step towards the boy.

For the first time, Kyle stepped into range and swung his sword at the ushioni. It had likely been made heavier with gravity magic as well. Despite that, with a simple swing of his arm, the ushi-oni shattered his blade. Through the fog, I could hear Kyle gasp in shock. It was the first hint of discomposure he'd shown all tournament. The ushi-oni casually raised his club over his head.

"Did you feel anything when you saw him?" I asked. Then the ushi-oni swung his club horizontally and sent Kyle flying. He rolled to the edge of the platform, then stopped moving. There had been no back-and-forth—just an overwhelming difference in strength. "He's on a different level from you. Cheap tricks like gravity and shadow magic won't work on him." Looking at the collapsed Kyle, I mumbled out one more thing. "If you could still feel fear, you wouldn't have been so reckless."



The ushi-oni slowly lumbered its way back to me. "You did hold back, right?" I asked. He silently nodded. He was as unsociable as ever. Although not as strong as Mizuchi, he was one of the more powerful ayakashi that I still possessed, yet he was surprisingly easy to handle. I had used him quite frequently in my past life, and he had served his purpose this time as well. The scary look on his face didn't actually mean he was angry.

Returning the ushi-oni to the other plane, I ran over to where Kyle had collapsed. Although he had fallen unconscious, he was still breathing. He didn't seem to be too badly injured.

"Are you really gonna let him live?" Yuki asked.

I nodded. "I guess so. Do you think I'm being soft?"

"Yes. But I'm also starting to think that's okay."

For now, I'll just sneak him out of here... What happens after that depends on what he wants. If he says he's returning to the company, I won't stop him. But if he wants to be free, then I'll grant that wish. Someone as strong as Kyle shouldn't have any trouble hiding himself and living as an adventurer or merchant caravan quard.

It was possible his emotions might return. Much like how the blind could develop sharp hearing, the human body had a way of making up for lost functionality. If he lived a normal life and wanted to regain his feelings, it was possible some other part of the body besides his brain would compensate.

Of course, that's all a conversation for the future. I have to get him to meet with Mabel first—

"Master Seika!" Yuki's voice cut through my thoughts.

There was a black pattern on Kyle's head, quickly expanding to the rest of his body. *Is that a curse mark?!* I immediately pulled out my hitogata and set up a barrier. The pattern's encroachment stopped, then slowly faded away. Just as I took a moment to let out a sigh of relief, his body began violently convulsing. My eyes went wide—the barrier should have been working. *Did the curse mark already begin damaging his body the moment it started spreading? I can't see any specific points of damage, and I don't have time to prepare a substitution hitogata.* There wasn't much I could do.

"Tell Mabel"—Kyle narrowly opened his eyes, his voice hoarse—"that I'm sorry..." After that, I listened to his final words, barely able to make them out. Once he finished speaking, all the strength left his body. He was no longer breathing. The light in his differently colored eyes was gone. The swordsman with the evil eye had passed away.

"Master Seika, was that..." Yuki mumbled in shock.

I had a guess as to the origin of the curse. The Lugrock Company had likely placed it on him when he had undergone the procedure. Either so that he couldn't give away information when taken prisoner, or so that the details of the procedure itself wouldn't be exposed. It was a curse intended to keep him from talking in the event he was defeated.

"You think"—cursed energy filled my voice automatically and all the hitogata I had on my person filled the air around me— "you can outwit me? Using sorcery?" I arranged the hitogata around Kyle's corpse. Cursed energy linked them together, completing the magic circle for the secret art. I composed the spell, chanting a mantra and making hand signs with both hands.

He who curses digs two graves. And I wasn't going to let the one who had cursed Kyle die so easily either. Everyone in the immediate vicinity when Kyle had been cursed and all their direct blood relatives would die as well. But this came first. It was fine—I would make it in time. He had only just died. All I needed to do was reference the construction of his soul from the most recent time stamp. As someone who had become the strongest in his previous life, resurrecting the dead was nothing to me...

"Master Seika, don't! This is definitely too far!" At her wit's end, Yuki cried out —and I paused my spell as she continued shouting. "You said it yourself, didn't you?! This is dangerous! Have you forgotten the whole reason you had to reincarnate?!"

I remained silent.

"Think about it for a second! Is this person somebody you have any obligation to go above and beyond for?!"

I silently lowered my hands, no longer making hand signs. My hitogata fell to the ground around me. Its connection to my cursed energy severed, the magic circle collapsed. I stood unspeaking in front of the boy's corpse.

"I understand how you feel," Yuki said, worry in her voice. "I know how kind you are better than anyone."

Act 6

The finals ended with my victory. After I recovered my fog ayakashi, the arena was thrown into an uproar. Kyle was missing, and in the end, they accepted my claim that I had blown him away without a trace. Creating a dye that resembled blood from mercury and sulfur and sprinkling it over the platform had paid off.

Afterwards, the award ceremony and closing ceremony came to a close very quickly. Despite the emperor supposedly having been present for the tournament, he wasn't at the ceremonies. I just received a medal from a bald man who said he was the chairman of the tournament management committee.

I turned down the offer to join the imperial guard during the ceremony. I chose and embellished my words carefully to avoid offending them, but they accepted my refusal so easily I almost got the impression that I was supposed to decline. The only real upside was the large sum of money I received as a prize for winning.

Then, the next morning, Mabel and I were standing outside the walls of the capital. We had walked a good distance from the gate and were near a forest. We stood silently in front of a small, moss-covered stone.

Kyle had been buried beneath said stone. I had stowed his body in the other plane and carried it out without anyone's knowledge. If I had left it, it likely would have been recovered by the Lugrock Company and disposed of without a trace. I'd wanted to at least give him a burial. It hadn't been for Mabel's sake—it was what I'd genuinely wanted to do. I still couldn't come up with anything to say to her.

"It's fine. I get it," Mabel said quietly, as though she could read my thoughts. "I kinda had a feeling there was a curse like that cast on him. Merchandise that lost in battle never came back. I know you were trying to save him. So don't worry about it. I'd even given up on being able to give him a proper farewell like this."

I didn't regret not bringing Kyle back to life. That secret art was something I had refrained from using very often even in my previous life. Resurrecting mortal beings ran contrary to the laws of the world. If it was done too frequently, it would eventually lead to a great collapse. I had let my emotions get the best of me and tried to use it, forgetting about the restraint I had decided upon in my past life. That had been a mistake. I had let myself get too comfortable.

As Yuki had said, I didn't owe Kyle or Mabel anything. There was no reason for me to use a spell I had refused to use in my past life no matter how much someone had begged me. Yet it still didn't sit right with me.

"Are you sure this is where you want it? I'd come with you if you wanted to bury him in your hometown." Mabel had been the one to decide on this location.

Mabel shook her head. "We don't have a hometown anymore."

I decided to break the silence before it went on for too long again.

"So...Mabel is your real name, huh?"

Mabel nodded curiously. "Yeah. Did you think it was fake?"

"At first."

"I don't think you'd specifically pick a past Hero's name for your fake Hero," she remarked.

"I guess not. It'd be pretty on the nose."

"How'd you know, anyway?"

"Kyle called your name several times," I said.

"Oh..." Mabel had a calm expression on her face.

"Actually, there was something Kyle wanted me to tell you, though I don't know what it means. He said, 'Sorry about the four-leaf clover.'"

Mabel's eyes went wide and she gasped. Then tears started pouring out. "A little bit before his procedure, he accidentally broke a four-leaf-clover hairpin that I really liked. We kinda got in a fight after that. That's probably what he meant... It wasn't even a big deal..."

I silently waited for her to stop crying. After a while, she quietly mumbled something.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"I told you, didn't I? Go back to the academy and be a normal student."

"Really?" Mabel looked at me, her voice full of anxiety. "I still can't believe all this. I was supposed to be killed by my brother. I lost the tournament. Now I'm going back to being a student as the adopted daughter of a nobleman? And I'm going to keep living like that? Is this even real? I..."

"It's all right," I said, taking Mabel's hand. "Let's go. The carriage—our carriage—is going to leave soon."

Mabel didn't say anything.

"And if everything's not all right," I declared, "then I'll do something about it. So don't worry." Being the strongest didn't mean you could do anything. In fact, you were surprisingly powerless. But despite that, you still had far more options than the average person.



"You're finally back." When we returned to the gate, Amyu was waiting with her hands on her hips in front of our carriage. Next to her, Yifa had a nervous expression on her face.

I'd more or less explained the situation to them. While I hadn't really had a choice but to tell them about the commotion at the inn, I'd also told them that Kyle and Mabel were siblings who had been raised by a company that dealt in mercenaries. I also told them that I'd secretly taken Kyle's remains and that Mabel and I had buried them just now.

The only thing I didn't mention was the part involving the Hero. Mabel being adopted by a nobleman and her reuniting with Kyle at the tournament were pure coincidence—that was the story we'd decided to go with. I figured it was best that Amyu remained ignorant for the time being.

For her part, Amyu was looking at Mabel with a fearless smile on her face. "Heh, I was getting tired of waiting," she said. "Not that I blame you for taking

your time."

"Amyu, are you really doing this? Now of all times?" Yifa asked.

"Dummy. Times like these are exactly when you should wield your sword."

What are they arguing about?

"First-year," Amyu said, holding a sword out for Mabel. It was rather broad and long for a one-handed sword, though it did appear to be cheap. "Duel me."

"No. I'm not in the mood."

"C'mon, c'mon!" Amyu pushed the sword at Mabel and drew her favorite mithril spellblade. "These aren't practice swords, so if your weapon breaks or you drop it, you lose."

"We aren't just going to stop before we hit the other person?"

"No way. That's too dangerous," Amyu cautioned. I tilted my head in confusion. What an odd set of rules. "Oh, and you're not allowed to use magic."

"Sure."

"But I am," Amyu added.

"Huh?" Mabel frowned. "Is that a joke?"

"What's the harm? You already won our first duel. Give me a handicap."

That's ridiculous.

"Seika, give us the signal."

This isn't like her. She knows Mabel's situation. Challenging her to a rematch right now feels really inconsiderate. Oh well, I guess. "All right, then. Begin!"

Amyu kicked off the ground and brandished her spellblade, aiming at the one-handed sword in Mabel's grip. However, her attack lacked its usual swiftness—it was oddly delayed. Mabel raised her own sword and blocked Amyu with a confused expression on her face. But the moment their swords connected, Mabel's snapped clean in half.

"Wha-?!" Mabel's eyes went wide.

"Wah!" Amyu stumbled forward and fell on the ground as though being

swung by her sword. Her blade stuck into the dirt shockingly deeply. On her rear, Amyu smiled at Mabel. "Ah ha ha! I won! How's that, first-year? I can do it too!"

"Was that gravity magic?" Mabel asked.

"I got a perfect score in every element for a reason! Still, this is pretty tough. I'm impressed you can use it in a real fight."

Mabel shot Amyu a cold look. "What's this about? Did you just want to brag?"

"You wanted to beat your brother yourself, didn't you?"

"Not really. I don't care about winning or losing. I just..."

"Liar. I can tell from your swordplay. You're not the type of little sister who's content to sit in her brother's shadow. You wanted to stand next to him as his equal, or even surpass him if you could. Am I wrong?"

Mabel didn't respond.

"Meeting him in the tournament was your last chance to fight him. Isn't that why you entered?" Amyu asked.

"Don't act like you understand me. What are you trying to say?"

"Try to beat me next," Amyu said simply.

"Excuse me?"

Amyu smiled at the exasperated Mabel. "We've got one win apiece now. Try to beat me before we graduate. Though I'm not gonna make it easy for you."

"Are you stupid? Why should I bother?"

"You don't have anyone to aspire to beat or any goals to accomplish anymore. You don't know what to do with yourself, do you?"

Mabel was silent.

"So why not? I've been bored not having anyone to practice with on campus. Humor me for a bit. At least until you find something else you wanna do."

Mabel stared at Amyu in silence for a while, then finally let out a small sigh. "You really are stupid." Then she took Amyu's hand.



Pulling Amyu up off the ground, Mabel spoke in an indignant tone. "Beating you is too easy—it isn't even a goal. You can't talk big until you learn how to actually use my magic."

"It's not my fault. I'm just not used to it yet."

"It's not about getting used to it. There's a trick—you have to release the spell earlier. Otherwise, you won't be able to pull your weapon back, like you just experienced."

"Hmm. So what do you do about the recoil while swinging?"

"Only change the weight right when you hit. If you do it while swinging, the force will—"

"E-Excuse me," Yifa said anxiously, coming back from the direction of the carriage. "W-We need to get going soon. The carriage driver seems mad."

I chuckled, then called out to the two swordswomen. "Come on, let's go home. You can continue your conversation in the carriage."



Two days later, we safely arrived at the academy. Although the entire trip had only taken half a month, I was surprised at how I felt like I hadn't been back in forever. Our classes had advanced a lot without us. Catching up might prove difficult—especially for Amyu. At any rate, it was good that things were peaceful.



The day after we returned to the academy, Mabel and I went to meet with the headmistress.

"Well done, you two," the headmistress said with a content smile when we entered her office. "I never expected the winner of the first-ever Imperial Combat Tournament to come from our academy. I'm proud of you. I'm not sure if there will be a second one, but you've represented the academy well, Lamprogue boy. You too, Mabel. Making it to the semifinals is a cause for celebration. It's just unfortunate that the two of you had to fight. Had the bracket been different, we could have secured both first and second place."

After pausing to take a breath, the headmistress continued. "Yet at the end of the day, you two are still students. And what is a student's duty? Studying. This event will serve as a nice accessory to your résumés, but nothing more. Get distracted and you'll fall behind in an instant. Especially you, Mabel."

"Me?" Mabel asked in confusion.

"Though we were the ones who asked you to, you were still away from the academy for half a month immediately after enrolling. Catching up isn't going to be easy. Particularly in your case, written exams will—actually, the Lamprogue boy and his servant get good grades. Why not have them tutor you?"

Bewildered, Mabel blinked a few times, then nodded.

With a smile, the headmistress clapped her hands. "Now, I apologize for making you come see me so soon after you got back. Get some rest and prepare for tomorrow. Lamprogue, would you mind staying behind a bit longer?"

I silently looked down. Mabel hesitated for a moment, but in the end, I was left alone in the headmistress's office. Even after the door closed, the awkward silence continued. It wasn't until Mabel had walked away that the headmistress finally opened her mouth.

"I assume you have some questions for me, Lamprogue?"

"Yeah." I took a breath. I see. If she's giving me the floor, then there's no need to beat around the bush. "Are you satisfied, Headmistress?" I asked with a smile.

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Mabel not making it to the finals means that your plan to make it look like the Hero died failed. I'm asking if you're okay with that."

The headmistress narrowed her eyes. "If you understand that, then why would you ask if I'm satisfied? Things didn't go according to plan."

"It never made sense to me," I said, pacing around the room. "That plan didn't require two representatives from the academy. There was no reason for me to enter the tournament. Granted, if that was all, then I could accept the

explanation that only choosing a first-year student would seem unusual. It doesn't hurt to be careful. However, you've taken an abundance of caution."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I heard the name Crane, I grew curious and asked my family about them. Of course, I didn't gain any information of note. Just the fact that they were a family of magic scholars with a long-standing pedigree and connections with the academy. And that they'd been quite affectionate towards their adopted daughter Mabel recently. Buying her dresses, introducing her throughout high society, having portraits painted of her—making it convincing is important, sure, but did they really need to go that far for a girl who was going to die soon? It almost seems like they were really treating her like an adopted daughter."

"Even after I warned them, they went and got carried away," the headmistress grumbled.

"The academy and those above you never had any intention of following through with the plan to begin with. Your goal was to acquire Mabel. Despite their condition that they couldn't be held liable for whatever happened during the tournament, the Lugrock Company wasn't going to let Mabel lose until the finals. They needed her for Kyle's test, so they manipulated the tournament's bracket and looked into the competitors' backgrounds, placing all the dangerous opponents like Reynus on Kyle's side where they knew he'd win. Mabel was supposed to make it to the finals, then lose there and die. I'm sure they didn't expect the academy, their client, to play a piece capable of beating Kyle."

The headmistress didn't respond.

"The only thing the academy stands to gain is Mabel herself," I continued. "I imagine the Lugrock Company sold her to the academy rather than loaning her out as a mercenary, no? It wouldn't make sense for them to ask for someone who was supposed to die in the finals to be returned to them later. There was probably a clause to dispose of her in the event she escaped, but they couldn't have expected her to lose and survive. You wanted me to eliminate Mabel from the tournament so the academy could acquire her. Does that about sum it up?"

The headmistress stayed quiet for a while, then sighed. "They completely looked down on us. In saying they wouldn't be liable if Mabel lost, they meant we wouldn't get our money back if things didn't turn out the way we wanted. On top of that, despite entering their own mercenary and using the tournament as a way to spread their name, they claimed there was a chance Mabel could win and charged us extra. Mind you, the Hero is extremely important to this country's future. That goes to show what they think of the empire. Anyway, that's why I used you to bring them down a peg. They lost both Mabel and their prized creation. Serves them right."

"You didn't think I might lose to Kyle?"

"Despite how it might look, I've lived a long life," the headmistress said, the corners of her mouth curved into a smile. "I've got a good feeling for how strong people are. Your potential rivals that of the Hero. You already possess considerable strength. It's almost frightening. You might even surpass the Hero—no, let me not get ahead of myself. There's no talent in the world that surpasses the Hero."

"Anyway, enough about that. There's actually just one thing I wanted to ask you," I said quietly. "What are you planning on doing with Mabel? I don't imagine this plan was just to pull one over on the Lugrock Company. There was a reason you wanted Mabel—what is it?"

The headmistress chuckled. "What are you going to do with that information?"

"Nothing in particular. If it's a sad reason, then I'll just feel bad for her. But I do have some decency, so if there's any way I can help her, I might do it."

"Ha ha ha, that's frightening in itself. Well then, what do you think the reason is?"

I furrowed my brows. "To strengthen the academy's internal defenses? Hired guards don't know the full extent of the situation. It's possible there could be a spy mixed in with the first-years, so you need a student capable of protecting Amyu."

"Not a bad theory. However, don't you think that the demons' attention will be directed away from the school moving forward? The fact that you—

someone who clearly doesn't match the oracle's description—won the tournament means the academy has more capable personnel than they thought. They can't say for sure that the disappearance of their assassin and spy last year was the work of the Hero anymore."

"If that's not correct, then what's the real reason?"

After a moment of silence, the headmistress looked down and mumbled quietly. "I took pity on her."

I just looked at her silently.

"You may not believe me, but it's the truth. Try as you might, you're not getting any better answer out of me. The government wanted to drop the plan. We'd finally found someone to serve as the Hero's body double, but if we couldn't make her win the tournament, there was no point. They wanted to reject the Lugrock Company's ridiculous terms and return to the drawing board. I agreed—at least until I met Mabel."

"…"

"She was a talented girl, yet she wore the face of someone who'd experienced all sorts of misfortune. Given she was scheduled to be killed by her beloved older brother, I can hardly blame her. But she told me that she would win—that she wanted to put her brother to rest. With dead eyes, she asked me to use her to kill her brother. And I thought that was wrong."

"…"

"So I persuaded the government officials, signed a contract with the company, and knowing that Mabel would never withdraw, I formulated a plan to use our wild card, a certain Seika Lamprogue," the headmistress explained. "That was also why I chose your servant as another potential candidate. If you declined, you'd be worried about her having to participate, wouldn't you? It's a classic merchant trick. Live long enough and you become less attached to things. Money, fame, power—even life itself. However, attachment to helping others is hard to let go of. Maybe that's why I'm in this position. Though I doubt you'd understand yet."

"No, I..." I let my voice trail off. I was probably a lot like her when I took in

orphans in my past life. I even lost my attachment to the strength I had once possessed when I reincarnated—no, when I was defeated by my disciple and lost that strength. I took a deep breath and asked the headmistress a question. "Mabel was worried about the Lugrock Company sending assassins after her. They can't ignore someone who knows their inner workings, and they're probably mad about losing Kyle, wouldn't you say?"

"We're prepared for that. Baron Crane has close ties to the imperial court, and his wife is the third daughter of a duke. Mabel may only be their adopted daughter, but the Lugrock Company would be ruined if they went after her. I heard they showed up with a bunch of money asking for her back but were turned away at the gate. I don't think there's anything to worry about." The headmistress added one more thing. "Lugrock only started building its strength these past few years. When an upstart is suddenly humbled, they tend to grow timid. I expect them to behave themselves, at least for a while."

"You think so? Then I guess there's nothing for me to do," I said.

"What are you talking about?" the headmistress asked, seemingly taken aback. "Assassins were never the issue. The important thing is how she's going to proceed. She's about to begin a school life she isn't familiar with. As her upperclassman, it's your job to help her."

"I'm aware." On that note, I turned to leave. The conversation was basically over. In my head, I let out a sigh. *In hindsight, I shouldn't have gotten so involved. I should have declined to join the tournament and separated myself from Mabel's death and the headmistress's expectations. That would have been my ideal outcome. Letting unnecessary curiosity get the best of me was a failure on my part. That said, I don't regret it.*

That moment, a trivial question popped into my head, and I turned back around to face the headmistress. "By the way, you said you've lived a long time. How old are you really?"

"Don't ask a woman her age, you rude little brat. I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to," she practically spat. "I stopped counting after three hundred."



A month later, we'd all returned to our normal lives. Students I passed

glanced at me as I headed to the cafeteria in the morning, and I could faintly hear them whispering.

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"Th-That's him."

"It's Lamprogue."

"The one who won the combat tournament in the capital?"

"They say he blew his opponent away without a trace in the finals."

"With a sword?! No way."

"He's kinda cute, don't you think?"
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I sighed internally. It's been like this ever since I got back, though I guess it's an improvement. There are definitely some misunderstandings, but they aren't too bad for me. I can ignore them. If nothing else, it beats people gossiping about me behind my back like last year. The rumors will die down eventually.

When I reached the cafeteria, I surveyed the room and soon found the people I was looking for. Amyu, Yifa, and Mabel were sitting at a table and talking with a book from the library open in front of them. I figured they'd be here. Yifa had told me that she and Amyu sometimes studied in the cafeteria during the morning, so I'd had a hunch. Approaching them from behind, I called out to one girl in particular. "Oh Mabel!"

"Eek!" Mabel jumped out of her seat with a look of shock on her face and tried to run away in a panic, but I grabbed her hand.

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"Hey, no running."
"No, no!" she shouted.
"S-Seika?"
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"How long have you been there?" Yifa and Amyu both noticed me for the first time.

"I have some business with Mabel," I said.

"W-Well, I don't have any with you."

"Too bad. Why didn't you show up yesterday? I was waiting the whole time."

"I-I don't wanna study with you anymore," Mabel said with tears in her eyes. "That's all I do! It's just study, study, study! On days I have classes I study until late at night, and on days I don't, I do nothing *but* study! It's been like this all month! E-Even the training facility had days off!"

"You have to catch up. Not only are you half a month behind because of the tournament, but you can't even answer questions from the entrance exam. You have to work extra hard."

"B-But..." Mabel cast her moist eyes down. "I've never had a reason to study until now..."

"Mabel." I sighed and put my hand on her shoulder. "None in this world are immune to being held back a grade."

"Don't say that like it's some kind of proverb! Besides, you have no business barging into the girls' dorm and staying until late at night!"

"The headmistress told the dorm leader to give me permission. I could continue tutoring you until morning if I felt like it." That said, I couldn't actually go anywhere besides the lounge.

"Y-Yifa. Help me," Mabel pleaded, turning pale. Mabel had warmed up to Yifa in a flash. Yifa must have been nice to her in the dorms.

Yifa gave Mabel a smile reminiscent of the Holy Mother I'd learned about in the West, then turned to me. "Seika, are you going easy on her? Look at how much energy she had. I'm sure Mabel can work even harder."

"N-No way... Yifa?" Mabel looked at Yifa with pleading eyes as though in disbelief that she'd been forsaken. The Holy Mother's smile still on her face, Yifa stared right back at her. Her gaze seemed somewhat distant.

"It's okay, Mabel. Humans can endure incredible hardship. Study, sleep, eat, study again. Until that's all you're doing, you can work even harder."

"I-I'm scared..."

"What kind of hell have you been through?" Amyu asked Yifa.

"It wasn't easy," Yifa said, staring blankly into space. Although it might have just been my imagination, it seemed like there wasn't any light in her eyes.

"Studying while working at the mansion was hard, but I could handle it. I could take breaks, move my body, and relax. But when the entrance exams got close and I was exempted from my work, I couldn't do that anymore." Yifa chuckled. "I spent the entire time studying. The other servants were annoyed at first, but pretty soon they started taking pity on me. They all cried the day I left."

Mabel and Amyu were silent.

"It's all thanks to Seika that I was able to work so hard. Thank you so much," Yifa said, a halo practically forming above her head.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, you're welcome."

"That's it?! That's all you have to say?!" Amyu shouted.

"It was only studying. We just didn't have much time until the exam." Everyone was so overdramatic. "Anyway, Mabel. I'm coming to the girls' dorm after class again today. Since you skipped yesterday, you're going to have to work even harder these next few days."

"N-No... I don't wanna end up like Yifa..." Mabel whined.

"Try to be reasonable," said Amyu.

After negotiating with Mabel's counsel, Amyu, I decided to give her at least two days off a month. Her efficiency had been starting to slip, so it was probably a good idea. Mabel's academy life had only just begun.

Chapter 2

Act 1

Three months had passed since the chaotic Imperial Combat Tournament, and summer had arrived. Sitting on the bed in my dorm room with the window open, I skimmed through a letter that had been delivered to me.

"Is it from the people in that mansion, Master Seika?" Yuki looked down at the letter from my shoulder and asked a question. She couldn't read this world's writing yet.

I nodded. "Yeah, it's from my father."

"Hearing you call that young guy your father kinda gives me the creeps."

"Don't be like that. I owe Blaise a lot." Particularly because being a noble got me a private dorm room. I was quite grateful to be able to talk with Yuki and leave my exorcism tools lying around.

"So, what's it say?" Yuki asked, pulling herself together. "Does he want you to come home during your break?" As she said, summer break had just begun at the academy. Many students used this opportunity to go home and visit their families.

Last year I had come up with some excuse to stay in the dorms. There was no real reason to go home, and I hated traveling long distances by carriage. I had gotten used to the shaking at this point, but it was still exhausting. However, the letter wasn't asking me to return home. "No, he says he wants me to investigate a dragon," I answered, shaking my head.

"A dragon?" Yuki asked, clearly confused.

"Supposedly, humans live alongside a dragon in the former capital of one of the empire's vassal states, a kingdom named Astilia. I'm told that a large dragon built a nest in the mountains near the city and that the entirety of the city falls within its territory. Yet it never attacks the residents—in fact, it's worked with the city's guards to fight off bandits and enemy countries in the past."

"Neat," Yuki said, surprisingly interested. "I'm an ayakashi that lives alongside humans, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. What's going on with the dragon?"

"Apparently, it's been acting strange recently."

"Strange how?"

"It's been doing things like attacking humans and occasionally killing livestock."

"Hmm..." Yuki tilted her head. "Honestly, that sounds like normal behavior. Even a dragon will attack the fattest animal around when it gets hungry."

"Not quite. Although monsters in this world are very similar to animals, they're still a type of spirit. So long as there's enough magical power in the earth, they can survive without eating just like ayakashi." That was the conclusion I had drawn from the various books I'd read. "Astilia's dragon never attacked animals until now, nor did it show any hostility to humans. That's why the people of the city are concerned."

"Huh." Yuki gave a lifeless reply. It was a common occurrence for someone to think they had tamed a wild animal, only for it to bare its fangs at them. "So why are you the one being asked to do the investigation?"

"To put it simply, I'm supposed to see if the dragon is under control," I said. "Dragons are just about the most powerful monsters this world has. If it becomes uncontrollable, then it's not just Astilia's problem. The empire would suffer severe damage if it were to fly this direction. I've been asked to head there and determine if it's a threat."

"When did you become the government's errand boy?"

"That's not it," I explained. "This is a request from Blaise. Astilian legislators, not imperial bureaucrats, asked him to carry out an investigation. They probably thought it would be best to invite an envoy from the empire themselves before the imperial government could convene and make an issue of it. Which is why they chose an influential nobleman who's well-known as a researcher."

"Why a researcher? Isn't this more of a political issue?"

"If they owe a debt to a politician, they might be expected to repay it in the assembly later on. Blaise, on the other hand, keeps his distance from politics, and his being a researcher adds legitimacy to the investigation. It was convenient for them in a number of ways. In addition, he's often in the capital for academic conferences, making him easy to approach."

"Human society is a real pain," Yuki grumbled.

I'd been uninterested in politics in my past life, so I'd never had conversations like this before either. Reading into Astilia's actions a little more, it was likely that they'd already devised a means of dealing with the dragon problem. If they hadn't, inviting an investigation would just be digging their own grave.

"Still, I don't get why that youngster is making you do it," Yuki said, unsatisfied about something. "You're just a student."

"It's probably because I'm the only one available. Think about it—Blaise is always busy, Luft has his hands full learning to govern our territory, and Gly can't leave the military base he's stationed at. I'm sure the rest of our relatives are busy with their own jobs or territories too. Meanwhile, I'm a student on summer break. I'm not going home, so I've got an entire month free."

"That's the reason?"

"Even if that's the real reason behind it, it sounds good for him to say he entrusted the task to his talented son. Particularly when that son is one of the top students at the academy and even won a combat tournament." I was probably a little *too* outstanding. It might be better for me to take a step back in the future.

"What are you gonna do? If you're trying to avoid standing out, I think you should turn the request down."

"No, I'll go," I said, despite just thinking I should take a step back. "You're correct, but I've been wanting to see what other countries are like. It's better than being told to return home. I'm also curious about the dragon."

"That last part is the real reason, isn't it?" Yuki said, clearly unenthused. "Just try not to go overboard, Master Seika."

"What do you mean?"

"It's fine to have hobbies, but moderation is key. Please don't lock yourself in the basement running experiments for three days straight like you did in your past life. Everyone thought you'd gone missing."

"I know, I know," I answered, waving her off. Yuki seemed to think that in addition to researching sorcery, my hobbies included biological and scientific experiments. Granted, they were sort of like a hobby, but they had useful results.



"On that note, I'll be heading to the Kingdom of Astilia during summer break." It was lunchtime at the cafeteria, and I was sitting at a table with Yifa, Amyu, and Mabel.

"Investigating a dragon, huh? That sounds fun. I've never seen a dragon before. Can I come with you?" Amyu asked as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

"What are you talking about?" I replied in astonishment. "Aren't you going back home to your family?"

"My family doesn't live far from Lodonea. I could go home whenever."

"Don't say that. You should see your family while you have the chance."

"I'm not sure how seriously I should take that since it's coming from you. But yeah, I will. I already asked for a carriage anyway."

"In that case," Mabel chimed in, raising her hand. "I don't have any plans. I'll carry your stuff and be your bodyguard." The look on her face said she really wanted to go.

It was surprising, but she'd been more cheerful lately and seemed to be getting used to her life at the academy, so maybe she was looking for a little adventure. That said, I had to turn her down. "You do have plans."

She looked at me in confusion.

"Studying. Are you doing the assignments I gave you? If you can't keep up with your classes when the new semester starts, you're going right back to it."

"I-I'm diligently working on them," Mabel said, averting her eyes.

"Besides, shouldn't you return to your family too?" I added. "Your parents probably want to see you."

"Hmm... All right, then," she relented.

Turning away from the nodding Mabel, I caught Yifa fidgeting for some reason. "Yifa, will you be coming?"

"Huh?!" she exclaimed.

"It's going to be a long trip and will probably take up most of the break, so I won't force you."

"I-I'll go! I thought you were going to tell me I couldn't come either," Yifa said, laughing awkwardly.

"They gave me permission to bring a single servant." I felt a little bad after I said that. Even though I wasn't going home, I couldn't let Yifa head back on her own. She probably wanted to see her father, so I felt guilty for getting in the way of that. Granted, since Yifa's father was even busier than Blaise, there was no guarantee she'd get to see him even if she went home.

"So, when are you leaving?" Amyu asked.

"The plan is to depart the day after tomorrow."

"That's pretty quick."

"It's going to take a while, and summer break is only a month," I explained. "So we need to hurry."

"Did you arrange for a carriage already?"

"They're taking care of that."

"Who's 'they'?"

"Some bigwig in Astilia," I explained. "He was just visiting the capital and said he'd stop by Lodonea on the way back. We'll be heading to Astilia with his convoy."

"Convoy?" Amyu asked, cocking an eyebrow. "That seems like a bit much. If you're taking the highway, you shouldn't have to worry about bandits or

monsters."

Amyu made a good point. When traveling the main roads, even merchant caravans only brought a few guards. The empire's highway system was essentially a bunch of military roads connecting distant cities for easy movement of troops. Monsters along the roads were regularly eliminated to ensure safety, and bandits didn't dare go near. This time, however, the situation was a little different.

"We don't really have a choice. He's got a position to maintain."

Amyu looked confused.

"That Astilian bigwig I mentioned is actually—" As I was speaking, a commotion broke out in the back of the cafeteria. A particularly loud voice reached my ears.

"So this is the place. Thank you for guiding me. But I must say, it's rather plain. Oh, is that right? If the building is old, why not simply rebuild it?"

"My lord."

"Oh, pardon me. Ignore what I just said. That's him? You have my thanks. We can take it from here, can't we, Lize? What's wrong? Aren't you coming?"

I turned to see what was causing such a stir and found an extravagantly dressed boy standing there. He seemed to be in his late teens. From his refined appearance and elegant demeanor, it was clear he was of noble lineage. He had a bodyguard with him as well. The tall demihuman woman with pointed ears standing next to him looked quite skilled. It was obvious they were the source of the commotion.



Wait, are they...? As I was taken aback, the boy spoke to me with a smile.

"Hey there. Are you Lord Seika?"

I froze up for a second before collecting myself and standing up. Putting a smile on my face, I spoke with a formal tone reserved for nobility. "Yes. It's an honor to meet you. You arrived ahead of schedule, Prince Cecilio Astilia." Behind me, the girls started whispering.

"Who is that?"

"Seika just called him 'Prince.'"

My smile strained, I continued. "You didn't have to come to a place like this—I would have come to you. The cafeteria is hardly a fitting location to welcome the first prince of the Kingdom of Astilia."

"It's fine. I'm the one who asked the academy to guide me here," the prince said with a cheerful smile. "I wanted to take a look around the imperial magic academy while we were here to pick you up. This building seems like it has quite the storied history. The students here also seem quite outstanding. My goodness!" Cecilio cut himself off. His eyes were locked on Yifa, who was sitting next to me. "What is your name?"

"Huh?! Um...I'm Yifa," she answered, frozen stiff.

The prince got on one knee in front of her and took her hand, his eyes blazing with passion. "How lovely. Would you join my harem?"

Excuse me?



Yifa looked at me in bewilderment, unsure what to say. Unfortunately, I was also at a loss.

"The ruler of Astilia is my mother, the queen. The current harem is nominally open to me as the first in line to the throne. You must be an intelligent and refined woman to be receiving an education at such a prestigious academy, Yifa. For the sake of both myself and my country, I would like to invite you to join the harem."

Yifa finally understood the situation. She hung her head, but her voice was clear. "I-I'm sorry... I'm Master Seika's slave, so I can't do that."

"So you're not a student of the academy?"

"N-No, I am."

"Then you must be a talented woman after all. There's no problem," the prince concluded. "Lord Seika, I'll buy her for whatever price you name. Is a payment in my country's gold coins acceptable?"

Still dumbfounded, I barely managed to open my mouth to speak. "U-Um, well..."

"My lord." That was all the demihuman woman said in her cold voice. The prince's expression immediately turned awkward.

"I know, Lize. Pardon me, Lord Seika. That isn't the purpose of our meeting today. Let me get to the point."

"In that case, we should change locations, Your Highness," I suggested. "We'll draw too much attention here. We should borrow one of the academy's private rooms. This way." As we walked, I thought to myself, *Is there something wrong with this quy?*



The headmistress had been informed of the prince's visit in advance, so we were able to borrow a reception room without any difficulty. Inside, we sat facing each other. For some reason, Yifa was nervously sitting next to me—no, there was a reason. The prince had requested her presence.

Anyway, forget about that for now. Pulling myself together, I opened my mouth to speak. "To start with, can you inform me of the situation in the former capital?"

"Indeed, that's a good place to begin, Lord Seika."

"Before that, Your Highness, there's no need to call me 'Lord.' I haven't inherited my father's title, nor do I intend to do so."

"I see. Then Seika it is. We seem to be close in age, so I'd feel more comfortable that way," the prince said with a smile. Both his speed and conduct

were refined. "Now, do you know where exactly the former capital is located?"

"Approximately half a day to the west by carriage from the capital, Asta, there is a city named Protoasta." As I recalled, that was the name of the former capital. The name meant "past capital of Astilia."

The prince nodded. "Although its influence has waned since the capital was relocated around a century ago, Protoasta remains a major city in our country. Since the relocation of the capital, it has been custom for the next in line to the throne to serve as its head. That's the reason I was visiting the imperial capital and why I'm meeting with you today."

That's unexpected. I thought he was just serving as an envoy, but the prince is actually in charge of the former capital. While it's not a custom I ever encountered in my past life, it makes sense to give your country's future leader experience governing before they take the throne.

"And Astilia's dragon lived with the people there for over a hundred years before the capital was even relocated," the prince continued. "It resides in the mountains right next to the city."

"That's incredible." I was genuinely surprised. I couldn't think of any cases in my previous life where a powerful spirit had lived alongside people for over two hundred years. With the exception of guardian deities, it was difficult for such beings to coexist with humans.

The prince nodded respectfully. "Indeed. Together with our ancestors, the dragon once repelled an enemy army approaching the capital. But as you've likely heard from Lord Blaise, it's been behaving strangely for the past year or so."

"Around a year, huh? I was told it's been attacking livestock and people."

"Correct." The prince nodded solemnly. "It hasn't done any severe damage. The attacks on livestock have been limited to a few sheep that strayed away from the herd while grazing. As for the attacks on people, it was only a single outsider who climbed the mountain without realizing the dragon lived there. The dragon didn't attempt to eat them—their injuries came from losing their footing on a cliff while fleeing. Still, the dragon has never done anything like this before, and it's clearly on edge. It's gotten even worse as of late and has started

behaving threateningly towards city residents who venture outside the walls."

"Can the dragon differentiate between people who live in the city and people who don't?"

"It can. It probably remembers the faces it's seen. Although it never lands within the city walls, it often used to land in the nearby fields and pastures where it would seemingly doze off. It never minded people getting close to it. That said, many travelers and merchants from other cities claim it would glare at them and pursue them from the sky."

"Interesting." Is it wary of outsiders invading its territory? However, that wouldn't explain why it accepts the people inside its territory already. "Why did Astilia's dragon refrain from attacking people in the first place? I don't get the impression that dragons are monsters which live alongside humans from the books I've read."

"To be honest, I don't know. Supposedly it's been that way since long ago," the prince answered. "There's a legend that says the dragon's egg was hatched by a past queen of Astilia."

"A human hatched a dragon egg?"

"It's only a legend. I've heard of dragon eggs occasionally popping up for sale at the market, but never of anybody successfully hatching one."

Reptile eggs usually hatch without any special effort. I figured dragons would be similar, but maybe not.

"Although the damage isn't severe, it's not a situation we can take lightly either," the prince said, his tone serious. "The livestock are frightened, which hinders their grazing, and traveling merchants are avoiding the city. There's a growing sense of unease among the people. And of course, there's also the empire's watchful eye." The prince looked directly at me. "I would like you to see the situation for yourself, Seika," he said with a grave expression.

Ostensibly, he had the higher position, but in reality, I was the one who held all the power. My report would determine how the situation in Astilia would be handled. Judging from the way he spoke, it seemed like Astilia did indeed have a plan in place to resolve the issue. "Of course, Your Highness," I replied with a

smile. "The duty given to me by my father is to conduct an academic investigation, analysis, and report." I stated the mutually understood official stance. It was an attempt to convey my intention to view the situation neutrally, and the prince's expression softened.

"I appreciate that. As it so happens, I have an interest in academic analysis myself. Do you have any thoughts on the situation at this point in time?"

"Let's see..." I thought to myself for a moment. There were a few things that had caught my attention, but I didn't have enough information to make any solid claims. "No, not at the moment. I think I'd like to head there and see if there are any detailed records first."

"I see. How about you, Yifa?" The prince shifted his focus to Yifa, who had been silent this entire time.

"H-Huh? Me?" Yifa asked, clearly shaken.

"Do you have any thoughts?"

"I... If Master Seika doesn't know, then I don't think..."

The prince smiled at her. "Don't worry about your master. I'm asking for your opinion."

"Uh... Hmm..." Yifa thought for a moment, then spoke up. "Um, I'm really not sure. Has anything like this ever happened in the past?"

"Hmm." The prince put his hand on his chin and thought. "I haven't heard of anything, but it might be worth reviewing the historical records. Thank you, Yifa. I hope to rely on your insight in the future as well."

"O-Of course..."

"How about we have dinner tonight? Seika can join us as well, and we can have a nice, long talk—"

"My lord," the demihuman woman standing next to the prince said flatly. "That will interfere with your escort. Have some restraint." The prince made an unhappy face. Regardless of whether she was a servant or a bodyguard, she seemed to have serious influence over him. She was a tall woman with green eyes and silver hair that looked as soft as silk. Given her pointed ears, it was

likely she was an elf.

Elves were a race that excelled with bows and magic. I could sense an appropriately powerful flow of energy within her. The thing that concerned me was the wary way she'd been looking at me ever since she'd entered the cafeteria. It was different from a bodyguard's typical alertness. If anything, I would say it was closer to how I had often been looked at in my past life. Her eyes were filled with apprehension. Why is that? Has she sensed my power? We only just met.

"I know, Lize." With the bitter look still on his face, the prince responded to the elf. "Sorry, Seika. My bodyguard is a bit of a worrywart."

"It's no problem at all."

"Well, I should be on my way. I'll see you again when we depart."

"Of course, Your Highness." The prince and his elven bodyguard exited the cafeteria. Once they were gone, I let out a sigh and sunk back into my chair. This sort of thing is exhausting. It reminds me of when I was a government official humbling myself before powerful nobles. That had been a real pain. It was one of the reasons I had all but fled the Bureau of Exorcists.

"I didn't say anything rude, did I?" Yifa asked uneasily, still standing. "Is everything gonna be okay?"

"Huh? You were fine. I thought your take on the situation was quite reasonable as well." Similar cases from the past were the first thing we should look for. From there, we would be able to deduce what might happen next and devise a strategy to handle it. Judging from the prince's demeanor, however, I doubted he had done that.

Looking back on that conversation irritated me a little. Seriously, is there something wrong with that prince? Doesn't he think it's a little rude to dismiss the master and ask for a servant's opinion? And is now really the time to be inviting someone else's slave to your harem and trying to buy them? Actually, he's got some nerve making a move on another woman when he has a female servant with him. I couldn't help but feel he wasn't a particularly stand-up man.

"Uh, Yifa... You don't have to force yourself to come with me on this trip."

"Huh? How come? It's no trouble. I'm your servant, so I should come with you."

"Right..." was all I could muster in response. Yifa looked at me blankly. *Oh well.*

The prince seemed to understand his position, and both his language and mannerisms were polished. It probably wasn't fair to call him completely incompetent. Though he was from a vassal state, he was still royalty and first in line to the throne. He had both status and wealth. Getting on his good side had its advantages. Yifa would certainly be treated well in his harem. As a marriage partner, there wasn't anything particularly objectionable about him.

I glanced over at Yifa. She had grown quite beautiful in my opinion. She was popular with the male students at the academy as well, so it wasn't a surprise that a foreign prince had fallen for her at first sight. She would turn fifteen this year—that would make her an adult in this world as well. It was about time for her to decide what she was going to do with her future. It'd be sad to part ways with her, but making connections with a foreign country wasn't a bad thing. If it was what she desired, I was open to the idea of marrying her off to Astilia.



On my way back to the boys' dorm, I was suddenly pulled into the bushes.

"Come quietly."

"You're gonna tell us everything."

I looked up and saw Mabel and Amyu covering my mouth. I had known they were waiting for me, but I hadn't expected all of this.

"What'd you talk about with that prince?" Amyu demanded.

"The dragon and the situation in the former capital. Same thing we talked about at lunch," I answered after Mabel removed her hand from my mouth.

Amyu frowned. "I don't care about that. I'm asking about Yifa. You brought her with you, didn't you?"

"Oh, right."

"That's it? Are you actually planning on selling her?!" Amyu demanded.

"No, no. We really just talked about the dragon. I don't have anything else to tell you."

"Really?"

"It's true. His Highness does seem quite taken with Yifa, though," I admitted.

The two girls exchanged glances, then Mabel asked me a question. "You're really not gonna sell Yifa?"

"I'm not. Do you have that little faith in me?"

"That's not it, but..." Mabel's voice trailed off.

"That said"—I stood up and dusted off my clothes—"if it's what Yifa wants, I'll set her free. It would be difficult to do in the empire since she'd need an adult guardian, but that isn't the case in Astilia."

"In Astilia... Are you talking about letting her join the harem?"

"If she wants to accept the prince's offer, then yes."

"Are you crazy? She'd never agree to that."

"How do you know?" An accusatory tone unintentionally slipped into my voice. "Yifa will be an adult this year. It's not every day you get an invitation from royalty. She can decide her own future. It's not our place to get in the way of that."

The two girls had conflicted expressions on their faces, and Mabel timidly spoke up. "I get where you're coming from, but don't say that to Yifa. I think it'd make her sad."

"Why would it make her sad?" I asked. "Besides, if I don't tell her, she might be concerned about me and not speak up."

"Please."

"All right. But it's a different story if she brings it up herself."

"That's fine," Mabel replied. Amyu looked like she still had something she wanted to say, but Mabel gave her a push on the back and they left.

I'm sure they're just worried about Yifa. I definitely wouldn't want to force her to join some good-for-nothing prince's harem. You two have nothing to worry

about. I'll respect her decision.

Amyu and Mabel were more than capable of living on their own, and I was confident Yifa was too. It was fine if she wanted to build her career at the academy, but there were other options available to her. Some of my disciples, despite their talents, had chosen their own paths. They'd lived and died happily, and I wasn't going to criticize their decisions.

Act 2

Two days later, Yifa and I departed Lodonea with the prince's convoy. The Kingdom of Astilia was even farther away than the Lamprogue family's territory, so it was going to be a long trip.

Yifa was sitting next to me, clearly worried. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. I've become more accustomed to this," I replied with a grimace. I'd ridden in enough carriages to build up a little tolerance. It still wasn't comfortable, but as long as the road didn't get too bumpy, I'd be okay.

"You can go to sleep again if it gets bad. I'll wake you up if anything happens."

"I will if I need to. But I'm not really tired yet."

"You're not? Oh, I guess it is just the first day."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's nothing." Yifa shook her head and gave a slight smile. "When we rode together in the past, you couldn't sleep at any of the inns along the way, right? I was just thinking that was probably why you slept in the carriage during the day."

"Oh... You noticed, huh?" Inns in smaller cities and villages usually just had a single large room where everyone slept. That made it hard to get a good night's rest, especially when you had valuables and a young woman with you. Hence why I'd had to remain vigilant all night when we'd left the family's territory last year. However, it wasn't the reason I had stayed awake. If that was all there had been to it, I could have just had my shikigami handle it.

The reason I'd stayed awake was simply because I didn't like feeling motion sick and wanted to sleep through it. Granted, sleeping through it was the reason I hadn't gotten used to it until the seventh and final day.

"You don't need to worry about it," I assured her. "I actually preferred it to

being awake in the carriage."

"Okay..." It was the truth, but I didn't think it was possible for Yifa to not care. That was probably why she was so beloved in the girls' dorm.

"Anyway, we shouldn't have to worry about inns this time. A convoy of this size has to have made preparations ahead of time." He was a prince, after all. Although there were so many of us that we might have to sleep outside, even that was preferable to a rural inn. "It's not often that you get to visit a foreign country on such favorable terms. We owe the dragon a thank-you."

"The dragon, huh? I can't believe it's really living alongside people. That's amazing," Yifa said cheerfully, looking up at the sky. "I wonder if people can ride it like a dragon knight."

"You've always liked that sort of thing. Dragon knights are just fairy tales. Riding a dragon isn't actually possible."

"Yeah, but this one actually gets along with people."

"That isn't the issue." As I'd learned from my ayakashi, flying on winged creatures was difficult. When riding ayakashi, I chose ones that flew using their supernatural powers instead, like Mizuchi. As I was pondering how to explain that, Yifa suddenly remembered something.

"That reminds me—before we left, Cecilio invited me to ride in his carriage with him."

"Huh?!"

"He said he wanted to talk about the dragon more in-depth."

"D-Did he now?" That prince... He wants to talk about the dragon but doesn't mention a word about it to me? No, I get it. It's just an excuse to talk to Yifa. Even if he doesn't mean it, he could at least show me a little respect. Besides, is now really the time? My face stiffened up. "And what did you say?"

"I turned him down, of course. I'm your servant," Yifa said with an awkward smile. "I don't know what to do. I don't think he'd seriously invite me to his harem."

"No, I'm pretty sure he's serious."

"You think? That'd make me a little happy," Yifa said bashfully.

The carriage continued on as I sat there full of uncertain feelings.



Nine days later, the walls of our destination appeared before our eyes—the former capital of the Kingdom of Astilia, Protoasta. It sat in the middle of a wide, tranquil grassland, with mountains to its rear. While it seemed a little small for a city that used to be the capital, it did have a certain majesty and historical feel to it. Our carriage came to a stop well before the gates.

"Wh-What happened?" Yifa asked.

"Hmm... It looks like the gate is blocked," I said, poking my head out the window. Several merchant carts were awaiting entry. We seemed to have arrived at a bad time. There were a good number of them—the city seemed to indeed be quite the metropolis.

"Seika." A voice called out to me from outside the carriage. I saw that the prince had left his carriage and walked over to us with a few guards. "My apologies. It seems like we'll have to wait awhile. How about we get some fresh air?"

"That's a good idea." Sticking my head back inside the carriage, I spoke to Yifa next. "Wanna get out?"

"Yeah, let's do it." Yifa exited the carriage first and stretched. "Wow, it's so pretty," she said as she walked through the grass. She was more energetic than I was, but I was sure she was still tired from the long ride.

I talked to the prince, who was standing nearby and watching Yifa. "This is a nice place."

The prince chuckled. "Indeed. I quite like it here. Though it isn't as peaceful as it used to be. The delay to enter isn't helping with that."

"Did something happen?"

"Apparently, the merchants' horses are afraid. Earlier, the—"

At that moment, I sensed a powerful presence. A large shadow appeared as though gliding over the earth. When I looked up at the sky, I couldn't stop my

eyes from going wide.

"That's..." A giant monster soared through the sky, leisurely spreading its wings. Its silhouette resembled a lizard with wings. However, its atmosphere was closer to that of a ryuu. It was a dragon. I'd seen pictures in books before, but this was my first time seeing one in the flesh. Such powerful spirits exist in this world too, huh?

"I see it hasn't left yet," the prince grumbled in annoyance next to me. Noticing my gaze, he began explaining. "It started flying around this area a little while ago. It's probably on guard because so many merchants arrived at once. That's why the horses are scared. It won't attack as long as we don't do anything to provoke it."

"I see." It didn't appear hostile. It seemed like the talk of it living alongside humans was true. Preparing myself just in case, I spoke to the prince. "It's pretty big. Most of the dragons in the books I've read weren't that large." It was over thirty meters long from head to tail.

"I'm told it's a greater dragon. They grow larger than normal."

"Is that right?" I wished he'd mentioned that sooner. Had I known, I could have researched it more thoroughly. *Oh well.* "Is everything going to be okay? There are even more carriages now that we've arrived."

"Don't worry. It might be a little irritated, but it won't—"

Just as it seemed like the dragon was returning to the mountains, its massive body rotated in midair. Losing altitude, it headed straight for us.

"Um, it's coming this way."

"Indeed. It seems rather on edge," the prince said, not the least bit alarmed. Looking around, I saw that his guards were completely relaxed as well. It must have been something that happened all the time.

The dragon descended even further, getting so close that I could see its rugged head and blackened scales. Then, just as it was about to reach us, it flew straight up. Wind struck the canopies of the carriages, and the horses whinnied in fear. A short distance away, Yifa cried out as well and fell on her backside.

"It's like a giant crow defending its nest," I said, watching the dragon's back.

"You're quite brave. Even seasoned adventurers scream before they get used to it." The prince seemed surprised. "But you're correct. It'll leave soon enough if we don't respond."

The dragon once again turned around in midair. However, this time it didn't come as close to the ground. Maybe it would leave after one more try like the prince had said. The dragon approached for the second time—yet this time, I felt a clear flow of power coming from the ground instead.

"Come forth from the scorching earth! Lava tiger!" A man's voice echoed through the air, then an oversized, dark-red beast appeared out of nowhere. The massive creature spread waves of heat as it raced over the grass before leaping into the air. It jumped so high I had to look up to keep track of it—high enough to attack the oncoming dragon.

Its claws and fangs only just barely didn't reach. Seemingly startled, the dragon gave a powerful flap of its wings and flew off towards the mountains. Watching the beast roar at its fleeing foe, I narrowed my eyes. Its dark-red skin was like armor made of minerals and lava. It had a rounded face, the lithe body of a cat, and crude red and black stripes that vaguely resembled a tiger's. However, it was nearly three times as large as the tigers I knew. It was a lava tiger—a monster that ordinarily lived around volcanoes.

"That's not good," I grumbled to myself.

Despite the dragon fleeing, the lava beast hadn't settled down. It let out an angry roar, then lunged at Yifa as though relieving its frustration. Yifa stood frozen in place, her eyes wide with fear. She showed no signs of running or resisting. Frowning, I used one hand to make a hand sign.

Phase of earth: Transparent Barricade. Semitransparent pillars rose up out of the ground and blocked the lava tiger's path. The pouncing tiger snapped at them, but the log-sized pillars didn't budge. No, upon closer inspection, their surface was beginning to melt. The quartz created by Transparent Barricade should have been able to resist the heat of lava, but it seemed that the lava tiger's armor was even hotter than that.

Leaving the prince, I stepped forward. Although I didn't fully understand the

situation, the lava tiger was clearly a threat that needed to be eliminated. Noticing my presence, the beast turned my way. Its red-hot feet kicking off the ground, it charged at me with its fangs bared. Just as I was about to launch a spell from an invisible hitogata, the lava tiger reared back as though yanked by unseen chains.

"Whoa, now. Sheesh, this thing's real quick to go on a rampage." I heard the man's voice again. Looking towards the source, I saw a mage wearing a black robe with several followers in tow. His face was obscured by a large hood, and he had a book open in his right hand.

Is that a grimoire?

"Settle down. That's a breach of contract." Despite its struggling, the beast was unable to move. Whatever magic was binding the lava tiger seemed to be connected to the grimoire. The mage sighed. "Enough. Return." The man closed his book, and the lava tiger turned into particles of light that were then absorbed into its pages.

Now I was certain—he was a summoner. Summoners were backliners who made pacts with monsters, allowing them to summon them freely. The lava tiger was presumably his summon.

"That was a close one. You all right, Prince Cecilio?" the summoner asked casually as he strolled over to us.

"Zect! What do you think you're doing?!" The prince, on the other hand, was furious. "You know the dragon isn't a threat! Why did you sic your summoned beast on it?! You almost got our guest from the empire hurt!"

"Now, that ain't true, Your Highness. I was just savin' you." The man named Zect shrugged his shoulders. "You're the one who hired us. Can't go lettin' my client die. To be honest, I'd prefer you not walk around outside the walls. The situation's changed since you've been gone."

"Changed how?"

"The dragon hasn't been flyin' around as much lately, but in exchange, it's grown real feisty. It's been landin' nearby and roaring at the citizens. Don't ya see you were in danger?"

The prince remained silent.

What's this guy's deal? "Your Highness, who is this?" I asked. The prince turned to face me.

"My apologies, Seika. He's Zect, the leader of a band of mercenaries I hired. Zect, this is Seika Lamprogue, an envoy here to investigate the dragon. He's the son of an imperial count. Take care not to offend him."

"Seriously? He's just a kid. Oh, excuse me. Becomin' an envoy when you're even younger than the prince is just impressive."

Ignoring the man's disrespectful attitude, I asked the prince a question. "A mercenary band? Why would you hire them?"

The prince hesitated a moment, then answered in a somewhat unhappy tone. "To kill the dragon."

Excuse me?



"Kill the dragon?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"That's correct." The prince nodded. "It's the only way to resolve the situation at this point."

Then it hit me—was that the plan Astilia had come up with? "Do you think that's even possible?"

"Yes. You saw it yourself, did you not? Zect's summoned beast drove off the dragon. The dragon fears that monster."

I thought to myself. Although the lava tiger was bigger than a human, it was still far smaller than a greater dragon. Granted, it was true that the dragon had seemed daunted by it. The honey badgers native to India and Africa and wolverines that lived far north of Japan were ferocious enough to face down lions and bears despite their small sizes. It was possible that lava tigers and dragons had a similar relationship. It certainly didn't look like a dragon's fire breath would be effective against the lava tiger's armor. That said, killing it was out of the question. Unlike lions or bears, dragons could fly.

I looked over at Zect and his mercenaries. There were fewer than ten of them

in total. Aside from Zect, they all had swords—I didn't see any other mages. While there might have been a few who weren't present, I couldn't imagine it would make much of a difference.

"I think you should reconsider, Your Highness," I told the prince.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That monster can't kill the dragon. It drove the dragon off because the dragon wasn't looking for conflict, but it wouldn't stand a chance in a real fight. The dragon is far too big, and it can fly. If it came at the lava tiger without fear of injury, it would smash it to pieces. And even that might be preferable to the dragon actually losing. Worst-case scenario, the dragon abandons its nest and flees the kingdom. That may well be what the empire fears the most."

"The little scholar sure does like runnin' his mouth." Zect drew closer to me. From under his hood, I saw sunken cheeks and unhealthily pale skin. "We've killed plenty of dragons! Long as you've got a good plan, you can bring down even the strongest monsters. I'd appreciate you not chimin' in about things outside your area of expertise."

"Pardon me," I said with a bright smile. "It certainly isn't my area of expertise. That said, I'm sure there's an etiquette to monster extermination. If you're such an expert, you should exercise a little more prudence. That stunt you pulled earlier was dangerous. You're lucky I was able to stop your summon."

"Ha! So that earth magic was you, huh? I had it under control without you doin' anything."

"Under control? You misunderstand me." My next words practically dripped with sarcasm. "I'm telling you not to carelessly bring out your precious summon in front of me. I very nearly turned it into charcoal."

"Huh?"

"That wouldn't be very good for your business, would it?"

Zect's face twitched as he saw my smile. "Turn my lava tiger into charcoal? You've got a big mouth, kid."

"Enough of this!" The prince broke us up. "Zect! I told you to be respectful!

We're done here! Head back!"

Zect clicked his tongue. "Yeah, yeah. As you wish, Your Highness. This ain't our job anyway."

The prince watched Zect and his mercenaries head to the city, then turned back around to me. "You too, Seika. Don't provoke that ruffian."

"My apologies. My servant was put in danger, so I couldn't help myself." Hearing that, the prince went silent. I sighed, then asked him something that had been on my mind. "Getting back on topic, does your plan to kill the dragon have the support of the queen and the people?"

"Uh, well..."

"The dragon is basically the symbol of Astilia. Do Her Majesty and your people approve of attacking the neighbor who's lived with you for so long?"

"That doesn't matter," the prince said, as though trying to convince himself. "I'm the one in charge of Protoasta. Handling this situation is my duty."

"Is that Her Majesty's will?"

"My authority is defined by the law. The law takes precedence over the queen's will."

A constitutional government, huh? It's a fine system, but this shows one of its flaws.

"I'm sure my mother and the people will understand."

"Still..."

"Seika," the prince said firmly. "This is Protoasta and my kingdom's problem. It isn't your responsibility. I'd prefer you didn't interject."

"You're correct. I apologize for overstepping my bounds."

"I'll resolve the dragon problem. All you need to do is watch and report back."

"I suppose so." I don't like this. The prince is clearly acting on his own and not thinking things through. That mercenary band is suspicious as well. However, now isn't the time to say anything more. Oh well. For now, I guess I'll do the other thing I need to do.

"Yifa." I turned to face Yifa, who had returned to us. She didn't seem to be injured. That was good, but...

"I-I'm here. What is it? Oh, thanks for—"

"Why didn't you use your magic?"

"Huh?" My stern tone caught Yifa off guard, and she fumbled over her words.

"Why did you hesitate? You very nearly died."

"Uh, I was just surprised..."

"Are you going to let being surprised kill you? Or did you think someone would save you?"

"S-Seika?!" Cecilio interjected. "I don't think she—"

Ignoring his shock, I continued. "I'm not always going to be by your side. What are you going to do when you're in danger and I'm not around?"

Yifa didn't say anything.

"I told you, this is a dragon investigation in a foreign country. I thought you were smart enough to understand the risks. Was I wrong to think I could bring you along just because you're good at magic?"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Seika! What did she do to deserve that?! Anybody would freeze up when attacked by a frightening monster. Don't worry about it, Yifa. You're a woman, so—"

"So what?" I shot the prince a sidelong glare. "Your Highness, this is a conversation between Yifa and me. It isn't your responsibility. Isn't that right?"

"B-But..."

"Yifa, I'm not going to tell you you have to defend yourself from here out, but at least use your magic. No, you don't even have to do that. Just running away and asking someone for help would be good enough. All I want is for you to take action of some kind. I'll protect you until you can manage on your own. Got it?"

"O-Okay..." Yifa said sadly. I patted her head.

"I think that was a little harsh, Seika. Yifa is a woman. Why are you making her learn how to fight?"

"You just keep going on about that, huh? She's strong. What merit is there in not being able to wield that power when you need to?"

The prince didn't respond.

"The area in front of the gate looks like it's cleared up now. We should head back to the carriage. Let's go, Yifa."

"R-Right," she answered in a tearful voice. I took her hand and walked with her to the carriage. I did feel a little bad about what I'd said, but it had to be done. Anyone could become subject to fear's paralyzing grip. When it did, what they needed was a strong push on the back so they could move forward.

In my case, it had been when the only other disciple I'd been close to had been devoured right before my eyes. I would never forget that moment. I'd lost myself and sealed that ayakashi away in the other plane. I still used it as a pawn to this day. I didn't want Yifa to experience anything like that.

Transparent Barricade

A spell that creates pillars of quartz. The main component, silicon dioxide, has a melting point of 1,650 degrees Celsius and is very chemically stable and strong. It is also the most abundant compound in the Earth's crust.

Act 3

Protoasta was a bustling city, yet it had a certain historical feel to it. Unlike Lodonea, which was a relatively new city, and the capital, which had been burned down by a large fire in the past, it had many old buildings that were still standing.

I would have liked to do some sightseeing, but I was so exhausted that I didn't have it in me. We didn't eat with the prince—he had his hands full with government affairs that had piled up in his absence, so he told me to go get some rest. I didn't blame him.



The next day, Yifa and I visited a library in the former royal castle. Naturally, our objective was to find records about the dragon. I'd expected to find more books than in Lodonea, but the library was even grander than I'd imagined. It had copies of almost every book in Astilia.

As a result, although finding anything was a chore, we were able to gather even more materials than I'd hoped for. Now I was in the middle of reading through it all. Yifa was helping as well, but because she couldn't read archaic language, progress was slow.

"Where did you learn to read this kind of stuff?" Yifa asked me.

"I found some books in our mansion's library." It was one of the languages I'd picked up as a child. I couldn't speak or understand the archaic tongue, but I could read and write it just fine. Astilia used the empire's official language now, but most of the records from over a century ago used the archaic language. And the older the book, the more unknown information it contained. Some of it seemed rather important.

"Seika, I'm done with my part," Yifa said, after a time. "Have you found anything?" She walked over to me looking quite tired—there were plenty of materials to pore over, even only counting the ones in the official language.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. "It looks like something similar happened around 150 years ago." While the exact date of the Astilian dragon's birth wasn't recorded, it seemed to be several hundred years old. Whether or not its egg had been hatched by the queen was unclear, but what was certain was that it had lived alongside the city's residents for several centuries, establishing its territory on the nearby mountain.

However, that had changed just over two hundred years ago. Another dragon had invaded its territory. Although at first, the Astilian dragon had tried to drive out the unwanted intruder, it hadn't been long before they were living on the mountain together. Astilia's dragon was a male, and the new dragon was a female—they had become a pair. The female dragon showed no interest in the people of the city, and despite being fearful at first, the people had gradually returned to their normal lives.

Yet fifty years later, the dragons' behavior had changed again. The two dragons had become much more wary, attacking livestock that strayed from their herd and intimidating outsiders, much like the dragon was doing now. The people at the time had soon learned why—roughly a year after the strange behavior had begun, baby dragons had been spotted on the mountain.

"So they were raising their babies?" Yifa asked.

"Seems like it." It wasn't unusual for creatures to become more aggressive during spawning and child-rearing. It was possible that the livestock attacks had been because the magical power in the land alone hadn't been enough for the baby dragons to build strength. The dragons' spawning was divided over several seasons, and the earlier-born dragons could be seen raising the later-born ones. Once the dragons grew larger, they would leave the nest. Although where they went wasn't recorded, they had seemed to be headed to faraway lands.

Another fifty years after the baby dragons had all left the nest, the female dragon had passed away. According to the records, it had been a natural death. I wasn't sure if monsters had lifespans, but ayakashi like kuda-gitsune died soon after giving birth. It was possible dragons were similar.

After that, the Astilian dragon had grown considerably more mellow. The size of its territory had shrunk, and it'd stopped attacking monsters and the city's

enemies. That had been around a century ago. It was also the reason Astilia had become the empire's vassal. The demons were beginning to invade, and several of their forts had fallen. No longer able to rely on their capital's invincible guardian, Astilia had formed a close relationship with the imperial family and put itself under the empire's protection, inviting the empire's army into its borders.

They had essentially submitted to the empire's rule, but it had been better than being invaded. The demons' army had given up and retreated, so it seemed to have paid off. Not long after, the capital had been moved for administrative reasons. The land still belonged to the king, and it became customary for a member of the royal family to be chosen to govern Protoasta. Now that member was Prince Cecilio. The dragon had silently watched over the city's changes all this time—at least until recently.

"I had no idea..." said Yifa. "But that doesn't really seem relevant to what's going on now. Isn't there only one dragon?"

"Yeah. And it's a male. I can't imagine it's raising a baby. However..." I'm not willing to write it off as unrelated. As always, it's just my intuition speaking. At times like this, the only thing to do is take matters into your own hands. "I'm going to climb the mountain."

"Huh?! You don't mean the one the dragon lives on, do you?"

"Exactly." Since we were here, seeing the dragon up close was the best course of action. Observation was key in both biology and youkai research.

Yifa was dumbfounded. "B-But it's dangerous. Even you can't stand up to a dragon..."

"I'm not going there to fight it. If it finds me, I'll just run away. Beating it might be impossible, but I can at least manage that much." In reality, beating it would be significantly easier for me.

"Y-You think? Then I'll come too."

"No, I want you to wait here. It'll probably take more than a day. I don't want to put you in danger." I might end up having to use spells or ayakashi I didn't want anyone to see. The situation was different from when we had gone

looking for magic stones together in my family's territory.

Yifa laughed awkwardly. "Right..." She seemed a little down. My getting angry at her might have been weighing on her mind.

"Don't worry about earlier," I said with a smile. "I was never planning on taking you to the mountains to begin with. It's still summer break, so you should take it easy."

"Okay." Yifa nodded dejectedly.

I might've gone a little too far yesterday.



That night, as I was thinking about what I would need for tomorrow, I heard a knock on the door of the room I'd been given. "Coming... Huh? Yifa?" I had expected a servant, but there stood Yifa in her nightwear.

"Seika... Um, earlier, one of the maids came to my room and said Prince Cecilio wanted to see me..." she said nervously.

"Huh? At this hour?"

"She said he wanted to speak with me about something."

I frowned. Come on, there's a proper order to this stuff. Aren't you supposed to send a love letter with a poem? No, that was in my old world. At the very least, he should come in person. Who does he think he is? No, that was also a custom in my old world. He's a prince. C-Calm down. What am I getting so worked up for? Anyway, is he serious? She isn't his lover or his maid. Is now really the time to be getting infatuated with a woman in the first place?

"Wh-What should I do?" Yifa was on the verge of tears.

"You don't have to go. I'll talk to that mor—His Highness," I said, waving my hand.

"O-Okay. Um..."

"Are you scared to be alone in your room?"

"Yes." Yifa nodded. We'd been given guest rooms, but the whole place was still the prince's residence. I couldn't blame her.

"Then do you wanna sleep here?"

"Y-Yeah!"

"All right, come on in." Yifa nodded furiously, so I invited her into my room with a smile. Come to think of it, I seemed to recall disciples of mine who had just lost their parents or homes being too afraid to sleep on their own and coming to sleep with me or other disciples. But in Yifa's case, I'm really not sure where to look. Her uniform really makes her look slimmer. I guess she's gotten bigger, so it's only natural she'd be bigger there as well... No, enough of that.

"You can use the bed, Yifa," I said as I put out several lights. "I'm gonna be up a little longer, so I'll just sleep on the couch."

"Huh?! I-I can't do that. I'm your servant."

"It's fine. Children need their rest."

"Ch-Children? You're younger than I am. Then, um...do you wanna sleep together?"

"Huh?"

"I-I mean, the beds are big here. We can both fit," Yifa said timidly.

"Sure, let's do that. I guess I'll go to bed now, then."

As I put out the lights, Yuki rustled around on top of my head and whispered into my ear. "I guess that means I should leave now."

"Why would it mean that? Actually, you're gonna get found if you come out now," I whispered back. After a period of silence, Yuki crawled back to the top of my head. What was that about?

Yifa was still standing frozen next to the bed when I put out the final light. "P-Please treat me well."

"What are you talking about? Get in already." As I wrapped myself in the covers, Yifa cheerfully slid into the bed. Gazing blankly at the ceiling, I thought to myself.

I'm not fully comfortable leaving Yifa here by herself while I head to the mountain. I should leave some shikigami behind just in case. I don't think they're

too wary of me, so it shouldn't be difficult.

Only moonlight illuminated the room. Unlike Japan, the summers in this world were quiet. There were no paddies for growing rice, which meant no frogs or insects making noise. Now was as good a time as ever to talk.

"Yifa."

"Y-Yes?!" Yifa cried out frantically.

"What do you think of Prince Cecilio?"

"Huh?" Her voice was full of confusion. "Nothing in particular."

"Have you considered joining his harem?"

"N-No! I haven't thought about it at all! Where did that come from?"

"You don't have to worry about me. You can be honest."

"Wh-Why do you...? A-Am I that much of a burden?" Yifa's voice was trembling. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I'll try to use my magic next time. I-I'll study other languages too! I promise I won't give up! S-So..."

"No, no, that's not it." I turned to the side and looked at Yifa. Even in the dim light, I could see the moisture in her eyes. I reached out and wiped the corners of her eyes with my fingers. "You aren't a burden."

"I'm not? Then why..."

"I don't think it's a bad offer," I said. I felt bad about breaking my promise to Mabel, but I really felt like this was something we should have a serious conversation about. "This kingdom may just be a vassal of the empire, but it's still a royal harem. Usually only the daughters of influential noblemen can enter. It might be difficult for you without any backers, but I'm sure you'd be fine. You managed to make a bunch of friends despite the difficult position I put you in when we entered the academy, after all. If you want, I can arrange for you to be set free here in Astilia. Then you can remain in this country."

"I don't..."

"You don't have to decide now, of course. I'm sure you still have stuff you wanna do at the academy. But think about it. You'll be an adult soon."

"You..."

"Hmm?"

"You wouldn't mind if I joined the harem?" Her voice wavered, and I thought for a moment.

"I'd be lonely. But everyone has to choose their own path eventually."

"I see." Yifa wiped her eyes and smiled at me. "Thank you for thinking about me. I'm glad you're my master."

"Sure."

"I'm pretty reluctant, but I'll think about it."

"Good."

"Good night, Seika," Yifa said, turning away from me.

After staring at her back for a while, I turned around as well and closed my eyes. "Good night, Yifa," I muttered.



Yifa was gone when I woke up the next morning. The sun was high in the sky —it seemed like I'd slept in a little.

"Master Seika, don't you think that was a little harsh?" Yuki sat atop the table and spoke to me as I got dressed.

"What was?"

"Last night. I can't believe you told that girl it was okay if she wanted to join the harem... I'm starting to feel bad for her."

"Why?"

"Like I told you before, that slave girl likes you."

"Huh? Since when?" I asked in surprise as I buttoned up my shirt. "Are you still stuck on that nonsense from over a year ago?"

"I can tell. She's been in love with you ever since then. She still is."

"I wonder." Yuki was oddly fond of human love affairs, so she definitely had some preconceptions. I let out a long sigh. "Look, this is Yifa's problem to figure out. She should be the one to decide whether or not to accept the offer. I'm not gonna get in the way of that. It's in her hands."

"Wh-Why are you so adamant about this?" Yuki asked, obviously confused.

I hesitated a moment before explaining myself. "Do you remember that disciple I had? The girl who was really good at astrology and cooking?"

"Oh, the really pretty one?"

"Yeah, her. There was once a boy who would constantly come to my estate to see her."

"He was a noble's son, right?" she asked. "She seemed to enjoy talking to him too."

"Right. Yet despite that, I lectured the boy one time."

"Oh, I remember. You told him he was coming over way too often. You were kinda scary."

"And after that day, he stopped showing up."

"Yeah..."

"Do you remember what happened after that?"

"The girl didn't speak to you once for ten days straight."

"It really got to me, to be honest," I admitted.

"I'd never seen you so shaken up before."

"It was the first time one of my disciples had ever been that mad at me." I remember her telling me she hated me with tears in her eyes. I wonder if that's how a father feels when his daughter yells at him. Who knows what would've happened if he hadn't started coming again. "Ever since then, I've made a point of not interfering with my disciples when it comes to that sort of thing. Granted, Yifa isn't my disciple, but still."

"Hmm..." Yuki pondered for a moment. "That's fine, but I think this situation is a little different. You're the one she likes."

I sighed again. "Even supposing that's true, Yifa will be fifteen soon. She knows that you can't be picky when it comes to marriage partners."

"You have a point, but she's not a noble, is she? What's the harm in her choosing a partner based on love?"

"It's precisely because she isn't of noble birth. She can't rely on her own family, so she should marry into a family with money. And also"—I wavered a moment before adding one more thing—"sometimes love comes later."

"Huh?" Yuki's ears perked up. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"You could say that."

"W-W-Wait... Were you married?"

"For a brief time in my youth."

"Huh?!" Yuki suddenly shouted. Leaning forward, she excitedly continued. "What the heck?! That's the first I've ever heard of this!"

"That's because I never told you."

"Why would you keep something so important a secret?!"

"Th-There was just never a good opportunity," I explained lamely. "Besides, it's not that important."

"I wanna know all about it! How old were you? What kind of person was your wife? What's the story behind your marriage? How did you show your love for her?"

"Pipe down already." I plugged my ears. I shouldn't have said anything.



"Your Highness, I heard you summoned my servant last night. Did you need something?" Later that morning, I called out to the prince, who was on the terrace during a break from his work.

The prince answered with a short chuckle. "I just wanted to speak with her. Unfortunately, she turned me down."

"She was panicking, so I told her she didn't have to go. Could I ask you not to make any more requests like that, Your Highness? She hasn't decided to join your harem yet, and she isn't your maid," I said with a serious expression.

The prince turned to face me. "I think you've got the wrong idea. I really just

wanted to talk over some tea."

"At that time of night?"

"My duties keep me occupied until the late hours of the night. Everyone usually adjusts themselves to my schedule, so I suppose my sense of time is a little off. I apologize." The prince apologized up front, but something about it was suspicious. "Would you mind apologizing to Yifa for me as well?"

"You should do that yourself if you're serious about inviting her to your harem."

The prince's eyes went wide with surprise at my response. "That's unexpected. I thought you would reject my request."

"Do you really want her in your harem?"

"Of course." The prince bowed deeply.

"What is it about her that you like so much?"

"Her looks, I suppose. But it's not simply that she's beautiful. She has an atmosphere of intelligence about her as well that has me captivated. Is she a good student at that academy by any chance?" the prince asked, seemingly a little embarrassed.

"She usually gets the first-or second-best score on our written exams."

"I knew it!" the prince said happily. "The queen plays an active role in government affairs according to Astilian custom. The woman I marry must be intelligent."

"Uh-huh."

"In addition, she's quite lovely. She'd make a fitting face for the country diplomatically. And personally speaking, she's just my type..." The prince cleared his throat, then continued. "Since we became the empire's vassal, economic development has led to an increase in the power of commoners, and lineage is no longer as highly valued. If possible, I would like to make her my first queen and have her support my rule," the prince declared earnestly. Then he looked at me with a conflicted expression. "I understand she is a slave and a beautiful one at that. I'm sure you have an intimate relationship, but I don't

mind. We'll keep her past under wraps officially."

"Yifa and I aren't like that."

"Is that so? You two seemed rather close for a master and servant."

"She was born as my family's slave. She and I were raised together. I guess she's kind of like a little sister to me, though I'm the younger one."

"I see. That explains it. In that case, I'd like to ask you again—would you give her to me? I'll pay any amount. I'm sure she'll be happy in Astilia's harem. If you're like her brother, isn't her happiness what you want?"

"If you're asking me to sell her, then the answer is no," I replied. "But if she wants to join your harem of her own accord, then I'll set her free in this kingdom. Does that work for you?"

"V-Very well... In that case..." The prince seemed very hesitant. "Could you persuade her for me?"

Excuse me?

"She seems to be avoiding me..."

"Uh..." I said with a frown. "Please try to court your women by yourself.

Aren't you a prince? You have good looks, and there probably aren't many people as wealthy as you. Besides—" I shut my mouth there. Not good. I almost started lecturing him. "Anyway, I'm just going to respect Yifa's will. I'm not going to persuade her one way or the other."

"Of course. That's quite reasonable. You really are just looking out for her. Though I wonder if she truly wants to be set free," he added quietly.

"Well, I can't imagine anyone would be content to be a slave. I'd like to free her already, but she would need an adult guardian in the empire," I explained. "I think that'd be a little embarrassing for her at the academy."

"I understand." The prince nodded as though he'd come to a realization.

Suddenly, I remembered something else I needed to discuss with him. "By the way, Your Highness, I was thinking I'd go to the mountain where the dragon lives tomorrow."

"Wha— The mountain? It's too dangerous. Don't be reckless."

"I'll be fine. I'd just like you to prepare a few things for me. Is that all right?"

"C-Certainly. You can ask my subordinates. What exactly do you have in mind?"

"It might take a few days, so things like food and clothes."

"Investigating the mountain would certainly take a while... So you'll be gone several days..." The prince mumbled to himself, then nodded. "As you wish. We shall prepare everything you need for your investigation."

I narrowed my eyes as I watched him. "I appreciate it." *He's plotting something, isn't he?*



The next day, with a knapsack on my back, I climbed the mountain towering behind Protoasta. The prince had been able to prepare everything I had asked for, but because it had been on such short notice, it hadn't been ready until this morning, delaying my departure slightly.

"Is the dragon's nest far away?" Yuki asked from atop my head.

"It's a ways off, and we'll have to take some detours too. I'd rather not hike at night, so we'll have to camp." Although birds tended not to fly at night, I'd learned from my time in the dungeon that monsters weren't deterred by darkness. There were also records of dragons flying through the night sky. I really didn't want to face it in the dark.

While camping in the mountains was normally fatal, my barriers and shikigami could handle wild animals and weak monsters. Alternatively, I could travel during the night using owl shikigami and light spells, but there was no need to overdo it on the first day.

I could get a grasp of my destination, current location, and surroundings all by using hawks and crows. If there were any animals or monsters nearby, my mice and white-eyes would soon know. To me, even an untouched mountain was akin to a walk in a park.

That said, Yifa seemed pretty worried when she saw me. I should wrap this up



Interlude: Yifa in the Protoasta Estate

After seeing off Seika, Yifa was returning to her room. With nothing to do, she couldn't help but sigh. When she'd first come to Astilia with Seika, she'd hoped she'd be able to do her job as his servant and be of use to him, but all she'd done was get in the way. Downcast, she opened the door to her room.

There was already someone inside. "Oh, you're back." It was the demihuman woman who had come to the academy with Prince Cecilio. She had vibrant white skin and pointed ears—two features Yifa knew to be characteristics of the elven race.

Yifa grew both curious and afraid. They were something of a dignified race in the fairy tales she'd enjoyed as a kid, but the current situation was incomprehensible to her. "Um... Do you need something?"

"I wanted to speak with you alone. Go ahead and sit down." The elf woman—Lize, as Yifa recalled—spoke as though it were her room. Yifa felt obligated to sit in the nearby chair. Lize herself simply paced around the room as she spoke. "Protoasta is a nice city, isn't it?"

"S-Sure."

"It has a storied history, kind inhabitants, and above all, the land is abundant with magical power. That magical power is why we elves have had close relations with Astilia since ancient times, and it's why that dragon has long watched over the city."

"R-Really? I don't know much about magical power."

"No, you do." The elf looked directly at Yifa with her green eyes. "You're surrounded by elementals. I'm sure you're aware of that."

"Ele— Ah, I mean...I have no idea what you're talking about..."

"There's no need to hide it," Lize said as she held up her hand and caught a blue fish swimming through the air—a water elemental—between her fingers. "Although this land is rife with elementals, it's rare for a city to have this many

—particularly these blue ones. I suspect it's due to the many rivers stemming from the mountain behind the city. They might be why so many children here are born with an aptitude for the water element." Lize let go of the blue fish, and it swam off in a hurry.

Yifa unconsciously followed it with her eyes, only to gasp when she realized Lize had noticed. Then she timidly looked up at the elf. "How did you know I can see them?"

"How could I have thought anything else? Nobody attracts that many elementals using magic stones and items by accident. I was astonished when I first saw you in the academy cafeteria. Then I realized you must be one of our descendants."

"Wh-What do you mean by that?" Yifa asked. "L-Like, descended from elves?"

"Correct. There aren't many humans who know this these days, but the magic elves use differs greatly from magic used by other races and monsters." Lize looked down at Yifa as she continued. "By enveloping ourselves in magical power and calling upon elementals, we can cause mystical phenomena to occur. The power to communicate with elementals is an elven ability. At the academy, you cast spells by calling upon the elementals, don't you? That's elven magic."

"B-But..." Yifa seemed bewildered. "I'm just a normal human. I don't have nearly as much magical power as you." A vast quantity of spirits of all sorts of colors had been swirling around Lize ever since Yifa had first seen her. She had to have a considerable amount of magical power.

Lize chuckled. "Don't use me as a basis. I may not look it, but I'm quite practiced. That said, you're right that I don't sense much magical power from you. You don't have many of our racial traits either. Still, that's all trivial. Which of your parents was blonde?"

"U-Um, my mom."

"Then I suspect one of your mother's distant ancestors was an elf."

"B-But..."

"Magical power varies even within a race. Elven features will also fade the

more human blood you have, but the ability to see elementals is unmistakable proof that you're one of us. Could your mother see them too? If not, then the trait must have recurred in you. How lucky."

Yifa was dumbfounded. She never would have guessed that was the origin of her ability. She was descended from the dignified race she'd read about in storybooks.

Lize calmly spoke to the speechless Yifa. "The elementals must have brought us together. I'm happy to have met one of my kind in an unexpected place, but at the same time, I'm also saddened. Being a slave, you must have endured great hardship."

"N-Not really."

"To tell you the truth, I'm here today on behalf of my lord to persuade you." A smile flashed across the elf's face. "Join the Astilian harem, Yifa."

"Huh?!"

"It's quite the intriguing place. As a former member, you have my word. Though my lord is still immature and unreliable, he's not a bad man. I'm certain he'll show you that he's resourceful enough to save you from your current master. Of course, that doesn't mean you're obligated to become his queen—"

"I-I'm sorry!" Yifa panicked and cut Lize off, looking away. "I-I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not going to join the harem." Yifa had never wanted to to begin with. Despite what Seika had said, she couldn't imagine herself there. "And I'm happy with how things are now. The academy is fun, and Seika is kind. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"What are you talking about?"

"Huh?" Yifa looked at Lize and was taken aback by the incredulous expression on her face.

"Are you saying you're content being that boy's slave?"

"Um..."

"I didn't invite you to join the harem because it opens a path for you to get ahead in life or become queen. I did it because I thought you would desire to be free of that boy. Granted, my lord probably isn't aware of that."

"H-Hold on a second. I don't want you saying any more bad things about Seika!"

"Surely you've realized it yourself." Tension sneaked its way into Lize's voice. "That boy is a monster."



"A monster?" Yifa repeated it back at her, then fell silent. She didn't understand what Lize was trying to say.

"Yes. I'm sure you've seen it. Elementals don't approach that boy. It's not that they simply aren't attracted to him due to his lack of magic—they actively avoid him as though he's surrounded by some sort of miasma." Lize continued in a stern tone. "I told you I was shocked when I first saw you at the academy, didn't I? However, when I saw the boy sitting next to you, I was petrified. All the elementals around you kept their distance from him. It was the first time I'd ever seen anything like it." Lize sounded as though she was recalling an ominous scene. "I couldn't help but feel that the Demon Lord who once lived must have been someone like him."

"S-Seika is a little weird, sure, but he's human. He's not even a demon, let alone the Demon Lord."

"Are you certain he's not a demon?" Lize asked. "How long have you known the boy?"

"We grew up together, so since we were little."

"Are Count Lamprogue and his wife truly his parents?"

"Ah... No, the count is his dad, but his mother was a mistress."

"Do you know his mother?"

"No..."

"Then how can you be certain she wasn't a demon? In fact, how can you be certain the count is even his father?" Lize demanded. "You aren't much older than he is, so you wouldn't remember anything early on. How do you know there weren't any signs of abnormality during his childhood? And even after

your memories begin, was there really not a single thing that seemed off about him?"

Yifa couldn't answer. When she really thought about it, Seika clearly was unusual. Despite not having any magical power, he could cast spells. And would a normal child have been okay with the way he had been treated by his brother, mother, and the other servants? Could someone in that situation really learn on his own, face monsters without fear, prove himself, and even bring a slave like her to a magic academy she ordinarily would never have been able to attend? The mysterious spells using talismans he claimed to have learned in the mansion's library didn't seem ordinary either.

Despite having been with him ever since they had been children, she barely knew anything about Seika. She got the feeling that he was hiding something seriously important from her. "Still," Yifa said, shaking herself free of her doubt. "Seika's a human. And he's a good person. That's what I believe."

"To believe is to stop thinking." Lize poured cold water over Yifa's determination. "That's no different from blind faith in a deity. It's equivalent to closing your eyes and praying while gambling. I don't know what that boy is, or why the elementals avoid him, but he's far too abnormal for me to simply accept that he's a good person. And I don't imagine you have any reason to be that faithful to him. Join the harem, Yifa. Your master is dangerous, and you need to get away from him."

"But..."

"Wait... Do you have some sort of misconception?" Lize asked as though suddenly realizing something.

"Huh?"

"The Astilian harem is more than a place where the king and his wives live and create a complex web of love and hate."

"I-It is?"

Lize looked like she was at her wit's end. "I can't believe this. I had thought the empire would be aware of our country's customs." Collecting herself, Lize continued. "Very well. Then I shall show you. It'll be faster than trying to explain it. We head to the capital, Asta, tomorrow."

"I-I can't just do that on my own."

"Did that boy tell you not to leave the city?"

"No, but..."

"Then there's no problem," Lize declared. "He won't be back from the mountain for a few days, and the capital is close by. If we depart tomorrow, we'll be back before noon the next day. Even if you're going to turn down the offer, you should do it after seeing things for yourself."

Although she was reluctant, Yifa suddenly thought back on what Seika had said to her two nights ago.

"Everyone has to choose their own path eventually."

"You'll be an adult soon."

Before she knew it, Yifa had nodded.

Act 4

The morning of my second day on the mountain, I reached my destination—the summit. The incline leveled off at the top, leaving a wide-open area. Although the entire path on the way here had been forested, the summit was unnaturally devoid of trees. Instead, rugged rocks were scattered about.

From the charred trunks that could be seen here and there, it was clear that the dragon had burned away the trees, knocked them down, and carried over the rocks. Now the owner of the nest was rearing its head right before my eyes. A discerning gaze turned towards me from behind majestic scales, and I smiled in response.

"Hey there." I cheerfully greeted the massive dragon. *It really is huge.* It was well over thirty meters from head to tail. Its head alone was taller than I was. Having been awoken from its slumber atop the nest of piled-up rocks, it glared at me with blatant hostility.



"Groooaaar!" The dragon suddenly roared, opening its fang-lined maw wide. I could see a faint red light inside its mouth, and a moment later, fire breath poured out. The flames, easily capable of engulfing me, created a clean line of heat and light across the summit.

"Not that it matters since it can't get past my barrier." Seeing me emerge unharmed, the dragon attempted its fire breath a few more times. Naturally, the result was the same. "Oh?"

The dragon unexpectedly spread its wings, and I felt a faint flow of power. Seemingly using some sort of magic, it flapped and took to the sky. Buffeted by the fierce gales, I couldn't help but frown.

Something that huge shouldn't be capable of flying. However, when the atmosphere is more dense, takeoff becomes easier. It seems like it can manipulate atmospheric pressure similarly to high-level ryuu—though on a much smaller scale than the ryuu that can induce storms. I tilted my head as I looked up at the dragon in the sky above me. What's it trying to do? Surely it isn't fleeing.

A moment later, the dragon rotated in midair and swooped down, headed straight for me. Unlike our first encounter, it didn't seem like it was trying to intimidate me. Its massive body drew closer, and just as I was about to be snatched up by its waiting claws, I swapped places with a nearby shikigami. The paper hitogata slipped right through the dragon's claws. After failing to grab me, the dragon's leg crashed into a boulder, smashing its upper half to bits.

Scary. Looking confused as to how it had missed, the dragon swiveled around in midair once again. Guess I should get serious now. I opened up a hitogata gate right above where the dragon was flying.

Summoning: Konaki-jiji. A baby with the face of an old man emerged from the spatial distortion. The unsightly ayakashi then clung to the flying dragon's back, his wrinkled face contorting like a pouting child's. He began to cry.

"Waaaaaah!" The dragon immediately began to fall out of the sky. Despite flapping its wings desperately, it lost more altitude with every sob. "Waaaaaaaaah!" As the loudest cry yet rang out, the dragon crashed down onto

the mountain's summit. The force of the impact sent the konaki-jiji tumbling off

its back.

The ayakashi screamed as it fell through the air.

"Oof." The ayakashi hit the ground face-first and let out a cry that sounded like a frog being crushed before falling still. *I feel kinda bad for him.* The konakijiji didn't have any sort of power that let him cling to his opponents—he had simply been holding on using his natural grip. Making him mount a flying dragon might have been asking for too much. Still, he had done a good job.

Konaki-jiji were ayakashi that disguised themselves as crying babies, luring compassionate humans into carrying them. Once on their backs, they would crush them under their weight. They grew heavier each time they cried, reaching a maximum weight of roughly ten times that of the person carrying them. On top of a dragon, he might well have reached nearly two hundred tons.

As I returned the konaki-jiji to the other plane, the grounded dragon attempted to take flight again. I pointed a hitogata at it. "Oh no you don't. Behave." *Phase of earth: Fireproof Net.* A net made of white rope fell over the dragon. It struggled violently in response, spewing out its fire breath in all directions. However, the white net neither tore nor burned.

"That's a pretty sturdy net," Yuki said, timidly poking her head out.

"The rope is made of asbestos." Asbestos was an extremely resilient material that was resistant to heat. It didn't burn even when directly exposed to fire.

Eventually, the dragon grew tired and ceased struggling. That said, it was still glaring at me and growling.

"Why didn't you just use that net from the start instead of summoning an ayakashi?" Yuki asked.

"It'd be dangerous for the dragon if I suddenly took away its ability to use its wings while it was flying."

"That's unusual. You don't normally have any mercy on spirits."

"I don't? Well, this time, I'm the uninvited guest." There was also the fact that I couldn't simply kill the dragon without permission.

"Hmph. Anyway, spirits in this world are really weak, huh?" Yuki said,

sounding quite arrogant.

"In general, but this one is about as strong as the typical ryuu."

"Is it really?" Yuki pulled her head back and fell silent.

"Now, I guess I'll start by investigating its nest." As I approached the rocks that had been gathered into a nest, the dragon began growling and struggling once again. I climbed up onto the pile of rocks and peered inside the nest—then my eyes went wide.

Sitting on the gravel was a pale-yellow, oval-shaped object large enough to fill my arms.

"Master Seika, is that..." Yuki grumbled, sticking her head out again.

I gently touched the surface of the object. It was smooth. Although there was a weightiness to it and it seemed rather sturdy, there was no mistaking it...

"It's an egg."



"What should we do, Master Seika?" Yuki asked in confusion.

Suddenly everything became clear—the dragon was protecting its egg. That was likely the reason it had been seen less frequently as of late. It had probably started acting strangely around a year ago because it had been getting ready to lay an egg, and the livestock attacks must have been because it couldn't subsist off of the magical power in the earth alone.

That would explain everything except for one crucial question—how did the dragon lay an egg?

"That spirit is a male, isn't it? Then there must be another one around that's its mate."

"No, I don't think so." Somebody would have noticed if there was a second dragon.

"Then how?"

I answered with the only possibility I could think of. "It changed sexes."

"Huh?"

"The dragon became a female." I didn't expect Yuki to understand, so I continued explaining. "There are many species of fish that change sex according to their environment. There are males that turn into females and females that turn into males." A renowned naturalist from ancient Rome, where owning a fish pond had been a sign of status and fish cultivation had been widespread, had left behind records of this behavior. "One of the conditions for changing sexes is a lack of any members of the opposite sex in the immediate vicinity. This dragon probably changed sexes sometime after its mate passed away. That may be the reason it suddenly shrunk its territory and became more docile a century ago." I hadn't heard any examples of terrestrial animals changing sex, but there were many species where the ratio between the sexes changed based on the temperature or other factors where they were born. The sex of living creatures was in fact quite fluid.

"B-But Master Seika," Yuki insisted, "even if it became female, it still doesn't have a mate. How did it lay an egg?"

"Species that can reproduce with only females aren't actually all that rare," I explained once again. "There are several examples of snakes and lizards being kept without any mates laying viable eggs. Not only that, but there are some animals that don't have males at all."

"A-Are there really?"

"The crucian carp I kept in the pond at my manor were one such species. At first, I only had one." I had been shocked the first time I'd seen said behavior.

"You didn't keep them just for eating?"

"That was the original plan. Anyway, it's not too strange that dragons can reproduce with only females. While reproducing as a pair is more advantageous, sometimes the environment doesn't allow for that."

"Neat," Yuki responded flatly. "Your hobby sure comes in handy."

"Hobby? Anyway, what to do now." Although I knew the reason for the dragon's strange behavior, the problem had hardly been resolved. The kingdom could simply wait for its young to leave the nest, but if historical record was any precedent, it would lay eggs a few more times. Who knew how long it would take for all the young to grow up?

Then there was the issue of what to do with the young after they left the nest. It had been different when Astilia had been independent 150 years ago, but they were a vassal state now. I didn't imagine the empire would appreciate them letting dangerous young dragons loose. Funnily enough, the prince's plan to kill the dragon is starting to seem like the best option. Though I'm doubtful those mercenaries can pull it off. On the other hand, it'd be wrong for me to interfere. Hmm...

I pondered to myself as I stared at the egg—then I noticed a trail in the gravel around it. It seemed that the egg had been rotated. Suddenly it hit me. "The prince said he'd never heard of anyone successfully hatching a dragon egg, and I think I know why."

"Huh? What's the reason?" Yuki asked.

"Dragon eggs need to be rotated." I dived into an explanation yet again. "Chickens and other birds do the same thing. If they don't periodically turn their eggs, their young will get stuck to the eggshell and die. Lizard and turtle eggs, on the other hand, shouldn't be touched—but dragons seem to rear their young more like birds than lizards. Which is why you have to do this," I said, rolling the massive egg along the trail in the gravel. "I'm confident that's why the dragon eggs sold in town never hatch. There's no way they were rotating them during transport."

Yuki stared at me silently.

"This lends more credibility to the story about the Astilian queen hatching a dragon. She would have just needed to know the proper method. Granted, just rolling it around haphazardly probably wouldn't work, so luck was probably a large factor as well."

"You sure are passionate about this stuff..."

"Shut it," I snapped at the exasperated Yuki. What's wrong with being passionate?!

"Oh, and while I'm at it..." *Phase of fire: Blaze.* Fire gushed out of several hitogata, heating the rocks that made up the dragon's nest.

"Master Seika?! Are you trying to make fried eggs?!"

"No, take a closer look. I'm just heating up the rocks. Thanks to the gravel that's been spread out, the egg itself won't get too hot. Heating up the rocks with fire like this keeps the nest warm even while the dragon is gone. This is how it incubates its eggs."

"H-How do you know all that?"

"There was a rock that had turned brittle and split. That's proof it had been heated up over and over. It was also still a little warm." In addition, I'd heard of a bird on islands far to the south of Khmer and Champa that heated its eggs with the heat of the earth. It was a similar concept.

Then I realized that the dragon had long since gone silent. Turning back to it, I saw its eyes fixed on me from behind its majestic scales. There was no longer any hostility, so I floated a hitogata over.

"M-Master Seika?! What are you doing?!" Yuki panicked.

Using the canceling spell attached to the hitogata, I turned the asbestos net back into the particles that made it up. Now free, the dragon shook itself slightly but showed no sign of attacking. However, it was still staring at me.

"Grrrr!"

"Huh?" Suddenly roaring, the dragon spread its wings. Using its atmosphericpressure magic once again, it took to the air and flew off, leaving Yuki and me dumbfounded.

"What just happened?" she asked.

"I'm not really sure." For some reason, it felt like the dragon had told me to look after its egg.

Fireproof Net

A spell that ensnares its target with a net made of asbestos. White asbestos, or chrysotile, has a tensile strength of thirty thousand kilograms per square meter. This is higher than piano wire, and an intertwined rope would in theory be even stronger than carbon steel wire. In

addition, it is pliable and resistant to chemicals, abrasion, and heat. Its decomposition temperature is far greater than piano wire at 450 to 700 degrees Celsius, and it boasts a melting point of 1,521 degrees Celsius.

Blaze

A spell that creates flames using fire ki. It does not create any tinder, so its efficiency is low.

Interlude: Yifa in the Capital, Asta

The capital, Asta, was less than a half a day's carriage ride from Protoasta. It wound up being so close that Yifa was almost disappointed. It begged the question of why they had bothered moving the capital at all, but it likely had to do with things like location, expandability, and the ease of laying imperial-style highways.

Asta was an elegant city. As it was relatively new, its construction had been thoroughly planned out, and its streets and buildings were arranged logically. Although it wasn't quite on the scale of the imperial capital, it was still plenty large as far as Yifa was concerned.

That said, she hadn't come as a tourist. Keeping their sightseeing in moderation, Lize and Yifa headed straight for the harem. The harem was a separate building within the Astilian royal castle's grounds, and it was even larger than Yifa had imagined. Countless women probably lived inside. Her thoughts racing, Yifa followed Lize into the building.

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"Um..." Yifa mumbled.

"What is it?"

"This is the harem, right?"

"Of course."

"Then what's everyone doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Lize said matter-of-factly. "They're taking lessons."
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The room inside the harem building looked just like a lecture hall at the academy. Well-dressed girls were sitting at rows of desks. In the front there was a lectern, a blackboard with equations written on it in chalk, and a female teacher lecturing in a loud voice. They seemed to be learning about statistics.

"Back when Astilia was independent, this was a normal harem. That is to say, it was a den of intrigue inhabited by the king's wives and mistresses." Yifa

looked up at Lize, who had begun speaking quietly. "However, that changed when Astilia became the empire's vassal. Simply put, it was because the issue of succession had been resolved. Women and adopted children were now recognized as legitimate heirs to the throne."

"There were no queens in the past?"

"Correct. They weren't recognized by the royal family. Women couldn't even inherit assets."

"Is that right..."

"But the empire was different. During their ancient conflict with the demons, the number of men dwindled dangerously close to extinction, so women were recognized as heirs. When Astilia became the empire's vassal, the empire wouldn't tolerate any differences in policy. They likely thought it was an impediment to expanding their economic influence. Under the supremacy of imperial law, women's right to inheritance was acknowledged, as was their right to the throne. Queens could then rule the country. Following that, due to circumstances on our end, we adopted the empire's household law, allowing adopted heirs to inherit the throne as well. This completely resolved the issue of succession, and in doing so, rendered the harem unnecessary."

"I see." Yifa understood what Lize meant. If only men could inherit the throne, then the royal family would die out if a prince was never born. It was necessary to have a harem with a multitude of women to prevent that. However, if queens could take the throne, that changed things. Put simply, it meant it was twice as likely for an heir to be born. Add adopted children to the mix and there was no need to ever worry about heirs. So naturally the harem was no longer needed. "But what's all this about?" Yifa asked.

"Astilia has a long-standing custom of its queen consorts being deeply involved in governance. The harem has always employed high-skilled educators to serve as tutors. Even after the first queen regnant took the throne, many influential figures still wanted their daughters to enter the harem to receive an education. Once it became possible for women to inherit assets, more people wanted capable daughters who could inherit their estate if it became necessary. Thus, the current state of the harem is something akin to a girls' academy.

Many of them go on to enter politics, so you could say it's also an institution for raising female bureaucrats."

"Then, um...I guess Prince Cecilio doesn't actually see me as anyone special."

"That's not true," Lize said with a soft laugh. "For generations, most queens have come from here. In that sense, it still is a harem. Some girls even join for that explicit purpose. I'm quite certain my lord fell in love with you at first sight."

"Y-You think so?" Hearing that just made Yifa more confused. Still, the harem was far more cheerful and bright than she'd imagined.

"That's enough of an introduction. Now, I'd like to start by getting everyone used to basic concepts of statistics." Yifa found herself watching the calm teacher hold up a die. "Here's a question—I rolled this die and it landed on six ten times in a row. What are the odds it will land on six the next time I roll it? How about you, Cornelia?"

"Yes." A dignified girl with blonde hair stood up and answered. "One in six."

"Thank you." The teacher grinned. "Does anyone else have any other answers? No? In that case, how about the girl who came to observe?"

"H-Huh? Me?" Yifa asked in surprise. She felt all the eyes in the lecture hall on her.

"Yes. I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Yifa reflexively looked over at Lize, who simply smiled in amusement. Facing the floor, she felt obligated to answer. "I think the next roll will also be six."

A moment later, the lecture hall erupted with laughter. "You better not ever go gambling," the girl named Cornelia teased. "Don't you know you have to treat each instance as independent? What happened in the past doesn't affect the next roll."

"The probability of a die landing on six ten times in a row is one in sixty million," Yifa responded, slightly upset.

"Huh?"

"I should be asking why you think something like that would ever happen

naturally." Yifa turned to look at the teacher. "Is that die you're holding weighted? No, it probably has a six on every side, doesn't it?"

"Excellent! That's exactly right!" the teacher exclaimed happily. She then passed the die to the students, starting with the ones at the front of the room. Yifa couldn't see it from where she was, but judging from their reactions, it was probably a cheating die with six on every side.

"If this were an arithmetic lesson, Cornelia's answer would have been correct. However, this lesson is about statistics, where we explore probabilities nobody knows for certain. Instead of viewing biases as mere coincidences, we view them as tendencies. We throw away preconceived notions and evaluate probabilities based on actual results. That means..."



Once the lecture ended, people crowded around Yifa.

"Hey, where are you from?"

"Do you really go to the magic academy?"

"Can you use magic?!"

"What's the empire like?"

"Have you met Prince Cecilio?"

"When are you joining the harem? My room has an opening!"

Yifa was overwhelmed by the barrage of questions.

"Everyone, please don't trouble our guest." An irritated voice silenced the crowd before it parted to reveal the blonde girl from earlier. "There's something I want to ask you," she said to Yifa, who was staring at her blankly.

"Huh? O-Of course! What is it?"

"You don't have to be so uptight. How did you calculate six to the tenth power in your head earlier?"

"Um...I didn't actually calculate the whole thing," Yifa explained slowly. "When you multiply 6 by 3, you get 216. I rounded that to 200 for simplicity, then multiplied it three times to get 8,000,000. That's 6 multiplied 9 times, so I

multiplied by one more 6 for 48,000,000. That's supposed to be a little higher since I rounded down, so I figured it'd be around 60,000,000. I wasn't very confident, though..."

Murmuring spread through the crowd and the blonde girl sighed. "I did the math, and you were almost exactly right," she said. "You've got a really creative approach. What's your name?"

"Yifa," Yifa answered hesitantly.

"No family name, huh?" The girl seemed like a noble, but she continued without a hint of scorn. "Making it here without any standing is impressive in itself. What brought you to Astilia's harem from the empire?"

"Um...Prince Cecilio invited me."

Shrill squeals exploded from the crowd. "A queen candidate. That explains it. You've got a cute face on top of being smart." The girl extended her hand. "Cornelia Est Latosa. Our goals may differ since I'm the heir to my family, but I look forward to competing with you here."

"R-Right. I'm honored." Yifa shook the girl's hand, feeling a little guilty.



"It's a fun place, isn't it?" Lize suddenly asked as she and Yifa walked back to the inn where they had a reservation. "If nothing else, it doesn't feel anything like a harem."

"Yeah..." It had made a good impression on Yifa as well. It reminded her of the magic academy. However, she felt like the students there were even more serious than the ones at the academy. Perhaps it was because they had a clear goal.

"Because of places like that, the trend in this country is for women to be in administrative positions. That's why my lord didn't want to involve you in any conflict." Lize let out a sigh, then continued. "I thought the same thing when I was enrolled there. If I hadn't become a court mage due to my poor grades, I would probably still feel the same way."

"Really? You?" Yifa giggled.

Lize slowly began to speak. "My lord's mother, the current queen, is a magnificent ruler. She is wise, decisive, and beloved by the people. She's everything that a ruler should be. His succession may still be a long way off, but I'm sure my lord is worried about living up to her. That's why he's acting hastily about the dragon. He may even think that he's unfit to become king if he can't resolve the issue. I suspect that same sense of urgency is driving his search for a queen. Although he's young and immature, he's not a bad person. I've known him since he was an infant, so I guarantee that. Would you be willing to support him by his side?"

"I..." Up until a moment ago, she would have immediately declined. But now Yifa's words were caught on something, and she couldn't get them out.

Act 5

It was my third day on the mountain, and the sun was already high in the sky. Stretching my body, I let out a heavy sigh. "I'm so tired."

After flying off yesterday, the dragon had returned a short while later with the hind leg of a monster. As soon as it had finished eating, it had fallen asleep next to its nest. Waking up around dusk, it had then flown off again and seemingly patrolled the area. Upon returning once night had fallen, it had promptly fallen asleep.

Morning had passed, and then afternoon, and the dragon still hadn't woken up. It wasn't dead—it was just fast asleep. Watching its stomach rise and fall as it slept, I thought to myself.

It must be exhausted. Raising a child isn't easy—for humans or for animals. I'm sure it's no different for monsters either. It's clear that the magical power in the earth isn't enough to sustain it. Not having a mate probably makes things even harder. Still...

"When am I going to be set free?" As the dragon had been eating, flying, and sleeping, I had been dutifully tending to its nest by rotating its egg and heating the rocks. When I'd gotten fed up and tried to leave, it had angrily growled at me. There was a chance it would follow me back to the city if I attempted to run away, so I was stuck. It was probably fine for me to leave the egg alone for a while, but I didn't know how long. As a result, I'd stayed up all night.

"I can't believe it's making someone else raise its young. This spirit has no shame," Yuki said, clearly fed up as well.

"Kuda-gitsune do the same thing."

"N-No, it's just...we're ayakashi that serve humans, so..."

"Anyway, I imagine this dragon is a unique case." This dragon was certainly a special case, though it was also possible that was just how dragons were.

"So, what are you going to do?" Yuki asked. "You're not going to keep being

this dragon's nanny, are you?"

"I'm heading back. I'm gonna run out of food soon anyway." I'd just have to persuade the dragon somehow. "Hey! Wake up! It's already afternoon!" I shouted at the lazing dragon, and it barely opened a gnarled eyelid. It was clearly annoyed. Losing my patience, I pointed towards the city. "I'm leaving!"

"Grrrr!"

"Don't growl at me! Enough of this! I'm not your mate!"

After growling unhappily for a bit, the dragon let out what sounded like a sigh and stood up. Trudging over to me, it lowered its head and placed its jaw on the ground. "Grrrr..."

Watching it flap its wings, I picked up on what it was trying to tell me. "Are you going to let me ride you?"

"Grr."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but—wait." I realized something. I'd thought it was impossible for me to ride anything with wings, but the dragon might be a viable option. Putting my feet on its scales, I climbed onto its head.

Conveniently enough, it had firm hair up there, making it rather comfortable.

"Grrrr!" The dragon spread its wings and flapped. Activating its pressure-controlling magic, it took to the sky with me riding it. Fierce winds buffeted our surroundings, but it wasn't so bad that I would fall off.

There's barely any shaking. Just as I thought. Holding on to its scaled protrusions, I couldn't help but cheer. After a single revolution, it began a gentle glide towards the city at the base of the mountain.



The day after they visited the harem, Yifa and Lize took a carriage from Asta and reached Protoasta just before noon. When they returned to the estate, they were greeted by Prince Cecilio with several of his escorts.

"You're back, Yifa. Did you have a safe trip? I suppose I don't need to ask since you had Lize with you."

"Ah, y-yes. Thank you," Yifa responded timidly. Internally, she was very

confused. Why did he have so many guards with him? They were presumably taking Lize's place, but had he just been meeting with someone?

"I've been waiting for you," the prince said with a smile. "This way, please."

"O-Okay." Yifa did as she was told and followed him alongside Lize. She was led to what appeared to be a conference room on the second floor of the estate. It had a terrace that looked over a vast courtyard, and the windows were open to let in a nice breeze.

There were several men inside the room. Prince Cecilio called out to one of them. "Sorry to keep you, Mr. Glude. This is her."

"Well, now. She's quite something." A plump middle-aged man drew close to Yifa and looked her over as though evaluating her. "The standard practice is to have her strip naked to ensure she doesn't have any skin conditions or scars, and to check for proper nutrition, but I suppose that isn't an option. You say she has some schooling and can use magic as well?" the man asked Prince Cecilio.

"Correct."

"That makes this difficult. It's hard to predict the demand for slaves with so much added value, making it challenging to set a price. However, if I had to give a rough estimate..." The man had a boy tailing him fetch a pen and paper, then wrote something down before handing it to the prince. "I would say she's worth around this much."

"That's just about the amount we had prepared. Very well. Curtis, does this qualify as an official evaluation?"

"Yes, Your Highness," replied a bearded man, taking the paper from the prince. "It has the date, the firm's seal, the appraiser's name, and the slave's name. As a tax collector, I acknowledge this document as an objective measure of her worth. Her emancipation tax will be one-twentieth of the stated value."

"Excellent." At the prince's command, a member of his escort placed a leather bag on the table and opened it. Yifa's eyes went wide—it was filled with an incredible number of gold coins.

"U-Um, what is all this?" Yifa asked Prince Cecilio, filled with indescribable anxiety.

The prince turned to face her with a smile. "Your emancipation, Yifa."

"H-Huh?"

"You're going to be set free." Seeing Yifa's confusion, the prince continued.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Astilia and the empire both have a system for slaves to earn their freedom. If they pay their master a sum of money equal to their worth and pay a tax, they will be freed. Ordinarily, this would have to be carried out at a government office, but since I've authorized it as the head of the city, there's no issue. I will be paying all the money to set you free."

"Wha-?"

"I'll pay Seika an appropriate amount of money, then allocate a portion of it to the city as your emancipation tax. Formally, it will be treated as you buying your own freedom. Don't worry, we'll handle all the paperwork."

"Um...you can't do that," Yifa said as though trying to convince herself. "You need Seika's approval to set me free. You can't just do this on your own."

"I am aware. Rewarding a slave for their labor and eventually setting them free is a standard upheld in the empire's high society. Refusing to free a slave that has paid a sufficient amount would be frowned upon," the prince declared. "However, if he refuses to free you in spite of that, then I will issue a slave requisition order here in Protoasta and forcibly purchase you from him."

"Huh?! Y-You can't—"

"Although intended only to be used during times of war, the city's head can issue orders without council approval. Slaves will temporarily be treated as public city property, but what happens after that is up to me. I need only buy you once again and set you free."

"I-I don't want that!" Yifa said in a panic.

"I heard from Lize," the prince responded calmly. "While I can't see elementals myself and don't fully grasp how frightening Seika is, I can't leave you with a potentially dangerous master. Besides, it must be difficult to be a slave. I'm not asking for anything in return. Whether you join the harem or not is up to you. I simply want you to live your own life."

"Freed slaves require an adult guardian in the empire. W-Will I be able to go back to the academy if I'm set free?" Yifa asked in a shaky voice.

The prince awkwardly averted his eyes. "Well, we'd need to appoint a guardian and file some paperwork with the empire."

Yifa realized that her bad feeling had been spot-on. According to imperial law, freed slaves had to have a guardian to guarantee their livelihood and status. Ordinarily, that role would be fulfilled by their former master, but Seika wasn't an adult yet. While she might be able to manage in a vassal state or in the countryside, there was no way she'd be able to stay in a large city or attend an imperial institution without a legal guardian. If she was freed, she wouldn't be able to return to the academy. That would also mean she'd have to be separated from Seika.

"Seika said that he would set you free here in Astilia if that was what you desired. He never seemed particularly attached to you in the first place," said the prince. His words poured salt on the wound, and Yifa felt her heart waver.

However, she still couldn't accept it. "N-No thank you. I don't want to be free."

"But why? You don't wish to live your own life? Your life is in someone else's hands as a slave. Why do you wish to serve that dangerous master?"

"I-I decide what I want! Slave or not, I'm free to choose my own desires!"

"The emancipation paperwork is ready, Your Highness. What shall we do?" the bearded man asked coldly.

"Yifa doesn't..." The prince's voice trailed off.

"Ha ha, you seem perplexed, Your Highness. It's not uncommon for a slave to desire to remain in bondage," the chubby man said with a light chuckle. "To cope with their harsh conditions, they convince themselves that it's actually what they want. I've seen slaves like her many times. You could say she's not in her right mind."

"How do we get her to come back to her senses?"

The plump man shrugged. "It won't happen right away. But if her conditions

improve, she'll eventually come to realize she was mistaken. For now, I think it's fine to force her acceptance if necessary."

"I see. Do it." At the prince's command, two of his guards seized Yifa.

"N-No! Stop!"

"Sorry, Yifa. Her thumbprint is enough, right, Curtis?"

"Yes. Here's the ink."

"Stop it! O-Or I'll..." Yifa called to the elementals around her. If it came down to it, she would use her magic. Seika had scolded her to prepare her for this moment. However...

"Stop your magic." The elementals that had responded to Yifa suddenly fell silent. Taken aback, Yifa saw countless white butterflies fill the room—light elementals. It was a light spell that resembled the barrier Seika could create with his talismans. "Use force here and the problem will no longer be yours alone—not that I imagine you could within my Sanctuary," Lize said sternly.

"Wh-Why are you doing this?!"

"Forgive me. This is for the sake of my country, and ultimately, for your sake as well."

Yifa felt a sharp pain in her left thumb, followed by a warm trickle of blood. A small, glittering green bird passed by her field of vision. She immediately realized she had been cut by a blade of wind. "I trust a thumbprint in blood will suffice, Curtis?"

"Oh, well done, Lize. Your skills are truly impressive," Curtis marveled. A guard grabbed Yifa's left hand and slowly pulled it towards the parchment. Her fingers, clenched so tightly they turned white, were forced open.

Then Yifa's eyes went wide. "Seika!" Just before her bloodstained thumb touched the parchment, a gust of wind swept through the room.



Riding on a dragon was rather comfortable, even compared to ayakashi. The strong wind made it cool up in the sky despite it being summer. Granted, that was true of Mizuchi as well, and I could use spells to improve the experience to

a certain degree. As long as the shaking was minimal, I would be okay.

"Now then..." Looking through my shikigami, I observed the city below. Where should we land... Outside the walls would probably be best, but it's a pretty long walk to the estate. Maybe heading directly there would be better. It has a pretty large courtyard, and I don't have to worry about scaring livestock or carriage horses. "Could you land inside the walls?"

"Grrrr!"

I didn't know whether the dragon's growl was a yes or no, but I got the feeling it was a yes. "All right, that way!" We descended over the city as I led the way with a brightly lit hitogata. The dragon followed it closely, lowering its altitude.

At that moment, I saw an unwanted sight through the shikigami I had left on the mountain. I couldn't help but scowl. If they're coming now of all times, that must be what they're after. I can't afford to turn around now, but it looks like there's still time. I'll head back to the mountain after I drop by the estate. I was getting tired of guarding the egg by myself anyway.

The dragon lowered its wing, turning leftward as it descended. We were gradually closing in on the vast estate. Once it was almost at the ground, the dragon spread both its wings and activated its pressure magic. The massive creature made a dramatic landing in the courtyard, scattering the dense air it had created.

Taking a breather, I looked up and realized something. "Oh." I was right in front of an open window on the second floor of the estate. A bunch of papers and gold coins that had been on the desk inside had been scattered by the gust of wind created by the dragon's landing. Whoops, I owe them an apology. Is that the elf servant? That means... Yeah, there's Prince Cecilio too. Perfect. I know this is a little rude, but I don't have time.

"Sorry for the sudden intrusion, everyone! It's Seika! I just got back!" I shouted over the winds still buffeting the area due to the difference in pressure. "I apologize for the discourtesy, but I'm in a hurry! How do I make this brief... I made friends with the dragon." Everyone was speechless. Although I was a little concerned, I needed to get on with my business. "I found out the cause! Unfortunately, I don't have time to explain. Could someone come with me back

to the mountain? Ideally, someone who can use fire magic!"

As I expected, there was no response. The prince, the elf, and everyone else backed away from the window. This isn't ideal. I guess I can only blame myself for bringing the dragon. I need to get back soon, but if I don't get any help, then I came all this way for nothing.

"Ah." Then I caught sight of a certain girl. She was here too? Then she'll do just fine—she can even use fire magic. While I would have liked to get someone from Astilia, it looks like they're all too afraid.

"Yifa." I extended my hand to the unassuming blonde girl.



It's like a dream, Yifa thought to herself the moment he appeared atop a massive dragon. Had he really come at the perfect time? Yet she had always believed he would come to save her.

"How do I make this brief... I made friends with the dragon." Hearing that, Yifa couldn't help but smile. It was absurd, but so was everything else he did. He pulled off what she thought was impossible. He broke down barriers she thought were insurmountable. And he was always showing her something new. "Yifa." He called her name.

Yifa stepped towards his outstretched hand. She was happy he was asking for her. Happy that he needed an insignificant, unimportant slave like her. She'd felt that way when he'd asked her to come to the academy, and she felt that way now.

"Don't go!" Lize's voice came from behind Yifa and stopped her in her tracks. It sounded like it was full of concern. Lize had called Yifa one of her people—her concern was probably genuine. But still...

"Sorry, but I can't stay here," Yifa replied with her back turned. She finally understood how she should have answered Lize and the prince. What had caused it? Perhaps it was because she'd been teased by the maids and other slaves when she'd decided to go to the academy. Or maybe it was because he had always come to her aid when she'd been scolded back at the manor. Or was it the way he would occasionally show an expression of hopeless loneliness

despite being able to handle everything by himself and not caring what people said about him? It was probably all of it.

"I'm going with Seika." Yifa turned to face Lize. "Because he's the one I like!" With that declaration, she raced over to him—to Seika.



Yifa seemed to be saying something to the prince's elven servant, but due to the loud wind created by the pressure magic, I couldn't make anything out. They must have reached an agreement because Yifa came running over. The dragon lowered its head by the terrace, and she jumped, grabbing my hand.

"Seika!"

I grabbed her hand and pulled her up, sitting her behind me. "Sorry for interrupting. I'm in a bit of a hurry. Hang on tight."

"Okay!" Yifa wrapped her slender arms around my stomach. Once I'd confirmed she was steady, I flew a lit hitogata in front of the dragon's vision to tell it to take off.

The dragon looked back at me as though to ask, "Weren't you leaving?" before finally raising its head and spreading its wings. It increased the power of its magic, creating a powerful tempest from the difference in pressure.

Putting a smile on my face, I turned to the prince and the others. "I'll be waiting at the summit of the mountain, everyone," I announced. "Oh, and please bring some food with you when you come." The dragon flapped its wings, seizing the dense air to elevate its massive body. Once it reached a suitable altitude, it began gradually moving forward and picking up momentum. Tilting its wing, it made a wide turn and aligned itself with its destination, beginning a leisurely flight back to the mountain where it resided.

"Eek! W-We're flying!" Behind me, Yifa cried out in surprise.

"How does it feel to fly, Yifa?" I asked in a good mood.

"I-It's a little scary...but it's beautiful. I've never seen anything like this," she mumbled as she looked down. "You're incredible."

"Hmm?"

"I can't believe you rode a dragon. You said it was impossible before."

"That's right!"

"Eek! Wh-What's right?"

"That's what I thought, but I made an amazing discovery!" Losing myself in my excitement, I began explaining. "Riding a winged creature is fundamentally impractical. When they flap their wings, their bodies are moved up and down, making it impossible to stay mounted on their backs."

"Is that right?"

"But there's actually a part of their body that doesn't move when they flap their wings. Do you know where?"

"Huh? Um, the head?"

"Exactly! Birds and dragons both do everything they can to fix their heads in place when they fly. It keeps their field of view straight and stops their brains from getting jumbled around."

"Uh-huh..."

"It might not work with a regular dragon, but greater dragons are large enough that you can ride on their heads! This dragon can be ridden! Maybe this is what the dragon knights from the fairy tales did."

After a brief silence, Yifa burst into laughter. "Aha ha ha ha ha! No way! A knight riding on a dragon's head would be so uncool!"

"I-It's uncool?" Is it really? I rode on Mizuchi's head in my previous world. Did other people think I looked weird doing that?

Yifa giggled. "This is the first time I've seen you so passionate about something."

"Wh-What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I wanna hear more. How'd you make friends with a dragon?"

"Well..." We'd reach the mountain before I finished explaining everything. We also had company to deal with. "It's a long story. I'll tell you once things settle down."

"All right... Also, thanks for earlier, Seika," Yifa mumbled.

"Huh? Did I do something?" Yifa didn't respond. *Hmm? Well, whatever.* "I know I said the head doesn't move, but it does shake a little. Make sure you hold on tight."

"I will." Yifa brought her body closer to mine and tightened her arms around me.

I feel something soft on my back, but I think I'll avoid focusing on that for now.





With the dragon flying straight there, it didn't take long to reach our destination. Landing by the rocky area it called home, the dragon lowered its head so we could jump down.

"Is this the dragon's nest?" Yifa asked.

"Yeah, the pile of rocks over there is the dragon's bed. That's also where the egg is."

"Wait, egg?"

"Sorry. Looks like there's no time to explain."

At that moment, a creaking sound echoed from the forest beyond the rocky area. Several trees were felled one after another. Something was heading straight for us. Finally, toppling the trees on the edge of the rocky area, a huge, dark-red tiger appeared.

Behind me, the dragon seemed to retreat fearfully. The monster approached with ferocious bloodlust, and I responded by casting a spell. *Phase of earth: Transparent Barricade.* Pillars of quartz erupted from the ground and crashed into the tiger. From there, further pillars protruded from them diagonally to enclose the lava monster's body, trapping it in place.

The lava tiger let out a fierce roar and bit into one of the pillars. Just like before, the quartz pillar didn't yield. However, the heat gradually began to melt its surface—it wouldn't last long.

Still, it had at least bought me enough time to chat. Breathing in deeply, I shouted as loudly as I could. "Hey, Zect! I know you're there! Come out!"

"You came back at a bad time, scholar boy." A robed mage holding a grimoire emerged from the forest with several sword-wielding mercenaries. From beneath his hood, I could see the mercenary leader and summoner Zect smirking. "I was plannin' on snatching an egg and runnin' off with the retaining fee, but now it looks like we gotta take care of the two of you."

"So the egg was your goal all along. I thought that might be the case when I heard the prince mention that they show up in the market sometimes."

"Ha, of course it was. If we sell a dragon egg, we can take it easy for a whole year. Ha ha, that prince is a real dumbass," Zect sneered. "Ain't no way we can take on a greater dragon with this few people. You'd need an entire country to take that thing on, but he bought it the moment I showed him the lava tiger. That said, drivin' it off wasn't too hard."

I laughed back at the summoner. "So it's exactly as I said all along. You're just a scam artist."

"Looks like you don't get the situation you're in, kid." The corners of Zect's mouth curled up. "Your pathetic magic can't do a thing to my lava tiger." With a loud smash, the lava tiger finally broke through the melted quartz. Slipping out of its transparent prison, the monster let out a bloodthirsty snarl. "Cook him up and eat him!" Zect cried.

Just as the tiger's dark-red legs bent so it could leap into the air, a massive column of water spurted out from beneath it. "Wha—?!" Blown away by the water, the lava tiger was sent tumbling through the rocky area right before Zect's eyes. The water then fell back to the earth, following the slope of the mountain and sweeping up Zect and his men.

I was just as surprised as they were. I felt a massive flow of power stemming from the soft-haired girl clutching the ring on her hand next to me. "I'm not going to sit back and take it anymore," Yifa mumbled calmly.

"Yifa..." I couldn't stop myself from speaking.

"Seika, I—"

"That was amazing! Great job!"

"H-Huh?!" Hearing my elated voice, Yifa's expression immediately turned to confusion. "I was just doing what you said..."

"Most people wouldn't be able to pull that off even if they were told to. You've got a lot of courage."

"Y-You think so?"

"Bringing you along was the right call. I had no idea you'd gotten so good at water magic." Yifa giggled happily in response.

"Damn it. The hell was that spell? Are you an elf too?!" the soaking-wet Zect shouted after grabbing hold of a rock.

I tilted my head. "Elf? What's he talking about?"

"Um, actually, Seika..."

"Anyway, to continue our conversation—you were right to use a large amount of water. A small quantity of water would have just been evaporated by the lava, making things even more dangerous. But when you use a lot of water... Well, see for yourself."

I pointed at the lava tiger as it unsteadily stood up. The reason for its clumsy movement was readily apparent—its lava armor had turned black and hardened. "See how the red parts have solidified into round, bumpy shapes? That's what happens when lava continues flowing after the surface has cooled. Rocks like that also form when a volcano erupts and the lava flows into the ocean."

"R-Really?"

The lava tiger roared and its hardened armor split, new lava flowing out. "It's gonna take more than that!" Zect shouted. "Half-assed magic doesn't work on my lava tiger!"

Yifa's expression turned stern, but I gently lowered her raised right hand. "Huh?"

"It's fine. I'll handle the rest." *Phase of earth: Fireproof Net.* A white net fell over the lava tiger. Angered that its movement had been hindered, it began struggling violently. Naturally, asbestos couldn't withstand temperatures capable of melting quartz either, and the net began to tear here and there.

Zect smirked as he watched the scene unfold. "Ha! Dumbass! You can't capture a lava tiger with a net!"

"I wasn't trying to capture it," I responded quietly, directing a single hitogata that had appeared in midair towards the beast. "I just needed it to sit still for a second." *Phase of yang and fire: White Blaze.* Blindingly bright white fire poured out of the hitogata, instantly engulfing the netted tiger. After a short while, it faded away—and nothing was left.

"Huh?" Zect was stunned. The only remnants of the lava tiger were lumps of high-melting-point minerals that had been stuck to its armor. There was no trace of its body, any lava, or the asbestos net. In fact, the earth itself had melted, boiling and turning to glass.

I laughed scornfully. "I said I'd turn it into charcoal, but not even that was left." I had forcibly increased the flames' heat with yang ki, turning it into pure white fire capable of melting even scheelite. A single lava monster was no trouble at all.

"Who the hell are you?" Zect grumbled, his eyes wide with fear.

"The world's strongest mage," I replied with a smile.

"Stop screwing around! Hey, you lot! Form a wall and earn your pay!" The mercenaries that had been swept away by the water and clung to rocks and trees falteringly stood up. At that moment...

"Groooaaar!" The dragon roared behind me. Panic spread through the mercenaries, and they began to flee.

"Damn it! You can't be serious!"

"We can't fight that thing!" one of the mercenaries shouted back at Zect as he fled.

"Hold it! Stop running away!"

"That's right. There won't be any fleeing," I said, capturing the scattered mercenaries with Binding Vines. After that, I smiled at the motionless Zect. "You're all that's left."

"Why aren't you capturin' me like you did them? You think this is funny?"

"Yes. You look weak, so why don't you tie yourself up? It's too much of a hassle for me to bother."

"You're gonna regret that!" Zect's grimoire glowed brightly as he gave a vicious smirk beneath his hood. "Take a look! This is the trump card even I can't control! Who knows what's gonna happen to you and that cit—ow!" Letting out a ridiculous cry, Zect dropped his grimoire. "What happened?!" The book was on fire. It should have been soaked, yet it was wrapped in a pillar of orange

flames and was burning to ash.

"You use that instead of a wand, right?" Yifa asked, staring firmly at Zect. "Are you finished?" Spiraling orange flames began appearing around Zect. They were the flames of the hitodama that I had seen so often in my previous world. "I hope you are. I'd feel bad having to burn you too." Zect sank to the ground inside his hitodama prison. He had completely given up. "Was that good, Seika?" Yifa looked at me expectantly.

"Y-Yeah, excellent work, Yifa. He almost summoned some kind of monster." I patted Yifa's head as she smiled happily. However, I felt a little let down. I kinda wanted to see that trump card.

White Blaze

A spell that creates fire heated to 5,000 degrees Celsius using yang ki. Tungsten is the metal with the highest melting point, but even it melts at temperatures of over 3,400 degrees. Tantalum hafnium carbide, made with modern technology, maxes out at a melting point of 4,200 degrees. The heat is capable of melting everything on Earth, and completely vaporizing most of it. The high temperature makes the color of the flames bright white (approximately 5,000 kelvin will give you the color of a fluorescent lamp). Ordinarily, thermal radiation would pose a danger to the caster and those around them, but Seika deployed hitogata with yin spells attached to absorb the excess heat.

Act 6

I ended up returning to the estate a few hours later. I would have liked to wait until some of the prince's subordinates arrived at the summit, but the angry dragon had been harassing Zect and his mercenaries. Given that I wanted to turn them in as criminals, I'd decided to leave the mountain before they got eaten.

The dragon once again landed in the courtyard and spat out the bundle of vines it had been holding in its mouth. Tied up, Zect and his mercenaries tumbled onto the lawn. The prince, his elf servant, and a large number of guards had all gathered in the courtyard.

I guess I should expect this kind of welcome given it's the second time around. I got off the dragon along with Yifa as the prince looked at us dumbfounded.

"S-Seika, what is the meaning of all this?" he asked.

"This lot is a bunch of scam artists and poachers, Your Highness," I replied. "They lied about being able to beat the dragon. They just wanted to swindle you out of your money and make off with the egg."

"Surely they wouldn't... And egg, you say?"

"The dragon's egg, of course. This dragon is currently incubating an egg." I explained what I had seen on the summit and the deduction I had made based on those facts.

The prince shook his head as though in disbelief. "I never would have imagined..."

"It's true. And as far as conjecture goes, I think my theory tracks. I intend to include it in my report. You're welcome to scale the mountain and see for yourself if you'd like."

"That would be dangerous. In fact, how did you get the dragon to accept you in the first place? Not only does it not attack you, but it even lets you help care for its egg? No creature would allow that."

"In a sense, dragons are quite special," I explained. "Animals that care for their young aren't particularly uncommon, and among them, some species allow individuals other than the parents to care for their young. For example, there are many species of birds, a few species of canine such as foxes and raccoon dogs, and a very small number of fish that exhibit this behavior. Though limited in number, it's a wide range of species—and dragons are one of them. I looked over old records in the library, and when the dragons from 150 years ago reproduced, the young that were born first cared for the later young. In other words, dragons are monsters that raise their young as a family."

"B-But," the prince protested, "you're not one of its young! You're a human! Why would it accept a member of another species? You have no blood relation!"

"There are species that allow non-blood-related individuals to raise their young. Besides, have you forgotten about the legend, Your Highness?"

The prince's eyes went wide. "You mean the egg hatched by the queen? But that's just a legend."

"It's possible if you know the method. If the legend is true, then it would explain everything. It's not at all surprising that the dragon made me take care of its egg. The reverse has been happening all this time."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you get it, Your Highness? This dragon's parents were humans. Their children were its family, and it likely viewed all the townspeople living in the same territory as family as well. Naturally, that has extended to their descendants. The dragon once fought alongside humans against rival nations and demons. Why do you think that is? Why do you think it never attacked the townspeople and continued to watch over them all this time?"

"You mean..."

"Yes, I do. Astilia's dragon has been helping raise human children for hundreds of years."

The prince seemed to have had his breath taken away, and his guards began to whisper among themselves.

I looked up at the docile dragon. "At the very least, I think that's how the dragon sees it. It was simply the natural thing to do as far as it was concerned." I returned my gaze to the prince. "You should repay the favor, Your Highness."

The prince's words were caught in his throat.

"You owe it a debt of a few hundred years. Raising the young isn't easy for a dragon without a mate. Help it. Though the lack of interaction may have caused some distance, it hasn't forgotten the people who raised it. The fact that it accepted me is proof of that. It isn't too late. Make the people of Protoasta this dragon's family again. And if they're raised by human hands, its young will probably regard humans as family as well," I added. "Even if they settle near human lands after leaving the nest, it's unlikely that they'll attack anybody. They may even be able to live together, just like Astilia. I suggest you explain the situation to the empire in this manner. I'll concur in my report, emphasizing that the threat is minimal. What do you think?"

The prince remained silent for a while, then eventually shook his head. "No." "Why not?"

"The imperial assembly won't accept that. There's no proof of your claims."

"There are very few things in this world with definitive proof to back them up," I said to the timid prince, exasperated. "I intend to structure my report such that they're inclined to believe it. I'll set everything up for you, so all you have to do is lay some groundwork and smooth-talk your way through. You're a politician yourself, Your Highness—surely you're capable of that much."

"I can't. You have no idea. The imperial assembly is a den of scheming old foxes. I can't convince them..."

"Come on." Seriously, what's wrong with this guy? He's got no self-confidence at all. "Then what are you going to do? What's the alternative? Your plan to kill the dragon was never going to work."

"You're at least strong enough to beat Zect's summon. Would you kill the dragon for me?" the prince asked.

Huh? As I looked at him dumbfounded, the prince said something that made me question his sanity.

"You've already been accepted into its nest. If we can obtain some poison that would work on a dragon, you could just use that."

"Poison? Are you really suggesting that after everything I said? Are you actually losing your mind? I don't think anyone's okay with this."

"You don't understand!" Prince Cecilio suddenly shouted. There was clear panic in his eyes. "As the first prince, I have to get results! I'm not fit to be the next king if I don't solve this myself!"

I listened quietly.

"Seika, I'm asking you again. Will you please cooperate with me and kill the dragon?"

I looked down and shook my head. "I refuse. Even removing my feelings from the equation, that isn't my duty. I have no reason to help you."

"Very well. In that case, I shall have you apprehended. Men." At the prince's command, his guards drew their swords.

"Huh? Why?" I mumbled in shock.

"You are suspected of causing the Astilian dragon's strange behavior through your magic. You will be taken into custody, and afterwards, we will demand an apology from Count Lamprogue. Rest assured, you'll be treated well."

"So...you're taking me hostage? You know, my father doesn't really get involved with politics. There isn't much to gain from threatening him."

"He's still a count in the empire. We won't know until we try."

What's that supposed to mean?! I was thoroughly fed up. Things had gone far too off course. Even the guards seemed hesitant—of course they would be. The entire situation was ridiculous. Irritated, I thought to myself. Playing along and then escaping after letting myself get captured would probably settle things peacefully.

"Yifa! Come to me!" the prince suddenly shouted.

Are you kidding me?

Yifa silently looked at the prince.

"I'll set you free! You don't have to obey him anymore! I'll temporarily seize Seika's assets and grant you Astilian citizenship."

Yifa didn't respond.

"Come this way! It's dangerous where you are!"

"Enough of this!" I finally snapped. Furious, I shouted at the prince. "Are you seriously worried about women at a time like this?! And you call yourself a politician?! As ridiculous as you're being, I've kept my mouth shut since I'm an outsider, but you're telling me Yifa was your goal the entire time?! Aren't you ashamed to act this way in front of your citizens?!"

"Wh-Wha—" Prince Cecilio stammered.

"Everything you do is too hasty! Stop relying on others for everything! You just keep looking for the easy way out! Do you think that's gonna make people follow you?! Focus on yourself before you think about accomplishments or women, you immature little fool! And what's all this 'Come to me! I'll set you free!' stuff about?!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. "Like hell I'm ever giving you Yifa!"

Silence fell over the courtyard.

"M-Master Seika?" Yuki whispered into my ear, bringing me back to reality.

I timidly looked at Yifa standing next to me. She was staring at me in astonishment, but she quickly averted her eyes when she saw me looking back at her. I turned pale. *Did I screw up again?*

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Lighthearted laughter abruptly resounded through the courtyard. It was Lize, the prince's elven servant. "Pardon me. Everyone, sheathe your blades. That's enough of this farce."

"Lize?! What are you— Urgh..." The elf shut the prince up with a glare. The guards returned their swords to their sheaths, seemingly somewhat relieved.

Then the elf looked towards Yifa. "Let me ask you—are you all right with this?"

"Yes," Yifa said with a smile. "Your Highness, I'm honored to receive your offer, but I must decline again. I'm going to return to the academy with Seika."

"B-But Yifa, you don't..."

"This is what I want. And also," Yifa said coldly, "even if I were free, I wouldn't stay with you."

"But..."

"My lord." The prince's elf servant chastised him. "Give it a rest already. You've been rejected."

"Wha..."

Ignoring the shocked prince, the elf cheerfully spoke to me. "I'm terribly sorry, Seika. First, I must express our gratitude for your assistance regarding the dragon. It's truly a relief to have uncovered the truth of the matter. You even apprehended a criminal as well. I cannot thank you enough. We shall follow your advice on how to handle the aftermath."

"You're welcome," I responded quietly.

"And though I realize it may be rather forward of me, could I ask that you forget everything the prince just said?"

"Ah, sure. I got a little carried away myself."

"I appreciate it. When will you be returning to the empire? We can arrange a carriage for you anytime."

"The new semester is about to start, so ideally as soon as possible. Staying here any longer would also be a little awkward at this point."

"I'm truly sorry. In that case, I will make the arrangements quickly, as well as your lodgings along the way. I would also like to speak with Yifa in private, if you would allow it."

"Huh?" I looked to my side and saw Yifa give a small nod. "Go ahead."



"I'm sorry about that," Lize said to Yifa. They were still in the courtyard, a short distance away from the guards. "It would seem I misjudged you."

"What do you mean?" Yifa asked.

"I thought your feelings for your master were born of necessity, as that slave

trader said. People often fear new situations and convince themselves that their current reality is best. But I see your feelings are different. You're in love with that boy, aren't you?"

"L-Love?!"

"Then there's nothing more to be said. Stick out your hand." Her face bright red, Yifa did as she was told and extended her right hand. Lize took it, and using her index finger, which had somehow begun to bleed, she drew a symbol resembling a magic circle on the back of Yifa's hand. She muttered a short incantation, and then, the circle of blood disappeared as though being absorbed into Yifa's hand. "I'll give you a few of my elementals."

Yifa noticed that a portion of the vast number of elementals surrounding Lize had moved next to her. They seemed to be gathering around the magic circle that had disappeared into her hand rather than her ring or any magic stones.

"Light elementals are particularly rare. Once you grow accustomed to using them, you'll be able to do things like this." Following Lize's gaze, Yifa looked at her own left hand. The cut on her thumb from the blade of wind had disappeared without a trace. "For some reason, you remind me of a princess out of a fairy tale. There was a princess of a ruined country who used elven magic. Despite being one of the Hero's companions, she was a compassionate girl who sympathized with even the Demon Lord. You'll be just fine. I'm sure your feelings will reach him."

"Y-You think so?"

"There's still something off about that boy—my opinion on that hasn't changed. However, he said it himself, didn't he? Different species can become family. Dragons and humans managed to live together, and this should be much easier than that." Lize paused, then added one final thing. "May you find happiness, my kin."



Two days after all the commotion, Yifa and I were in the carriage back to Lodonea.

"Say, Yifa."

"Wh-What is it?" Yifa nervously glanced my way, avoiding eye contact. Things had been like this since the day before yesterday.

"Uh, is there anything you want?" I asked, adopting a slightly ingratiating tone.

"Huh? Wh-Where did that come from?" Yifa turned to me in surprise—seemingly due to the abruptness of the question.

"I was just thinking you might be mad," I responded timidly.

"Why would I be mad?"

"I mean, I got in the way of your marriage talks."

"Seika, I already told you, I never wanted to join his harem. If anything, I'm grateful for your help. The prince was being really persistent."

"You're not just saying that?"

"Of course not! Why are you so doubtful?!"

"Because," I said hesitantly, "you've been refusing to look me in the eye, and you avoid me every time I try to talk to you."

"Th-That's..." Yifa averted her eyes, her face flushing slightly red. "That's because Lize had to go and say all that stuff."

"Did that elf woman do something?"

"N-Never mind! A-Anyway, I'm not mad!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! And I think you were exactly right about the prince! He makes hasty decisions and doesn't think things through. He's got a lot of work to do before he's fit to be the next king."

"I don't think he's that bad."

"Y-You were the one who insulted him! Why are you making it sound like I'm the one who said all that stuff?!"

"Did I? Well, he's young. He's bound to make a few mistakes." That said, he certainly did give off the impression of a screwup. It was hard to argue against

that. Still, it seemed like the dragon issue was going to be resolved safely.

When I'd made my report to the queen, she had seemed to conclude that the situation was too much for the prince to handle and had decided to intervene directly. She was a skilled statesman, and since I was the one drafting the report for the empire, it probably wouldn't be too difficult for her to come to a compromise with the imperial assembly. Hopefully, the prince would be able to learn a thing or two about politics from her.

If nothing else, Protoasta was about to become a little more busy. An imperial naturalist who'd just happened to be in Asta at the time had shown interest in the dragon and said he'd be bringing his students along to observe it soon. The topic would likely spread within academic circles and bring in even more scholars. As the head of the city, the prince wouldn't be able to simply ignore the arrival of such renowned individuals and would have to make arrangements for them to visit the mountain. He would soon be faced with more work he wasn't accustomed to.

That should keep his mind off searching for a queen for a while. Forget about the harem and focus on your job, Your Highness. That reminded me of something. "You went to visit the harem, didn't you? What was it like? Was the smell of perfume overwhelming?"

"It wasn't what I expected at all. It used to be a normal harem, but now that succession isn't a concern, it's been turned into an educational facility. There was a statistics lecture going on when I visited."

"Oh, really? I've never heard of anything like that."

"Even though everyone was really serious, it didn't feel uptight. The teacher asked an interesting question too."

"What was it?"

"She said that she rolled a die and it landed on six ten times in a row. What's the likelihood that it lands on six the next time? Do you know?"

I chuckled. "Does said die have an equal probability of landing on every number?"

[&]quot;Um...I can't answer that."

"That's as good as giving me the answer. The next roll will almost certainly be six. The odds of landing on six ten times in a row are something like one in sixty million."

"Huh?! Uh, yeah, that's correct. H-How did you calculate that?"

"It's just one-sixth to the tenth power, isn't it? The denominator, six to the power of ten, can be calculated by multiplying two to the power of ten by three to the power of ten."

"How did you do that?"

"Normally you would multiply 1,024 by 59,000—" Then I realized something. I'd memorized several exponentiations of prime numbers in order to construct formulas, but unless I could explain that, I'd just seem like a weirdo who'd memorized strange numbers for no reason. Panicking, I tried to come up with an excuse.

"U-Uh, so if you multiply 2 by itself 5 times, you get 32. Multiply that by itself and you get around 1,000. 3 is a little trickier. 3 squared is 9, and 9 multiplied by itself is 81. Multiply 81 by itself and you get something around 6,500. That's 3 to the 8th power, so multiply it by 9 again for around 60,000—that's 3 to the 10th power. Finally, multiply 60,000 by 1,000 and you get 60,000,000. It's a rough estimate, but that gives you an idea of the scale you're dealing with."

"Wow. That method seems accurate."

"Is there another method?"

"Well, I..." Yifa explained her method, leaving me quite impressed.

"Interesting. It's a bit of a stretch, but it simplifies the process and has fewer steps."

"Still, it's definitely not the best way. The number being close was just a lucky guess. You're incredible to be able to calculate it just like that."

I brushed her off with an awkward laugh. "A-Anyway, it sounds like the students there are pretty smart."

"I was told many of them leave the harem to become bureaucrats. Lize said she used to be a student there too, but her grades were really low. It must be tough if someone capable of becoming a court mage gets failing grades."

"Hmm... I wonder how long ago we're talking about." Lize had seemed like she was about a hundred years old, so she had probably been there somewhere around eighty years ago. I recalled the impressive flow of power I'd felt around her. "Come to think of it, she could see elementals too, couldn't she?" Lize had said that was an elven ability. "So that means your magic is elven magic."

"Yeah. I had no idea."

"You never heard anything from your parents about having elven blood?"

"No, never. My mom might have known, though."

"Hmm. Maybe my father would know something if I asked him." No, probably not. He doesn't seem like he'd be interested in anything but his own research. I'd thought he might have had some sort of ulterior motive in giving this task to me, but that didn't seem to be the case. Maybe there really hadn't been anyone else available—or maybe he'd used it as an excuse to check in with me.

"It still doesn't feel real," Yifa said. "There's nothing elf-like about me. My mom died of an illness, so I don't know if she would've had a long lifespan."

"Elves are supposed to be an attractive race. Maybe that's why you're so pretty. Your mom was beautiful too, wasn't she?"

"Wh-Wh-What are you—"

"Looking at it that way, maybe it was for the best that you rejected that nogood prince. You can probably find someone better." *Actually, could she? Is there someone better than a prince?* It wasn't any of my business, but it still felt like a shame it had fallen through. "Hmm. What sort of person would you want to marry, Yifa?"

"Huuuh?! Um..." Yifa looked down and hesitated. "I don't care about status. I'd want them to be smarter than me, strong, kind...and maybe a little lonely."

I couldn't help but smile awkwardly upon hearing that. "That's a lot of demands. This might not be what you wanna hear, but it's important to compromise or you're just making it hard for you to find anyone."

Yifa glanced at me, then gave a troubled laugh. "That's not true."



Epilogue

The cries of monsters echoed through the forest. A party made their way through the trees, pursued by a horde of monsters. It had likely been a trap. Some of the false chests generated in dungeons would emit a loud sound upon being opened and attract nearby monsters, placing the adventurers who opened them in a bad spot.

In this forest where stagnant magical power lingered, the party had discovered a giant, swollen fruit. The moment it had burst, it had sprayed a foul-smelling liquid all around. It had to have been a similar type of trap—so surmised the party's leader, Zolmnem.

Despite the dangerous predicament, Zolmnem's calm expression didn't waver. In fact, the predicament wasn't all that dangerous. It wasn't really a predicament at all. To their party, a situation that would leave ordinary adventurers saying their prayers was nothing more than an unforeseen twist. Zolmnem didn't even participate in the battle—he simply watched from the center of the party's formation.

In front, Mudelev was violently swinging his club. "Gah ha ha ha ha ha! They're all so frail! Gah ha ha ha!" Each time he brandished the club that was nearly the size of a human, a venom-spitting slime was splattered or a sword-wielding skeleton was pulverized. "Hmm?!"

A monster bearing the face of a pig emerged from the trees. It was an orc.

"Oh?! Did we finally get a strong one?! No, never mind. Hmph." After snapping its spine with a single blow to the torso, Mudelev grabbed the orc with one hand and hurled it. All the monsters in its path were flattened and crushed. A mere orc was no match for Mudelev—not even in size.

Mudelev had reddish-brown skin, short horns protruding from his head, and a height comparable to that of an orc. Even without armor, neither blade nor magic could wound his durable body. He was an ogre—a race notable even among demons for their prowess in battle.

To the left, Pirislaria was demonstrating her power. "Where...are you going?" she said with a yawn. "That's a table leg... You'll fall off the moon..." Curled up in a ball, the small woman was floating in the air using gravity magic. Both of her eyes were closed, and the words coming out of her mouth were complete gibberish. She seemed to be in the middle of a nap.

However, there was a pile of goblins that had been turned to stone in front of her. Drawn by the fruit's scent, a seemingly endless number of goblins clambered over the mound of stone, eager to tear their prey apart. Yet the moment they exposed themselves to the woman, their movements came to a halt, and their flesh and eyes turned gray. They then slowly toppled over, joining the pile of stone statues. It was almost comedic—her evil eye was so powerful it felt like it had to be a joke.

Though both of her eyes were closed, Pirislaria's gaze was fixed on her enemies. A red third eye—her evil eye—was wide open on her forehead, peeking through her fluttering hair. Pirislaria was a tria, a unique race of demons wherein every single member possessed the evil eye.

Ro Ni was standing to the right. "Yeah, that's it! Great job, Uni! Eat 'em up! Ah! Dee, go help Tess!" He had a small body, dark brown fur, and long ears atop his head. The rabbitfolk boy wasn't doing the fighting himself—he was directing the shadow wolves he controlled from the back.

Though the kobolds attacking him were numerous, his shadow wolves were far stronger than the monsters. They sunk into the shadows, tearing into the kobolds from behind with their fangs and gradually thinning out the horde. Then a large figure emerged from the mass of kobolds. It had silver fur and was twice as large as an ordinary kobold—it was a superior variant known as a kobold lord. Pushing through its fellow monsters, the kobold lord fended off several shadow wolves as it dashed towards Ro Ni, the one controlling its enemies.

Not budging from his spot, Ro Ni simply tilted his head in confusion. "You're trying to hurt me?" The kobold lord suddenly stopped in its tracks. Its cleaver was still raised above its head, yet its eyes were wavering with hesitation. "I just wanna be friends with you." Despite the danger he was in, the rabbitfolk boy's calm words were filled with innocent kindness.

The kobold lord dropped its cleaver and extended its now empty, furred hand to Ro Ni as though trying to touch a delicate flower. Ro Ni narrowed his dark eyes and smiled. "Good." A moment later, a giant mouth emerged from the earth and swallowed the kobold lord whole. The long body of the subterranean dragonkin known as a wyrm twisted and turned before it returned underground, satisfied.

"Perfect timing. I was looking for something to feed him," Ro Ni said happily, wiping the dirt off of his face. Even among beastfolk, rabbitfolk were particularly skilled at bonding with animals and monsters. Ro Ni was a gifted tamer who could convince almost any creature to follow him in an instant.

Gal Ganis was protecting the rear, a swarm of killer wasps dropping one after another before him. "Damn it!" He clicked his tongue. "No, that's wrong too!" The giant wasps scattered on the ground looked intact at first glance, but upon closer inspection, the bases of their wings, the eyes and antennae they used to sense the world, and the jaws and stingers they used to attack were all charred black.

Countless small flames were floating around Gal Ganis. They would intermittently disappear into the glow of a magic circle, and then one of the killer wasps would fall to the ground. "Just barely off. That one was even worse! Damn it!" By teleporting the flames created with his fire magic, he burned his enemies' vitals from within. Despite showcasing extraordinary skill as he defeated the monsters one after another, he lamented his inexperience. "I missed?! Gaaaaaah!"

Gal Ganis unleashed a massive burst of flames, incinerating the swarm of killer wasps and the surrounding trees. Even after the flames subsided, the fire continued to spread through the forest, leaping from tree to tree. It was liable to turn into a full-blown wildfire if left unchecked. Yet every last ember disappeared at once, leaving only the fading light of innumerable magic circles in their wake. Collected and teleported to an area with no combustible material, the fire gradually shrunk before disappearing entirely.

The only thing left smoldering was the devil's anger. "It's hopeless. I'm never gonna live up to my brother like this." Gal Ganis had two coiling horns, black fur, and a goatlike face that was currently warped with self-loathing. Devils

were a race of demons that excelled at dark element magic. Despite his youth, he had already surpassed his deceased brother's skill, but he refused to acknowledge that.

Silence soon returned to the forest.

"It's over, Zolmnem," said the ogre.

"Round... Calm..." the tria yawned.

"That was lucky!" the rabbit boy exclaimed. "I got a lot of food for everyone!"

"Sorry it took so long, Zol," the devil added.

"It's no problem," Zolmnem responded curtly. Both the scale of the trap and the time spent dealing with it had been within expectation.

"Anyway, what are we doing with him?" Mudelev asked, prompting everyone to look in his direction.

A human man was cowering on the ground, looking at the party as though he couldn't believe his eyes. "There's no way. Who are you?! Demons or not, you shouldn't be able to make it through a calling trap in the Forest of Monsters unscathed!"

"So you knew about it. I thought you'd gone crazy when you suddenly started hitting that creepy fruit," said Gal Ganis.

"Still, he was ready to face his own death. Frail as he is, his resolve is commendable," Mudelev replied.

"Why?" Zolmnem asked. "Why did you deceive us? We agreed to spare you if you guided us through this forest of high-level monsters."

"Wh-Who would believe that?!" the man shouted. "You're gonna spare me after you slaughtered everyone else in the village?! That's a load of crap!"

"Sorry about that, Zol. I tried not to get caught, but it looks like I've shown my inexperience yet again," said Gal Ganis.

"It's fine. It had to be done." They couldn't afford to let the empire find out about their presence. All the humans in the village they had used to resupply had to be disposed of either way. If Gal Ganis had blundered, then there was no

other choice.

At that moment, a massive figure rose over the forest. Toppling trees as it approached, it was tall enough to look over the canopy. It had rough, pale blue skin, and a heavy, muscular physique. In its hand was a stone axe made by giants, and there was a single eye glaring down at Zolmnem and the others in the center of its face.

Looking up at the monster, the man's expression filled with both happiness and sorrow. "Ha ha, I did it! It's the lord of the Forest of Monsters. I managed to call it here. I've won. I avenged you, everyone."

The monster appeared to be a cyclops. They weren't particularly noteworthy monsters and were known only for their singular eyes and superhuman strength. However, this one seemed to have lived in a forest filled with stagnant magical power for a long time, growing to a size so huge it rivaled even a giant. Its mere presence was so imposing it approached that of dragonkin like wyrms or wyverns.

Zolmnem observed the cyclops.

Name: - / Lv: 72

Race: Elder Cyclops / Job: -

HP: 7,835/7,835

MP: 1,876/1,876

Strength: 734 Endurance: 792 Agility: 355 / Magic: 628

Skills: Heat Ray Lv 5

"I'll handle it." Zolmnem halted his antsy party members with a single sentence and drew the sword at his waist. His race's ancestral blade, passed down for generations, still retained its edge despite its years.

Clearly hostile, the lord of the Forest of Monsters raised its enormous stone axe over its head. It had likely obtained it by killing a giant and plundering its weapon sometime in the past. A single strike would be strong enough to cut

through the trunks of the massive trees that had been growing since time immemorial.

Yet the monster's attack was effortlessly halted by Zolmnem's sword. Birds took flight from the trees as a tremendous sound echoed through the forest. Shock flickered through the unintelligent monster's single eye. Zolmnem couldn't blame it—it had likely reigned as the most powerful being in this forest for many years. However, for Zolmnem, this was the expected outcome.

"I'm stronger." Enraged, the cyclops raised its axe over its head once again, but Zolmnem was already gone. With a flash of his sword, the cyclops fell to its knees. The tendons in both its legs had been cut in the blink of an eye. "And you lack the requisite agility," Zolmnem said, shaking the blood off of his blade.

Giving up on its legs, the lord of the Forest of Monsters turned its upper body and swung its axe horizontally. One step ahead, Zolmnem was already chanting a spell. "Numbed, frozen, and shattered blue—" A massive pillar of ice created by magic pierced through the cyclops's chest from behind. With a short wheeze, the lord of the Forest of Monsters fell face-first to the ground.

"Whoa, nice job, Captain," Ro Ni said cheerfully, judging that the fight had ended.

"It's not over yet." Zolmnem knew that the battle had not yet concluded.

HP: 104/7,835

The cyclops suddenly raised its head, directing its wide-open eye at Zolmnem. It glowed red for a brief moment, then unleashed a blinding ray of heat that engulfed Zolmnem. It was powerful enough to instantly vaporize the trees in the forest, yet...

"Dispel Circle." The heat ray was easily blocked by Zolmnem's light element barrier. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have had time to cast a spell, but Zolmnem had begun chanting before the cyclops had even started to move. Because he'd known—he'd known about the lord of the Forest of Monsters's trump card, the Heat Ray skill. "But now," Zolmnem said, stepping forward, "it is over."

With a flash of his silver sword as fast as a bird in flight, the cyclops was beheaded. Ignoring the enormous head rolling along the ground, Zolmnem observed the cyclops's corpse. Even when he was certain of his victory, it had simply become habit.

Name: Elder Cyclops Corpse / Rarity: 7

Taking a deep breath, he sheathed his treasured sword.

"Hmm. As mighty as ever. His swordsmanship is excellent, naturally, but how is it that he seems to be able to see the future?" Mudelev mused.

"Of course the captain's strong, Mudelev. He's a divine demon," said Ro Ni.

Divine demons were an exceptionally powerful race even by demon standards. Aside from their deathly pale skin and the black markings running along their bodies, they were nearly identical to humans in appearance. Yet their physical ability and aptitude for magic were greater than that of all other demons. In addition, Zolmnem had an ability no one else possessed. Zolmnem observed himself.

Name: Zolmnem / Lv: 87

Race: Divine Demon / Job: Magic Swordsman

HP: 13,626/13,626

MP: 29,982/31,578

Strength: 1,462 *Endurance: 995* Agility: 1,344 / Magic: 1,503

Skills: Swordsmanship Lv 9, Martial Arts Lv 7, Fire Magic Lv 4, Ice Magic Lv 8, Wind Magic Lv 6, Earth Magic Lv 2, Light Magic Lv 9, Dark Magic Lv 6, Elemental Resistance Lv 4, Status Appraisal Lv 4

Status Appraisal. It was a skill Zolmnem had been born with. It allowed him to

visualize the characteristics of all things—demons, humans, animals, monsters, and even objects—in the form of their "status." He could tell the difference in ability between himself and his enemies in an instant. Preserving magical power, hiding techniques, and playing dead were all pointless against him. And above all, his ability was crucial for this mission. That was why he had decided he had no choice but to set out himself.

"No way. The lord... It's not possible..." The man muttered deliriously, unwilling to believe his eyes.

Zolmnem looked back at his party members. "Now, returning to our discussion—does anyone have any opinions on what to do with this man?"

"Kill him, I guess," said Gal Ganis. "Not like he's gonna guide us anymore. It'll take a little longer, but we'll just have to find our way outta the forest ourselves."

"Picnic..." Pirislaria mumbled in her sleep.

"If we're going to dispose of him, I'd like to do it myself. I don't know when I'll next get to devour a human," said Mudelev.

"No fair!" Ro Ni protested. "I wanted to feed him to Meede! He loves eating humans."

"Does anyone else want him?" Zolmnem asked, looking over his party.

"I don't need him for anything," said Gal Ganis.

Pirislaria yawned. "I'm full..."

"Then it's settled," Zolmnem declared. "Those who want him, split him evenly."

The man's screams echoed through the forest as Zolmnem thought to himself. Their attempt to make a local human guide them through the forest had ended in failure, but it was within expectations. It didn't matter if their travels were delayed. Their goal was one that had to be carried out at all costs. For that reason, he had planned for any and every situation. He had even accounted for the unexpected, always striving to maintain flexibility. Failure wasn't an option.

He had to protect demonkind from a war-torn future. This was a journey to save the world.

"Even if it costs me my life, the Hero must be slain."



On the way to class under the clear blue sky at the academy, I suddenly glanced behind me.

"Is something wrong, Seika?" Amyu, who had been walking ahead of me alongside Yifa and Mabel, noticed that I had stopped and looked at me curiously. "Did you forget something?"

"No, it's nothing." Facing forward again, I shook my head. Then with a smile, I started walking. "There's nothing wrong. Nothing at all."

Extra Story: A Tale of Medicine and Exorcism

As the sun set over the capital, Takanori Inanami hurried through the streets of Sakyou, the eastern part of the city, in an ox-pulled carriage. At twenty-five years of age, he served as a physician in the Imperial Court's Bureau of Medicine. Despite being off duty today, his expression was grim as he rushed to see a patient.

"All you all right, Hayao?" Takanori asked his friend who was sitting in front of him. Hayao was staring out the window of the carriage, clearly distraught.

"Yes, I'm fine." His expression said that he was anything but. Hayao was six years younger than Takanori, and he was an excellent student at the Daigakuryou Imperial University. However, he was currently lacking the presence of mind that had led him to get such good grades. Takanori couldn't blame him—the patient they were on their way to see was Hayao's younger brother. "We're here, Takanori."

The carriage had finally arrived at a large manor. Passing through the gate and entering through the doors to the pavilion, Takanori and Hayao proceeded through the luxurious manor guided by servants. They were taken to a side residence past the main building, and the patient was inside.

"What in the world?" Takanori mumbled. A groaning child was tied to a pillar by a long sash, his hands behind his back. He looked to be around fourteen or fifteen, and his features somewhat resembled Hayao's.

"Akina, I brought Takanori," said Hayao.

"Stop! Don't open the door! Stay away!" The child thrashed about, his disheveled hair flying in every direction. Drool flew from his mouth, and he was sweating profusely, likely due to a fever. He refused to raise his head as though he feared the light of the setting sun that faintly illuminated the room.

"You said he was bitten by a dog, correct?" Takanori asked Hayao.

Hayao nodded, his expression hardening at his brother's seeming loss of

sanity. "Yes. Our father bought a rare breed from Korea for use in falconry."

"How long ago was he bitten?"

"Around a month and a half ago."

"I see."

According to Hayao, Akina had come down with a fever a few days ago. At first, Hayao had thought it was just a cold, but Akina's symptoms had gradually worsened until he'd finally grown delirious. In addition, he'd also grown afraid of strong light and being touched. Even drinking water seemed to bring him pain—it was impossible to administer any medicine. And the diagnosis given by the family's physician had been...

"There's no mistaking it. It was a rabid dog." Rabies was a disease that could be contracted when bitten by a dog or bat. While there were few cases in Japan, it was fairly common in China and Korea. Medical journals from the mainland detailed the disease quite thoroughly, and based on those accounts, there was little doubt in Takanori's mind.

Hayao's eyes went wide, and he hung his head. "B-But he was bitten over a month ago! The wound healed right away, and he seemed completely fine."

"It's said that it takes time for the symptoms of rabies to set in—anywhere from one to three months. That aligns with Akina's timeline."

"He'll get better, right? Our family doctor said there was no way to cure it, but there has to be some kind of medicine that'll work! Surely you've read something in the Inanami family's medical journals!"

"I'm afraid not," Takanori said, shaking his head in response to Hayao's pleas. "There's no medicine that can cure rabies. Once they've contracted the disease, very few survive. There's nothing I can do for Akina."

"No..." Hayao's lips trembled.

Takanori hung his head, unable to bear looking at his friend in such pain. The unfortunate reality of the situation was that it wasn't particularly uncommon. Death spared no one, no matter their wealth or status. The only things special about this case were that rabies was an uncommon disease and that the patient

was the brother of his friend. Takanori came from a long line of doctors. He had long since grown accustomed to the death of patients.

Takanori gently placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's no one's fault. All we can do now is—"

"Hurry! Quickly, this way!" A man's loud voice echoed through the estate. Takanori, Hayao, and several surrounding servants all looked in its direction. The voice steadily approached alongside noisy footsteps, and a figure soon appeared down the corridor. "This way! Use a spell to ease my son's pain!"

"Father?!" Hayao exclaimed in shock next to Takanori. The figure turned out to be a large man approaching old age—he seemed to be Hayao and Akina's father, the head of their family. "Where have you been?! You're out of breath!" Hayao demanded of his father, his voice tinged with accusation.

"Quiet! You abandoned Akina and ran off somewhere yourself!" An argument broke out between father and son before another voice interrupted them.

"I can't see the patient with you standing there." A young man appeared from behind Hayao's father. He was presumably his father's guest.

Looking him over, Takanori couldn't help but frown. At first glance, he appeared to simply be a handsome young man wearing a white kariginu robe. He looked around Takanori's age, if not a little younger. Yet something about his demeanor filled Takanori with an indescribable unease. If nothing else, his youthful appearance was certainly a lie. It was sorcery—or perhaps he was some sort of spirit.

"M-My apologies!" Flustered, the man who was supposed to be the head of the family stepped aside. From the estate's size and prime location in Sakyou, the wealth Hayao's family possessed was readily apparent. It would have been difficult for any ordinary person to so much as speak with the head of such a family, yet this guest seemed to have him at his beck and call. Who was he?

Perhaps Hayao's father had personally guided him through the estate without any servants because he was worried about his son's condition and wanted to hurry, but there had to be more to it than that. The answer soon became clear as Hayao's father clung to the young man's robe.

"Please, I beg of you, Haruyoshi!"

"Haruyoshi? Is he Haruyoshi Kuga? The great exorcist?!" Takanori mumbled in surprise as the servants began to whisper as well. Haruyoshi Kuga was a name Takanori was familiar with. He was the strongest exorcist in history, said to have lived for nearly a century, and still retained his youthful appearance. He was well-versed in all sorts of sorcery and possessed several ayakashi capable of toppling countries. Takanori had heard rumors that he was the protector of the capital—a being akin to a vengeful god that one should never engage with lightly.

"Indeed, I am Haruyoshi. However, this isn't about me," the young man said sullenly. "Is this boy the one who is ill?" The great exorcist himself, Haruyoshi Kuga, looked at the groaning boy tied to the pillar and scowled. "He can't stand light or stimulation, he fears water, and he lashes out like a mad dog. Rabies, huh? That's a cruel disease he's contracted." His voice was full of pity. Haruyoshi seemed to both have heard the full story from Hayao's father and to be at least vaguely familiar with the disease.

"Haruyoshi, please," the head of the family begged.

"It's impossible," Haruyoshi told the noble bluntly. "Rabies is an incurable, fatal disease. Even I can't heal him." Takanori looked at Haruyoshi silently. Haruyoshi looked away from Hayao's father and Akina, then continued. "All I can do is ease his pain."

"Sure. That's fine." Hayao's father nodded, a shocking amount of sweat on his brow. "I didn't summon you to ask you to cure him in the first place. The sorcerers at the Bureau of Exorcists already told me that sorcery only suppresses the symptoms and enhances the body's natural healing abilities. It doesn't eradicate the root cause of the illness. No form of sorcery can cure a disease like rabies. Please put Akina...put my son to rest."

"Father..." Hayao softly muttered. Perhaps realizing his father's resolve, his voice seemed to have regained some of its usual calmness.

Haruyoshi looked back at the head of the family and nodded. "As you wish. You have my word that he will pass as though sleeping. I'll give you time to say your goodbyes—"

"And then—" Hayao's father shouted, interrupting Haruyoshi, "I want you to bring Akina back to life!"

"Huh?" Haruyoshi was at a loss for words.

"F-Father?! What are you saying?!" Hayao, on the other hand, was clearly upset.

Ignoring the commotion around him, Hayao's father shouted at Haruyoshi. "I've heard that exorcists have a means of reviving the dead! I'm sure you're capable of it. Bringing someone back from death should be an easy feat for one who has surpassed his natural lifespan! You're hailed as the strongest for a reason, aren't you?!"

"Father! Have you gone mad?! Reviving the dead?!"

"Silence! I beg of you, Haruyoshi! Return my son back to normal!" Hayao's father fell to his knees and pressed his forehead against the floor, bowing deeply.

The side building fell silent, only the groans of the patient echoing through the building. As the room darkened with the setting sun, Haruyoshi's eyes went wide, and he remained silent for a moment. Then he finally shook his head. "No. I can't grant your request."

"Why not?!" the head of the family shouted. "I'll give you anything you ask! Rice, cloth, Chinese texts, treasure! Whatever you want! You can even have this estate! You said you live in Sagano, didn't you? A home here in Sakyou would be—"

"It's not a matter of payment," Haruyoshi responded with a stern expression. "Bringing the dead back to life runs contrary to the natural order of the world. There would be no end to it—the capital would be flooded with the resurrected dead. Imagine how dreadful that would be."

"What's dreadful about it?! What's dreadful about bringing Akina back?!"

"I'm sorry, but I have no obligation to go that far for you or your child. Though this may sound harsh, you're going to have to accept the child's fate."

"Why?" Hayao's father crumpled to the floor. "Why did things turn out like

this? Is this my punishment for using my position as governor to amass too much wealth? Or is it a curse from the Korean dog I killed after it bit my son? I know the sins I've committed in the pursuit of power, and I knew they would one day come back to haunt me. But why Akina? Why not take me instead...?" The head of the family's grief echoed through the building.

Haruyoshi turned his gaze to Akina, as though unable to bear looking at Hayao's father. "Your son's condition will only grow worse as time goes on. If I'm to ease his suffering, I should do it now." Haruyoshi grabbed something inside the sleeve of his hariginu.

"Haruyoshi."

Before Haruyoshi could pull it out, Takanori suddenly opened his mouth, taking a step towards him with a smile. "I apologize for being unable to introduce myself earlier. My name is Takanori Inanami. I'm a physician with the Bureau of Medicine. Hayao here asked me to come today."

Haruyoshi looked at Takanori. "Inanami... Ah, the family of doctors. I've heard the name Mototane a lot. They say he's an excellent physician."

"I'm honored you know of my grandfather."

"It looks like neither of us could do anything this time," Haruyoshi mused, his voice filled with compassion. "Doctors have no means of curing rabies either, do they? I know it's frustrating, but take this as a reason to strive to do even better in the future. I'm sure this experience will—"

"Haruyoshi, may I ask you a few questions?" Takanori said, cutting Haruyoshi off.

"What?" Haruyoshi asked, puzzled.

"Have you encountered someone infected with rabies before?"

"Once, in an asylum in the West. Before that, I knew of it from a Song dynasty text."

"I thought as much. Did you cure them using sorcery?"

"No. It was but one patient of many in the asylum, and their symptoms had already advanced beyond saving. Rabies isn't a disease that can be cured with

sorcery in the first place."

"I see." Takanori paused before asking another question. "If you were to have treated them, what would you have done?"

"As the father said earlier, I can transfer the worst symptoms to a hitogata and enhance the body's natural recovery. If done continuously over time, you can generally expect the patient to recover. That's the standard method for dealing with illnesses and poisons."

In truth, Takanori already knew how sorcery was used to heal patients. It was a method with several advantages. There were no side effects, and depending on the sorcerer's skill, symptoms could be alleviated without waiting for the patient to move past them naturally. In addition, it could be done without knowing the specific disease or poison. However, it had its downsides as well.

"That said, in the case of rabies, it would be a futile effort," Haruyoshi continued. "At the end of the day, this method relies on the body's natural healing capability—it doesn't eliminate the source of the disease. I can't do anything about poisons that remain in the body, abnormalities in the body itself, or incurable diseases. It also fails if the patient's strength wanes." Haruyoshi cast a sidelong glance at Akina. "According to a Western medical journal I read, there are no cases of anyone ever recovering from rabies. Sorcery is powerless to cure diseases the body can't overcome on its own."

"Hmm." Takanori followed up with yet another question. "Putting curing him aside, to what extent and for how long could you curb his symptoms?"

"Well," Haruyoshi answered, slightly bewildered. "As far as extent is concerned, I'd say I could mostly quell them. He may end up bedridden if his strength falters, but there wouldn't be any obvious symptoms like fever or delirium. As for the duration—as long as I live, I suppose." Haruyoshi then frowned slightly. "However, I can't stay here forever. Even if it seems like there aren't any symptoms, his body will gradually decline. It would only prolong his suffering. What's all this about?"

"I was just curious. Anyway, I'm glad to hear that," said Takanori. Haruyoshi's expression grew all the more curious. Takanori realized he had a smile on his face. He was convinced now—he could make use of the exorcist. There was no

known cure for rabies. Neither sorcery nor medicine had a clear means of treating Akina—but it *had* been done before.

"Haruyoshi." Takanori cheerfully called the exorcist's name. Even Takanori himself could feel how out of place his tone was. "You said you can't stay here forever, but how about five days?"

"What would you do in those five days?" Haruyoshi asked doubtfully.

"Cure him," Takanori declared bluntly. "I'll see to it that Akina makes a full recovery."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, then Haruyoshi returned to his senses. "That's absurd. How do you intend to do such a—"

"Y-You will?!" Hayao's father interrupted Haruyoshi and crawled over to Takanori's feet, still on his knees. "Please! If there's a chance to cure him, I'll do anything! I'm begging you!"

"Me too. Please save Akina, Takanori," Hayao said, a hint of apprehension in his voice.

"Haruyoshi," Takanori said with a smile. "You came here to help, didn't you? Surely you'd be willing to lend your aid if there's a treatment with a chance of success. You heard the two of them."

Haruyoshi was silent for a moment as though conflicted before he let out a long sigh. "Very well. I'll cooperate with your treatment. Five days, was it?"

"Yes!" Takanori nodded enthusiastically. All that remained was the work itself. "First, we need to warm up this room. It's a little chilly in here. Someone bring a wooden brazier—"

"That won't be necessary." Several white objects floated in the air—paper cut into the shape of people, the talismans known as hitogata that exorcists used. "An open flame would harm the quality of the air. It's better to use light." Immediately after Haruyoshi finished speaking, heat gradually spread through the room. Although he had called it light, the hitogata floating around the room weren't emitting any sort of luminescence. Nonetheless, he seemed to be using some kind of spell to produce heat. Haruyoshi walked over to Akina. "I'll use his hair as a medium. Someone fetch me a blade."

"And bring some wooden tablets for writing as well!" Takanori added. "We're going to need some medicines. I'll write down what types and quantities, then please deliver it to the Bureau of Medicine." As he spoke, Takanori thought to himself. To begin with, he would need ephedra and forsythia, as well as jasper and dragon-vein fungus. A day's worth should suffice for the time being. He would decide on the future amount based on the patient's condition the next day.

Collecting his thoughts, Takanori rolled up the sleeves of his kariginu. "Also, I'm going to untie the sash around Akina. The way it's binding him isn't safe. It could wrap around his neck if he struggles." Takanori approached Akina and grabbed the sash around his wrist, making Akina writhe in pain from the light touch to his clothing.

"It hurts! Stop! Don't touch me!" As Takanori reached out to touch him, Akina used the only part of himself that was free, his mouth, and attempted to bite him. Rabies was a disease contracted by being bitten by an infected animal. Though dogs and bats were the primary carriers of rabies, humans were no exception. Takanori watched the mad dog's fangs approach him with an odd calm.

However, Akina's body suddenly came to a halt. "Gah! Urgh!" He remained frozen in place, as though all his prior struggles had never happened. Upon closer inspection, five hitogata were floating around him in the shape of a pentagram.

"Be careful! This is all for nothing if you get bitten!" Haruyoshi shouted.

Takanori looked back at the scowling Haruyoshi and responded with a gentle smile. "Thanks, Haruyoshi."

With a displeased expression on his face, Haruyoshi turned away and mumbled. "When I transfer his symptoms, the delirium should fade. Hurry and untie him."

"Of course." Takanori then spoke to the boy as he untied the sash. "You want to get better soon, don't you, Akina?"

The boy groaned and nodded weakly, sweat, drool, and tears all running down his face.

"All right!" Takanori said with a cheerful grin. "That's all I need from you. The rest is our job."



Five days later, Takanori yawned as he awoke early in the morning. The dawn sun was peeking into the room of the side building he'd been staying in for a while now. Next to him, a boy was stretched out on the floor.

"We've done all we can," Takanori mumbled quietly. "I don't think anyone else could've pulled this treatment off. It's safe to say we've given it our best effort." There was no response. "The rest depends on you, Akina," he said, looking at the boy.

"Right..." The boy's voice was barely audible. His expression was stiff. He likely still couldn't move the muscles in his face very well. However, Takanori knew Akina was smiling.



"Oh, so this is where you were," Takanori called out to Haruyoshi, who didn't turn his head as he gazed at the morning sky in the courtyard of the vast estate. "The morning sun feels nice, doesn't it? I've been trying to make sure I get enough sleep lately, so I haven't been able to enjoy it in a while. I imagine exorcists who exterminate ayakashi in the dead of night are accustomed to welcoming the next morning."

"How is the boy?"

Takanori responded cheerfully to Haruyoshi's brusque question. "Quite well, as a matter of fact. His speech is getting clearer. I can't confidently say that there won't be any lasting impairments, but he should at least be able to return to his daily life with minimal difficulty."

"Is that so?" Haruyoshi sighed as though to say, "Good grief." Yet Takanori knew he was relieved. He'd come to understand Haruyoshi over the course of the five days they'd spent together.

"How did you do it?" Haruyoshi asked. "Rabies is an incurable disease. Neither medicine nor sorcery should have been able to heal him."

"As it turns out, rabies actually is a disease the body can overcome on its own."

"Pardon?"

"As far as I know, there's only a single case of it ever occurring. It was recorded by a medical sorcerer here in Japan four hundred years ago. First, the symptoms were reduced as much as possible using sorcery. Then, by prescribing the appropriate medicines, the disease itself was weakened. Using that method, the patient recovered after a few days. Although they couldn't walk for a while, they were back to their normal life after a month."

"How can that be?"

"Rabies doesn't seem to be that strong of a disease. Its symptoms are just severe in the short term. If the patient can survive the initial period, the body can recover from there. That said, making it to that point is no easy feat. Also," Takanori said, adding one more thing, "the treatment was only possible back then because that exorcist was a member of the Bureau of Medicine. Physicians and exorcists don't cooperate on treatments these days."

There were no longer any sorcerers in the Bureau of Medicine. Shortly after the capital had been relocated, medical sorcery had become the purview of the Bureau of Exorcists, and eventually, the position of medical sorcerer had been abolished entirely. While exorcists still used medical sorcery to treat patients, the differences in organizational structure meant they didn't collaborate with doctors. Treatment that combined sorcery and medicine was a lost art.

"I'm impressed you knew of such a rare treatment," Haruyoshi said, a hint of admiration in his voice. "The position of medical sorcerer has long since been abolished. I don't imagine there are any records left in the bureau."

"Well, my family has piles of copied medical journals back home. Some of them are really old and were written by medical sorcerers before the capital was relocated. I'm fortunate to have been born to the Inanami family."

"Hmm."

"Personally, I just enjoy reading medical journals. Oh, that's right. I heard you traveled to the West in the past. Is it true that they claim diseases are caused by

invisible creatures?"

"Yes. Supposedly, they multiply within the body and make a person sick."

"I thought so. That explanation makes more sense than it being a disturbance in the body's ki. Living organisms being the cause would also explain why cooking, salting, and drying meat can prevent stomach problems. Burning them would kill them, and they probably can't live without water either."

"You always seem like you're enjoying yourself," Haruyoshi said in amazement. "No matter how dirty your clothes got or how much sleep you lost —even when the boy tried to bite you, you always looked happy."

"Sorry, I tend to get lost in my work. I know I didn't make things easy for you."

"You've got that right." He was full of energy even without sleep and handled every task skillfully, so Haruyoshi had ended up relying on him quite a bit. It almost made Haruyoshi want to take him as an assistant. Unfortunately, the world wasn't that convenient.

"I just like helping people," Takanori said with a smile. "My father and grandfather did it out of a sense of duty, but I simply enjoy the act of making people better. It's like a hobby to me. I'm so passionate about it that I stop caring about anything else. I get so engrossed that I'll use anything at my disposal—even someone known as a vengeful god. I'd even help the dead if I could. I felt the same way as their father when you refused to revive Akina. I thought to myself, 'What's so dreadful about the capital being full of the dead? I'd be overjoyed if I could make that happen."

"I'm often told that I surround myself with eccentrics and oddballs."
Haruyoshi's tone was laced with bitterness. "I see you're one of them yourself. I thought you were a selfless doctor who put others before himself, but it turns out you're just a loon who takes joy in healing people."

"A loon, huh? That's fine by me." Takanori smiled. He didn't care what other people called him. "I've heard that in Western mythology, there was a doctor who was struck down by the gods for reviving the dead and became a constellation. That's what I aspire to. Though in this city, I'm more likely to be struck down by a person than a god."

The incident with the rabid dog might well have been set up by someone. It was inevitable that the head of such a politically influential family would have a few enemies. It was possible someone had deliberately given him a diseased dog. Although he hadn't been bitten himself, Takanori couldn't deny the possibility that by helping him, he could end up incurring someone's wrath. Yet to Takanori, that was a trivial matter.

"There's something wrong with you," Haruyoshi grumbled in exasperation.

"Meanwhile, you're surprisingly normal," Takanori replied with a grin. "I didn't expect a great exorcist who's lived such a long life to be so ordinary. You're even a pretty nice guy."

"Nice? Me?" Haruyoshi gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

"I think so." Takanori nodded cheerfully. "You said it went against the natural order of the world, but you were actually really conflicted when you were asked to revive Akina, weren't you?"

Haruyoshi remained silent, perhaps because Takanori's claim had hit the mark.

"It was the only way to save Akina. Anyone with a kind heart would be conflicted. By the way, can you actually revive the dead?"

"If I catch them on the day they die, yes. If you're fine with them being a corpse or spirit, even more time can pass. But you can hardly call them the same person at that point."

"That's incredible. I bet having that sort of power causes some hesitation." Takanori was envious. He was almost inclined to ask Haruyoshi to teach him, but he had a feeling that even if he started now and devoted his life to it, he'd still never learn the secret. So instead, he told Haruyoshi something. "But I don't think there's any need to be worried about the so-called natural order."

Haruyoshi remained silent.

"While you may be unaging, the person you're helping isn't. And the present moment never comes again, no matter how long you live."

"Upholding your duty to the world is admirable, but I think it's okay to do what you want on occasion as well. You'll end up with a lot of regrets if you don't."

"Perhaps so," Haruyoshi replied, thinking it over.

Takanori found that amusing. He truly was a nice guy to take the words of a loon like himself so seriously. Stretching, Takanori turned to leave. "I should get going. I'm starving. It's pretty early, but I doubt they'll complain if I ask for breakfast."

"Takanori."

Hearing his name, Takanori turned back around.

"Thank you," Haruyoshi muttered quietly, his body still only halfway facing Takanori. As Takanori looked at him blankly, Haruyoshi continued. "That boy wouldn't have been saved without you. There was nothing I could've done alone."

After overcoming his shock, Takanori gave an awkward laugh. "I think I'm starting to get why oddballs flock to you. There's no need to thank me," he said with a smile. "That treatment method depends on how much the sorcerer can reduce the patient's symptoms. The medicine I gave him was barely consolation. It's fair to say you did most of the work, Haruyoshi."

"No, it was a combination of my spells, your knowledge, and the boy's willpower. We wouldn't have reached this result without any one of those things. You did your duty as a physician better than anyone else."

"You think so? Then I guess I'll accept your praise. Now that we've made each other's acquaintance, don't hesitate to call on me if you need anything. As long as it's in a doctor's purview, I'm sure I'll prove useful. Come to think of it, you said sorcery can't cure poisons that remain in the body, right? Would you like me to teach you a simple way to deal with them?"

"No need. So long as I prepare beforehand, I have plenty of means at my disposal. Even beheading me wouldn't be enough to kill me."

"Sounds like you don't even need a doctor."

Noticing Takanori's disappointment, Haruyoshi added one more thing. "But one of my disciples is prone to illness. I'll come to you for medicine if it's ever necessary. In a certain sense, there's no doctor I'd trust more."

"Can I take that as a compliment?" Takanori asked with a friendly grin. "Well, I should be on my way now." Bonds between people went both ways. Takanori chuckled to himself, deciding that he would come to Haruyoshi if he was ever in need of sorcery.

+++

The treatment for rabies was coincidentally established simultaneously across the world in the late eleventh century and twelfth century. In Japan, it was recorded in the *Record of Medical and Sorcery Treatments*, written by Takanori Inanami.

The key to treating rabies after the onset of the disease lay in preventing the neurological symptoms that were caused by the virus reaching the brain until the body's immune system could naturally fight it off. As a result, all treatments involved the use of sorcery. Medical sorcery based on onmyoudou filled that role in Japan.

During the medieval era, when sorcery depended entirely on individual skill, the effectiveness of the rabies treatment hinged on whether one could employ a skilled sorcerer. In the case of Takanori Inanami, a physician without knowledge of sorcery, it is said that he relied on the great exorcist Haruyoshi Kuga, who lived during the same era. While Takanori never mentioned his name in his writings, two main points are cited as evidence. The first is Haruyoshi's undeniable skill, and the second is that in Haruyoshi's own diaries, he frequently described Takanori drunkenly passing out at banquets held at his estate.











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The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World: Volume 2

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2024