

Makishima
Suzuki
ill. Yappen

Welcome to Japan,

3

Ms.

Elf!



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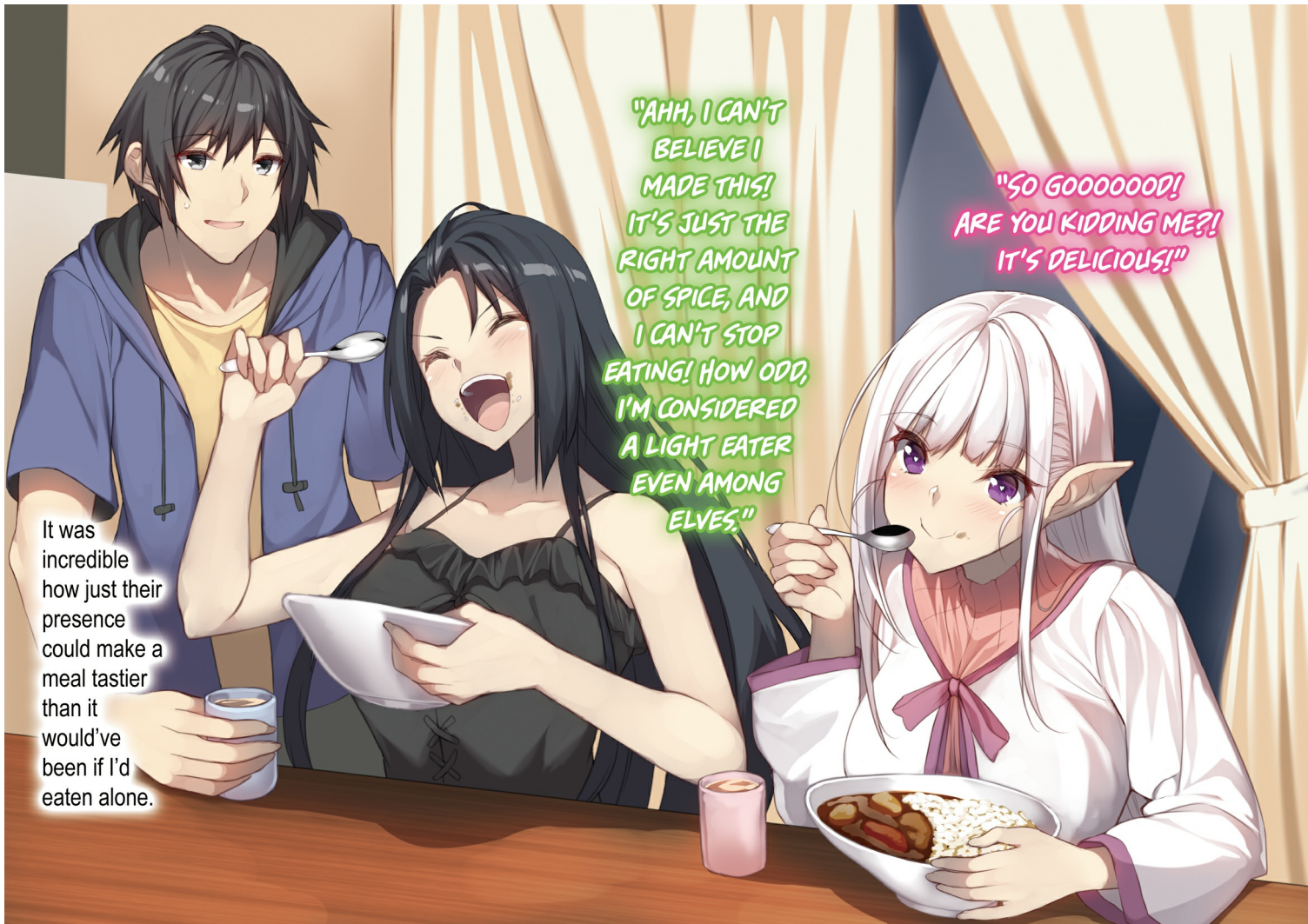


Welcome to 3 Japan, Ms. Elf!

"WHAT'S
WITH
THESE KIDS?
DID THEY
MISTAKE THE
LABYRINTH
FOR A
PLAYGROUND
OR
SOMETHING?"

The woman's wavy blonde hair reached down her back, and her skin was well-tanned. I was accustomed to seeing pointed ears like the ones the girl before me had, but it was difficult to compare her to a half-fairy elf like Marie.





It was incredible how just their presence could make a meal tastier than it would've been if I'd eaten alone.

"AHH, I CAN'T BELIEVE I MADE THIS! IT'S JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF SPICE, AND I CAN'T STOP EATING! HOW ODD, I'M CONSIDERED A LIGHT EATER EVEN AMONG ELVES."

"SO GOOOOOD! ARE YOU KIDDING ME?! IT'S DELICIOUS!"



"IT'S
SO PRETTY...
IT'S ALMOST
SCARY HOW
PRETTY THE
CHERRY
BLOSSOMS
ARE."

"BUT THAT
MAKES ME
APPRECIATE
HOW CAPTIVATING
THEY ARE ALL
THE MORE. YOU
KNOW, BECAUSE
YOU KIND
OF GET USED
TO SEEING
PURELY
PEACEFUL
SIGHTS."

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Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth: Prologue

Clack, clack! The sound of stakes being pounded could be heard echoing in the air. The men swinging the mallets were sweating profusely as they worked, but they didn't let the relentless heat of the desert wear them down. She gave them sidelong glances, impressed by their vigor, as she continued to walk down the grassy path.

There was something unique about plants in desert countries. They were thick at the trunk and looked similar to palm trees, and they were growing all around the area. As long as the desert was blessed with an oasis, it had the potential to be more like an enjoyable getaway in some southern country. Many people were in the middle of putting up their tents, however, which did somewhat detract from the scenery. Yet, beyond the many trees ahead, an emerald waterfront could be seen. It was the source of blessings upon the desert, and its glimmering sight was like a beautiful jewel. Those blessings were, in fact, just as valuable as a pool full of jewelry here in Arilai. The view of the girl placing her hand against the giant tree covered with scale-like bark was quite picturesque. Her long ears were twitching, as if in response to the sound of the knocking mallets, and her pale skin made it clear she wasn't of the human race. Her cloud-white hair was flowing in the wind, glistening all the brighter in the sunlight. The girl turned around slowly, showing a glimpse of her pearly teeth.

"The oasis looks so beautiful from here. This place was filled with monsters not too long ago. I'm glad they're gone now. Now I can enjoy this view in peace."

With that, the girl reached out expectantly. Her skin was pale, and her fingers slender. Her arm was enshrouded in her sorcerer's robe, while her other hand gripped an impressive staff. I reached out to meet her awaiting hand, and she held it without hesitation. As I wondered what would happen next, she pulled me several steps closer. I found her eyes directly in front of mine and felt my chest beating loudly. The purple crystals before me were more dazzling than the oasis itself, and her soft, pale lips could charm anyone who gazed upon

them. I'd always been troubled by how cute and feminine she was, despite her nearly childlike youthfulness. She then pointed her finger toward the waterfront.

"Take a look! The view is so wonderful. Let's camp here for the night. We need to hurry before those sharp-eyed humans take our spot."

"Oh, right. We'll be taking on the ancient labyrinth tomorrow, so we'll need a camping spot, too."

"Don't tell me you were thinking of camping out in the open without a tent like usual. Do you want to show off our crude lifestyle to everyone here?" The girl looked at me dubiously and squeezed my cheek. I couldn't help but feel ticklish as she pinched me with her soft fingers. In any case, I'd thought elves were a species whose lifestyle involved being one with nature, but maybe my understanding wasn't quite right. As I mulled over this thought, a big pair of eyes stared right at me.

"We're here as the representatives of the Alexei region. You can't keep looking like a sleepyhead forever. Pull yourself together."

The thing was, I was born with this sleepy-looking face, and it wasn't something that I could just fix so easily.

The unrelenting girl that was repeatedly pinching my cheek was Mariabelle, nicknamed Marie. She was a half-fairy elf, which was said to be a species that was so beautiful, they would appear in your dreams once you laid eyes upon them. Although she had the expressiveness of a young girl, she was actually over a hundred years old and a spirit sorceress, which was a highly uncommon class. It was often said that one shouldn't judge others by their appearances, but that saying apparently applied to elves, too. Her mystical nature never ceased to amaze me.

"Your face is so stubbornly sleepy-looking. Don't forget that we were the ones who discovered that ancient labyrinth. We can't give up this nice spot to anyone else." The girl pouted her lips as she moved her face closer. The male mind was rather complicated, I had to admit. All I could think about was how adorable she looked despite her unhappy expression. Though, of course, if she was actually upset, my mind wouldn't be preoccupied with such careless

thoughts. Ah, but this was troubling. She was so heated up that she wasn't paying attention to the distance between us. Her lips were directly in front of me, parting and closing as they uttered complaints at me. I could feel her breath and smell her sweet scent, which nearly snapped me out of my drowsy expression.

"Understand, Kazuhiho?" Marie asked and tilted her head as she stared into my eyes. It seemed she finally gave up on forcibly changing my face, and her soft fingers moved away from me. I rubbed my cheeks as I looked around, and I suddenly understood why she was being so insistent.

It was said that this was once an excavation area in which people searched for magic stones. That explained why the rocky mountains were arranged in a ring shape, as if a hole had been bored right down the middle from above, and there were mine shafts visible here and there. It seemed groundwater would seep out of the rock walls after the people struck a water source by chance, which ended up making the temperature in just this little corner unbelievably comfortable. The trees in this area had been blessed by this environment long before we even arrived, which was why they'd been able to grow so freely. Anyway, I wasn't one to turn down an opportunity to help out an adorable girl. I plopped my shoulder bag down on the rocky ground, then turned around.

"Let's hurry and go rent a tent, then. Would you mind waiting here to reserve our spot, Wridra?" I called out to the dark-haired woman who had been observing the view below until now, and she quietly turned to face us. Her pale skin peeking out between her equipment was different from an elf's, and it seemed to accentuate the color of her lips, which was that of a ripe fruit. The woman's name was Wridra. The horn on her forehead and the tail wavering behind her both made it clear that she wasn't just an ordinary, pretty lady. Most people would have been surprised to know that she was actually an Arkdragon whose level was over 1,000, if they could even believe it in the first place. We became traveling companions in an unexpected turn of events, and I was still struggling to believe it myself. Who would've guessed I'd be adventuring with someone who'd killed me? The dress-like armor she wore was a matching black in color, and its amazingly intricate details came into view as she approached. She was a full head taller than us, and her lips curled into a

smile after she swept her hair away from her face with one hand.

“No, I would not mind. That rock seems like a good spot to sit. I will be resting here, so you two go on your precious date hand in hand.” She spoke in an alluring tone of voice, but the very air about her was different from that of a human’s. This feeling she gave off was likely due to her draconian heritage, but she seemed even more amiable and charming than a human as she smiled. It was strange how dramatically the impression she would give off changed depending on her mood. As I was lost in thought, I felt Marie give my hand a tight squeeze.

“Well, there isn’t anything wrong with holding hands. I don’t know how it is for draconians, but children do it all the time, and it even has the advantage of keeping us from getting separated.”

“Ha, ha, I did not mean to mock you. Though I do find the children of men and elves such as yourselves adorable.” Wridra chuckled, clearly amused, with the unconcerned demeanor of someone with children of their own. The half-fairy elf beside me furrowed her brow at being treated like a little kid, then turned toward me with a displeased look in her eyes.

“Forget her dumb comments. Let’s go. Not on a date, but just a walk.”

With that, she tugged on my hand and began walking. Marie stuck her tongue out at Wridra as I stumbled after the elf, and the draconian cheerfully laughed out loud at the girl’s brashness. Now, it was time for our date... I mean, time to go rent a tent to spend the night in.

The hot wind brushed our cheeks, and the ground underfoot changed to dried sand as we put more distance between us and the oasis. But when I looked at Marie’s face beside me, she seemed to be faring much better than she had when we were traversing the desert region before. She had been complaining nonstop on the way. Her pale purple eyes were looking around curiously, and her ears were perked up as if to listen to the noises around us.

“There’s cloth everywhere. I suppose that’s to be expected... Look, they even have cloth ceilings put up between the tents!”

“They must be for providing shade from the sun. I don’t know much about camping in desert countries, but they’ve come up with some pretty creative

solutions. I didn't expect them to have countermeasures for the sun before putting up defenses." That went to show just how harsh it could be to deal with the heat rays slowly roasting your skin. The cloth billowed and directed the wind from the oasis toward us, which pleasantly cooled my sweat-covered skin. Men carrying bags of sand walked past us as they spoke to each other.

"Man, this place is nothing like the rumors. I heard it was crawling with monsters and so hot that it'd shrivel you right up. We must be blessed by the Land God to have such a great campground here."

"You can say that again. I bet we'll dig up loads of magic stones in no time, too." We watched the two laugh amongst each other and began walking again. The "Land God" they mentioned referred to one of the gods that were worshipped within each country. Supposedly, there was a god for every country out there. I'd traveled far and wide, but it seemed that culture never changed no matter where I went. There were theories on why this unique practice came to be, but there were so many of them that I couldn't tell which one of them was true. I asked Marie about it, and the girl looked at me with her big eyes. For some reason, she seemed to be in a good mood.

"Oh, I'm surprised you don't know that when you've traveled all over the lands. What if I told you that we, the highly capable sorcerers from the Alexei region, have pretty much figured it out?"

"What? Really?! I wanna know!" Maybe I had some sort of medical condition. I couldn't help myself from being fascinated with the fantasy world, which was probably why I put so much effort into learning the different languages. Marie smiled, seeing me so curious for her answer, and ran her hand through her white hair with a satisfied smile.

"The bracelet both you and I are wearing. That's a part of it. Skills, magic, and levels. Wouldn't you consider them unworldly? It's said that they're powers bestowed to us by God. No one even knows how long they've even been around." I nodded thoughtfully in response. Nobody in this world really doubted the existence of a divine being. Much like me with Over the Road, a long-distance movement skill that borrowed the god of travel's powers, there were many people who had received similar blessings. A horse-like animal passed nearby, pulling a noisy cart loaded with many bags. It seemed the setup

for the tents was mostly done, and they'd moved on to carrying cargo. Marie extended her arms outward as if to gesture toward the busily working passersby.

"Take this place, for example. It's going through all this development as if they're trying to build a new country here. But that's never going to happen. Now, why do you think that is?" Huh, that line must've been from the influence of that quiz show she's been into lately. TV had been a very useful tool when it came to Marie's Japanese studies. It was a good resource for learning societal norms and served to stimulate her curiosity. I could almost hear the theme song as she posed the question, and I furrowed my brow as if I was a contestant on the show.

"Hmm, could it be... because there's no god here?"

"That's right. It seems a bit strange that there's always a god in each country, doesn't it? But you can think of it the other way around, too. Maybe countries are only created wherever there's a god."

I nodded in thought as I felt the bracelet on my arm. This system with levels and skills seemed all too similar to video games in modern Japan. That was why I figured this world was all part of a dream. But it seemed there was actually a legitimate system in place to explain all of it.

"So, that begs the question, why do they lend us their power?"

"Agreed. The same goes for the god of travel you often ask for help from, but it's not like we can ask them directly. Nor are there any records left in books we can reference, so we don't know when this all started. As a sorceress, I find it a bit of a shame that all we can do is speculate." She looked frustrated by this, but I had a feeling her questions would be answered someday.

Beyond this base and on the other side of the oasis was a gaping hole that led deep underground. There lay the ancient labyrinth, which was, as the name suggested, a large maze that had existed for thousands of years. The roaring sound of wind could be heard from its entrance. There was a primitive scent to the wind coming from there that gave one the feeling that it was the breath of an ancient civilization reawakened. Perhaps the answer could be found within. Thinking about it, I couldn't wait to set off on our adventure. But preparing the

tent was the immediate priority, so I contained my feelings and began walking again.

In any case, we arrived at the general goods store. The owner and employee were there, still hurriedly transporting and unloading their wares. I looked around and saw what seemed to be a tent, so I called out to the man who was inspecting the products.

“Excuse me, do you happen to have any spare tents? Also, how much are those tea leaves from Arilai on that shelf over there?” Marie glanced at me as if to ask why I wanted tea leaves, but I decided to hold off on explaining until later. The owner, who was a burly man wearing a turban around his head, turned in response. There was a dubious look on his face, likely because we clearly appeared to be children. Not to mention, my skin color made it obvious that I wasn’t from around here, and I was with an elf, who were known for being difficult to deal with. He let out a dismissive “*Hmph*,” and continued looking through his goods again.

“Um...”

“Look. As you can see, I’m a merchant that’s working with the Arilai government. That means I don’t carry any cheap goods, and I’m clearly busy. I can’t afford to delay opening the shop by wasting time talking to some kids.”

“What’s with your attitude? We may not look like it, but we’re a part of the raid team. You should know it’s thanks to us discovering the ancient labyrinth that it’s being raided to begin with.” Marie furrowed her brows angrily at the excessively rude treatment. Though, she was an elf who disliked humans to begin with, and I thought she’d become a lot calmer since. She’d been interacting with the neighbors in Japan as of late, so that may have been helping. The mood between the merchant and the elf girl grew more tense as I considered these things, and I moved in between them.

“As she just mentioned, we’re the ones who discovered the labyrinth. You can easily confirm with someone in charge if you don’t believe us. Could you please sell us a tent that could fit three people or so?” I bowed my head, and the man seemed to consider it. He then slapped his knee and stood up. But, to be honest, this was where things got a bit tedious. Unlike in Japan, there were no

price tags on the items; only the market price agreed upon by the merchants. He looked over me head to toe, no doubt trying to figure out how much he could squeeze out of me. These sorts of negotiations were a total pain. I just wanted to have fun in the fantasy world and relieve some work-related stress. That should've also served to explain why I spent my days traveling around instead of interacting with others.

“Let’s see... There’s a big demand for tents right now, and they’re flying off the shelves for a pretty penny. This goes for that one there, too. I’d say it would cost ya about...”

“Don’t try to rip off a couple of foreigners. It’s embarrassing.”

He was suddenly interrupted by an unfamiliar voice. I turned to find a large man standing there, baring his white teeth with a smile. His muscles were bulging out against the leather armor enveloping his body, and his black hair was buzzed short. His eyes were nearly gray in color, and they had clearly seen plenty of battle in the past.



“L-Lord Zera of House Thousand! My apologies, we aren’t open quite yet...” The man disregarded the stammering merchant and glanced at his surroundings. Once he scanned the campgrounds with his sharp eyes, he opened his mouth again.

“The tents are all done setting up. These are leftovers, aren’t they? Most people here came in big groups, so no one needs smaller tents like these. Tell me, am I wrong?”

“Oh, no, these simply haven’t had a buyer yet. They certainly aren’t leftovers... Haha... I must say, as a merchant, I do admire your keen eye, Lord Zera.” We watched, wide-eyed, as the merchant seemed to visibly shrink. I caught an object that Zera offhandedly tossed toward me, and I realized it was the bottle of tea leaves from earlier. I looked up again to find his lips curled into a grin.

“Props for finding an ancient labyrinth in a place with nothing but sand and sunlight. That’s a token of thanks from me. The battlefield is full of riches, and these greedy merchants have more than enough. But at the very least, they only carry the highest quality tea leaves. Enjoy it with that girl there.”

“Th-Thank you! Um, how much do I...”

“Nah, don’t sweat it. I may not look it, but... Oh, I guess you could tell by the merchant’s reaction. I’m decently well-off, and I’m one of the top three highest skilled among the raiding teams.” He was bragging quite openly, but he somehow didn’t give off an unpleasant impression due to his casual attitude. His body was tall and muscular and seemed to contain an inner heat, somewhat reminiscent of a black panther. Zera stared at us for a moment before opening his mouth again.

“Now that I think about it, setting up the tent with just you two kids would be hard work. I know! I’ll have one of my men lend a hand, so go set it up in a jiffy. Where are you guys staying?”

Whoa, this guy is so nice! I wondered if I should be wary of him trying to pull a fast one on us, but he gave off the impression of someone pampering some clueless tourists, and all I could do was nod repeatedly. He ended up being true to his word. The sound of stakes being pounded into the ground rang out for a

while, and the tent was soon constructed. I found myself somewhat in awe to find out there were such kind people out there.

A dim light was lit, and many tents became filled with illumination. The view from atop a plateau reminded me of the lantern floating ceremony called “toro nagashi.” Looking up, I saw the sky to the west had been dyed a madder red, and the faint outline of the mountains could be seen in the distance. The now-constructed tent had a circular structure at the base with a pointed ceiling. There were multiple layers of cloth spread out, seemingly to help guide the flow of wind. It looked very Asian in design, which I found interesting. Not to mention, there was some incense burning to keep the bugs away, which added to the similarity.

“It’s pretty chilly here. It’s strange how quickly it gets cold at night in the desert.” Marie had already changed into her silk sleepwear, sitting in a chair while brushing her white hair. Our tent was different from what was considered a three-person tent in the modern sense, and it was named as such by the standards of residents who lived here. I was surprised to find that even with the chairs and sleeping gear we had borrowed in use inside, there was still room to spare.

“Hmm, I’m so used to camping outdoors that this feels overly luxurious.”

“Oh, but if you ask me, I’d say you’re just too primitive. Normal people understand that a proper bed and fireplace are basic necessities. As a side note, I think a TV and a bath are also necessities. Actually, there’s more. Anime, snacks, Japanese food... Oh my, there might be more than I can count.” The girl had been counting the items on her list with her fingers, but she let out a “*Hmph*,” and went back to brushing her hair. Hmm, it seemed Ms. Elf’s standards were steadily becoming more luxurious. Maybe it was just me, but I liked it when cute girls asked me for things. Some people might have thought I was some sort of weirdo, but surely a lot of men could understand where I was coming from.

“This must be how people end up spoiling their nieces.”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

The girl turned with a dubious expression and walked across the carpet as she

approached me. The fluffy fabric seemed to be a bit ticklish on her bare feet, or maybe she was just thrilled by the luxurious texture, but she strode over with a bounce to her step. She then plopped on top of the bed with little regard for proper manners.

“Ahhh, so comfortable! I thought that Zera person might have been all talk, but it looks like he really is rich. Here, hurry up and join me. I want you to feel how wonderful this is too.” She scooted over with her butt and face still facing my way, making room for me on the bed. I did wish she would realize how painful it was for me as a man when she urged me to hurry while in that pose.

“He really took good care of us, lending us all this furniture. Oh, I can tell this one’s really expensive by the texture.”

“Ah, so you can tell, too. Have you heard? Zera even brought servants with him. Most wealthy people tend to be difficult to deal with, but that man is different. I feel like we’ve gained so much without doing anything!”

Marie, who had a moderate amount of worldly desires for an elf, had an admiration for luxury goods. That would explain why she left the forest she came from, but I couldn’t say anything as she happily writhed around, and I actually found it rather adorable. I lied down too, and she rolled over and leaned on me without hesitation. It seemed that she was getting more and more comfortable with being physically closer as of late. In fact, her face was so close that I could almost hear her breathing from her pigmented lips. And of course, it was clear to see she was in a good mood from the look on her face.

“Nn, so soft and warm. It’s definitely important to have extravagance in your life. Don’t you agree?”

Yeah, there was certainly an extreme juxtaposition between that brilliant, flowery smile and the words coming out of her mouth. Though, I did sort of get where she was coming from. The smell of incense, which smelled somewhat like spices, wafted in the air, and the sheets and blankets felt very nice against my skin. With the girl beside me resting her head on my shoulder, I couldn’t help but feel happy with the experience.

“Hm, maybe I’m the one who got too used to finery.”

“What are you talking about? Hehe, but I don’t mind. I’ve really come to like

the bed and incense.” Having her rub her head of soft hair against me was the epitome of luxury itself. Her feet, which she was lightly kicking up and down, lifted up under the blankets. Then she muttered, “*Hup,*” and placed them on top of my thighs. Her thin waist was right there when I outstretched my hand, and she pressed her stomach against me. I could feel her softness along with her body temperature, but it seemed I was the only one who felt a bit embarrassed by it. She put her forehead on my shoulder, then giggled. Then, seemingly overcome by the warmth of the blankets, her eyelids grew heavy. She was full of energy just a minute ago, but we did walk quite a ways to get to this place. As a spirit sorceress with poor stamina, she must’ve been exhausted.

Between the tent’s covers, I could see Wridra the draconian sitting in front of the fire and looking up at the clear, navy sky. Her side profile accentuated her pointed chin, and she blinked her long eyelashes. I wondered if the view from those eyes as clear as the skies was different from what we saw. There was a fantastical element to the sight, and I couldn’t help but stare as sleepiness began to overtake me. Her true identity was that of an Arkdragon, a creature that was far out of reach for an ordinary human. But somehow, it felt as if I could reach her if I stretched out my hand. My thoughts became muddled, and under the Arkdragon’s kind watch, my vision darkened as if I had fallen deep underwater.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 1: Shopping with Ms. Elf

Slowly, I awakened. I was in the usual room, at the usual place, in the usual Japan. Sunlight was peering in through the curtains, and I could hear the faint sound of the wind from outside. The birds were chirping to welcome the morning, heralding the start of a new day. I glanced at the alarm clock to find it was eight in the morning. It seemed I had slept in a little later than usual. I yawned, thinking about how I'd had another nice dream last night. Yes, all the events and conversations that had occurred earlier were contained within my dream. It was so realistic, and the half-fairy elf was so cute, that I always looked forward to my fairytale-like dreams. But this place, Japan, was always awaiting me upon waking, which left me with a bit of a melancholy feeling.

"I'm off work today. I could have slept in a little longer."

I moved the blankets as I muttered, placing my feet on the flooring that was cool from the start of spring. Ever since I was young, I'd always looked forward to my dreams. I could enjoy the fantasy world I loved so much whenever I wanted, so it was easy to see why I always wanted to leave work on the dot, despite being a salaryman. Though, of course, I couldn't tell my bosses it was because I wanted to go back to dreaming.

"Mm, what a nice dream."

Oh, that wasn't me who just spoke. I turned around to see two outstretched hands poking out of the blanket. The figure then sat up, revealing a girl with white hair. Her silk sleepwear had changed into fluffy pajamas, her long ears peering out from her slightly disheveled hair. Mariabelle the half-fairy elf. The girl I had been walking with in my dreams had awakened here in Tokyo, as well. She tossed the blanket aside, lightly hopping to her feet as if to show off how fully awake she was. She then readjusted the blanket and her pillow and quickly stepped over to me.

"Well, that was another fun dream. And tomorrow, we'll be raiding the

ancient labyrinth that's been sealed for several thousand years. I'm sure it will be just brimming with treasure. Ohh, what if I can't sleep from all the excitement? Hehe, this is like a dream come true."

The girl cheerily speaking before me was a lot smaller than she was in my dreams. It wasn't that she had actually shrunk in size, but instead, I had gotten taller... or, rather, I had returned to my original height. For some reason, I aged more slowly in the other world. It was certain that everything that had happened earlier occurred in my dreams. But along the way, I'd found out that the dream world actually existed. I think it all began when I had woken up with this elf girl one day. Though, I still didn't know why all this was even possible.

"Good morning, Marie. Speaking of dreams, do you remember the tea leaves from Arilai? The ones that Zera guy gave us."

"Oh, I completely forgot. But we were planning on eating in this world, so we'll be having that tea tomorrow after we go to sleep, right?" Mariabelle tilted her head with a confused expression as she replied. It seemed she still hadn't noticed. I turned to the right and changed directions, then walked toward the bed basking in the morning sunlight. Then I pointed at the object on the stand at the base of my pillow.

"Question time. What do you think that is?"

"Huh...? Oh! Why are there tea leaves from Arilai here?" I wished I could play the *ding ding ding!* sound effect in response to her getting the answer right. The opening was narrow like a milk bottle, and there was a soft piece of cork-like wood being used as a stopper. It was wrapped with a coiled piece of string, too, so there was no need to worry about spilling its contents. It had a very uneven and lumpy design not found in modern items, indicating that someone had made each of them by hand. In any case, why was something from our dreams here? I decided to explain to the girl with the round purple eyes before me.

"As you know, we can only bring food and drinks, like bento, into the dream world. I ended up experimenting a bit and found out I can take things from there, too."

"Wh-What? That can't be...!" Marie shook her head, the news dawning on her. She gripped the neck of her pajamas, her bunny-ear slippers turned inward

toward each other.

“Oh, but it can. This means that from now on, we can bring the highest quality luxury goods to this world without spending a single yen!”

“Yaaay!” She did a little hop, disregarding all manners. But I thought it was understandable for her to be that happy about it. Arilai produced high-grade tea leaves even by the standards of the modern world, and we had often enjoyed their incredible fragrance. Even the highly disciplined elf could hardly wait for tea time, and she began busily making preparations. I was also thrilled to think we had gotten it for free. Money was important to have in the other world too, but I was happy with having the bare minimum there. I mean, I wouldn’t want to work even in my dreams. “Hehe, I feel lucky even after waking up. Come on, let’s brew some tea. I’m sure it’s going to be delicious.”

“Sounds good. The fragrance is really strong, so it might be good to make some adjustments.”

“Hmhm, I can’t wait! Oh, I know. If we’re going to have some toast with it, let’s try that thing we bought the other day. You know, those fruits simmered in sugar.” Ah, she meant jam. It was something that could be found in just about any shop, but to her, it was something different entirely. Sugar was likely very expensive in the past, and in the fantasy world I love...

“The food tastes horrific. I can see now that the seasonings and preparations are far from sufficient. There’s hardly any sugar, salt, or spices used there.” Marie spoke with a serious expression, as if she was appraising some documents. I could tell she had gotten very accustomed to this room from the way she briskly opened the bread bag and tossed some bread into the toaster. She opened the refrigerator to find some strawberry jam awaiting her. Seeing the cute little illustration printed on the jar, she smiled and took it into her hand.

“We have plenty of seasonings now, but cooking in the other world is a lot of work. They probably think it’s fine as long as they’re getting the necessary nutrients.”

“Wrong. They’re simply ignorant about delicious food. Case in point, I never would have become so nitpicky with food if I had never met you.” The girl

puffed out her cheeks with the jam bottle in hand as she closed the fridge. She then noticed I was preparing to cook something and peered at me curiously.

“Oh, a small... frying pan?”

“It’s a cooking pan I bought a long time ago and forgot about. I got a little excited when I first started living alone.”

It wasn’t uncommon for me to use something two or three times, then completely forget that it was on one of my shelves. The small cooking pan on the stove was boiling some water. Then, I put a spoonful of tea leaves in the pan, dispersing a flowery aroma into the air. I placed the lid on top to seal in the fragrance and let it simmer for a while. I added some milk from there, turning the liquid from amber to a creamy color.

“Now I just need to strain the tea leaves, and... Oh, I don’t have a strainer. I guess I could just use the kyusu.” Unconcerned, I transferred the contents of the cooking pan into a kyusu teapot and poured it into cups. It didn’t affect the flavor, so I saw no reason to fuss about the small details. Besides, a kyusu’s straining mechanism was very well thought out. The toast seemed to be ready too, and the girl was busily preparing the table. I placed the cups I had prepared too, and our breakfast of ambiguous splendor was complete.

“It’s a shame we woke up from our dream. We were having so much fun enjoying the luxury.” I told the girl as I took my seat, and she blinked at me with a perplexed expression, plate in hand. After some time, she finally spoke again.

“Do you really not realize it? Well, I suppose it would be hard to notice when you’re used to living here. In any case, let’s eat.”

“Huh? Okay, itadakimasu.”

Somewhere along the line, it had become our custom to put our hands together and say that greeting before each meal. Marie repeated the same Japanese phrase, then picked up her teacup. Her lips were vivid even without makeup, and they had a sort of luster to them. It seemed she was a bit sensitive to heat. Her pale skin made her lips stand out like flowers as she blew at her tea in an attempt to cool it down. The sugar container next to the table was something we had bought together on a whim. She was into fragrant things like tea, and we had been getting more and more items related to that sort of

lifestyle. I thought it was great. It was fun seeing her developing a daily routine, getting little knickknacks she liked, brewing tea in the morning, and getting into the habit of saying greetings like itadakimasu. Thinking about it, my daily tasks before meeting her consisted of “preparing bento and going to bed.” Though, I figured eating and sleeping wouldn’t really count as daily tasks.

Marie took a sip from her milky-white cup with pink accents and her lips curled into a smile. The tea leaves had transferred fully into the hot water, and the milk smoothed out the flavor. The milk also served to soften the fragrance, which was perfect for the strong-smelling tea leaves from Arilai. I heard the sound of slippers flopping against the floor, and I heard Marie’s high-pitched voice.

“Mmm... So sweet and delicious! This just won’t do. An elf shouldn’t be so accustomed to luxury like this. Ohh, but I can’t help it. I can’t go back to a modest life living in nature now.” She wrinkled her brows as if it was almost too much, looking cute as she shook her head in denial of her original lifestyle. Then, she put her cup down and reached for the newly purchased bottle. The strawberry jam had been simmered in sugar, and it still had little remnants of seeds in it. She scooped it up with a spoon and spread it on toast slathered in butter. Her lips parted, and then she bit down on the edge of the toast. She immediately began squirming.

“Ah, so sweet! Mmm, delicious! Wow, it’s boiled down to a pulp, but it still retains the fruit’s sour-sweet flavor. Kazuhiho, we were definitely right to buy this. I’m starting to realize that products with a lot of stock on the shelves actually tend to be really good. I’m sure there are very dedicated fans for these.” Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, and she explained as if she had just discovered a great treasure. Then, she made the greatest discovery of today’s breakfast yet. When she took a sip of tea with some bread still in her mouth, the piece of bread, the sweetness of the jam, and butter’s rich flavor seemed to overtake her taste buds.

Behind Marie was the view of the city full of concrete, known as the Koto Ward. I had always stared out at the sight without thinking, so it was interesting to see Ms. Elf there, squeezing her eyes shut and making a face as if she was shouting a silent scream. It was as if the fantasy world had come to Japan, and

even the inorganic concrete seemed to be full of life today.

“Wha, hey, this is...!” She glanced back and forth between the bread and tea, her finger pointing at each in a fluster. I couldn’t help but break into a smile, then laughed out loud with toast still in hand.

“How can you look at a lady and laugh like that?! Hmph, I see you’re trying to make this poor elf forget her discipline by spoiling her with luxury.” I got the sense that she had already forgotten that a long time ago...

“Sorry, that wasn’t my intention. If you wouldn’t mind, could you pass me some of that elf-approved jam?”

“Okay, but be careful. This is very sweet, and really delicious despite its deceptively cute appearance. If you use too much, it just might make you scream.” She offered the jam, and I took it in my hand. But Marie didn’t let go, and I looked at her with round eyes in turn. “This is a good opportunity to bring this up. I think Japan is very extravagant. It’s full of delicious food, fun, and things I still don’t know about. So, I don’t want you to apologize. In fact, I want to thank you.” She smiled at me as she asked if I understood, backlit by the morning sun. There were still some bread crumbs on her lips, and birds could be heard chirping outside the window.

How strange. It made me think that maybe this world, which I once thought of as completely uninteresting, was actually a fun and amazing place, after all. Maybe I was spacing out. She was apparently expecting a reply, because she nudged me under the table with her bunny slippers. I nodded.

“That’s good, and I’m glad. I want you to enjoy it as much as possible.”

“Don’t mind if I do. Now, let’s eat. The delicious bread is going to get cold.”

She finally released the jam bottle, and I received it carefully. I opened the lid and smelled the sweet aroma of strawberries, and I had a feeling it was going to be absolutely delicious.



I placed my arms on the brown fence and looked at the surrounding scenery. The sky still had remnants of its morning’s colors, and it was soon to turn into a beautiful blue. The river flowing before me was illuminated with the spring sun,

dyeing the rows of trees with recently fallen cherry blossoms. The sound of the flowing river somehow felt different from its counterpart in the dream world. That was likely because they were constructed with concrete here, and there weren't any boulders or rocks for the water to hit. I loved the uninhibited nature in the fantasy world, and I really loved enjoying the scenery as I spent my time fishing. As for the girl, she had changed into a laced one-piece dress for going out and was crouched down for some reason. Looking closer, I realized there was a cat with tiger stripes squirming around on the ground. The girl's braids were wavering around at the same time, and the cat was reaching both paws toward them.

"Oh my, just look at you. Your tummy is so round. It must be full of tasty food, huh? I'm envious!"

The cat purred audibly as it continued to wriggle around slovenly, seeming as if it was about to giggle out loud. They continued on like this for some time, but the cat seemed to be satisfied after a while and stood up, then meowed as if to thank her. Marie waved goodbye, and then they parted to enjoy their respective days off. And so, the cat went back to its stroll. The girl walked over to me, not even trying to hide her smile as she said, "So adorable." I reached out my hand, which she squeezed lightly, and I began walking along the riverbed with the humming elf girl.

"Seems like you've really been getting along with that cat. And your hair looks good on you, by the way."

"Hehe, thank you. I never really paid too much attention to my hair, but everyone has a different hairstyle in this country. I thought I'd try changing things up, too." She wiggled both her braids as she said so. Her characteristic long elven ears were currently hidden with the magical item Wridra had given us. Thanks to that, Marie was able to enjoy the culture of trying out different hairstyles. "I'll have to thank Wridra. I'm a bit surprised, though. I thought she would want to come to Japan with us."

"She said she wants to observe the campsite tonight. They should be explaining the plan on raiding the labyrinth at the night meeting."

She made a noncommittal noise, and she seemed to still have some doubts as

she tilted her head. I felt that her instinct was correct. Wridra didn't say it outright, but she probably decided against coming here out of courtesy for us. I still distinctly remembered the side profile of her face the previous night. Her expression told me she wanted to come play with us, but had reluctantly given up on the idea. Thinking about it, maybe she was actually a kindhearted woman. Though, she did kill me immediately after we first met, so I couldn't say much about that.

"Speaking of which, I was surprised when you chose Labor for your secondary skill." Marie blinked in response. That day, the staff created by the Arkdragon and Neko bestowed a secondary skill, which was different from primary skills, to her. Marie had gained an additional skill slot as a result, and she had selected Labor without hesitation.

"Of course I did. I'm a spirit sorcerer, and when I fought alongside you that one time, it became painfully obvious that I should learn to utilize spirit magic better."

"That one time? Oh, when we fought those bandits. Now that you mention it, you were shooting magic using those spirits." She had controlled multiple spirits back then to pin down a monster that was estimated to be around level 100. I suspected this wasn't something that anyone else could do.

"We'll have to think about coordinating even better from now on, right? To do that, we'll need to forget about conventional methods and make the best use of our advantage of having a spirit sorceress on the team. More specifically, not with destructive magic that has a high area of effect, but with spells that will let us maneuver more efficiently."

"Hmm... I can't really picture what you're getting at, but coordinating with you sounds fun. You do have a lot more available options compared to most."

Marie proudly puffed out her chest. Marie did, in fact, have more than double the amount of options in any given situation compared to other sorcerers. To be more specific, I was referring to the wide array of offensive spells and spirit magic that she could use when the situation called for it. I suspected she'd be able to demonstrate a great deal of prowess as long as she had the time to make preparations.

“But we’ll be constantly moving forward in the labyrinth, so we might not have time to prepare for the most part. Like at a hall closed off with a door. Maybe I should buy some time in such cases.”

“Oh, I was thinking about that, too. You’re good at maneuvering around without taking any damage, so I think we’ll make a good team.”

I was looking forward to it. This feeling reminded me of how I would feel when I played games. Customizing skills and specializing in order to efficiently take out enemies. Even if I failed at first, there was nothing better than overcoming the obstacle by adapting and improving over time. I’d lose sleep—or rather, I was already asleep, and I would find myself completely engrossed in the process. And unlike studying for a test, the results came immediately. The girl seemed to share my sentiment, her eyes twinkling like precious gemstones.

“Ahhh, I can’t wait! And with Wridra with us, there’s no risk of losing. That means we can experiment with trial and error as much as we want!” We looked at each other and snickered evilly.

“My, my, how wicked you are, Ms. Elf.”

“Oh, but I’m nothing compared to you. You’re far worse, considering your face has the appearance of being harmless.”

With that, she bumped her butt into me from the side. As we continued messing around, the automatic doors of the local supermarket slid open.

The girl stared at some carrots inside a grocery bag critically while saying, “Hmm...” She flipped it over to stare at the price and fidgeted with it some more. Judging by the look on her face, it seemed she wasn’t just intrigued by the transparent bag around it. Before her was a picture of farmers, with the caption, “This was grown by us.” Below it, there were details of how they operated a farm within the city. I translated it for her in Elvish, and she made another ponderous noise.

There was a reason we were at the supermarket that morning. It was my day off, so I wanted to spend it in leisure. I had asked her if she’d like to cook with me, and she replied immediately with, “Sure!” She’d often asked me about recipes in the past, so I figured she was interested in cooking, but she seemed

more eager than I had expected. And so, I decided to have her start off by trying something simple.

“Okay, I’ve decided. Today, I’m going to cook this carrot grown by this Sato person. Now, to pick out some potatoes.”

The carrots went into the basket with the photo of the smiling farmers in the background. There weren’t many people around yet, but many eyes were turned toward the elf girl with the mystical air about her. I could see several of the employees in the back saying, “Did you see that cute girl?” I smiled and didn’t really find it to be a cause of concern. Although they did glance over with feigned disinterest, they never came to bother us. It made me realize how reserved, or I supposed, how committed to service Japanese people were. As I thought about this, Marie turned to look up at me.

“Kazuhiho, did we get all the vegetables we need?”

“Yeah, now we just need the meat and the roux.” She replied with an “Okay,” then gripped the shopping cart and proceeded through the well-lit store. Her eyes looked around busily with the music playing throughout the store and all the vivid signage lining the aisles. I continued following her, not minding when she occasionally stopped to look at something that caught her interest.

Marie stared at a bag full of white “hanpen” with a perplexed expression as she asked, “So, about this curry thing. What’s different about this one from the one you made before?”

“Well, that one was traditional curry, and this one is more of a Japanese style. It’s been refined so it can be made cheap, easy, and tasty.” Marie tilted her head, making a noncommittal noise. She didn’t know the difference between traditional and Japanese-style curry. I actually wondered why Japan was so obsessed with refining and improving everything. Making food taste better than the original is a given, and in some cases, they end up being imported the other way. Like fruits with ridiculously high sugar content, for example. “Speaking of refining, beef is a good example. It’s called wagyu, and it’s so delicious that I hear it’s gaining a lot of popularity overseas.”

“Wa-gyu...” She awkwardly uttered the unfamiliar term, and her pale purple eyes slowly turned toward the shelves. It was the meat section, which was full

of packs of wagyu. Anyone could tell at a glance that wagyu was on a different level than other marbled steak.

“Looks deliciou—Ah, that’s pricey!”

“Yeah, unfortunately, the price matches the flavor. Huh, I guess you’ve gained a sense of finances already.” I told her I’d treat her to it on some special day, but her braids shook side to side as she looked up at me.

“N-No, thank you... I don’t think I’d be able to enjoy the taste in peace. So, which meat do we use for the curry?”

“We’ll be simmering it for a while anyway, so we can get something cheap. Let’s go with this minced meat for today.” I pointed at a different one, and she let out a sigh of relief. Come to think of it, she and I had a similar sense of finances, so I supposed she had the sensibilities of a commoner like me. Now, we just needed to get the curry roux and some ingredients for our bento.

With our modest haul in our shopping basket, we headed toward the cashier. The lady at the register seemed a bit troubled as Marie stared at the beeping scanner with her purple eyes, seemingly curious about how the barcodes worked. After making several input errors, she finished ringing us up. What surprised me most was that the lady jogged over to us and handed Marie a piece of candy afterward.

“She said it’s a present for you. It’s a tasty snack.”

“Oh, thank, you. The shop was very, clean.” She stumbled slightly as she spoke in Japanese, and the onlookers around us reacted with an “Oooh.” The worker smiled happily upon hearing Marie’s response and went back to work.

And so, Marie’s first time grocery shopping ended up being a heartwarming event without incident. The sky was brighter than earlier when we stepped outside, with more cars driving around.

“Oh? I thought we were done shopping?” Marie asked when I stopped in front of the convenience store. It was brightly lit to welcome customers in, and the interior could have given the blue sky a run for its money.

“In this country, there’s a rule that says you gotta reward people for going shopping with you. Just like the candy that lady gave you.”

“My, that’s wonderful. So, does this place have those rewards you speak of?”

One could certainly say that. There were all sorts of goods available here, and it was an extremely convenient place for locals, too. I went straight to the register and ordered one vanilla ice cream. Then, I quickly changed it to two orders, because I knew I would get envious when I saw how much Marie was enjoying her ice cream. With two ice cream cones in hand, I stepped back outside. I debated on where to eat it, but decided to disregard proper manners and eat while walking around. I handed Marie her cone, and she gave me a bewildered look.

“Umm, can you teach me how to eat this? Knowing you, I’m sure it’s delicious.”

“You’re right about that. You can either bite right into it or lick it.” I demonstrated by licking my own ice cream, and then the girl moved her lips closer to hers. Hesitantly, she scooped up a piece of the white ice cream with her tongue. It had a shade of yellow to it, which seemed indicative of the rich flavor. Its wavy structure melted away upon the tongue and dissolved into milky deliciousness. Vanilla was my favorite ice cream flavor, with its simplicity that made one appreciate the richness of the flavor all the more. That convenience store carried great ice cream, and it was hard to believe such a delicious treat was readily available on the street corner. The girl had stopped walking, and she swallowed a mouthful of ice cream before giving her impression.

“Ah...! S-So sweet, delicious... Why, y-you, you made me let my guard down by telling me it was just a reward for going shopping with you!” Her words implied that she was upset, but she had a strange expression on her face, with flushed cheeks and wonder in her eyes. Yup, women were definitely the cutest when they were eating tasty or sweet foods.



“Would you go shopping with me again if there are more treats like this waiting for you?”

“I like shopping. I wouldn’t mind if there’s no reward, but... Oh, never mind. You need to carry through with promises, and rewards are important to have. I don’t mean to sound harsh, but that’s to be expected in exchange for labor.” She looked up at me with a look as if to ask, “Understand?” I nodded in response, and we slowly made our way back home. All the way back to my room, the girl continued to educate me about the deliciousness of ice cream.

As expected. I was really glad I ended up buying her some. Now, on to the cooking.

I usually cooked in the evening, but doing it while it was still bright out was a refreshing change of pace. The girl next to me had a piece of cloth tied around her head, the image of which was reminiscent of home economics classes. However, her long ears pointing straight up gave her away as an elf, and I was too old of a businessman to relive my grade school days. There was a determined look to her face as she tied the strings of her apron.

“Okay then, let’s wash them in order. Then we’ll peel off the skin and chop them into pieces. This part isn’t too different from what we do in the other world.” Marie was staring at the potatoes with a critical look as I explained, then replied, “Got it,” while turning on the faucet. I’d been worried about her at first, but it seemed she was getting used to modern devices over time.

I was particularly worried about her using kitchen knives, but she’d always cooked for herself, so it didn’t seem to be a problem. Still, it seemed to be in my nature that I couldn’t help worrying about her anyway. I mean, anyone would feel the same when they were with a girl like her.

“You’re a bit too overprotective. When will you realize that I’m not a child anymore?”

“I know that already, of course. Oh, you should make sure the blade isn’t pointed toward your finger. Like this.”

“As, I, was, say-ing, I’m far older than you, and a very competent spirit sorceress... Ah, m-my eye. I need to put the knife down... Waaah, help me,

Kazuhiho!” Ah, so the great spirit sorceress needed help. Tears began streaming down her face as the onions irritated her eyes. I quickly took the knife from her hands in a fluster and began preparing the meal instead. I could hear her blowing her nose behind me. She sniffed, red around the eyes. Seeing her like this, it was hard to believe she was over a hundred years old. Considering her strait-laced personality, I doubted she was lying about her age, though. It was a bit troubling to find she had gained a distrust for onions because of this incident. Seeing her pacing back and forth around the onion but maintaining a certain distance reminded me of a child’s behavior, too.

“What do you wanna do? Should I go ahead and cut it?”

“I’d like to learn how to cook, but unfortunately, I’ll have to pass on the onions. I suspect elves don’t like onions in general. We probably just aren’t compatible.” Yeah, humans probably weren’t compatible with onion juices in their eyes, either. Though, you could avoid this by holding the knife at an angle so the juices would fly away from the eyes. I gave her such pieces of advice as we proceeded to make preparations for the meal. After slicing ingredients into bite-sized pieces, Marie looked up at me, as if to ask if she was doing okay. Each time she did, I replied with some simple advice, and the colander became filled with vegetables. The ventilating fan spun noisily as we cooked the vegetables in a large pan. Then, we added some water and skimmed the foam... though there didn’t seem to be any need to explain all that.

“The ingredients are nearly cooked through, so let’s add the roux we bought.” The girl began breaking the roux apart with her fingernails and put the pieces into a large pot with a serious look on her face. If she had been wearing a different outfit, she may have looked like she was in the middle of performing alchemy. As she began mixing the roux with a ladle, the kitchen became filled with a scent that was softer than that of traditional curry. I could see Marie’s nose sniffing the air, seemingly enjoying the unique and faintly spicy aroma. And so, Ms. Elf’s cooking was complete.

“Ah... It smells so good... It’s making me hungry... Wait, it’s done already?!”

“Yup, it’s ready. After all, Japanese curry was created with convenience and deliciousness in mind. Not that traditional curry is too hard to make, either.” Even the traditional curry I made a little while back didn’t take too much time. It

did take some effort to draw out the sweetness from the tomatoes or adjust the spice levels, but the actual cooking could be done in the time Marie finished taking a bath. Popular dishes had a tendency to become more convenient over time.

“Hm, I do understand that. They try to avoid as much hassle as possible in the other world too, but I think they sacrifice flavor in the process.”

“I agree. It seems like over there, they don’t care about food as long as it’s edible.”

“Those people are just lazy. They think heating ingredients is all there is to cooking. Wait... I feel like that’s all we had to do for this curry.” She looked perplexed as question marks popped up over her head, but she was right. That was pretty much all there was to the actual cooking process. But if I had to guess, the environment in which spoiled ingredients was the norm was more to blame. The fantasy world was great, but it was terrible when it came to preserving foods, too. The people there had no interest in improving food variety, either, so they tasted oddly harsh and unappetizing.

A beeping noise signaled that the rice was done cooking, and Marie snapped out of her musing. Then, I had her taste the curry on a small dish, and her purple eyes widened.

“Wow, it’s sweet! I thought it was the same curry as last time, but... Mmm, the aftertaste is so comforting...”

“This sort of gentle flavoring is a trademark of Japanese cooking, I think. All right, it’s ready.”

We high fived, and our first cooking project together was complete. I looked at the clock to find it was just in time for lunch, and I happened to have someone to test the flavor for me, too.

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The moon could be seen up in the sky, as if it had been carved out of a blanket of darkness. The dragon continued staring at it, completely motionless. There was nothing but stillness, save for the light breeze blowing by occasionally to rustle her black hair. Occasionally, some passersby spoke out of

curiosity to the black-haired beauty in unusual clothes. But to her, they sounded like nothing more than chirping birds. Worries about women exploring labyrinths or invitations to go out for a drink didn't stimulate her curiosity in the least. The man currently standing before her introduced himself, claiming he was going to be a hero one day with an intolerable demeanor. And so, Wridra simply enjoyed the view of the night.

It was a peaceful time of nothing but blackness, and there was no need to think about anything. A sight that had always been there since ancient times and had existed since before the world was born... The young man hassling her eventually gave up after being ignored for some time, visibly irritated as he left.

There was no doubt a certain other boy had potential, however. But the black-haired dragon knew... She couldn't provide him a place of peace like the hot springs or the joy he felt singing with the elf. So she looked up to the sky as usual, waiting for time to pass without wavering. At least, she planned to, until...

"Hey there. Nice moon, isn't it? It's so round and pretty."

Wridra displayed emotions for the first time as the voice called out to her. Her eyes widened, and her vivid lips, which resembled ripened fruits, parted slightly. And when she turned, there was the sleepy-looking, yawning face of the boy, as expected.

"You surprised me. What are you doing here? I thought you were enjoying your time in the other world."

"It's such a nice night, I wanted you to enjoy some good food. I cooked something with Little Ms. Elf. Would you care to have some?" With that, he sat down next to her. She was speechless for a moment, but a feeling of amusement seemed to erupt from within her, spilling out in the form of laughter. A thought crossed her mind. Even when dealing with a dragon, this human and the elf only thought about how to entertain her. Most would only scheme and try to take advantage of her, leading to their own eventual ruin.

"Hah, hah, hahaha! I cannot turn down an invitation like that. But if this food fails to satisfy me, know that your drowsy-looking face will be no more."

"I wish this sleepy face *could* be fixed, but... Yeah, please follow me, then." He

spread a blanket that smelled of dust over her shoulders. It fended off the night air, and the warmth that enshrouded Wridra made her feel a bit happy for some reason. She didn't actually require any sleep or food. She had been controlling her magic to such an extent that she didn't need them, but she felt strangely tempted by the boy's offer. Resting her head on the boy's shoulder, she quietly looked up to the night sky. Perhaps it was due to the dry desert air, but the stars seemed more beautiful than usual that night. She continued to enjoy the colors that seemed to indicate the vastness of the world, and the boy's sleepiness seemed to spread into her. There was no need to say or think anything. Wridra simply felt this time was for enjoying the silence and the night itself, and her eyelids grew heavier. She blinked slowly, thinking she couldn't possibly be falling asleep so quickly... and then the dragon dozed off. So easily and without resistance, like a baby. The boy, who was left awake, also looked up to the sky and let out a sigh, releasing a white puff into the cold night air.

“The night sky is so pretty. Oh, did you fall asleep already?” he asked.

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“Nnnnnn!”

“Mmmmmm!”

It seemed like it was going to be an eventful morning already. There she sat, gripping her spoon along with Marie with her brows deeply furrowed. But I did understand how she felt. Curry was among the top of beloved lunches in grade school, and it made kids excited for lunch since the morning whenever it was on the menu. The curry they were stuffing their mouths with had a distinct spicy flavor that came with a hint of sweetness. As for me, I was enjoying their reactions so much that I hadn't even taken a bite yet.

“So goooooood! Are you kidding me?! It's delicious!”

“Ahh, I can't believe I made this! It's just the right amount of spice, and I can't stop eating! How odd, I'm considered a light eater even among elves.”

It was incredible how just their presence alone could make a meal tastier than it would've been if I'd eaten alone. The draconian continued to throw food into her mouth with great vigor, then chewed with a satisfied expression. The elf took careful spoonfuls into her mouth, then placed her hands on her cheeks

and let out a satisfied “Mmf.”

“It tastes extra good when you know you made it yourself, doesn’t it? It’s even better when you eat outdoors. It might be fun to go camping by the riverside when it gets warmer.”

“Good idea! This might even be good to eat in the ancient labyrinth.”

“Yes, a brilliant idea! I am all for it!”

Yeah... I dunno about that. I wasn’t sure if I wanted the revered ancient labyrinth, which had been untouched for thousands of years, to be filled with the smell of curry. I’d have been pretty disappointed if that were to happen, to be honest.

“Oh well. Do you want seconds? I made plenty, since Wridra was coming.” It really was satisfying watching her eat, and her plate was cleared off in mere moments.

“Yes, I do!” she responded as she handed me her plate enthusiastically... Unfortunately, it seemed she wasn’t going to fix my sleepy-looking face after all. I figured that was better than not meeting her standards, though.

“So, how was the camp? Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?” I asked as I scooped more rice onto her plate, and Wridra crossed her legs in her black one piece, showing off her beautiful thighs.

“Indeed I did. It seems there was an intruder. The higher ups were flustered about it, but it felt as if there was something else going on, as well.”

“Huh... Oh, I wonder if the intruders were those bandits. Remember those bandits we dealt with a little while back, Marie? I think they went into the labyrinth ahead of us.” When I spoke to her, she came to from her dreamy expression.

“Oh, right, I remember them. But they weren’t that big of a group, so I don’t think they’d be able to take on the forces of Arilai. The best they could hope for is to sneak around and pocket a few valuables.”

She was right about that. But considering how Wridra said the higher ups were in a fluster, it might not have been ordinary jewel thieves we were dealing

with. In that case, they would fall into one of two categories. Either they were a bunch of fools acting recklessly... or they had some method of dealing with an entire country. Judging by the look of things, it was slightly more likely to be the latter. I didn't want to get into that and interrupt our pleasant mealtime, but it seemed like there were going to be many layers to this labyrinth situation. That being said, the added difficulty only made it more exciting. I grinned, walking over to the table with an extra large plate of curry in hand. Wridra urged me to hurry with her eyes, and when I placed the plate on the table, the ear to ear smile on her face told me the labyrinth had already been forgotten.

“Hah, hah, it's finally here. Itadakimasu!” She immediately began scarfing down the food. As usual, her appetite was even greater than any man I knew of. Maybe it was better to worry about how much curry was left instead of the bandits. The big batch of curry that had filled the pot to the brim seemed so reliable earlier, but seeing Wridra waving her tail gave it a paltry impression for some reason. There wasn't much I could do about that, though. She was the legendary Magi Drake, after all. While that thought crossed my mind, Marie presented her plate to me with a shy expression. Yeah, that pot of curry wasn't going to last long. I peered into the now-empty pot and did a double take.

It couldn't be... I made enough to last two whole days. I glanced at the table to find the draconian and elf leaning back in their chairs, rubbing their bellies with satisfied expressions. Wridra had eaten pretty much two days' worth of food. She had stuffed her seemingly bottomless stomach full of food, but it somehow only resulted in a slight increase in her waistline. Curry became cumbersome to wash off if you let it sit, so I decided to clean up right away. As I began running the sink water, Wridra slowly sat up in her chair.

“About the labyrinth tonight—I will not be forming a party with you two.”

“What do you mean? Aren't we going to have fun together?” Marie blinked, but couldn't sit up due to her overstuffed stomach.

Wridra stared at her for a moment, then began braiding her waist-length hair and replied, “Of course I am.” Her naturally straight black hair became bound in moments, and a string appeared to tie it together in the end. She showed off her hair, braided to one side, and it was more apt to say she looked cool rather than cute. The two of us clapped, and the dragon smiled charmingly.

Wridra was busy with her getup, so I decided to answer instead. “I think what she meant to say is that there’s too much of a level difference. Marie, you and I are already 40 levels apart. Add Wridra into the equation, and you would barely get any experience at all.”

Marie nodded to signify her understanding. Despite that, my explanation apparently wasn’t sufficient, because Wridra cleared her throat to speak.

“That is also true, but I do not have the bracelet required to form a party. I have no intention of going out into civilization to obtain one, either.”

“Oh, then there’s nothing we can do. It would take several weeks just to register if we start now anyway. Chatting through mind link in a party would have been fun, though.” Marie looked disappointed. Seeing the elf’s pouty expression, Wridra stirred a bit.

“Hah, hah, fortunately, I have a connection with the staff I have given Marie. Not only will it support her magic, but we will be able to communicate just the same as we would with that so-called mind link chat.”

“Wow, how advanced... Could it be that staff is amazingly powerful?”

I scrubbed the pots with a scrubbing brush as I absentmindedly thought about their conversation. I hadn’t heard of any item that was connected to a dragon in the first place. Dragon parts, which were extremely durable and heat-resistant, were used in all sorts of weapons and armor. But most of those materials were from lesser dragons, and those creatures couldn’t compare to one of legendary status like Wridra.

“Hmhm, of course. I am somewhat meticulous, and the equipment of this world is made up of nothing but toys compared to my creations. However, I shall behave in this world. There is someone prone to nagging nearby, after all.” Her chuckles echoed behind me, and I wondered if I really was that much of a worrywart. I’d certainly looked on with apprehensiveness, but I didn’t think I’d voiced my concerns out loud... Though, I did appreciate that Wridra had made it a point not to draw unwanted attention. I twisted the faucet shut and wiped my hands with a towel. When I walked back to the table, the two ladies greeted me with a “Welcome back,” and a “Good work.”

“Then, you’re gonna be Marie’s tank as we originally planned. It’s an honor

and a relief that you're going to be watching over us."

"You keep me satisfied, such as with that curry earlier, so I do not mind. There is no need for thanks, of course, but... you do not have many of those days off, if I recall. I do appreciate the gesture, but you need not treat me to such meals so often."

Huh? Since when had she gained such an understanding of my work situation? Suddenly, I was reminded of the sight of her sitting at the oasis alone. She had done so out of consideration, giving Marie and I time alone together. She was feared by many as the Arkdragon, but I considered her far kinder than most humans. Although, we didn't need her to be considerate like that to us now. Marie happily took a desk calendar in hand to show her the reason why.

"Hehe, don't worry about that. Just look at this calendar full of days off! You may not know this, but May is a wonderful month that's full of holidays." That was why there was no need for Wridra to worry. I only needed to work until Tuesday, and then I would get consecutive days off on Golden Week. Constitution Memorial Day, Greenery Day, Children's Day, and then Saturday and Sunday would give me a total of five days off in a row. It nearly made me dizzy with excitement. But unfortunately, Wridra didn't seem to understand the significance of this, coming from the perspective of someone who basically had days off every day of the year. She responded to our smiling faces with a neutral, "Huh."

"Oh, right. I also got us tickets. Since I have several days off in a row, I wanted to invite you to my home in the country, like I mentioned a while back... Do you remember?"

Marie responded to my question with a high-pitched exclamation. She had come to admire Japan's countryside full of greenery from the influence of the anime she'd been watching. So, naturally, I wanted to grant her wish and take her there. Marie stood up from her chair almost unconsciously, her cheeks started to turn pink, and her purple eyes widened as if they forgot how to blink. I watched her in confusion, and then she ran over to me across the flooring, tackling me in a hug. She was surprisingly powerful for her small frame, and it made my chair bend back at an angle. I quickly hugged her back in a fluster.

“Yes, yes! I want to go! Oh my goodness, I’m so excited! Umm, thank you!”

“Haha, I’m glad. Though, there really isn’t anything there. I don’t think they even have convenience stores.” With that, I pulled out an envelope from the bag next to me. Inside were tickets for the shinkansen, “Hayabusa.” I placed them on the table. They weren’t cheap, but I wanted Ms. Elf to experience riding a bullet train firsthand. I also wanted to get her some boxed lunches from the station, a specialty on trips such as these, and let her enjoy a vacation to the northeast. As I considered all that, an important realization hit me. Something totally obvious had completely slipped my mind: I’d only purchased two tickets.

“That’s right... Uh, Ms. Wridra. I’m sorry, I ordered the tickets on Friday, and I only got enough for two.”

“Hm? I do not mind. You were not expecting me in the first place. I can hardly blame you for not being able to predict the future. Go enjoy some time alone together.” It seemed she was in a good mood from the meal, and she nodded magnanimously. That was a huge relief. I was glad she didn’t get angry at me. I was impressed by the ancient dragon’s maturity. Marie took the ticket in her hand, flipping it over and observing it.

“What is a shinkan-sen? Is it different from the car we usually ride?”

“Yeah, it’s faster than the trains we went on before... I think it’ll be easier just to show you.” With that, I looked it up on my smartphone and selected a shinkansen video. The footage uploaded on a video site displayed the distinctive silhouette of the shinkansen Hayabusa, which promptly took off at breakneck speed. The sight of it speeding away under the blue sky with a pastoral and mountainous background was inspiring. This was something that didn’t exist in the dream world, of course, and the girl raised her voice with her eyes glued to the screen.

“Ah! So fast! Wooow, how can it go so much faster than a bird? Whoa, wait, wait a minute. We’re going to ride on *that?!?*”

“Of course. I got tickets, after all. You get the special window seat.” She looked adorable as she glanced back and forth between my phone screen, then to me, and back again. As I was feeling good about making the reservation, I heard Wridra’s voice mutter from next to me.

“I want...”

“Hm?”

“I want to ride it too...”

We froze. Wridra had a faint smile on her face, tears running down her cheeks. W-Wait a minute. Didn't she just say she didn't mind, all mature-like? I could hardly voice the question, standing motionless, and the draconian began to sob openly.

“W-We can go on a trip again some other time. We can go together then!” I tried to cheer her up in a fluster, my voice cracking involuntarily. She was staring at the ticket. Her emotions always showed on her face easily, so it was very obvious what was going through her head. There were two tickets. Marie's window seat was already accounted for. So, what about my seat? Marie and I both gulped audibly at the same time.

“K-Kazuhiho wouldn't lie about something like this! Next time, for sure! Okay?”

“I wonder when this 'next time' would be. Ah... Surely you would forget about me by then. They say what happens once happens three or even four times. Children of men do not care about some lonely, ancient dragon like me. I am no different from some rock on the ground.”

Oh no, she was now sitting with her face down and knees up against her chest. We turned pale, and all we could do was flap our lips uselessly. In the end, she wouldn't let up until I signed a written pledge stating we would take her next time. Even then, she kept making me repeat my promise.



The room was illuminated only with indirect lighting, with thick curtains covering the windows. The once lively room was covered in an orange hue, indicating that it was time to go to sleep. And in that room, a girl was lying on the bed. She probably didn't realize it, but she was brimming with female charm as she stared at me with a spot next to her open on the bed. It was as if she was calling to me. She seemed different from usual in the dim lighting. Her clear-cut features, her full, flushed lips, and her collarbones peeking out from her clothes seemed to obscure her actual age. The bed creaked as I placed my knee onto it and took the spot next to her, and she put her arm around me. Marie lifted one leg and placed it on top of my thigh as usual. She ran her fingers through her hair, and I could smell a faintly sweet scent. The elf was quieter than usual. She stared at me wordlessly, her eyes slightly moist. She squeezed me a little tighter, and her silky hair tickled me a bit.

Ah, I see. She's waiting.

Tentatively, I parted her hair with my fingers and she froze. She stayed motionless with her eyes closed, confirming my suspicion that she was waiting for me. I kissed her on the forehead, and she felt the heat of my lips that she had been anticipating. Her face softened, but then she hid her face under the blankets, so I couldn't enjoy her cute expression anymore. Only her beautiful white hair was now visible, but I could tell her long ears were a shade of pink.

"Hehe, good night. Let's do our best at the labyrinth."

"Good night, Marie. Sweet dreams... Oh, I guess we'll be watching the same dream."

We laughed, then listened to each other's heartbeats. I could feel the warmth of the blankets and softness of her body. Our body temperatures gradually rose, getting ready to fall asleep. Watching her blink sleepily was lulling me closer into dreamland, as well. As my eyelids grew heavy, I heard a creak from behind.

"Mm, so cozy. This is as nice as those hot springs."

With that, a pair of arms wrapped around my waist. Maybe it should have been considered unfortunate, but it seemed draconians disliked wearing clothing when going to sleep. The sensation pressing up against my back was

torture for me as a man, and it pulled me back slightly from my sleepy state.

“You two are simply too adorable. You have begun to awaken my maternal instincts.” She spoke softly, as if out of consideration for the comfortably sleeping Marie. Her whispered breaths felt ticklish against my ears.

“Maybe I’m just imagining it, but I think you’ve always had strong maternal instincts.”

“Fool. You say that, but you know nothing of dragons.” With that, she tightened her arm around my stomach. She pressed her hips against me from behind, and my sleepiness seemed to become more and more distant. But no, I had to go to sleep early tonight with the imminent raid on the labyrinth, or I’d be in for a scolding.

“Good night, Wridra. Thanks for everything.”

“Hah, hah, if I can relish in moments like these, being a bodyguard would be a small price to pay. The meals and conversations were enjoyable, indeed. *Fwah...* The drowsiness emanating from you is too powerful. It almost feels like the effect of some sort of magic.” With that, she let out a yawn and nestled her head up against me. The inviting warmth of the blankets quickly drew her into the realm of deep sleep.

I was the only one left awake. I watched Marie, who was quietly breathing in a comfortable sleep. As I stared at her long eyelashes, a thought crossed my mind. Maybe she was already a lot closer to me than I had assumed. In fact, I couldn’t imagine her not being by my side. Which was strange, considering we had only been spending time together for a month. I also seemed to realize that she wasn’t actually a child. Maybe that was why I was so drawn to her. So much so that I couldn’t stop these feelings. As I listened to the soft breathing sounds from both sides, my eyelids began to grow heavy, too. I eventually joined them in sleep, and snoozing sounds from the three of us could be heard echoing throughout my bedroom.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 2: Begin Raid

Boom, boom, boom...!

I sprang awake at the sensation of noises reverberating into the depths of my stomach. A pencil-shaped ceiling made of plenty of cloth filled my vision, as well as Marie, who yelped with a sleepy-looking expression on her face. I threw the blanket off of myself in a scramble, then peered out from between the tent flaps. The sky that could be seen from the mountaintop was still dim, and I assumed it was still early morning. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes as I scanned my surroundings and found fully armed men gathered at the oasis with the priest at their center, noisily sounding their musical instruments. *Dang, I wanted to wake up early to depart with everyone else.*

“Aw, we overslept... We missed our chance to get a buff.”

“That’s why I wanted to go to sleep early. We missed our chance because *someone* wanted to take their sweet time.” The girl’s head also popped out of the tent as she reprimanded me. How strange, I seemed to recall going to bed late because a certain someone had kept me up with questions about the shinkansen. But still, we went to bed before seven, which was earlier than usual.

The reason for our early bedtime was the raid on the labyrinth, which was scheduled to begin at dawn. Well, it was too late to make it now, anyway. They had probably been preparing the ritual even earlier, considering it was a large-scale buff for over a hundred people. The instrument rang out one final time, and those standing in the area of effect were granted an ability boost. Their bodies were surrounded by a glimmering light, and I imagined their powers were increased by ten percent or so. It may not have been that strong of a boost, but the effects would last a while.

Wridra had finally woken up and walked over in the underwear of her armored dress, saying, “No need to worry. It is not all that useful, anyhow.” I turned to see the source of the voice, then quickly averted my gaze. The

draconian was wearing skintight clothes that accentuated the curves of her body, and her thighs were radiant in the morning sun. Her hair was then bound upward, and metallic noises echoed out as she armored up.

“Oh, but receiving physical buffs is considered standard procedure. I also use spirits that fortify the mind, and pretty much every party uses similar spells.”

“I do not mind normal buffs, but... you should not become accustomed to that of one who worships a Land God. It will alter your senses without you knowing, interfering with one’s natural potential. I dislike it.”

Huh, I didn’t know there was such a negative side to it. I’d been spending time by myself for the most part, so I didn’t know much about spells that required coordination with others. Judging by her vague wording, I had a feeling Wridra was withholding something from us. But knowing her, I had a feeling it was just because she decided it wasn’t something we needed to know just yet. Wridra reached out and pointed toward the distance. I followed her finger with my gaze to find approximately two isolated groups in the distance. It looked like there were other groups that didn’t receive the ability-boosting effects either.

“They also deemed it to be unnecessary. I looked into them last night, but you should learn of the masters of those two groups.” I squinted my eyes and located figures at the centers of the crowds that seemed to be the masters of their respective groups. One of them was a young man that was brimming with spirit. He was tall, and even I could see that he had well-shaped features. The other was an old man with white hair, with a solid build despite his old age.

“They do look strong. Stronger than me, I’m guessing?”

“Indeed, those two are exceptionally strong. I estimate the young one to be about level 140, while the older is about 120. But levels alone are not much to go by. One with a favorable matchup against a higher level opponent could easily turn the tides of a battle.”

Oof, we’re running into people above level 100 now. The younger one only seemed to be about 20 years old, so I was surprised to know how powerful he was. Maybe it was due to his appearance, but there were many women around him, and I could see him briskly giving orders to the others.

“All right, I’ll be sure not to start any trouble. We should start getting ready

too. Like we discussed before, Wridra won't be part of our party, so we'll have to handle most of the fighting between us two and have Wridra protect us when absolutely necessary." The two nodded. There was movement down below us, as well. It seemed the groups had begun mobilizing toward the labyrinth. Our turn was near the end. Not because we were discriminated against as outsiders, but sadly, just because we were late. We had no right to complain, and we could only blame ourselves for going to sleep too late.

"Let's check our party status, just in case. I changed my settings, so you'll be able to view everything. I think it's more interesting that way."

"Okay, I'll do the same. Yes, it looks like we're both in the party." I kept my settings the same, and an icon showing the party status indicated that we were both all green and good to go. This function had a Mind Link Chat feature built into it, which we could make use of right away. That was pretty much it for our preparations. We didn't use heavy armor or shields in the first place, and we only needed minimum food supplies. We were well-stocked on sleeping goods, so we just had to make sure our sword and staff were in good shape. Though, they were both made by the Magi Drake, so I doubted there would be any issues.

"Oh, I should go say hi to Hakam before we go."

"That's how I can tell you're a working adult instead of a child. I don't mind, of course. I wanted to greet Aja the wizard, too." We both nodded in agreement and left the tent.

We breathed in the scent of the plants wet with morning dew and slowly made our way down the path. A tent made with splendid cloth could be seen at the middle of camp, where a large crowd of people was gathered. It seemed they were taking orders from the person who stood at the center. That person was the very one I wanted to greet, but I figured he was too busy and decided to leave. Just then, the man built like a bear raised his arm to get my attention. The muscular man with skin tanned to a shade of bronze was the manager and commanding officer of the raid on the labyrinth.

"You're finally here! Come, don't be shy!"

"Good morning. I haven't seen you since the Neko workshop. Sorry to bother

you when you're so busy."

"Ah, don't worry about it. I've been wondering about you anyway. Oh, I see Mariabelle the elf is with you, too. You finally look like a proper sorceress in that robe. Though, I wouldn't complain if you stayed in that adorable outfit of yours, of course!" Hakam laughed out loud, then dismissed those around him with a wave. He seemed a bit crude at first glance, but the orders he was giving earlier were detailed and precise, and he gave off the impression that he was liked by others.

"Hello, Sir Hakam. I'm glad you seem to be doing well. This is our tank, Wridra."

"Pleasure to meet you." Wridra had her arms crossed without so much as a bow of her head, and Marie stood motionless in uncomfortable silence. But much to the credit of the Arilai commander, he wasn't annoyed at all. He was just... frozen in place? It was hard to tell with his complexion, but Hakam seemed to be blushing uncharacteristically. He gulped, then awkwardly began to speak.

"Such beauty... I mean, you two are like flowers blooming in the desert. Your presence lights up this otherwise shabby encampment. Prepare some tea for our two guests!"

Wait, don't I get any tea? I would've been thrilled to try whatever fancy tea the commander had. Sadly, only two cups were brought to the table, and I just watched the ladies enjoy their drink. The tea sure looked delicious...

"Oh, now that we have a tank, we decided to join the raid on the labyrinth. We just wanted to come by to say our greetings."

"I look forward to working with you, Sir Hakam. I'll do my best to contribute." Marie bowed.

It seemed he wasn't a fan of too much propriety, and he tried to ease our nerves by saying, "Don't get too worked up just because we'll be out there with such lovely ladies." Next to him was Aja, the aged wizard we met at the hall, who had a pleased expression on his face.

"I thought you would come by. Yes, it is better to be somewhat reckless while

you are still young. That is the quickest path to growth. I am glad you've decided to join."

"Thank you, great Aja. I'll do my best to keep up." The old man offered his wrinkled hand, and we each shook it. Aja was a backer of this raid and held the title of wizard, which was reserved only for those with an extraordinary amount of skill. He seemed to remember something out of nowhere, then reached for the staff at his side.

"It's not every day that an elven sorceress comes to visit. Let me show you something interesting. Here, keep your eyes on my hands." His old eyes looked into Marie's as if he was dealing with his own granddaughter. Aja smiled warmly, then turned his palm toward the ground. The air became filled with a pale glow. Small points of light appeared, lines connecting between them, then dispersed in all directions. They formed into grid patterns, creating what looked like a jungle gym in no time.

Whoaaa, what's this? It was like CGI. I stood there with my mouth open, and the girl let out a surprised voice.

"Could this be the map of the ancient labyrinth?"

"Indeed. It's still incomplete, but this is what was left by the preliminary search party. In addition, it allows communication with this headquarters and coordination with other parties as needed. Hm, Hakam... Would you mind if I gave them a Magic Tool?"

"You're the wizard here, I'll trust your judgment. We're not supposed to show them to outsiders according to the rules, but I can't help but worry about them." With that, Hakam glanced at our shoes and equipment. I supposed it would've seemed strange that the only things we were carrying were a bento box, a blanket, and some camping equipment. I had no intention of explaining that I could go back to Japan and back at any time, so I just wordlessly returned a boyish smile.

"You look as if you're half asleep... In any case, this is an item I enchanted with a spell earlier. It will prevent you from getting lost, and you can use it to contact me if needed. Remember, you are free to be reckless, but do not be foolhardy about it."

“Yes, of course. Thank you very much.” He handed us some sort of magical item. The cylindrical object was heavy in hand, and he explained that anyone could activate it simply by touching it. We bowed, then decided to start heading for the labyrinth.

The lively commotion outside eventually died down. The elites of the group had entered the labyrinth, lowering the number of people left outside. Those who were at the campgrounds mainly consisted of the support team, such as those who were there to treat wounds or do maintenance on equipment. But they didn’t have much to do, with the raid having just begun, so smoke from cooking pots could be seen here and there in preparation for a late breakfast. In the meantime, we were playing with our latest home appliance—err, Magic Tool—while we waited our turn.

“Wow, it’s so convenient. It automatically records the layout of the labyrinth as you go. I think that’s what they call an automapping function.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but this must be a new Magic Tool developed in this country. They must be pretty worried about us if they’re letting us borrow such a valuable thing.” I couldn’t really blame them, though. We appeared to be a young boy and girl, and our bodyguard, Wridra, looked like an elegant woman. We were getting odd looks from those around us while we waited, but we were used to it by now. That seemed to apply to the draconian too, and she peered in at the Magic Tool without so much as giving a glance toward the onlookers.

“Hmm, it’s a toy for providing information on our current whereabouts. Its other function of relaying our voice seems to have restrictions. I suppose it’s fine as long as it’s used to communicate only when we wish to.” We wanted to keep Wridra’s identity a secret, so we definitely didn’t want our conversations being listened in on. That also went for our ability to go to Japan and back, and Marie’s staff, too. I didn’t think too much about it, but we would’ve had to return the item if it was going to allow people to overhear whatever we talked about.

The sun was now rising, and its rays were coming down a lot stronger. Looking ahead, I could see that it wouldn’t be our turn for a while, but it was a lot cooler out here than it had been in the desert, thanks to the breeze coming

in from the oasis and the rock walls surrounding us. The wind was nice and gentle, and it was actually pretty pleasant. As I was lounging around, a man and woman came stepping through the sand toward us. I turned when I looked down and noticed the shadows approaching us, and my eyes met with the somewhat disagreeable-looking woman's. The man beside her was wearing leather armor, and he whistled at Wridra, which must have been his idea of a compliment. He looked down at us, as if judging our worth, and it gave an unpleasant sort of impression that was different from the one I felt from the merchant yesterday.

"What's with these kids? Did they mistake the labyrinth for a playground or something?" The woman's wavy blonde hair reached down her back, and her skin was well-tanned. I was accustomed to seeing pointed ears like hers, but it was hard to believe she was a half-fairy elf like Marie. The look in her eyes and tone of voice as she looked down at us from a whole head above were cold, like she was dealing with some sort of rodent.

"A human, an elf, and... not sure what she is. What a weird combination." She took another step closer, her attire showing off the entirety of her thighs. There was a sort of animalistic air to her. She gave the impression that she could even outrun wolves out in the mountains.

"Umm... Hello. Can we help you?" I was taken aback by their sudden appearance, but they were most likely part of the raid on the ancient labyrinth. As such, I decided to at least greet them, but the woman didn't bother to reply. Instead, she pointed at me and spoke to the man she had come with.

"Don't tell me this dopey-looking human kid is their leader? He'll probably end up on the ground in the first room. Why are they part of the raid team?" The man grabbed her arm, as if to get her to stop, but she shook it off. I couldn't recall doing anything to bother her, so Marie and I just looked at each other, dumbfounded. Marie shook her head sideways as if to say, "She's not an elf I know," and "We shouldn't bother with her" at the same time. But unfortunately, it seemed the woman intended to bother us, and her finger pointed at my shoulder bag next.

"How many meals' worth of food do you have? Have you even prepared *at all?*"

“...We have enough. Uh, is there something you need?” Something told me she wasn’t trying to offer advice, but rather, was just looking for excuses to criticize us. I’d thought I was being civil, but she clearly didn’t like that response. Her blue eyes narrowed with displeasure.

“With that little bag? It’s common sense to bring at least a week’s worth. What, are you trying to get these girls killed?” I glanced at Wridra. I was worried this would turn into trouble, but she was just staring at the sky without showing a hint of emotion. Her mannerisms were identical to how she’d been acting the previous night, when she was sitting by herself. I’d noticed her wearing that expression occasionally. It seemed that whenever she did that, it was always when there were humans other than us around. I couldn’t tell whether she had very little interest in humans in general, or if she was deliberately avoiding trouble as a dragon. I felt a hand roughly shove against my chest with a *thud*. There was anger behind that push, and it came with more force than expected. I staggered backward, and her finger jabbed toward me accusingly.

“Are you listening, boy? What, are you scared? Need an adult to come save you?”

“Hey, that’s enough...!” Marie was getting heated, but I held her back with a hand and slowly stepped out in front of her. I wished I could make an intimidating face at times like this. Unfortunately, I could only manage to look like I was about to yawn. Maybe one day, when I get older... Wait, that never got better even as I became an adult. Hmm, what an unfortunate future I had.

“Sorry, but we’re fine. Thanks for your concern, Ms. Mean-eyed Elf.” I could tell the woman’s anger was swelling up even more. But for some reason, her glare didn’t bother me nearly as much as Marie being upset with me would have. Maybe all those times I’d gotten my cheeks pinched by her ended up being effective training. The man who had come to accompany the woman let out a sigh, seemingly tired of watching this precarious conversation.

“Cut it out already. We need to head out soon too, and we’re not even supposed to be out here. The boss is gonna get upset before you know it...” He said the last comment in a hushed tone, but the woman still shivered in response. That awkward, tight smile was scarier than any expression she had shown so far.

“R-Right... I wasn’t being serious... It was just a joke.”

“Good. Then let’s go.” We watched as they walked away, the woman holding her head drooped, as being dragged away by an invisible collar. She seemed to have lost interest in us after that singular comment, leaving us with nothing but an inexplicable unpleasant feeling.

“I wonder what that was about.”

“Yeah, that was weird. I think they might’ve been a part of the raid party we saw earlier. The one with that handsome-looking guy.” Marie cocked her head.

“What handsome-looking guy?” she uttered to herself, and I wondered why she was having trouble remembering.

“It was that young guy at the platform Wridra pointed out to us. Don’t you remember that group of women?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I think I saw a single elf in the group. But I feel sorry for them, being led by someone like him.” Someone like him? He was an extremely powerful figure with an estimated level exceeding 140... *Maybe elves had a strange sense of beauty or something? Like, since elves were all beautiful, everyone was considered plain by their standards? Is that how it works?*

Though, the look on that woman’s face was concerning. I didn’t even know her name, but it was like she was being treated as a slave or something. It wasn’t like she and I were close enough for me to ask about it, and they had already left for the labyrinth. A man that was level 140... I was starting to become a little curious about how he interacted with his companions.

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The gaping hole in the ground seemed to be an endless abyss, with stairs along its edges spiraling downward. The wind like ancient breaths blowing up from the depths remained unchanged since we’d come here some time ago.

It’s been so long. I took a moment to quietly reflect on that thought. To be honest, I wanted to get in there and start exploring every nook and cranny right away. But from then on, I was able to visit this place whenever I wanted. To think, I could come home from work and go straight to exploring the labyrinth. How blessed I was... I stood staring at the abyss, which apparently gave off the

impression that I was having second thoughts. The man who had been managing the order of entry spoke to me, as if to give encouragement.

“You’re the last team left. I pray for your safe return.”

“Thank you. I’ll enjoy it to my heart’s content.” I smiled, and the man with the turban around his head looked at me wide-eyed. Well, I was there at last. The underground labyrinth everyone dreamed of. Adventure, battle, priceless treasure, and ancient lost magic. The thought of knowing whatever lay ahead was a complete mystery was absolutely wonderful. The three of us looked at each other, each with the same expectant smile on our faces. It seemed to me that there was a hint of greed to our smiles. But there was nothing wrong with that. Greed was what fueled things like adventure and the paving of new paths. We all called to each other, “Ready? Go!” and took the first step together.

Our footsteps sounded more rigid than expected as we stepped down the curving stairs and descended into the labyrinth. With each *clack, clack*, the light and sound around us seemed to disappear. Looking up, the entrance hole was far above us. I could see sand flowing down like a wavering curtain. The moisture clinging to my skin was likely coming from the nearby oasis. The air felt chilly, and it was hard to believe there was a vast desert right above us.

“Wait, let me light the way.” A girl’s voice echoed out as if to ground my impatient mind. I stopped walking and heard her chanting something to the spirits. Marie requested assistance from them in their language, then tapped the ground with her staff. Spirits surrounded by particles of light appeared. Now, we had three light sources that had been summoned by Marie. She directed them with her staff, then turned her eyes toward me. “I’ll fix their positions above our heads so we don’t get separated. Stay still.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you could do that. That Advanced Labor skill is already coming in handy, huh?”

“Yes, my magic power isn’t being depleted, thanks to the staff. Maybe this is a good opportunity for me to increase my skill levels.” She smiled happily, then touched each spirit with the tip of her staff. Marie was of the rare spirit sorceress class, and so she possessed the ability to endow magic to each of her spirits. This was her advantage of being able to make preparations, as I had

mentioned before. Now that her spirits had a sort of crest applied to them, they were ready to trigger her magic at any time.

“Whoa, my magic has gotten a lot more powerful. This is incredible, Wridra! It’s like the difference between night and day when I use your staff.”

“Hah, hah, of course it is more powerful with my support. More importantly, you still have an open secondary skill slot. It seems you have not decided what to use it for yet.”

“Yes, I wanted to hold off on picking one until it’s necessary. I don’t want to end up regretting not picking something I need later on, so I’m going to wait for now.” I nodded in agreement. The skill slot could be set at any time, so there was no harm in waiting.

The path continued circling downward around the hole in the center. Though there was the occasional roaring sound of air flow coming from the bottom of the hole, we hadn’t encountered any enemies yet. We simply continued to descend, taking in the view like a group of tourists. There was no sign of anyone who had entered before us. They were probably far ahead already.

“I thought we’d be rushing in in a hurry, but this has been pretty laid-back so far. Any monsters here were probably taken out by the parties before us, so we should be good for a while.”

“I can’t sense anyone around. It’s like we’re the only ones here. Though, it is nice that we can just enjoy the atmosphere like this.” I nodded in response to Marie’s words. We didn’t have to deal with people getting on our case like earlier, and it was nice that we could move at our own pace. After advancing for some time longer, the light spirits became the only source of illumination in sight. They dimly lit their surroundings like a vending machine out in the countryside, and we eventually started seeing ancient text like cryptic symbols scrawled on the walls. The writing was few and far between at first, but its density increased as we pressed on. I stared at them absentmindedly, when Marie began speaking quietly.

“Night, fixed star, world... Hmm, this is about ancient mythology. It looks like the story is laid out in order as you walk down the path.”

“Ancient text... I used to study them a lot, so this takes me back.”

The girls looked at me with faces full of surprise. Those faces seemed to wordlessly say, “But I thought you were an academic failure?”

“Huh? Didn’t you see my skill list already, Marie?”

“I’m more confused about why you learned ancient text when you’re not a magic user. I can’t imagine it being very useful for you.”

“Just the sound of the term ‘ancient language’ is exciting to me, and I thought understanding it would make labyrinths even more fun to experience. It can be useful at times, too. Like when there are written signs.” They looked at me as if they were impressed, but at the same time, still found me strange. I was a bit sad that they couldn’t understand a man’s spirit of adventure. Then again, I probably had a greater sense of curiosity than most folks. I’d even come across writing on the wall and had trouble sleeping because I was so fixated on knowing what it said. Though, it was in my dream, so I was actually sleeping already.

As for the ancient mythology written here, the gist of it was: *The arrow unleashed from the morning star vanquished demons. The shot would reach all the way to the fixed star with power that does not belong in this world. Even the demon’s thoughts were wiped out in a mere moment, and it would eventually return to the world, for the morning star was the very thing that brought it into existence.* I continued reading along with Marie as we proceeded down the winding corridor and found an image of a demon attempting to wake up at the end.

“It’s a bit scary looking, but it’s drawn with such beautiful colors.”

“This deep navy color feels like it’s going to pull me inside... It’s strangely calming.” I placed my hand against the wall, and Marie followed suit. Our faces turned toward each other, and we looked up at the wall art one more time. The color of the night was so captivating and pure that it really did feel like it was going to suck us in.

After pressing forward for some time, we stopped walking. A door so big we had to crane our necks to take it all in stood before us, indicating that this was the end of the entry corridor and starting point of the labyrinth. The metallic doors had retained their forms without a hint of decay, with beads of water

covering their surface. The dreadful and somewhat scholarly looking patterns on them told me this came from an ancient culture that wouldn't be found in any other labyrinth. I turned around to find two women looking just as excited as I was.

"This is definitely the ancient labyrinth. Just thinking about how we're about to go explore it gets me excited."

"Ohhh, I've never done anything like this! Just look at the creatures here. None of them are listed in the books. We could earn a lot of money just from these."

"The air itself is ancient here. Ah, how nostalgic. I have not breathed in air of the previous generations in some time." We all chuckled to ourselves, then pushed the metal doors open without hesitation. Although, others had gone in ahead of us, so unfortunately, we weren't the first visitors. It went without saying, but since we had come in after the others, there were no locks or traps barring our path. The door opened all the way with a heavy thud, and a hallway completely enshrouded in darkness awaited us. The heavy air, darkness blacker than night, and a rumbling that could be heard from afar... The atmosphere was so fitting for a labyrinth that we almost broke out in applause.

"Oooh, it's so authentic. I've been to a bunch of labyrinths before, but this is the first time I've seen one that's so intact. The decorations on the corridors are so intricate, too. Wow... There isn't even a speck of dust to be found."

"Hehe, there are so many ancient things for us to investigate. Let's decide the approach we're going to take as we keep walking." The path was wide enough that we could line up side by side with our hands outstretched, so we could walk slowly and take our time exploring. Wridra and I turned to Marie and asked, "Approach?"

"Yes. Do we try to clear the labyrinth the fastest, prioritize leveling, or take our time and enjoy ourselves? That sort of general direction."

"Hmm, I would normally go with the first option, but I dislike being rushed."

"We could level anywhere, so why don't we take our time? Marie could probably teach us a thing or two on the way, too." We all raised our fists together in agreement with a "Yeah!" Being in the leading party would've

helped us find better loot, but it would've been a shame to rush through such a well-made labyrinth. Ruthlessly competing with over a hundred seasoned warriors sounded like a pain, and I already had an important job back in Japan. I had to manage my schedule so I could wake up on time.

"There are some people here that are several times higher in level than me, so I think I'll give up the honors of getting the fastest clear time."

"Oh, you're giving it up, are you? You're saying that as if you could do it in the first place." She walked over jovially with light steps, then peered up to look at me. The light spirits fluttering around her seemed to be an expression of her good mood. As for the race for the fastest clear time, it wouldn't have been impossible to achieve if I'd really wanted to go for it. I mean, I had movement skills, and Marie had the ultimate bodyguard protecting her. If I sped right through to the goal, I could've gotten there faster than anyone else... probably.

"No, we are not doing that! That takes all the wonder out of it, and I'm sure we'd miss lots of important things. We're not here to run a marathon."

"Yeah, of course. We got this Magic Tool, so let's check the map and advance slowly. I wanna check out the places the other parties haven't seen yet, if possible."

"Then, we should proceed to the east. If these lights represent the others, we should go where there are less of them." Apparently, it even told us where the other parties were located. The automapping Magic Tool was very convenient. It made things a lot easier, and it was nice that we could view the labyrinth's layout in three dimensions. I wondered if we could convince Aja to let us keep it after we were done exploring the ruins.

"Oh, a monster."

Just then, several eyes flashed in the darkness from the light of the spirits. A total of three monsters rushed toward us with heavy, thudding steps. As soon as they entered the range of the illumination, their stocky forms came into view. They were Koopahs, a monster we were familiar with from the oasis. It was a bipedal creature with a large head, and it resembled a round, oversized lizard. Apparently, the monsters here were still around level 40 or so. I still had its weak point memorized with my Reprise skill, so I used it to slice the Koopahs

into rings with ease. I was impressed with the sword Wridra had given me. She had explained that it was strong and unbreakable, yet flexible, and it was just as advertised. The blade emitted a white smoke, and as it dissipated, the oils that had coated it upon defeating the monsters evaporated. Its convenience factor was simply wonderful. Not to mention, its beautiful black luster was simply captivating to behold. I was feeling pretty elated, but for some reason, the sides of Marie's eyebrows began to droop gradually. She let out a sigh, then looked at me as if she was ready to complain.

"That was no fun at all. I didn't even have time to use the spells I prepared beforehand. The battle music barely played for a few seconds before it ended. How sad."

"Whaa? But you already defeated a bunch of Koopahs before. I'm sure there are much stronger enemies ahead, so why don't we enjoy the battles coming up?" I replied as I sheathed my sword, but it was too late. She was already making that pouty face she made whenever she was upset. Tentatively, I asked what sort of experience she was looking for.

"Let's see... Something like, 'Get behind me! I'll try to buy some time for you to summon your Fire Lizards!'" She replied with more specific details than I had expected. We continued talking about such nonsense as we walked on without giving a second glance to the monsters we turned to dust. But as Wridra listened to our conversation, she seemed to be deep in thought, with her hand on her chin. She then clapped her hands together and turned her obsidian eyes toward us. The glint in those eyes told me this would be nothing but trouble, and I was right.

"Hah, hah, then I shall provide training until things become more busy. Oh, there is no need to thank me. I have always been worried about your weapon levels being too low."

"What? You want to train us here? As in, while we're walking through the labyrinth?" Why? Why would she want to do that during our fun time exploring the labyrinth? Didn't we just decide as a group that we'd take things slow? Wasn't adding sword training while we proceed only going to ruin the experience?

The metallic sound of armor shifting sounded in reply. She lowered herself, the knees of her armored dress bending as she did so, and a straight hilt appeared before her. Wridra took it in her hand, and the sound of metal sliding along a sheath echoed. The joyous smile on her face told me there was no one who could stop her now. It was my turn to sigh now, and the look on Marie’s face seemed to say it didn’t concern her in the least. But a teacher in the ways of swordsmanship was an important thing to have. My skill with a one-handed sword was currently 52, and there weren’t many people who were far higher than that. In fact, anyone that skilled with the sword tended to be out in real battle, so they wouldn’t be giving me the time of day. This meant that if I wanted them to train me, I would have to give them more compensation than they would’ve made going exploring, and I obviously didn’t have that kind of money. I had already half given up, but my lips curled into a smile as I drew my sword.

“Well then, Master, please go easy on me.”

“Hah, hah, do not think you can keep up that drowsy face while facing me.”

It actually would’ve been nice if she *could* do something about my face, but I really did hope she’d go easy on me. We bowed to each other, then began our bout in the depths of the ancient labyrinth.

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Bzzz, bzzz...

The sound of white noise could be heard. The darkness was too deep for the lamp light to penetrate. The source of the noise was the Magic Tool, emitting a bluish white light that had the incredible ability to enable long-distance communication, keep track of the user’s current location, and provide a visual image of the labyrinth’s layout. This group of ten or so members also had the boon of the Magic Tool, and they advanced through the labyrinth with practiced steps like a group of running deer.

“Hmm. It’s convenient, but there’s no emotion to it,” the man at the front of the group uttered suddenly. He had a solid build, and he wasn’t even out of breath, despite his rapid pace. His subordinates seemed surprised by his words.

“You hear that? Captain Zera’s talking about emotions.”

“You must be joking. That’s more like the kind of thing an innocent child would talk about... Ow!” The man named Zera delivered a swift punch to the speaker’s head while keeping up his sprinting pace. He made an exasperated expression, then turned back toward the Magic Tool. Then, he opened his mouth to speak again.

“What comes to mind when you look at this?”

“The Magic Tool, you mean? Not much. It’s convenient, so I’m sure it’ll make the raid easier moving forward.” The subordinate replied while rubbing his head, and the large man returned a scowl.

“You don’t get it. Convenience doesn’t make things easier. Think about what would happen as things become more and more efficient. We’ll be worked like carriage horses without rest.”

The men in the back groaned audibly. The systematization of raids was a new initiative, and it would likely soon become the norm. It seemed that in that sense, Zera felt that emotions such as enjoyment were becoming separated from the experience of actually raiding. The only ones who could find joy from it were likely those kids he had met yesterday. He let out a breath of resignation from his nose.

“It’s not all bad, though. I’m glad I can check up on all the teams with this.” The multiple points of light indicated that the front and rear groups were advancing with coordinated movements. If any trouble came up, the others would move in for assistance right away. The man stared at a rust-colored light on the display. The text above it read, “Team Andalusite.” A young man peered in from the side and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Do you think Doula is okay? Her squad is separated from the rest.”

“She can handle herself. I’m sure she’s fine... Oh, I have a comm link coming in.” Seeing the blinking light on the device, the man stroked the Magic Tool. Then, the white noise echoed through the corridor again.

“Bzzz... This is Emerald. The Magic Tool seems to be working well. I’m tracking Team Diamond as they proceed through down the center. I’ve only seen corpses of our enemies so far.”

“This is Sapphire. Proceeding through the route taken by the preliminary team that’s been MIA since a few days ago. Haha, I see Team Diamond is as wild as ever. Our device is also working well. Over.”

Each team was chiming in for their regular reports. This was another new system, and it was meant to further improve coordination between teams by updating each other on their situation. The man listened to the white noise as he considered this a confirmation that there was no room for fun in this labyrinth. More importantly, he was more concerned with Team Andalusite. He waited quietly for her voice to report in.

“This is Topaz. Currently following Team Sapphire. Defeated several Koopah some time earlier. Anyway, is that group of foreign kids being here some sort of joke? There were only three of them, and they were all so lightly equipped.” Maybe there weren’t enough monsters around, because Team Topaz began making small talk. The kids he mentioned, Zera figured, were the ones who he had helped set up the tent for. Recalling those little ones with uncharacteristically polite manners, he smiled to himself as he gripped the Magic Tool in his hand.

“This is Bloodstone. Come now, you can’t blame someone from out of country for not being prepared enough. Besides, these Magic Tools are limited in their comm link functions, too. Let’s go easy on them.”

“I guess they’re just here sightseeing,” a voice replied with a chuckle. The response somewhat dodged the comment, as the royalty of Arilai had been cautious of getting their treasure taken from them. That was the entire reason this new system was being put into place, but then these children who appeared to be playing around came and wandered in, so it was only natural that the organized adventurers were reacting this way.

“This is Diamond. No, that black-haired woman is trouble. She was so sexy that our boss was giving her some wild looks. Eve got jealous earlier too, and... Ow, ow, all right, sorry, I won’t talk about it. Oh, looks like the enemy levels increased to 50. Just sighted a High Koopah.”

“It’s Team Ruby. Spotted a level 50 here, too. This is increasing pretty quickly, considering we haven’t even descended a floor yet. We could end up passing

level 100. If so, this labyrinth is the real deal.” Teams Diamond and Ruby were incredibly skilled raid teams. The display showed that they had been leading the charge and cutting through the ancient labyrinth like two spears. As he watched, the voice Zera had been waiting for could finally be heard through the Magic Tool.

“This is Andalusite. We’ve discovered a hidden hall. Detecting several organisms here. Preparing for combat. And try to cut out the small talk. Don’t forget Sir Hakam and Great Aja are listening in.”

The somewhat austere voice belonged to Zera’s childhood friend. Hearing her chiding her colleagues in that familiar, serious tone, he couldn’t help but crack a smile. Seeing his reaction, his squadmates began commenting in a rather outspoken manner.

“I think the captain needs to get himself a lady already.”

“Not gonna happen for a while. His declaration of love to her got ignored, after all.” A vein popped up in Zera’s forehead, and his fists of anger rained down upon the two who had spoken. With the reports by each team completed, silence returned to the labyrinth. However, the sounds of battle could be heard in the distance, and monsters continued to emerge from the darkness. It wasn’t yet time to let one’s guard down, but things seemed to be going smoothly thus far. With enough magic stones obtained, Arilai would undergo great changes. The magic stones would be converted into military might through the production of powerful weapons and armor, allowing Arilai to overcome its neighboring states. Not only would it give them a powerful edge in war, but it would grant them a great economic advantage. Fortunately, there had been a massive amount of funds and preparations put into this event. The raid was going smoother than anticipated, and some of the group members were even looking visibly relieved. Just then, a heavy tremor ran through the labyrinth. The intense sounds of destruction followed soon after, and the white noise that came from the Magic Tool almost sounded like a scream.

“Ah! They got the jump on—*Bzz*—the escape route! *Bzzz...* behind us!”

“Block the damaged wall, quickly! Ah, ahhh! There’s more of them! Too many to count! Ahhh! We’re done for!”

“Th-They’re gonna eat us! Captain! We need to retreat!!!”

“Requesting reinforcements! Our escape route has been cut off. We’ll hold them off as long as we can! I repeat, requesting reinforcements. Our—*Bzzz...*” The air seemed to tremble from the comm link message, and Zera’s eyes snapped wide open. In that moment, he realized the ancient labyrinth had finally shown its true nature and descended upon its intruders.

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Aja the old wizard stroked the white beard on his chin. Despite the rather chaotic comm link coming in, his unperturbed expression showed that he had half expected this outcome.

“The central resistance is rather light, as expected. It has only just begun, but either the west or the east side may be the main one.”

“The east pathway is very narrow. I can’t imagine the estimated level 100 monsters in the reports would fit there. The west is more likely, but... It doesn’t feel quite right to me.” The dim tent was enshrouded in a pale blue light. The staff in the old man’s hand was projecting a miniature, three-dimensional labyrinth that included the squads moving about in confusion. The other teams were beginning to regroup due to the earlier request for reinforcements, so the damages shouldn’t have been too bad. It hadn’t even been half a day yet, and with no documents to use as reference, it was difficult to estimate how many floors there would be. But Commander Hakam’s intuition was incredibly acute. He had been through countless battlefields and survived with his intuition guiding him. Despite the many subordinates he had lost under his command, he always led his country to victory in the end. This was exactly why he had been tasked with conquering the labyrinth full of unknowns. The old man turned his eyes toward Hakam, who held up his open hand.

“Well, I’d say there are four to five floors at most. It would be bizarre otherwise. Anything more would be beyond the realm of men.”

“A labyrinth’s state changes as it becomes bigger. Ah, the boy’s group seems to be up to something... Hm? What are they doing?”

“Fighting...? No, not exactly. Don’t tell me they’re playing around?” They found that the lights coming from the boy and the woman named Wridra were

shining brighter at the middle of the corridor. Despite this, there were no signs of enemies nearby. Could it be that they were sparring as some sort of training?

“Hm, I can’t help but worry about them as if they were my own grandchildren. And yet, they seem to have a decisive *something* we’re lacking.”

“Agreed. I felt like we were missing something, but they filled in exactly what we needed. Like the missing piece of a puzzle.” They glanced at each other. The two were debating on whether or not they should assign them the “role.” Seeing Hakam shake his head, the older man nodded. Perhaps they realized the best way to bring out the potential of the boy and his group was to leave them unrestricted.

“It seems Hakam the hero has grown old, relying on children like this.”

“I’ve even enlisted the help of a Neko. In that sense, a child isn’t as bad.”

The two men chuckled, and then their expressions turned as sober as they had been before. Countless lives of men and women they led had been lost because of them. The long, long raid on the labyrinth was only just beginning.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 3: Fun in the Ancient Labyrinth

Wridra's black blade slowly passed by overhead. However, the speed of the blade didn't seem to match the force of the swing. Sure enough, I felt cold sweat erupt from my body as it passed by me.

"Haha, ha... That swing could have killed a pile of Koopah in one swoop, huh?"

"Nonsense. Those tadpoles are not worthy of being considered my opponents. Let us speed things up now, shall we?"

I was standing face to face with Wridra for some reason, without slowing our advance through the corridor the whole time. She wasn't fighting her hardest, of course, and it was likely just a game to her. Even so, my mind and body were already screaming for mercy. How odd... I thought we'd decided to take our time and enjoy the sights as we made our way inside. On the other hand, Marie was leisurely observing the rooms and sculptures, and Wridra joined her in exploring our surroundings whenever I was out of breath and resting. Monsters popped out occasionally, but they immediately fled when they felt the intense pressure from the sparring between Wridra and me.

Is it just me, or am I the only one working really hard?

"How rude. I've been busy raising my skill, too. See? Look."

"Something's moving on the ground... Ah, is that a stone spirit?" There was something block-shaped there, and the stones in question clinked together as they lined up and stacked on top of each other. Their coordinated movements served as proof that Marie had been improving her Advanced Labor skill.

"See? I've been making an effort, too. It's already up by two levels, and your... Wow, your one-handed sword level is up by three!"

"Hmm, it seems you can handle more. You have been lazing about with that sleepy look for far too long. It is about time for you to train seriously." I cocked my head. How was Wridra able to see my stats?

“Why’d you grant her permission to view my stats, Marie?”

“I didn’t think it would be an issue. We may not be in a party, but we’re all friends here.”

“Indeed. And even if something happens to you, you would merely wake up in Japan again.” Wridra laughed aloud, but I didn’t understand what exactly was funny about that.

“Well, it is time to let out my frustrations of being unable to ride the shinkansen... I mean, it is time to show you my gratitude for everything you do and train you properly.”

Yeah, she totally just let her real thoughts slip out just now. I would’ve preferred not to hear that. In any case, I was surprised by how quickly I was improving. It went without saying that the stronger the opponent and the harder the training, the quicker skills leveled up. Wridra was purposely coming at me with murderous intensity to make the training all the more effective... I hoped. The other merit here was that I didn’t really have to deal with pain or fatigue because I was in the dream world. I was at a high level to begin with, and my physical abilities were pretty high as a result. Despite being drenched in sweat, I only felt slightly tired. But I wanted to take a rest soon... I tried to find an excuse to take a break, when the opportunity soon presented itself.

“We’re lucky the other teams rushed ahead. They left the treasure boxes unopened.”

““Treasure box?!””

I was relieved to find that I’d succeeded in distracting them. I didn’t lie out of a desire to get some rest. I pointed down the dark corridor, where a treasure chest could be seen just sitting there. It was rectangular with a curved top, the kind that was typically seen in video games.

“Those types of treasure chests are actually the most dangerous. You should check above...” Wridra walked over to it without listening, and in that moment, something came down from the ceiling... Then went flying away with a flick of Wridra’s tail with a *whack!* It was several times bigger than a Koopah, but I didn’t see anything.

“I see it is locked... Hmm, it would be faster to simply break it.”

“It might be booby trapped. Let me take a...”

Bam! Bam! Crack! Pew! (The sound of a poison needle breaking and flying away)

Wow... She really just broke it open...

I supposed it couldn't be helped, with an Arkdragon roaming in the labyrinth. This was pretty much expected, and I was just glad she wasn't running around on a rampage. Dull-colored coins and a jewel rang out as they scattered on the ground, and we all looked down at them at once.

“Wow, look at that. Umm, could it be some ancient currency?”

“Huh, those coins are pretty old. Lemme take a look.”

Oh, this is...

Marie handed me a coin, which was much weightier than I had imagined. I wasn't too interested in money in this world, but I felt myself grow sweaty just holding it in my hand. I poured some water from my bottle onto it and rubbed it with my sleeve. It wasn't the best way to clean something like this, considering it could leave scratches, but I just wanted to test it out on one coin. The piece shone brilliantly from the illumination provided by the light spirits, and Marie's eyes widened.

“This is definitely a gold coin. And the color tells me it has a high purity. It's really old, but it doesn't look like it was used, and it seems to be well-preserved.”

“You mean this is gold?” I placed it on the girl's palm, and she exhaled with surprise. It may not have been so impressive to a dragon, but it was to us. Gold was valuable in this world, too, and it was something that all women seemed to admire. Wridra stared at us for a moment, gave the impression that she was about to say something, then closed her mouth.

“Hm...? Well, we might as well take these. By the way, did you see something like jewels rolling away in that direction?”

“I don't know where it went. Wridra, can you open the next one properly?”

We split up to find it, then discovered it stuck between the stone paving. Wridra picked it up between her fingers.

“Hmm, this one may actually be more valuable. It seems to be enchanted with a magical effect called Replica. This is quite an old spell.” According to her, Replica would allow you to copy the target’s color and shape when used. The catch was, it didn’t work on creatures, or anything with magic powers. I wasn’t sure how it would be useful, but it may have come in handy someday. I was about to graciously put the gold coins and the jewel into my bag, when the elf girl spoke.

“Don’t you think it’s strange? This place was discovered a good while ago, but no one checked the treasure chest near the entrance.”

“Now that you mention it... I understand the current raid party is in a hurry, but the preliminary party before that should’ve been checking every corner.” I looked at the gold coins in my hand. There were about twenty of them, and their notable weight told me they had a high gold-to-filler-metal ratio... but was it really gold? How would I have been able to check to make sure? After considering it for some time, I lifted the jewel we had just found earlier.

“...Activate Replica.” A beam of light extended from the jewel and hit the gold coin. It made some clicking noises as it analyzed the target it was to copy. Then it made a high-pitched beep, and the words “*Cannot be copied*” appeared above the jewel. Essentially, that meant the coins weren’t “objects.” So then, what were they? In that moment, they seemed to detect the shift in mood and changed forms. Slender legs sprouted out, and the coins fell away from my hand, one after the other. The sensation of their little legs and the sight of them pouring off of my hand made my skin crawl. A chill went running down my spine.

“Eeeeeek...!”

“Eyaaaaaah!” Marie and I scrambled away from the fake coins, then clung to each other in a fluster. I could feel her heart pounding against me, and my own probably sounded the same. They fled into crevices while emitting a dull glow and disappeared from sight in no time.

“Gff... Gaha, hehe... Ehehehe!” Wridra stood at the corridor, clutching her

stomach and bent over laughing.

“Y-You knew, Wridra! And you just watched!”

“Ah, I have no idea what you are talking about. And do not forget, I am not a member of your party. Children of men, you must be vigilant at all times when proceeding through the labyrinth.” She looked at us with a serious expression, but she was covering her mouth with her hand. She was obviously hiding the smile she couldn’t contain.

“...You’re the one who opened the treasure chest.”

“I did not open it. I poked it, and it broke. You two are the ones who picked up its contents.” It was hard to take her seriously with her stomach trembling as she spoke, but she probably didn’t say anything because it was harmless, so I couldn’t be too upset about it. I turned around to find the fake coins merrily returning to the damaged treasure box.

Ah, I get it.

They infiltrated the unsuspecting victim’s bag by pretending to be a coin, then pilfered something from the bag to return to the treasure box. Which meant that the jewel that was in the box may have been someone else’s treasure at one point. As I looked at the glint in the jewel, my eyes widened a bit.

“Oh, this thing might be really valuable.”

“Why is that? Because it could find out whether something is actually a creature or not?”

“No, not that. Because it could duplicate even things as valuable as national treasures. Isn’t it pretty incredible if you think of it that way?”

The girl let out a surprised “Ah!” Even if the jewel wasn’t worth much now, it could become priceless someday.

“I’m actually glad those weren’t real gold coins. We could’ve wasted this Replica effect on just gold. That was a close one.”

“It’s kind of scary to think about. Okay, let’s put it away and keep it safe for now.”

And so, we obtained the rare jewel with a Replica effect. We wrapped it with

a piece of cloth and tucked it away. Marie and I exchanged smiles, acknowledging that this was the first loot we had found together. Meanwhile, the man who had appeared while we were waiting for our turn outside was rummaging through his pockets in search of something, but we were completely unaware of this event.

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The fragrance of tea filled the air as I began pouring the hot water. The tea set I arranged with our expensive tea leaves was rather cheap, but I wanted the focus to be on the flavor this time. A fire lizard was curled up on the pavement, and it blinked its beady eyes when I placed the kettle on top of it. I whispered that it could keep sleeping for a little longer, and it began nodding away drowsily again. I'd heard the labyrinth could get chilly, so it may have been a good idea to consider preparing warm food. It was a good thing I had brought camping equipment in my bag. The thought crossed my mind as I carried the tea set over to Marie, who was waiting with a book in hand.

"I'm glad there was a convenient room for us. It even has a table, too. Maybe whoever used to live here sat on that chair and elegantly read books like you are now, Marie."

"That person must have had a very comfortable life. I'm sure we'd get along." The robed girl paused and turned around. It seemed this place was once some sort of study. The shelves were full of various books, and they were in good condition thanks to the preservation effect applied to the shelves. They were valuable books from ancient times, but it was too difficult to take them with us, so we decided to take a break here and enjoy a meal while reading.

"It's nice that there isn't much dust here, either. Maybe there's something in place here to keep it clean and circulate the air, considering how tidy it is."

"I wouldn't be surprised. The ancient arts were very adept at that sort of thing. Especially when it came to ventilation—oh, thank you. I feel so spoiled, sipping tea while reading a book." I placed a cup of tea next to Marie as she read. Light spirits illuminated the room so our eyes wouldn't be strained from the reading.

"Don't worry about it, you're working. Be careful not to spill." The girl looked

up in response, and then her face loosened into a smile. I recently came to the realization that she liked being taken care of, and she already knew that I liked to take care of people. She tugged on my sleeve, which I interpreted as her wanting me to sit next to her. Well, we did tend to spend a lot of time being touchy with one another. I accepted her invitation and sat next to her, finding her watching me with her big eyes.

“So, what are you reading?”

“Umm, this is a study on the origins of magical primeval creatures. They say the current time is the era of humans, but a long while ago, it was the era of monsters. It was also called the era of night.” She asked me if I knew about that, and I shook my head. She seemed happy to have the opportunity to teach me and spread the big book open so we could both see.

“A long, long time ago, there was only night in the world. Creatures had white bodies, and they were physically very weak.”

“Huh, it was always night? That must have been nice for sleeping.”

“Oh, but if you sleep so much, you’d probably end up losing your eyes.” We chuckled. I was always the one reading to her, but she was the reader this time. Maybe that was why she seemed so happy. She picked up her cup with thin, pale fingers and took a sip. Just seeing her like that made me feel fortunate, for some reason. There was a luster to her silky white hair, and her striking purple eyes turned toward me. It was odd how much joy I felt from knowing she was enjoying a drink I had made for her.

“Yum... It’s sweet and fragrant. I just might forget about the ancient labyrinth staying here. This reminds me of being in your room.”

“We were lucky to find such a comfortable room. Let’s have some of the sandwiches I brought. Wridra, please come take a seat so we can eat.”

“It is about time!” The black-haired woman who had been surveying the shelves whirled around to face us with incredible speed. It was strange how light her movements were, despite the dress-shaped heavy armor she was wearing. But when she sat down in front of us, the chair creaked under the strain.

Seeing this, Marie commented, “I imagine your husband must be very strong, Wridra.”

“Indeed, he is frighteningly strong, though I do not know where he is off frolicking at the moment.” She spoke as if she was stating the obvious with her first statement, then made a scowl with the next. We couldn’t help but laugh, and I placed some bundles on the table as she urged on. A row of sandwiches was laid out on top of it. The red, green, and yellow ingredients between the white bread were appetizing to behold. I’d taken a tip from convenience stores and stuffed each sandwich with plenty of ingredients, and they turned out looking pretty good. The girls looked delighted, too.

“Wow, the vegetables make them look so colorful and pretty! And they smell so tasty, too.”

“Ahh, white bread! How luxurious. Mm, they do smell good, indeed.”

Marie was used to from our breakfasts, but fine-grained white bread may have been a rare treat for Wridra. I distributed some sandwiches, and then we all put our hands together and said, “Itadakimasu” in Japanese.

“Oh, there’s no crust on the bread. And it’s a bit thinner than usual. Is it to reduce the overall thickness even with all the ingredients used? Well then, let’s see how it tastes...” Marie and Wridra each held a sandwich with both hands and took a bite. They bit through the soft bread easily, and its fragrance filled their senses. The cheese, ham, and vegetable sandwich made a crisp sound as they ate, and they were certainly enjoying the texture.

“Mmm, the fresh veggies have such a nice texture. Hehe, the tomatoes are really good!” The two looked at each other with smiles, their eyes twinkling with delight. The flavor of cheese, presence of meat, and crispy texture made for a wonderful light meal. The savory taste of cheese deepened further as they continued to chew.

“Ah, this is too much. The texture and flavor are truly enjoyable. Not to mention the quality tea... Mm, such a refined flavor.” She took a sip of the aromatic tea, cleansing her palette as she did so. This allowed her to enjoy the flavor of the sandwich all over again as she took another bite. Suddenly, I remembered I had some condiments in my bag and took them out.

“This one is salt, and the other is pepper. Use however much you want.”

“You really are so considerate. Here we are, in this dim labyrinth, but I feel like we’re at a restaurant.”

Now that she mentioned it, this place did have that sort of vibe. We were surrounded by knickknacks and ancient furniture, and the warm lighting was definitely reminiscent of restaurants. The elf girl was full of smiles as she ate, and the books she’d selected had been moved to the edge of the table before the meal began. It seemed her appetite for food was stronger than her thirst for knowledge.

“What is this yellow thing? Oho, it’s quite rich. And with a hint of sweetness... Ah, this is wonderful.”

“That’s an egg sandwich. And this one’s the tuna sandwich you like, Wridra. They’re both pretty popular. Guess you can never go wrong with the mainstream ones, huh?” Marie and Wridra’s hands reached over and grabbed some tuna sandwiches and removed them from the case.

Wha? Gone already? I sat dumbfounded for a minute and watched the girls stuff their faces with joyous vigor. They sprinkled some pepper on their sandwiches, giving the flavor even more depth. *Hmm, maybe tuna is popular in this dream world.* They seemed to be big fans of the rice balls, too, so maybe they liked flavors that had a slight fattiness to them. Seeing them enjoying the food so much was making me want to eat, too. Still, it made me happy to see them so happy. The food wasn’t anything special, but their uninhibited joy was quite heartwarming.

“Whew... Delicious food and aromatic tea... I can hardly believe we are in an ancient labyrinth.”

“Yeah, it’s got the same charm to it as a room at a fancy restaurant. It might even taste better than usual here.” They continued chewing and nodded in response.

“I think so too. I was nervous at first, but I’m surprised by how much fun we’re having.”

“Agreed. Although I had nothing to fear, this place reminded me of my past,

and conversing with you two has been quite entertaining.”

That’s a relief. I was glad they could now understand how fun labyrinths could be. I firmly believed adventures were nothing to be afraid of, and that they should be enjoyed wholeheartedly. After pouring more tea, we could spend time reading the books in the room, checking each other’s status screens, and getting some post-meal rest. Resting properly was important for digestion. I thought Wridra would’ve been bored in a place like this, but she seemed curious about the Magic Tool’s construction and started disassembling it to see how it worked.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, but please don’t break it,” I told her.

“Nonsense,” she shot back.

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Bzz, bzzzz, bzzz...

Within the heavy sound of white noise, a woman’s voice could be heard. There was frustration and pain in her voice, and it was clear even without visuals that she was covered in sweat and dirt.

“Ahhh, they’re dead! Damn it, damn it! This is Andalusite. We’re abandoning our position and retreating! Hey, put up an anti-physical barrier! Prepare a reflection spell to fend them off for as long as possible! You there! Don’t break formation without permission!” The man who had answered the comm link message had grown haggard just listening to the audio. He had finally arrived at the entrance, but the thought of the woman he had nearly professed words of love to being eaten by monsters was nothing short of a nightmare. But no, this wasn’t a dream. Reality was far more horrifying. Grasping the Magic Tool with a white-knuckled grip, he shouted back.

“Riiing... Bzz... This is Bloodstone. We’re coming in to provide backup for your retreat. Whoa, what’s going on here? They’re swarming all over the place like a bunch of piranhas.” Somewhat dumbstruck, he stared at the herd of monsters running around before him. He had no idea how they could come out of this situation victorious. Returning to his senses, he spat out his orders to the rest of his team. “Get working on the door! Quickly! There’s no time to waste. Start casting a huge explosion spell. I don’t care if their position gets caught up in the

blast radius. We'll activate the explosion at the same time they start retreating. Just do it!"

"Bzz... Roger that. Let me know once you finish casting the spell. We'll rush out as fast as possible. Everyone, know that to stop running means death!" The group alongside the wall let out a collective shout of affirmation, as if this would be their last breath. The mass of monsters pushed forth like a surging wave, seeming as though they were trying to drown out the adventurer's wills to survive. Just then, one of the men shouted, eyes wild with fear.

"A-Ahh, aaahhh! D-Demon! It's a demon! That thing with the black horns! That's what's bringing out all these monsters!" He was able to catch a glimpse of it because the ceiling had turned completely red. The magic that had been weaved to summon the crimson flames was done so with no regard for the protection of the rest of the raid, and it had been cast with hopes of relying on miracle resurrection spells afterwards. It only took a mere tens of seconds to cast, but corpses were piling up in the meantime.

The barrier they had put up earlier was their last line of defense, and the woman at the head of the bloodied group shouted, "Forget the countdown! Cast the spell as soon as the incantations are done!"

"Get ready! Don't falter! Run, run, ruuun! The door will be sealed off in thirty seconds! Run with everything you've got if you don't want to die!"

The hall changed suddenly and completely. The sight, which was as if the sun had come crashing down into the world, was one nobody present wanted to witness ever again. Those who happened to run faster than the others who fell behind were the fortunate ones. The former were allowed to survive, while the latter would evaporate or get eaten by monsters. Those who were moving at an in-between pace were engulfed in flame, rolling on the ground until they died. The quickest adventurers stumbled over each other trying to escape with the smell of their burning friends in the air. Anyone who turned around and witnessed the horror taking place behind them had all emotion wiped from their faces. Wails of grief filled the air, joining into a chorus of sorrow. They had realized the woman who had tried so hard to lead her team to safety had been left behind, and the man who loved her had leapt into the fire after her. There was nothing they could do. Nothing but cry as they pushed the door closed,

sealing the hall behind them. A hot rush of air erupted as the door closed tight with a heavy thud, and the survivors stared at the door in stunned silence. That was all they could do.

Flames roared in the room behind the door like a furnace. It would continue to burn until all the oxygen inside was depleted. The countless monsters became reduced to black, round husks. The only ones left standing in that room were the man and woman, who were facing toward each other. Only the hems of their clothes had been burned, thanks to the barrier put up by the woman with hair like fire, but she didn't have much power left in her. She weakly uttered, "Why?" sounding like she could disappear at any moment. The man watched his surroundings as if he was observing the sunset, then replied.

"I still haven't heard your reply. If you keep withholding your reply after I told you how I felt about you, you'd own me until I die, Dula." He shrugged, and the woman named Dula blinked.

"...You dummy, you came in here just to ask that? Well, I'm going to keep withholding my reply."

"Hey, come on now. Are you really gonna let me burn to death while this is left unsettled?" Seeing the hint of anger in his face, the woman replied with a relaxed smile.

"I want you to keep holding on to me forever. Don't ever let me go, Zera."

The moment he heard those words, it was like the woman who had been trained to be a soldier had been reborn as an innocent maiden. She didn't pull away when he reached out for her, and she closed her eyes with a smile as his hand touched her cheek.

Before he knew it, she was in his arms.

Before he knew it, their lips were together, their bodies holding onto each other tightly.

As he stared into her steel-colored eyes, the desire to prevent this beautiful woman from dying burned deep within Zera. The emotion all but burst from his chest, flaring even stronger than the flames around them.

Could the monsters keep emerging endlessly? The sudden question had come

when he noticed the figures at the corner of the room. Some of them burned to death the moment they appeared, but they continued appearing endlessly in the gradually dying flame. But he already knew what to do. A wild grin indicative of his fierce battle instincts spread across his face.

“I’ll show you my trump card to commemorate this moment.”

“Commemorate? Oh, you mean us finally getting together? I don’t suppose you’re talking about flowers?”

“Close enough. This is a technique passed down the Thousand House bloodline.” He gave a determined smile, then moved away from the woman he loved. Turning toward the black mass moving toward him, he shouted as if to burn away his soul.

“Here... goes... Wide-range dire magic... Thousand Burst!!!”

His call was answered by a storm of destruction that filled the hall.

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I wrapped the tea set with cloth so none of the dishware would chip, then placed them into a box one by one. I had regained much of my vitality thanks to the long rest we had taken. Although, to be honest, I had basically just been training along the way without getting into any real battles. I turned around to find Marie debating on whether to put the books back on the shelves or take them with her. She seemed even smaller than usual, holding the large books, and I spoke to her softly.

“We can relax in this room for the rest of the day if you want.”

“No, that’s okay. We’re not too far in from the entrance, and we could always come back later. I’m sure there’s a boss or some big enemy if we go further in. That sounds more exciting than staying here.”

Yeah, Wridra and I felt the same way. I turned on the three-dimensional map to find that the raid parties were concentrated at the central and western sections, so we decided to take the eastern route. There were points of light near us too, but it was possible that they didn’t find anything noteworthy, because many of them were pulling away from the rest. The only thing was, they were moving much slower than I’d expected. I’d figured they were just

taking breaks as they went, like we were.

“Oh, if the others are also taking their time checking the area, they might take all the valuables before we get to them.”

“Hm, it seems there is no need to worry about that. Hah, hah, these Magic Tools are as entertaining as movies. This is quite the spectacular imagery.”

“Huh? Did you say something, Wridra?” When I asked, she only smiled and told me not to worry about it. Well, our stomachs were nice and full, so it was about time we headed out. We hadn’t even found a single magic stone yet, after all. The three of us yawned in unison and left the rest area together.

Now, it was time to resume the exploration of the labyrinth. We obviously couldn’t see the sun from inside the dungeon, so we weren’t sure what time it was. Besides, there were no clocks in this world, so no one could accurately tell the time here. However, I happened to have a pretty sharp sense of time. This was because I needed an accurate internal clock so I wouldn’t oversleep and be late for work... *Wait, that’s actually kinda sad.*

Anyway, I figured it was a little past four in the afternoon. In other words, it had been about two hours since we had lunch. Those two hours were very hard for me. As one might expect, this was because of Wridra’s training. The sound of steel clashing with steel rang out. Sparks flew from the sword as if it had been struck with a bullet, illuminating my haggard expression for a split second. I didn’t want to think about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t parried that swing. The woman opposing me stared at her sword as it vibrated from the impact, then turned her sharp, obsidian gaze toward me. I wondered if the slightly ominous air about her was because her sense of bloodlust was getting riled up from combat.



“Hmm, not bad. It appears you are quite accustomed to speed. Perhaps because you are always scurrying and hopping around.”

“Y-Yeah, though I don’t like how you made me sound like some sort of bug.” Somehow, I managed to reply with some measure of calmness as I wiped the sweat on my palms onto my pants. It seemed some testosterone-driven part of me wanted to prove something to my trainer.

The piles of dust on the ground were the monsters I had defeated earlier. Wridra gave me additional training whenever I took out a monster with ease. So kind of her... or maybe it was some sort of hazing ritual. She pushed me to the absolute limit each time, so as soon as I heard the *clink* of her sword getting fully sheathed, I would collapse to my knees. The scene made me half expect her to say some cheesy one-liner.

“I’m impressed, you raised two whole weapon levels in this short time frame. Wait, stay seated. I’ll wipe you down so you don’t catch a cold.”

“Thanks. To be honest, I’m kind of surprised it was only two levels.” It just went to show just how dense the training had been. I was considered high level in this world, but my vision was blurring from concentrating too hard for too long. Suddenly, a water bottle appeared in front of me. Looking up, I saw Wridra standing there with her waist-long black hair and a smile on her face.

“You are unconsciously beginning to learn how to handle condensed time. You may soon learn a new secondary skill.”

“Condensed time?”

Marie and I cocked our heads at the unfamiliar term. I’d heard that professional athletes could secrete adrenaline and enter a state of heightened senses, so maybe this was something similar. If Wridra said so, maybe I really would be able to learn a new secondary skill. I took a gulp of water and felt it soak into my tired body. As I took my prolonged rest, I heard some clinking noises next to me. The blocky stone spirits seemed to be doing some sort of coordinated exercise as Marie worked on raising her skill level too. To be honest, I was pretty envious that she got to train while taking a leisurely stroll through the labyrinth.

“How are things going for you, Marie? Has your Advanced Labor skill level gone up?”

“Yes, it’s at 14 now. I think it’s increasing pretty quickly. I’m not getting tired at all thanks to the staff Wridra gave me, so I feel like I could keep going forever,” she replied as she wiped the sweat from my forehead with a piece of cloth. This girl and I had been working on increasing our skill levels since we first entered the labyrinth. Our skill levels were different from our class levels, and represented our proficiency with things like swords and magic. Their effectiveness increased the more their levels went up, and their maximum value was capped at one’s class level. I was a level 72 Illusory Swordsman, so I had some ways to go to max out my level 52 One-Handed Swords skill. “It would usually take several days to make this much progress. It’s all thanks to my lack of fatigue and the fact that the spirits have been very cooperative.”

“Hmhm, this is because my support provides a boost to your mental fortitude and magic power. Use it well and strive to become a wizard someday.” Marie nodded. It seemed she yearned to become a wizard, the highest rank of the Sorcerer’s Guild. So, I would do whatever I could to help her. I drank down the rest of my water, and we started walking deeper into the labyrinth. The corridor, which had been a straight path until now, began growing more complex, with several stairs leading downward. Luckily, our map had kept us from getting lost. We could see the three-dimensional map with the Magic Tool Aja the wizard had given us, so we could easily tell how to move forward or head back. We arrived in front of a large door, and I placed my hand upon its surface.

“I have a feeling there will be enemies in here. Big doors like this usually have strong enemies behind them.”

“Hmm, is that some sort of rule? Labyrinths come in different shapes and sizes, but they do have a common basis. Like how they circulate energy to maintain their functions.” I wasn’t really sure what she was talking about. Leaving the analysis for Marie, I had to figure out a game plan for when we did run into a powerful opponent. Wridra watched silently, as she always did at times like these. It wasn’t that she was too lazy to join in; this was the arrangement we had decided on earlier. She was extremely reliable, but we

wanted to learn to handle ourselves without her.

“Marie, I think you should focus on defense rather than offense. Don’t forget that those Koopahs we’ve been facing were technically strong, too.”

“Yes, maybe I can use the stone spirits for defense. I can change their size, and I’m sure they’ll be very durable if I use Wridra’s staff.” I didn’t know they could be used like that. But what sort of shape would be ideal for defensive use? The first things that came to mind were castles and fortresses, the kind one would see in movies about war in the Middle Ages.

“Would it be possible to give us an advantage with height and an enclosure?”

“Oh, giving us height is an interesting idea. Let’s give it a try.” She uttered an incantation and swung her staff, and the stone spirit that looked like a brick with legs grew bigger, eventually becoming big enough to shake the ground. It turned into the size of a light automobile, and Marie and I were taken aback.

“Wow, look how big they can get! I didn’t realize my magic had been amplified so much. It’s about five times bigger than before.”

“Indeed, I increased the initial amplification, so you can use even low-level skills in combat. You will be able to do this much on your own someday.” Interesting. I was told that Wizard’s Guidance was active only while she was holding the dragon’s staff, but it seemed it worked even when her level was low.

“This is amazing. It looks really heavy and durable. Can you change its shape, too?”

“I just need to change them back first. Just like... this.” She knocked her staff against the ground, shrinking the stone spirit back to its original size, then changed it to a cylindrical shape. The transformation took about thirty seconds, which was about the time it had taken for the creature to reach its maximum size. Due to its size, it was pretty entertaining watching it expanding so quickly. And because of its weight, it seemed the spirit couldn’t be moved freely once this skill was activated. The two of us looked up at the stone object, deep in thought.

“It feels like this could be used for all sorts of defensive purposes, but... I think

the safest approach would be to connect a few of these and make a platform for you.”

“Hmm, but I wouldn’t want to face any sort of long-ranged attacks like arrows. Maybe I should construct an enclosure like a house around me. But adding holes for windows might be too complex.”

An enclosure of stone walls on all sides... The only catch was that an arrangement like that would be too heavily focused on defense and would make it hard for Marie to contribute offensively to the battle. I pictured a stone castle, trying to figure out what would be the most effective method to meet all of our requirements. A shape that was simple, yet specialized for defense...

“Oh, I know.” It came to me, and I presented the idea to Marie. She was surprised at first, but as I explained my reasoning, her purple eyes softened into a smile.

Creeeaaak...

We opened the heavy door and entered the wide room to find multiple white eyes glinting in the darkness. They stared at us for a moment before letting out a screech, and then monsters emerged from the hole, one after the other. I couldn’t see too well in the darkness, but I figured there were probably about twenty of them. Assuming there were more monsters hiding, their total was probably double that. They must have heard Marie’s incantations, because they began noisily rushing toward us. If we didn’t act quickly, they would surround us in all directions and start taking bites out of us in no time.

“We can turn the tides if you hold them off for three minutes.”

“Got it. This can’t be any harder than Wridra’s training.”

“Well said. If you have energy to spare, I will train you more thoroughly afterward.”

Oops, I shouldn’t have said that.

I moved forward to face them head on, and they changed the trajectory of their charge toward me. They were mostly Koopahs, from what I could see, but there were bigger shadows among them in the back moving more slowly than the rest. The monster in the lead of the pack had its head impaled in the blink of

an eye. I had kicked off of the stone paving and activated Over the Road, taking out the creature in an instant.

The monsters weren't the only ones surprised. My eyes bulged slightly as I felt my blade cut through the monster like I was splitting a watermelon with a kitchen knife. I didn't realize how much easier things were with a higher weapon level. Feeling gratitude toward my teacher, I decided to focus on being a professional watermelon splitter. But it just so happened that I didn't need to concentrate that hard. Fortunately, my Reprise skill let me repeat a specific movement, and I had the attack pattern for defeating Koopahs saved in its memory slot. I just had to move to their flank to deliver a killing blow, so I just had to maneuver into the correct position to execute it. I teleported from the flank of one creature to another, then another, making them drop dead in mere seconds and sending the rest of their group into a panic. Their wedge-shaped charging formation broke apart, each of them scattering in all directions. Their speed was greatly reduced right away, and I managed to stop the immediate threat to Marie.

"Wow, great job! It looks like all that time you spent in labyrinths by yourself paid off."

"Yeah, it sounds pretty sad when you put it that way. I'll go ahead and reduce their numbers, then." I was still a bit tired from the training, but the increase on my weapon levels was clearly effective. And because of the low intellect of our opponents, they were easily fooled by the illusions I sent out toward them. They came charging at me in a massive heap, but cutting them down from the side was an easy task. Suddenly, I heard a sharp whistle from Wridra. It meant Marie's preparations were complete. I may have been able to keep going to take them all out, but this was our first coordinated battle. I activated Over the Road, positioning myself to execute the plan we had discussed beforehand.

"Can I start?"

"Go right ahead. Our Koopah friends are waiting." I nodded toward the monsters, which were wildly attacking the illusions I had left as bait. Then, Marie's call toward the spirits rang out in the hall. She raised her staff, her face appearing calm as she diligently chanted the words for her spell. We'd decided on this plan in a short time frame, so there was a good chance it would've gone

wrong. In fact, the improvised spirit magic was far more likely to fail than succeed. Despite this, Marie was able to stay calm and composed, thanks to the reassurance that came with knowing Wridra was protecting her. A heavy tremor shook the hall, and the Koopahs screeched in confusion. When they turned around, they must have seen the stone spirit growing bigger by the second.

“Ah, you formed them seamlessly even on your first try. Meticulous as always, Marie.”

Two walls were formed on either side of me, both about the same height as me. The walls extending in front and behind me looked like a labyrinth had been created inside the labyrinth. Despite being in a large, open room, we now only had to worry about what was in front of us. That wasn't all, of course. The monsters gnashed their teeth as they leapt into the pathway. Seeing this, I leapt toward the back side. Some of them were slammed into the walls as their comrades pushed from behind, but they politely proceeded through the path without slowing down much. The moment they stepped on a colored block, the ground erupted with a *bang!* This was a trap Marie had set up with her spirit magic, enchanting the block-shaped stone spirit with an explosion spell. Traps like this using spells weren't all too uncommon, but this type of terrain made them far more effective than usual. When used in such a narrow area with walls on either side, the power of the explosion was increased even further. The cluster of monsters received the full brunt of the damage, unable to resist the force from below, and were sent flying into the air.

Schwing! Schwing! Schwing!

The airborne Koopahs wriggled their legs helplessly, but they were severed in half by my sword before they could make their landing. By the time the monsters in the back stepped over their fallen comrades, I had already backed up to make more distance between us. There were, of course, many more unused magical traps waiting for them.

“As I thought, it's easier for me to support you rather than trying to deal damage myself. I think next time, I could improve on this concept even more. Maybe I could make a sort of maze instead of a straight pathway.”

“I’d rather you didn’t, because I’m afraid I’d get lost myself. But sorcerers really are the stars of battle, huh? They’re really good at controlling the tides of the fight.”

“Hehe, I guess you’re finally realizing the extent of my skills. Oh, the one in the back stopped moving. Maybe I’ll add a magical trap right where it’s sitting. It’s so satisfying to cast spells with this terrain, because I basically can’t miss.”

Wow, she has no mercy! It was a bit hard to keep up with explosions going off all around me, but I was all for it. We finally put our Mind Link Chat to use and reduced the enemy numbers one by one. By the time the monsters realized they couldn’t win, it was already too late. There were magical traps cutting off their escape routes.

In the end, they couldn’t manage to destroy the pathway Marie had summoned. The huge, advanced form of the Koopah was dazed from getting blown up by several of the magical traps, and a light spirit unleashed an attack spell from above, incinerating the creature’s entire body. The High Koopah still tried to press forward, but triggered another magical trap, which seemed to finish it off. It fell back onto the ground with a *thud*, thrashed around for a few moments, then turned to dust.

Huh, she defeated a High Koopah almost entirely by herself. Those things must’ve been about level 50 or so.

“You can come out now, Marie.” I knocked on the wall behind me, and it bent out of shape, revealing a robed elf and Wridra. We both smiled wide, then slapped each other’s hands for a high five.

“How many levels did you get, Marie?”

“Hehe, two! And my Advanced Labor went up by three. Looks like my support counted towards gaining levels, even with the party penalty. It’s a good thing I was using the skill that increases my experience gain, too.” She spoke a bit quickly, her face flushed with excitement. The happy look on her face was likely from the pride she felt from a legitimate fight, rather than the leveling trick we had used before. Though, I wasn’t sure if our method this time counted as legitimate, either. The girl scanned the hall, and her eyes widened.

“Ah! How many of them were there? Look at all the mounds of dust.”

“I think there were thirty-four of them, including the reinforcements. This room isn’t that big. I’m surprised by how many of them there were. Maybe there was a hiding spot or something in the back.”

I couldn’t blame her for being surprised. The mountains of dust collapsed as Marie dismissed the stone spirit walls. The scenery was completely different from when we had entered, with pillars of black smoke rising from the dust piles. Marie gripped her staff with both hands, the gravity of her feat starting to sink in. Just then, a hand was placed upon each of our heads. We looked up to find Wridra smiling happily as she ruffled our hair.

“Hah, hah, that was quite creative and effective. It was hard to believe it was your first time, with such accuracy and coordination. You both pass with flying colors.”

Her expression was like that of a teacher praising her student, and it made me feel somewhat embarrassed. I’d been a working adult for many years now, but I never thought I’d be so happy to receive praise from someone. The three of us laughed together for some time, then headed toward the door in the back.

There were small rooms along the way that seemed to be resting spots. Marie was getting fatigued from using her low-level skill despite the assistance, and we decided to put our adventure to a halt. The light spirit wasn’t quite as bright as before, and we quickly prepared our sleeping arrangements in the small resting room.

We did pretty well for our first day. We could’ve enjoyed it even more if it wasn’t Monday tomorrow. As those thoughts crossed my mind, I felt something poke my forehead. I looked up in the dimness to find Wridra peering at me with a mischievous look in her eyes.

“You seem to be forgetting something you need to do before going to sleep.” With that, she pointed at the Magic Tool on the table. I nearly asked her what she meant, but then it hit me.

“Oh, they know our location.”

“Indeed. If you go to sleep like this, you will vanish from the map, and the higher-ups supervising you will grow suspicious. Here, I have come to mostly understand how it works, so I shall help you.”

I wondered what she meant by understanding how it worked. I watched Wridra curiously. She picked up the Magic Tool and turned on the three-dimensional map. She moved her finger toward a point of light and touched the one that represented our position, and then the image wavered.

“Oh, did you just move our position?”

“Indeed. It seems you are quite sharp when it comes to matters involving information, coming from the realm of the other.” She snapped her fingers, and the map disappeared.

Now we could sleep in peace. I thanked her, and she smiled, telling me not to worry about it. I looked over to the side to find Marie was on the verge of nodding off. She must’ve been really pushing herself, being in the unfamiliar environment of the labyrinth. And yet, she didn’t complain even once, which was commendable. I placed a blanket over her as she sat there, then led her over to the sleeping area. She sleepily tugged on my top, then snuggled up against my chest like an adorable cat or a young child. I opened the blanket so Wridra could also join, but she softly declined.

“I have mentioned this before, but I must return to my main body on occasion to share the information I have obtained. You two can enjoy your time alone tonight.”

“Oh, right. But are you going to walk back from here?” The dragon shook her head. She waved her hand, and a black smear appeared on the wall. It seemed she was able to create a secret escape hole even from ancient labyrinths.

“I shall come back tomorrow when that staff returns. Until then, young one.” She blew a kiss at me, and I felt my cheeks grow hotter. With her young and attractive appearance, she could portray sex appeal with such simple gestures.

“Well, good night, Wridra. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, good night. You were quite skilled with the sword today.”

“You too,” I uttered, and she flashed me her beautiful smile. I didn’t expect to feel lonely from being apart from her for just one day. She waved her hand, and I watched her go with heavy eyelids.

Good night, and see you tomorrow.

The blanket had become nice and cozy, the warmness inviting me toward a comfortable sleep. Marie was resting her head on my shoulder, and I closed my eyelids to the sound of her breathing lightly.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 4: The Room, Spirit, and Kakuni

My eyes opened in my condo, which was still dimly lit. I couldn't hear the sparrows this morning, and the rain was sprinkling outside. The light leaking in through the curtains was darker than usual, and I began to hear a quiet chirping. It seemed the sparrows were getting cover from the rain on my balcony. I was playing in the labyrinth of a fantastical world not too long ago, but it all seemed like a dream now that I had awakened.

But, as if to prove that it was all real, silky white hair and long ears poked out from under the blanket. A pair of pale hands followed, which then grabbed onto me. The half-elf awakened with both hands on my shoulders, as if to pin me down. Still not fully awake, she rubbed her ears and looked at me with her eyes framed with long eyelashes. She had a youthful appearance, but there was also a distinct allure to her slender neckline. Her skin, which looked soft like cotton candy, quivered as she let out a cute yawn. She whispered good morning, and I was reminded again how she was a resident of the fantasy world. Her amethyst eyes opened slowly, and as usual, I was captivated by their beautiful color.

"Good morning, Marie. Did you sleep well?"

"Whenever I'm with you, I always sleep like a baby. Since when did we start saying our morning greetings in Japanese, anyway?" She looked at me with an amused expression, and my eyes widened slightly. I still noticed a slight accent in her voice, but she was speaking in near-perfect Japanese. It had only been a month since she wandered into this world.

"Do you feel like you have a grasp of Japanese now?"

"Yes, I do. It feels like I can find the words instinctively lately. Before, I had to think about and translate each word, but now, it's like I make all the connections in my head." With that, she stirred and placed her cheek against my chest. Her lightweight body was stacked atop mine, and I couldn't help but feel happiness as she stared into my eyes. I looked up to find it was 6:30 in the

morning. We had gone to bed pretty early last night, so we had time to enjoy a morning conversation.

“That should make things easier when we go to the countryside. After I come home from work tomorrow, we’ll be leaving in the following morning.”

“Hehe, I can’t wait. Aomori is full of greenery and mountains, isn’t it? After watching that anime, just hearing about the country gets me excited.”

I had it pretty good, being able to watch the elf girl from so close as she happily swayed her head left and right. Her usually intellectual face was loosened into a smile, her feet flapping adorably as she pictured the unknown lands. But honestly, I wished she’d be a little more guarded against the opposite gender and get off of my chest. I didn’t know how to react, as I could feel the swellings on her slim body pressed against me. Though, for some reason, I couldn’t find it in me to say it out loud.

“Maybe we should watch the anime again before we go, as preparation. By the way, Wridra said she’ll be going back to her own place tonight.”

“Yes, I heard her as I was falling asleep. That’s too bad, it was lively and fun while she was here. We only have shinkansen tickets for the two of us, so I guess for golden week, it will just be the two... of us...” As she trailed off, her dreamy eyes suddenly snapped open. She blinked, then looked at me with a displeased expression. “Is that fine with you? Personally, I don’t mind whether it’s just me going with you or both Wridra and I together, but what about you? I mean, there are things like meal fees to consider, right? I don’t know, but I thought maybe you’d be happier or find it more convenient if it’s just me.”

“Huh? Oh, I don’t mind either way, of course.” I answered the girl’s rapid-fire questions at me, and then she moved away with a frown. I wasn’t sure why, since I thought I was being agreeable. “Things are lively when Wridra’s around, and you’re unbelievably adorable. By the way, did you know there’s a saying that you’ll never forget an elf once you see them? Rumors aren’t much to go by, but I feel like this one is definitely true.” Marie was in the middle of getting up with her back toward me, but stopped mid-motion. Her ears perked up, their tips gradually turning redder.

“H-Hmph. I didn’t know humans had such a silly anecdote. I don’t know about

me, though. Am I really so cute?”

“Huh? Absolutely. It’s hard to put into words, but you’re really cute, so you don’t have to worry about that. I’ve always thought so, at least.” She seemed to be listening to my words carefully, because I could see the tips of her ears quivering as she inched a little closer. I couldn’t read her expression with her back toward me, but she was fidgeting as if she was feeling a bit embarrassed. After making inexplicable movements for a short while, Marie finally stood up from the bed.

“Ahem. Well, aren’t you the smooth talker. Then I’ll forgive you, and I can’t wait for our trip, so try not to work too late tonight.”

“Understood. I’ll do my best to meet your expectations.” That was a request for my director and company, but with it being between the weekend and consecutive holidays, I wasn’t expecting too much work. Some people were using vacation hours to extend their days off even further.

“Then let’s hurry up and eat. Come on, it’s time for you to get up.” I let her pull me up by the hand to encourage me to wake up. It was already May, but it was a bit chilly from the rain. Marie stared at the sparrow out on the balcony from her seat at the table, then parted her lustrous lips.

“It’s so humid today. Does it rain a lot in Japan?”

“Next month is the start of what they call the rainy season. It’ll be even worse then. I’m pretty sure this country is on the higher end in terms of how often it rains,” I explained and gave the elf a sidelong glance as I began preparing breakfast. I cracked an egg into a bowl and thought over Marie’s words. Japan had a lot of dams, and it probably had a lot of water shortage problems since long ago. Although it did rain a lot, it was possible that there were issues with water reserves. It was a small country to begin with, and maybe all the water flowed down into the ocean. As I mulled over the thought...

“Ah! Look, look, Kazuhiho! Hurry!” The loud voice from behind startled me, causing me to drop the bread I had sliced into the bowl of egg yolk. I turned around in a hurry, then froze.

I could see something above the table. A white, nebulous something. Was it some sort of poltergeist? It was pretty terrifying, and I was snapped wide awake

as a shiver ran down my back. A thick smoke seemed to be gathering there, and as I rubbed my eyes in disbelief, Marie's voice rang out again.

"A s-spirit! Did I really summon one?!"

"Wha...? A spirit?!" I raised my voice in disarray. My mouth was agape, and I was having trouble closing it. After all, an elf had just called a spirit in the Koto Ward of Tokyo. Or, rather, maybe she was in the middle of summoning one right now. The plume of smoke slowly floated in the air, and then its shape began to become more clear.

Bloop.

The sound of something like water dripping could be heard, and a pale navy fish could be seen floating in the air. Yeah... I felt like being frozen in surprise was an appropriate reaction. They may have been a sight I was used to in the fantasy world, but I never expected to see something like that in Japan. Just outside the window was a view full of concrete buildings, and there was a definite sense of reality to it. Despite that, the water spirit flicked its tail fin, turning in the air and dispersing mist-like water as it did so. The intense gap between reality and fantasy was making me feel dizzy.



“Th-This is... Well, surprising to say the least. I feel like I’m seeing a hallucination here.” Finally, I managed to squeeze out some words of disbelief. I walked up to the table, and the blue fish was poking Marie’s finger. It was as if it was getting food from her. The elf turned her round eyes toward me, and I found that her cheeks were flushed.

“Umm, I called out to it in Japanese just to give it a try. The reason they haven’t been responding may have been because I was having issues communicating my words, or rather, my emotions.”

“Huh? The spirits talk in Japanese?”

She shook her head. According to her, the reason was as follows. In the fantasy world, spirits were the foundation of all things. They resided in plants, animals, and even man-made objects, and they were beings that weren’t bound by anything. But in fact, they were affected by certain things, too. For example, if a mountain was plentiful, the spirits would become more active, and when there was a big flood, the water spirits would overflow as well, so much so that they could be seen with the human eye, depending on the scale. In other words, spirits took on the characteristics of their environment.

“There are a lot of humans in Japan, right? I suspect that’s why they’ve been influenced by Japanese. More accurately, it’s the means of expressing emotions rather than the Japanese language itself.”

I managed to let out a weak “Huh.” I couldn’t deny it even if I wanted to, with a spirit right in front of me, so all I could do was nod. “It’s hard to believe, but I have no choice after seeing it in person. Is it okay for me to touch it, by the way?”

She gestured for me to go ahead. The fish was semitransparent and pale navy in color, and I could see the other side through its body. I gingerly brought my finger closer to it, and it poked my finger without shying away. The water that touched my finger was cool to the touch. I smelled it without thinking and found it had a refreshing scent.

“I wonder... Do you think there are skill levels in this world, too?”

“I wonder the same thing. I think that when I came to this world, I was

basically reduced to level 1. That's how it feels to me, though I'm not sure if that's how it really works." Nodding, I took a seat next to her... and then realized I was originally in the middle of making breakfast. It was very Japanese of me to prioritize getting ready for work, even though an event that had completely defied common sense had occurred. The bread had already absorbed much of the egg yolk by the time I returned to the kitchen, and I quickly fished it out with a pair of chopsticks.

"You did mention something like that before. I wonder if something similar happens to Wridra when she comes here, too."

"In her case, she's a legendary dragon, so I think there's a lot more she would be able to do even at level 1. I'm not sure if the concept of levels even applies to her, though."

I left the analysis to Marie as she nodded contemplatively. I put a frying pan on the stovetop, turned on the fire, and started cooking the egg-soaked bread. A sweet scent filled the air, thanks to the sugar I had mixed in.

"Sorry to interrupt your thinking time, but what kind of tea would you like?"

"Hmm, I wonder if there are high level people in this world too... Oh, I'd like lemon, please. I used to hate sour things, but I've been into citrus flavors lately," she replied, then finally noticed the sweet smell in the air. Her appetite overpowered her thirst for knowledge, and she walked over to the kitchen where I was cooking. One thing that was different from usual was how she had a water spirit following her. It followed its master like it was a household pet. "Mmm, smells good. You're cooking with a frying pan today?"

"Yeah, it's almost done. I soaked it in egg yolk before frying it." She made a curious noise and peered in, but I had to put the lid on to steam it. The scent grew faint after I placed the lid, and I started preparing the tea in the meantime. Then, I transferred it to a plate and moved it to the table along with some bananas, and breakfast was complete. I sat across from Marie, who had hurriedly taken a seat, and we put our hands together for the usual routine.

"Itadakimasu!"

Marie grabbed the tableware as if she couldn't wait another minute and stabbed her food with a fork. The french toast covered in maple syrup tore

easily as she bit into it. The sweet scent of the egg wafted out from the warm toast, and butter filled her mouth as she bit into it. It had soaked into the burnt parts, too, and had a deep, rich flavor. A smile spread across her face with her first bite, and I could tell she liked the flavor because I could hear her feet flopping around under the table.

“Nnaaah! So fluffy! The egg and butter and syrup’s sweetness soaked through and... This is really delicious! I can’t believe I’m having such a delicacy from the morning. Are you trying to use food as elf bait or something? Ohh, but this is troublesome. It makes me want to live in Japan, knowing I can enjoy food like this here.”

“Aren’t you practically living here already? At the very least, I’d be happy if you’d live with me.” When I told her so, her purple eyes went round with her fork still in her mouth. She slowly chewed the food in her mouth, then gave me an upward glance.

“...To be honest, I feel the same way. I feel like I’ve made myself at home here without getting your permission. But this is your house, and I was worried you might think I’m a nuisance.”

“Haha, I want you to spend time here without worrying about things like that. I don’t know if you can tell, but researching food that you like is my latest hobby. I’ve been planning on indulging this hobby forever.”

“Oh, I knew it! You’ve been using food as bait! Too bad for you, an esteemed elf like me won’t lose to food, sightseeing, or hot springs, and I can enjoy these things knowing full well what you’re up to.” She gave me a mock-obstinate look, and we both laughed. It was still raining outside, but it somehow felt like a cloudless, sunny day.

I felt a bit shy about saying it, but I really did want her to stay with me. Every day had been delightful since she had entered my life, and that went for both Japan and the dream world. We had shared meals, the hot springs vacation, anime, the labyrinth, and countless joys together. The girl put her fork down and reached her hand out toward me. I naturally took it in my hand, and our fingers intertwined on the table. I could feel her warmth through her pale, slender fingers. Looking up, I found that her cheeks were flushed, the pink

standing out starkly against her light skin.

“Then, I would love to live here. From now on, my home is here in the Koto Ward.”

“Welcome to our condo. And that goes to the adorable spirit there, too.”

The spirit floating in the air shook its tail fin, scattering water droplets around it. Marie beamed with a contented smile and rubbed my hand with her thumb. This made me inexplicably happy, and we both laughed out loud. And so, this marked the day Mariabelle took residence with me in the Koto Ward.

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I looked out the train’s window to find it was well after sunset. I wanted to get home as soon as possible, but the train moved so slowly that it felt like it was hardly moving at all. A late announcement played through the speakers. Apparently, someone had dropped their luggage onto the tracks at some station. There were water droplets on the window from the rain still pouring outside. I could feel some of the humidity, but fortunately, there weren’t too many people inside the train due to it being the start of Golden Week. Thinking about it, it was a similarly relaxed day at work. My other colleagues at work were spending their time off going on vacation, relaxing at home, or going to visit their families.

I just have to finish my shift tomorrow, and I’ll be free at last.

This seemed to be the sentiment across the office, and there was a generally excited mood in the air. As for me, I was planning on riding a shinkansen to the Tohoku region. I usually spent my time at home every year, but this time around, my schedule was pretty full. I would travel on the shinkansen with the elf and spend a few days at my home in Tohoku. Just thinking about it got my heart racing with excitement. It had been a while since I’d gone back to my hometown, and I was looking forward to showing Marie around the land I grew up on. Now, if only this rain would stop...

Vrrr...

Just then, my phone vibrated in my suit pocket. It was a notification from my social media app, and the screen displayed Kaoruko’s name on it. She was a

woman who lived in the same condo building as me, the one who had informed me about a vacation spot near the city. The trip I'd gone on there with the elf and draconian was quite fun, and we'd enjoyed the day trip to the fullest. I smiled and read her message.

"Would you be interested in some pork kakuni?"

I blinked in confusion at the sudden question. After sending some messages back and forth, I found out she had made too much of the stewed pork belly dish. Her husband, who worked at a government facility, had unfortunately gotten a sudden invite to a social gathering, so his portion had been left over.

"Kakuni does sound good..." I said out loud without thinking, then closed my mouth in a fluster.

I could have made it myself if I wanted to if I used the big pot I had, but it took a long time to stew, and the main ingredient was block meat, which didn't come cheap. This meant I would only have the weekend as an option if I were to make it, but I wasn't sure about making Marie wait the entire cooking time. That was why I really wanted time-saving tools, like a pressure cooker, along with some other cooking equipment. Enough about the circumstances of my kitchen. I had to decide what to do about the invitation. We lived in the same building, and it would have been a shame for the food to go to waste. I wanted to gratefully accept the food, but it would be rude to just take her food and then see her out. It would be better to have her come inside and thank her for the vacation plans she shared with me a while back. After thinking about it for a moment, I began writing my reply.

"Then how would you like to have a meal together? Marie would be thrilled, and I could make us some fried rice." She replied back right away. Women sure were fast at typing.

"Really? Yes, I'd love to! I'll come over with my pot!" There was an emoji indicating joy at the end of her message. I smiled, thinking it was funny how I could feel her delight through the text, and then my eyes met with a businessman standing near me.

Kakuni and fried rice, huh...

Yes, tonight's meal was going to be a treat. I only wished the train would get

moving. Contrary to how I was feeling, the train was moving at a shockingly slow pace.

I unlocked the door with a click and let out a sigh. Finally, I was home. I could adjust my shift hours with some extra effort, but there was nothing I could do about the train. My suit was looking pretty tired from the moisture, too. When I opened the door, I was greeted by warm air and noticed the scent was different from usual. Marie rushed over with a mischievous expression, then raised a finger in front of my confused face.

“Question time. What did I do today?”

My confusion only grew deeper. But as she took my bag, there was an air about her that was very expectant of compliments. I felt an involuntary smile creeping up on me as I watched Ms. Elf’s excited face.

“Let’s see... Did you do laundry? Wash the dishes?”

“Wrooong. Well, I did do those things, and I cleaned the house too, but I did something else that I haven’t done before. Do you know what it is?” Placing my shoes on the shoe shelf, I met her purple eyes.

Hmm, what could it be?

I removed my necktie as I looked around, not noticing anything out of the ordinary. It was odd how clean the air felt, despite this rainy weather.

“The clean air... Wait a minute.” I froze in the middle of removing my jacket. A transparent fluid was floating in the middle of the room, and I nearly let out a high-pitched squeal. I managed to stop it right before it escaped my mouth, but I was looking at what seemed to be liquid floating inside a spaceship. My heart was pounding in my chest nearly to the point of causing pain, but I was able to feign calmness.

“Hm, is it the water spirit you showed me this morning?” The half-fairy elf had learned to control spirits even when we were in Tokyo. It went without saying that any other human would’ve screamed if they were confronted with such a sight. Moving in a little closer, I noticed that pale navy fish was swimming at the center of the liquid mass. I turned around, and the spirit user was standing there with a proud expression on her face. “...Is the spirit absorbing excess

humidity from the air?”

“Correct! Remember how you said it would get very humid starting next month? I experimented to see if I could do the opposite of what I did in the other world.” Now that she mentioned it, I recalled her adjusting the temperature by controlling vaporization. That was also surprising, but performing such a feat here in Japan was nothing short of astonishing.

Wait, isn't this kind of a big deal? We could control humidity without air conditioning... which means we could save a lot on electric bills.

“This is amazing, Marie. If you can control humidity, you could make summer and winter a lot more bearable.”

“Hehe, isn't it? I love managing and tidying things up like this. This must be my talent... Oh, what's that you have there? Did you rent out a video?” Seeing the bag in my hand, the girl crouched down to take a look. The letters on the bag marked it as being from the video rental shop, but this was something I had purchased on the way home. I debated on whether or not to give it to her right now, then opened the bag toward her.

“Here, reach inside.”

“Huh? Wha? It better not be something strange. Hmph, you and that sleepy-looking smile.”

I seemed to have been smiling without realizing it. Marie seemed hesitant as she reached into the bag. There was some hard object inside, and once I confirmed she had taken hold of it, I slowly pulled the bag away. What emerged from the bag was a pretty-colored DVD package. A mysterious creature was looking up dazedly, hanging around in rainy scenery like tonight's. The hand-drawn background had a distinct air to it that reminded me of picture books, and Marie could already tell a wonderful story awaited inside.

“Oh, this is...!” She looked up at me, eyes wide.

“There's a rule that says you're supposed to give special presents to hardworking elves.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean... This is for me?!”

“Of course. You can watch it whenever and however many times you want. I thought it would be better to just buy it rather than renting again. I hope you like it.”

In response, she threw her arms around my neck in an embrace. She let out an unintelligible noise of joy near my ear, and the unexpected strength behind it nearly threw me off-balance. I quickly supported her with my arms, managing to regain my balance in time. Then, her face was right in front of mine, beaming with happiness.

“Thank you! I love watching this one. I’m so happy!”

“I’m glad to hear that. I wanted to surprise you, so I actually bought something else for you. Do you wanna watch that with me after dinner?”

“Yes, yes! I’d love to! Thank you!” She gave me another full-force squeeze, and I was a bit taken aback by how happy she seemed. Seeing her so happy brought me joy too. The arms around me didn’t relent for some time, and I could feel her soft, white hair as she rubbed her face against mine.

A while later, she finally released me from her hug. I heard the doorbell ring as I was cooking some fried rice. When I looked up, I found it was already 7:30 at night, and I realized our guest had arrived just in time.

“Sorry, Marie. Would you mind letting Kaoruko in?”

“Sure, no problem. Leave it to me!”

Marie confidently bumped her chest with her fist, then covered her ears and lightly stepped over to the front door. Marie had been staring at the video package until now, and even though she couldn’t read it, she was in a visibly good mood. We were in a small 1DK condo, so the front door was right behind the kitchen, and I could hear Kaoruko’s voice clearly as the door was opened.

“Good evening. I brought over some kakuni.” I turned toward the gentle-sounding voice to find a woman well-prepared for dinner, holding a pot with both hands and smiling at Marie.

“Welcome. Please, come in.” Marie gestured for her to enter, and Kaoruko’s eyes widened.

“Wow... I’m impressed. Your Japanese has become so much better, Mariabelle-chan!”

“Hehe, I’ve been practicing a lot. But I still don’t know complicated words or text. I think kanji is pretty, so I’d like to learn them someday.”

Kaoruko had a look of great interest on her face. I was surprised, myself. It would normally take several months, or even years, to learn as much as Marie had. No one could blame Kaoruko’s reaction of openmouthed astonishment, considering this girl had learned the basics in a mere month or so.

Kaoruko was wearing casual pants, and I figured she liked wearing clothing that wasn’t too flashy. Her shoulder-length black hair had a sense of cleanliness to it, and she had an air about her that was fitting of her profession as a librarian. I continued cooking as I called out to Kaoruko, who was still standing there, dumbfounded.

“Please, come in. I haven’t had homemade kakuni in a long time.”

“Oh, please don’t expect too much. This is a family recipe, so I’m not sure if it will suit your palate.”

I received the pot from her and placed it on the stove. Kaoruko walked past me as I was turning the stove on to reheat the pot.

“Wow, this layout should be a lot smaller, but it feels so spacious.”

“Your room is a 2LDK, isn’t it? It might be because I don’t have a lot of furniture...”

I flinched.

When I turned around, Kaoruko was staring at the single bed, frozen in place. She had seen the two side by side pillows, and we both stood immobile in the same position. I had completely forgotten that Marie and I had been sleeping under the same blanket. But with the size of the room, it would have been pretty cramped if we were to put two beds in here. There wasn’t much I could do about that, though I actually looked forward to waking up together, and—

“...Kitase-san?”

I heard my name in a rather stiff tone of voice, and I looked up with a start.

Kaoruko's face was a bit flushed, and she was looking at me with an accusatory expression. I wordlessly told her I hadn't laid a finger on Marie, but I wasn't sure if my message got across properly. The pot on the stove was starting to boil over and clatter, releasing a sweet, enticing aroma. Marie's head was cocked inquisitively at the awkward air between me and Kaoruko.

The kakuni, fried rice, sauteed Ching Guang Juai, and beer were placed on the table, and the ladies became much more lively. Marie was getting tea rather than alcohol because we had a guest, and she seemed bummed about that, as I had expected.

Sorry about that...

She helped me lay out the small plates, soup spoons, and chopsticks, and the preparations were soon complete. The kakuni sitting proudly in the center was the main dish of the night. The thick, succulent pork meat and fragrances of rice wine and star anise tantalized the senses.

"Ahh... It smells delicious...! It's one of those dishes that makes you salivate uncontrollably, isn't it?"

"The secret to enjoying kakuni is to open your mouth wide without worrying about how you look, then taking a big bite. Now, let's dig in."

We all said "Itadakimasu" together, and the girl stabbed the kakuni on her plate with unfamiliar chopsticks. The stewed pork meat was incredibly tender, the chopstick piercing it deeply with ease. It trembled softly as she lifted it up and brought it into her mouth. The girl seemed mesmerized by its appetizing luster and sweet aroma as she parted her lips wide. Her mouth closed around it, and the dense meat tore apart before she even bit through it. Maybe it would have been more accurate to say that it had melted. She was surely taken aback by the meat taking over her taste buds as it dissolved in her mouth. Umami filled her mouth, and a mixture of juices and the distinctly rich aroma of Chinese spices delivered a knockout blow.

"Mmmmmmm...!!!"

She clenched both hands, so fully immersed in the torrent of flavors that she didn't even notice the juices running down the side of her mouth. She chewed, releasing the flood of flavor, and the fatty meat lost its shape. The scent of star

anise passed through her nose as she chewed, and the taste remained strong no matter how many times she chewed. The girl continued to chew with a surprised look on her face, and even after finally swallowing, she remained motionless for a bit.

“Yummy...”

Kaoruko and I smiled, seeing the look of astonishment on Marie’s face. She really was straightforward when it came to her reactions to food, and just watching her was a joy. Kaoruko turned toward me, grinning ear to ear.

“This is just wonderful. I wish I could be kakuni.”

Umm, maybe she’s a bit strange after all.

I had always assumed that Kaoruko was a strait-laced public service worker. Though, I had to admit, I sort of knew how she felt.

“Do you mind if I wipe your mouth, Marie?” I asked with a tissue in hand, and the girl looked at me with a dreamy expression. Then she nodded, still looking like she hadn’t fully returned from her own personal paradise. The tissue absorbed liquid as I pressed it to her face, and I felt a squishy softness that could rival the texture of the kakuni.

“Kazuhiho, I want to become kakuni.”

You too?

It was a strange thing to say, but I was starting to feel envious toward the kakuni’s popularity. I still hadn’t even started eating yet, but Kaoruko and I laughed out loud. As for the fried rice, I went light on the flavoring to make the kakuni really shine in comparison, so it paired perfectly with beer.

One beer turned to two, and Kaoruko’s face was pink by the time we finished eating. She leaned back in her seat with a satisfied sigh, and I suspected she enjoyed her meal even more than her husband, who was currently out at a drinking party.

“My family sent this meat to me from Hokkaido, where I grew up. As you know, my husband is a bit overweight. I was a bit worried about all the calories.”

“Ohh, that must be nice. I was born in Aomori, but I’ve never been to Hokkaido.” Kaoruko rested her flushed cheek in her hand. She was more expressive than usual, thanks to the alcohol, occasionally gazing at Marie and breaking out into a smile.

“Where are you two going for Golden Week, by the way?”

“We thought it would be a nice opportunity to visit my home in Aomori. I’m planning to go see my grandfather, who’s a farmer.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Where in Aomori does he live?”

“It’s in the Hirosaki area.”

Kaoruko stopped to think, then pulled out her smartphone and started tapping at the screen. She seemed to be tipsy as she muttered to herself, then smiled when she apparently found what she was looking for. She presented the screen to me, and my eyes widened a bit.

“Then you would be missing out if you don’t visit this place. I’d definitely recommend it this year.”

Hmm, she might be right... If I could borrow my grandfather’s truck...

“Thank you. We’d love to go visit there,” I replied, and she drunkenly moved her face closer.

Then, she whispered in a low voice, “Yes, please have a good time with Mariabelle-chan. The trick to enjoying it to the fullest is to keep it a secret until you get there.” She drew away with a smile on her face. Her gentle expression really seemed to express her womanly beauty, and I found myself smiling along with her. The rain continued to pour outside, though it was expected to stop the day after tomorrow, according to the weather report. I was eager for the consecutive days off, but maybe this period of waiting was the most exciting of all.

“Was it good, Marie?”

“Hehehe! It was *too* good! If I was one to keep a diary, I’d probably fill a couple pages just writing about it. My stomach feels like it could burst!”

Apparently too full to get up, she gave me her impression while she leaned

back in her chair. She complained that she would gain weight like this, but I seemed to recall her chopsticks not resting for even a moment during the meal.

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I handed the pot back to Kaoruko after washing it clean, and she smiled again. We had walked her to her room after dinner, and she was backlit by the light at her front door.

“Thank you for walking me back to my room. I appreciate it.”

“Not at all, thank you for the food. Let’s do this again sometime.”

“Thank you for the meal. The pork kakuni was so good, I couldn’t believe it.”

Kaoruko looked at me, then at Marie next to me, and laughed. Judging by how much her husband had to work, it seemed she ate dinner by herself often. But we had enjoyed a lively night together, Kaoruko’s face still tinged a bit pink from the alcohol, and Marie even gave her a souvenir from our mini-trip. It was no wonder she seemed to be in such a good mood. We bade each other good night, and I walked down the silent hallway with Marie.

It was a moonless night, and the rain was still falling lightly outside. I was staring at the somewhat cold-colored city lights when the girl reached out and held my hand. I turned, and my heart beat a bit louder in my chest. The beautiful girl was looking up at me in the rainy night. I didn’t know how many times I had been captivated by those straightforward eyes. Maybe it was more like I was in a constant state of captivation. The elf spoke with a sweet voice, making my heart falter.

“Can we watch a movie together?”

“Sure. I’m a bit sad that you won’t need a translator anymore, though.”

“Oh, did you think I wouldn’t need you anymore? But you’d still make a perfect back rest. You can also serve as a hand warmer on a cold night like this.”

Since when did I become a cushion to her? But I was glad to do whatever would make her happy. We finally started walking again, heading back toward my room.

The bed creaked as the girl climbed into it in the dark room. She placed a

cushion behind her back and set down some warm tea on the table next to her, and the room turned into a dimly lit movie theater.

“This moment is my favorite. How about you?”

“I feel the same way. I think everyone feels excitement when something’s about to start,” I replied as I pressed a button on the remote. That also went for the consecutive days off coming up, since we’d both been harboring a sense of elation deep inside. I was worried we wouldn’t be able to sleep with so much to look forward to. Marie clapped as the movie began to play.

It started very quietly. The wind blew gently, and a girl lazily looking up at the sky noticed something and sat up. She began running toward an old and elegant house, and the story began to unfold. The story revolved around this young girl, about her growing up with her loving family and eventually setting out on her own. Marie watched worriedly and held my sleeve as the girl in the movie set forth on her journey.

“Will she be okay living all by herself? I hope some bad person doesn’t find her.” It seemed she was already empathizing with the heroine. There were many elves that never left the holy land of their forest. That was why there were trials for those who wished to depart, and parents would be worried for their children expressing the will to leave.

“Yeah, but it seems like this is what the girl really wants. What was it like for you when you first left your forest, Marie?”

“Well... I think I was very worried, but I was just as excited at the same time.” As we laughed together, the world within the movie was unfolding further. The film was showcasing the blue skies and deep-colored sea, and the elf let out an amazed, “Wow...” Marie’s legs started waving back and forth to the cheerful music, and she looked back at me with an expression that conveyed her complete fascination with how wide the world was.

“The city is so big and amazing!”

“Yeah, it’s very colorful and pretty. Would you like to live somewhere like that?”

“Of course,” Marie replied enthusiastically, her heart full of hope for the

future like the girl on the screen. She was likely looking forward to the new life, new world, and the people she would meet there. But the girl's optimistic outlook was shot down as she met harsh strangers out in the world. Seeing this, Marie's expression grew darker.

"I think everyone could be a little kinder." I knew I shouldn't have treated her like a child, but seeing Marie pouting at the movie, I couldn't help but pat her head. She must've been through the same thing. Having moved from the forest to the city and possessing the talent of being a spirit sorceress, she must have experienced much hardship herself. She leaned her head against me, then pulled my hand so it was resting on her stomach. It seemed she wasn't joking earlier when she said she would be using me as a cushion. She scooted her butt a bit to find a more comfortable position.

"Can you trust kind people right off the bat? Personally, I think that they're kind of scary."

"You might be right. You gave me a terrible first impression, after all. I won't let you forget... Actually, you should forget about it." She pinched my thigh, which barely tickled, but I pretended it hurt and said, "Ow."

The heroine in the movie was having a relatively rough time, but in my case, I'd been killed by Marie in the past. Wridra had the same reaction, too... Why was it that I had a tendency to get killed by women I had just met? Though, I could laugh it off because it all happened in the dream world. The girl in the movie never faced such danger, of course, and she slowly started to blend into the town. Come to think of it, maybe it was meeting people that broadened one's world. A similar thing was happening in the movie, where the girl interacted with others, made connections, and built upon her world over time. But not everything was going smoothly. With each small pain she endured, she was also going through growth. Marie watched her protectively, her hand holding my sleeve the whole time.

"She's so young, but strong. I remember crying in the alleys back then."

"You're a hard worker too, Marie. You've been through a lot, but maybe things calmed down for you after you began meeting people?" Marie turned and looked up at me. I felt drawn into her colorful eyes as they held my gaze.

Her lips began to move, but she simply said, “Never mind,” and didn’t answer the question.

In the meantime, the heroine in the movie had crossed paths with someone new. It was a boy around her age, but Marie’s impression of him was quite strict, having been watching over and empathizing with the girl this entire time.

“I don’t like him. He doesn’t take anything seriously, and he doesn’t have an ounce of tact in him.” She turned her head away in a huff and puffed out her cheek in the same gesture as the heroine. I laughed involuntarily; Marie didn’t like that. Anyway, the boy was an important plot device in the story. The story had been about blending in with the town up until this point, but now there was focus on making connections with friends and the opposite sex. What surprised me was how drastically the first impression that he had left changed. The boy showed his sincere and faithful side, revealing his straightforward and honest nature, completely changing the heroine and Marie’s view toward him. Marie suddenly turned and looked at me, seeming to realize something.

“What is it?”

“...No, it’s nothing.” She shook her head and turned back toward the screen... What was that about? Something unexpected was happening to the other characters, too. They seemed to be cold at first, but they slowly started acting kinder toward the girl. They each had quirks and personalities that weren’t obvious when just passing by, and Marie’s eyes widened a bit as their individual charms were revealed.

“Wow, this world is getting so much livelier. I wonder why? It almost feels like I actually live there.” Just as she had pointed out, the city had changed before I knew it. Everyone was considerate of each other, and the girl had become accepted by them over time. “How strange... It’s almost like Kaoruko. My impression of her changes every time we meet. She was so kind today.”

“The same goes for Wridra. She was so hostile at first, but before I knew it, she was enjoying songs with you. I don’t think either of us expected to go on a trip to the hot springs with her.” Marie nodded, a relieved expression on her face. She seemed to be realizing what a blessed environment she was in. Her body was soft and warm against mine, and she let out a quiet breath as she

rubbed her head against me.

Now then, it seemed Marie was starting to get used to how movies worked. After the introduction came the development, and there would surely be a turn and conclusion to follow. The story accelerated with an unexpected misfortune on an ominous night. Everything that had been built up to that point seemed to boil over, like the rise and fall of a rollercoaster, but the sudden drop came not at the beginning, but the end. If the heroine failed in her task, the town would be changed drastically. Everything she had worked hard to build up would vanish completely. Marie understood this and tensed up like the heroine in the movie, praying everything would work out in the end. Each time she turned around, she looked like she was about to cry like the heroine, and I smiled at her reassuringly. The rollercoaster that had been continuously accelerating had finally reached its finale. Marie let out a big sigh of relief as the people cheered under the clear, blue sky, and she let her body plop onto mine.

“That can’t be good for my heart. I felt like it was going to pop out of my mouth.”

“Yeah, I can still hear it beating.” Sure enough, I could feel her heartbeat through her sweat-soaked back. She spread her fingers and showed me her hands, which were similarly covered in sweat. She must have been pretty terrified. Although she was giggling, I saw tears roll down her cheek as she blinked. I put my arms around her from behind, and we watched the epilogue of the characters as the credits rolled by. We enjoyed the moment for some time later, and I noticed Marie’s tears had stopped. She placed her head on my shoulder and whispered quietly.

“How strange. People I wouldn’t have wanted to even be near in the beginning seemed attractive by the end. They weren’t just simply kind, and that somehow made them all the more wonderful. I think this story wanted to tell us that how we live our lives each day is what’s important.”

“Oh, that’s a sharp observation. What would you think if I told you there were novels centered around their daily lives?” I asked her, and the girl’s closed eyes opened. They were still wet from tears, and she wiped her slightly swollen eyes with her fingers.

“If there were such a thing, I’d love to read them, of course.”

“What would you think if I told you there’s one on that table?” Her light purple eyes widened, showing off their vibrant colors. Her lips parted, and she suddenly stood up with momentum. After shaking the bed as she got up, she ran toward the table on the other side of the TV. I got up slowly, walking across the flooring barefoot, then approached her from behind. “Did you find it?”

The elf turned around with a book in hand, then showed me its pretty cover. She jogged over to me in the dark room and hopped up to throw her arms around my neck. I stumbled, still stuffed from the meal we had earlier, but quickly held her by her waist so she was hanging off of me.

“Thank you! I’m also going to learn how to read for sure. Would you mind crouching down a bit?”

“Hm? What do you mean?” I did as she asked, and her feet reached the floor below. She tugged on my sleeve, which I took to mean she wanted me to lean down some more. I ended up in a kneeling position, and her beautiful face came closer to mine until my vision went dark. She held my head with both hands, and I felt a soft warmth blossom from my forehead.

Wait, this is...

Realizing she had kissed me, my cheeks started to grow hot. The complete darkness made my imagination work all the harder. Her soft lips changed in shape as they were pressed against my forehead. Marie stayed that way for some time, and I couldn’t move a muscle until she eventually moved away. She watched me from the front, and I was likely making a pretty funny face at the moment.

“In my world, this is how elves thank people who are very considerate. Did you know that?”

“No, I did not...”

Her puffy eyes narrowed as she smiled, revealing her pearly white teeth. It seemed I was powerless to do anything but be captivated by that smile of hers. I also realized that the teachings of elves weren’t all that bad.

That night, the pre-bedtime reading was to be with a novel rather than a

picture book. Supporting her head with my arm, I read aloud the parts that she pointed out with her finger. With her incredible intellect, this method was enough for her to absorb and learn the language. Maybe she had carried over a memory enhancement skill from the dream world. But sleepiness took over as we laid cozily in each other's warmth, and she repeatedly let out cute yawns.

"No, no, it's not my fault. Your voice is making me sleepy. I want to read more, but... *yawn*..." Her finger tried its hardest to keep pointing at the letters, but it precariously wavered like a ship veering off course. Then, with her finger pointing at the far distance, she drifted off into sleep. Trying not to wake her, I slowly removed the book and placed her head on a pillow. The bookshelf was becoming her personal collection. I placed the blanket up to her chest and noticed her scent wafting in the air. Her light, rhythmic breathing made me smile involuntarily. I had no choice but to be kind to the elf who had given me so many moments of happiness like this.

Good night, Ms. Elf. We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow.

When I spoke those words, the voice that echoed in the room sounded kinder than I had expected.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 5: Amethyst Squad's Formation

Labyrinth Raid, Day 2...

The oasis at the military post was enshrouded in the quiet of early morning. But a crowd was gathered at the tent that was bigger than the rest, where status updates, reports, and orders were being given out. When headquarters was busy, there was usually some sort of problem. The raid was moving slower than expected so far, and they had to report to the government with their plans on how to proceed. They would also need to relay the message to the teams working in the labyrinth right now. There was also another big problem.

"...Are they still separated in there?"

"We had to close the door and seal them off. There are too many enemies to send in a rescue team."

The commander of the group, Hakam, let out a sigh of frustration at the wizard's words. But he knew better than anyone just how difficult it was to rescue isolated soldiers. It was far more important to take down the boss of the current floor rather than thin out their forces by sending them in for rescue.

"Defeat the boss of the floor, and the entire area will become our domain. However, it's unlikely we'll be able to save them in time."

"Indeed. We've only made about thirty percent progress so far, after all. In any case, Zarish and Gaston's teams have been doing good work." Aja the wizard deliberately changed the subject. Hakam realized this, but deliberately followed the change in subject. There was no time to dwell on matters that couldn't be helped at the moment.

"It's hard to believe, but maybe it truly is the return of the heroes. It's no wonder you vouched for their abilities."

"Hmph, some expensive heroes they are. I could've been happy about them without reservations if there weren't issues with their conduct."

Despite the criticisms, there was no one more reliable than those two in question. Zarish of Team Diamond, and Gaston of Team Ruby. They were like two charging spears that competed with each other as they tore through the ancient labyrinth.

Suddenly, Aja and Hakam noticed a small group of lights on the display moving around. The map of the ancient labyrinth was being shown in a three-dimensional display. Each point of light represented a squad member, and the information they obtained in their exploration gradually filled out the map. However, these particular points of light were far behind the rest.

“Hoho, they’ve finally awakened. That boy and his group seem to sleep quite well.”

“Sleep brings up a child well, they say... I envy them. Because of my age, I can’t help but get up at the break of day. How about you, Aja? ...No, I suppose I don’t need to ask.” The two smiled, finding a rare moment of comfort in the dreadful ruins. And so, the comparatively peaceful second day of the raid on the labyrinth had begun.

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We woke up, rubbing the sleep out of our eyes. The most obvious changes from when we had fallen asleep earlier in the real world were the pitch black darkness, hard ground, and warmth of the girl’s body next to mine... Actually, that part was the same. “*yawn*... S-Spirits of light...” Yawning as she called to the spirits, a dim light appeared at the tip of Marie’s finger. Her finger, which was partially transparent with light, poked at the air as if to awaken the sleeping spirits, and the light gradually grew brighter. “Mm, it’s nice and warm...” The girl muttered lazily, unable to remove herself from the coziness of the warm blanket. The light grew stronger yet, and once it reached an adequate level of brightness, Marie poked it one more time, splitting the ball of light in two. They flew around to each of the four corners of the room, illuminating the small room they had fallen asleep in the previous night.

“Good morning, Marie. Make sure you don’t go back to sleep.”

“My, I never thought I’d see the day when *you* would be saying that to *me*. So, when will Wridra be joining us?”

That was a good question. *I think she said she'd arrive when we wake up... Oh, there she is.*

A black stain appeared on the wall, gradually growing to the size of a person. It oozed out like viscous tar, and then arms suddenly emerged from its depths. The arms grabbed onto the walls on either side of the shape, then pulled out the rest of their body... Yeah, that was kind of creepy.

“Nyaaaaaa?!”

Marie trembled under her blanket, letting out a shriek that was surprisingly loud coming from someone of such a small stature. When the shadow glob vanished, the woman who appeared from it called to us with a cheery voice.

“Good morning, you two. And... what are you doing? It appears you cannot keep your hands off of each other already. Hmm, perhaps you intend to make me envious?” She blinked at us with a puzzled expression, but it was hard for me to respond while being held onto so tightly. I managed to lift one arm from Marie’s grasp and responded to the draconian.

“G-Good morning, Wridra. Nice day, isn’t it?”

“Don’t scare me like that, Wridra! How am I supposed to go back to sleep now?!”

Huh, so she really was thinking of going back to sleep.

It was actually kind of fun seeing her acting so scared. I wanted to watch a little longer, but the inside of an ancient labyrinth was neither the time nor place. Moving the blanket aside with a bit of hesitation, we started preparations to depart.

“So, how were your children doing?”

“They were the same as usual. Hah, hah, though caring for them was far more enjoyable this time around. I have been looking after you two children, after all.”

“What? You consider me a child too? I’ll have you know, I am over a hundred years old. I’ve lived far longer than even an elderly human.”

But maybe from the perspective of a dragon that had lived for thousands of

years, we weren't far off from a dragon whelp. Come to think of it, Wridra seemed to have a little less of an edge to her, with a maternal atmosphere within her external beauty. She touched the Magic Tool with her right hand, manipulating the light points that indicated our current position. This was a simple task for her, as someone who knew the ins and outs of magic.

"Okay, are you two ready? Let's start day two of our raid."

The girls raised their fists with an enthusiastic "*Yeah!*" and the moment I had been looking forward to had arrived.

I soon came to realize we had been descending for some time now. Perhaps back then, the ancient people used this floor as a living area. As we descended to the lower floors, there were less signs of people having lived there, and the atmosphere changed into that of a more typical labyrinth-like air.

Unfortunately, this meant trouble for me. My sword master, Wridra, forced me to train with glee, and my skill levels increased in exchange for plenty of stamina. We stopped to rest whenever Marie wanted to inspect something as the sorceress of the party, and our exploration of the labyrinth progressed gradually. The girls joked with each other, talking about nothing in particular, and continued to descend even more staircases. Our surroundings were lit brightly by the light spirits, and three shadows wavered at our feet as our party walked on.

Then, we noticed something. There seemed to be something scattered on the ground up ahead, and the group stopped walking. It seemed to be someone's belongings, and upon inspection, they seemed to be new, but with several holes punched through them. The objects on the floor seemed to be military rations that had been trampled under foot.

"Huh, I guess the raid party already got to this area."

"They must have been in quite the hurry. Oh, look over there. There's a door." I looked in the direction Marie was pointing, where there was a door at a section of the wall that had been seemingly peeled back and laid bare. One peculiar note was that it was covered in black chains. The chains formed an octagram, with what seemed to be ceremonial ornaments adorning their apex.

"A hidden door. I wonder what these chains are for?"

“Hmm, it seems to have been sealed off by the powers of a priest. They were in a hurry, indeed. I can tell this was made in a rush.” Which meant they probably needed to seal it off in a hurry for a reason.

“I’d like to find out what’s in there. Oh, maybe we can check with the three-dimensional map on the Magic Tool.” I picked up the cylindrical object and activated it, using it to display our surroundings. We all peered in for a closer look to find only a small portion of the hall was being shown. The elf girl pointed, cocking her head with a puzzled expression. “The map isn’t filled out. It looks like they still aren’t done exploring this area.”

“Hmm, there are two points of light here. Maybe someone’s still inside.” The girl’s eyes widened and turned toward me, but I still wasn’t sure yet. It also made me wonder, did these lights only react to living beings?

“Maybe that door was sealed off because a powerful enemy appeared and they had to retreat?”

“Yeah, I wonder too. I’d like to fight it, if possible, and if there’s someone in there, I want to help them.” Marie gulped. We had been looking forward to fighting a powerful foe, but it seemed she couldn’t help being intimidated by the sight of the ominous, sealed-off door.

“Okay, let’s decide on what to do. What do you think, Marie?”

“...I’m sorry, but I’m not sure. I can’t imagine what could be awaiting us behind that door... but if we can, I want to help whoever is in there.” She squeezed her staff, looking up at me with a worried expression. Her slender shoulders looked as if they were about to start trembling any minute, but there was a surprising determination within her eyes. She would have thought about it a lot longer, had this been her old self. She believed everyone should fend for themselves, and she was the type to avoid confrontation. Maybe the influence of the movie we saw last night had changed her. Strangers were, by nature, strangers because you hadn’t interacted with them and had the potential to become friends only by making an effort to get to know one another. This was the lesson she had learned from the movie.

I stuck out my fist, and the girl hesitated for only a brief moment before forming a small fist with her hand and bumping it with a determined look on

her face. Then, Wridra's fist joined in from the side, our wills becoming one.

"Okay, let's go check if they're alive and execute a rescue mission. Our order of priority is our own safety, then theirs, and finally, to defeat our enemies. Is that fine?" They nodded.

Wridra the draconian was to watch over us as we had previously discussed. Marie and I would've preferred to complete the rescue mission without Wridra's help, but this was no time to be picky about that. We held up the Magic Tool and pressed the red button. This would allow us to communicate with Aja, who was at the headquarters. White noise could be heard from the device, and then the link was established.

"This is HQ. What is it, my boy? Are you in trouble?"

"No, I just wanted to report that we're about to start a rescue mission at the hall. But first, please tell us whether the two inside are alive or not." There was a weighty pause. After some time, Commander Hakam's voice replied instead of the old man's.

"...That area is highly dangerous. There have been reports of demons that can spawn countless monsters. They're estimated to be level 80."

"Thank you for the information. Please, let us know whether they're all right."

Marie's eyes widened at the commander's words. A level 80 demon would be at least considered mid-rank, and it was likely to come equipped with special abilities if it could spawn so many monsters. This would make the expected difficulty much higher than we originally thought. We deliberated over how to proceed as we waited for the commander's reply. Eventually, a croaky voice spoke up from the device.

"...They're alive, but barely. A barrier has been protecting them."

"I see. Then we will attempt a rescue, if possible." I was feeling a little nervous, considering we were talking with people of such high ranks. As I prepared to turn off the switch, the comm link buzzed again.

"I almost forgot to mention, but if you're going on a mission, you will be a part of the team even though you're not from this country. We don't intend on ordering you around or anything like that, but we will need to give your squad a

team name.” Our eyes widened. Apparently, the teams were all named after some sort of precious gemstone. I pressed a finger against the hole on the receiver so they wouldn’t be able to hear us.

“I don’t know what to tell him. This is so sudden.”

“It doesn’t seem to mean much, so why don’t we just pick a random gemstone?” the purple-eyed girl suggested, and I looked at her, then mulled over the idea.

I guess I’ll pick a gemstone I’m familiar with, then.

“Then, we’d like to go with amethyst.”

“Very well. Team Amethyst, I pray for your success.” The elf had a clueless look on her face, so it seemed she didn’t know how I came to pick that one. Wridra, however, gave me a knowing grin, and I couldn’t help but turn pink despite my age. Suddenly, we got another transmission coming in. A voice desperately called out amidst the white noise.

“Bzz... Bzz... This is Bloodstone, I’m calling in place of our captain! I know this is asking for too much, but please, save Captain Zera!”

“This is Andalusite. Also calling in place of our captain. Sh-She... She helped me escape at the end! Please, rescue Captain Doula. She’s a truly kindhearted person!”

Marie tugged on my sleeve, and I nodded. That name, Zera, belonged to the man who had helped us just a few days ago. He was a kind and reliable man, which was perhaps why his teammate’s plea for help was nearly a desperate scream. The intensity of his emotions could be felt even through the comm link, igniting a fire inside my chest.

“...This is Amethyst. Roger that.”

I cut the link. Boy, hearing these stories really got me fired up. I thought I’d outgrown them around middle school, but it seemed I was still young after all. Something was smoldering deep inside me as I reached for the sealed door.

Clink, clink, rattle...

The chains broke into pieces and fell to the stone floor. We were surrounded

by darkness, with a large door that had been sealed off standing before us. And now, the seal was being broken. We had requested Aja the mage to break the seal from above ground, and we would be facing off with a demon that was expected to be over level 80. Plaster and dust swirled into the air, as if to herald the countdown to our battle.

“I don’t know the situation inside the hall, so let’s come up with a strategy with the Mind Link Chat as soon as it opens. But we should prioritize our coordination, so I’d like to go with the same plan if possible.”

“Understood. Just say the word.” I turned around to find Marie with a look of determined energy, and Wridra was nodding behind her with a dependable air. Marie was referring to creating the enclosures with the stone spirits and efficiently taking down the enemies one by one. The shape of the enclosure would need to be determined after seeing the situation and enemy positions inside.



“Oh, depending on the circumstances, we might need you to use that empty secondary skill slot. Is that fine?”

“Of course. I’ve been saving it for exactly this type of situation.” Marie nodded confidently with soot staining her hair and cheeks.

The door began to open with a heavy creak. Light poured out from the hall, which was likely the remnant of illumination magic left by the previous raid team. As we stood staring, the entirety of what awaited us in the room slowly became revealed. The room was rectangular in shape, with its depth too far for the illumination magic to reach. The thick pillars were arranged in rows and supported a ceiling far above. Along the wall was a pile of monsters crowding atop each other in numbers too high to count. It was likely that under that pile...

“...There. Spotted two people; they seem to be holding up their barrier. A man seems to be unconscious and is being held up by a woman. Hmm, Marie, can you stand right around here? I want you to be near the exit so you can escape at any time.”

“Got it. Like we discussed before, we’ll expand our position bit by bit. Can you hold them off while I prepare our first fortification?”

“Roger that,” I replied to the voice speaking into my head through the Mind Link Chat, then began moving forward. How to put it... They were like ants swarming over honey. There was no point in trying to count the monsters that were crawling all over each other grotesquely. I was amazed that they managed to hold them off like this the whole night. The person putting up the barrier had to be extremely skilled.

I scanned my surroundings, then started things off by activating Over the Road five times. This skill allowed me to instantaneously transfer myself from one point to another, and it was highly versatile thanks to having no limit on the number of times it could be used. There were other restrictions as a trade off. There was a weight limit, I had to step on the ground with both feet, and I could only move to points that were within my field of vision. I made quick work of monsters that threatened to get near Marie. I had already memorized the position of their hearts and how to defeat them, so it felt like they were dying

automatically as soon as I finished teleporting. The sound of monsters dissolving into a cloud of dust rang in my ears.

“They aren’t charging this way, so I think I’ll start pushing forward.”

“We don’t know when they might start swarming at us. Don’t do anything reckless, okay?” She said, but I thought I was most effective when I was being somewhat reckless. I mean, this was a dream world to me, after all. Getting hurt was no big deal, and I would just awaken in Japan if I did end up dying, but I supposed going back to sleep afterward would be kind of a pain.

The mountain of monsters still didn’t draw any closer, and only the ones that noticed us came running in order. These were still only level 40 or so, and I easily cut them down with one swing, thanks to Wridra’s training. I appeared at a monster’s flank, and before its marble-like eyes could focus on me, I buried my sword into its skull down to the halfway point of its blade. I gave it a quick twist, then pulled the blade back out. The creature’s belly flopped onto the floor before it could even make a sound. It seemed this would take a while, so I decided to memorize this motion with Reprise. Now I could instantly kill these monsters by cutting their heart or head.

One by one, monsters fell to the floor in a clockwise order. But of course, I would never be able to vanquish them all with this method. The objective wasn’t to defeat all of the small fries, but to draw out the demon that was hiding somewhere. And yet...

“Hmm, I have no idea where it is, and their numbers aren’t decreasing at all. Where could they be coming from?”

“Oh, that’s right. If there are more of them spawning, I should have tried to detect where they’re coming from. Can you take out about twenty of them so I can give it a try?”

Huh, that was a tall order after just telling me not to be reckless. Since I needed to defeat a lot of them, I swapped out some of the slots I had memorized with Reprise. It could hold up to about twenty, so I memorized several attack patterns for attacking from the front, sides, and back. Of course, I would be aiming for the heart or the head, where I could take out the enemy with a single strike. As soon as I met certain conditions of “distance” and

“position,” I would attack automatically. The advantage of this was... Well, it took little effort on my part.

“A new monster appeared. Detected several creatures from the far end of the hall, behind the pillar.”

“Thanks. I’m all warmed up now too. How’s the situation on your end?”

“My first structure is almost ready. But since you seem to be holding up pretty easily right now, I want to start working on the next step, too. Is that okay with you?”

“Absolutely,” I told her. “Don’t mind me!”

I now had four tasks to handle. Protect Marie, defeat the demon at the end of the room, clean up the weak mobs, and rescue the two in the barrier that could break down any second. Well, it was definitely more interesting this way. The more impossible the task seemed, the greater the joy when accomplishing it. Maybe I was a gamer in that sense. Though, I didn’t actually play a lot of games in the real world.

“Well then, why don’t I work on two missions at once? Here I go.”

I was being careful not to make any noise before, but it was time to work up a sweat. I held up my sword and began walking forward without hesitation. Even now, I could hear the crash of monsters tackling the barrier near the center of the room. They seemed awfully riled up. They were so focused on their bloodlust for their target that they hardly noticed me approaching. But the tide was beginning to turn. I had walked up to them, cutting down each monster that entered my range of attack. I deliberately let them shriek out their death cries, and the others whirled around in my direction as if they received an electric shock. Watching the expressions on their faces, I slowly moved to the side. Even as they came swarming toward me, I had already memorized how to dispatch them with my Reprise skill. As long as I was careful about my positioning, the rest would be taken care of. Like I mentioned earlier, my instant movement skill, Over the Road, wasn’t without weaknesses. One of the drawbacks was that I could only travel to a point I could see, so I could have gotten into trouble if they were to surround me to the point where I couldn’t find a spot to escape to.

“I think I’ll slowly make my way around the outside.”

The reaction wasn’t too big at first, but as the mountain of corpses began to pile up, their attention was starting to focus on me. The sight of the countless eyes turning to gaze at me was... well, not too scary, actually. I could always jump away if I needed to, anyway.

“Ah...! Wow!” Marie couldn’t help but exclaim, seeing the enemies go down at a record pace. I created some illusions of myself whenever I nearly became surrounded, but my steady walk never halted. This was all thanks to Reprise, which had turned me into an automated Koopah killing machine, but it was also true that I was pushing myself very hard. It didn’t seem like I was expending any effort, but I could feel my vitality being sapped away. “This is... kind of eerie. Watching you is making my eyes hurt.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure how I feel about that. Anyway, I’ll draw the enemies toward the deep end, but let me know if you need help.”

“All right. I just finished preparing the second structure.” That was pretty quick. With her calm demeanor and precise use of magic, it was possible that she might surpass me someday.

The sea of monsters before me resembled dinosaurs with oversized heads, gnashing their teeth like a shoal of piranhas. They could even jump high into the air, which made them particularly troublesome. Maybe the sight of one monster going down per second was strange to behold, indeed. But I had to be able to maintain such a pace if I hoped to take on such large numbers.

“Oh, I’m down to about half vitality. I hope I can make it to the demon.”

I was about halfway through my rotation from the south side when I made such an observation, but my progress wasn’t without results. I may have expended a lot of stamina, but it was now a lot easier for our two rescuees to escape. The woman finally turned my way, her red hair wavering with the movement. She was still desperately holding onto the man, who seemed to be unconscious.

“You two, please escape whenever you find the chance. My companions are waiting for you over there.” She was covered in sweat and dirt, but there was a startling amount of strength in her eyes. I could sense a powerful love between

them as she protectively held the man in her arms.

So that's why she was able to survive the entire night like this... I continued to walk as the thought crossed my mind, when I heard Marie's excited voice.

"Another level up...!"

"Marie, don't get distracted by levels right now. We need to focus on rescuing those two."

"R-Right! Oh, the demon is moving!"

I saw it, too. It must have noticed that I was approaching as I led the mob of enemies deeper into the far end of the room. The creature that appeared from behind the pillar was a slender demon that was about three meters tall. Actually, maybe "slender" didn't quite describe it. Its body was thin, like it had been formed with wires, and only the black horns on its head were abnormally large. Its eyes were like white, glowing dots. There was an ornament like a reverse pentagram on its forehead, and the multiple orbs of darkness floating around it were likely one of its skills. Then, it screamed.

Kyaaaaaaaaaarrgh!!!

With its mouth stretched out vertically, it let loose a screech like wires grating against each other. This wasn't just a scream, but the language of demons. I would've liked to have learned it someday, but... No, maybe I shouldn't. I had a feeling that Ms. Elf would've come to hate me if I made a noise like that.

As Marie analyzed the opponent, the demon's name appeared above its head. I could barely make out the blurry letters that spelled out "Raab," and I figured it was a rare monster. I was surprised to find my forehead was damp with sweat from the intense pressure the creature was emitting. Then, I heard Marie's alarmed voice in my head through the Mind Link Chat.

"Immune to physical attacks, barrier level... Wow, 82! I can't pinpoint the source of its magic amplification."

"They're usually at the heart or the head. More importantly, I guess it does nullify physical attacks, huh? I know your hands are pretty full, but do you think you could give me an enchantment?" With two quick kicks off of the ground, I was back within Marie's cast range. Yeah, I wouldn't have been able to conquer

labyrinths by myself if it weren't for this mobility. The monsters lost sight of me, and they turned their large heads as they searched for me in confusion. Meanwhile, the demon stayed where it was without bothering to give chase. Despite its savage appearance, it seemed to have a careful personality.

“Don't move, I'm casting a spell on you. I'm still not very good with holy magic...”

“You can do it, Marie!”

She completed her incantation, and specks of light gathered at my raised sword. My black sword let out an unpleasant howl, then blurred momentarily. With a loud *whoosh*, a holy symbol recognizing it as an otherworldly object appeared on the sword.

“Uuugh, level 40 is the highest I can go! That sword isn't very compatible with holy magic.”

“It's good enough. I could only run away up until now, but I can finally fight the demon with this. Boy, I can't wait!” I gave it a few practice swings, and it made satisfying *voom* noises with each swing. A monster happened to come at me at that moment, and I sliced its head off in an instant. The section that had been cut was shining, and even its blood had a bright gleam to it.

“Wow, this is really satisfying. Okay, I think I'll take a quick rest before heading out.”

“It'll start blinking when the effect is about to run out, so let me know if that happens. My third structure is ready, so I'll start activating them in order.”

Things were starting to come together. I wanted to defeat the demon already, but it was better to be cautious. The ground rumbled as the first structure had become activated.

+ + + + + + + + + +

I ran through the path that stretched out between two parallel walls. Come to think of it, I wasn't much of a runner. My usual methods of travel were walking or teleportation. I turned around with these thoughts in mind, and monsters with horrifying faces were running after me. The black tidal wave coming my way reminded me of a disaster film that was popular some time ago. I skidded

to a halt at a blind alley, and I had run out of places to run. The monsters soon caught up to me, engulfing me within their wave. Their teeth tore through my arms and legs, devouring me without mercy... but then my body deformed, becoming amorphous as it lost its shape. As usual, I had used my Phantom Image skill.

These walls were not part of the original labyrinth. They had been created with the stone spirits which had been summoned with Marie's spirit magic. My real self was standing atop a stone wall about two meters high, observing the view below. They screamed and hopped around in vain, and then the entrance closed behind them, packing them tight into a sealed room. Flames immediately erupted below their feet, and I jumped up to a higher level to avoid the heat. I landed lightly on a platform where Mariabelle the elf girl and Wridra the draconian were standing. Marie briefly glanced in my direction, but seemed rather preoccupied casting the incantation to roast the monsters whole. With the fire's light reflecting off of her light purple eyes, they resembled amethyst gemstones even more than usual.

"Hey there. We're getting a lot more efficient now, aren't we?"

"Hmm, this method is different from before. Was there something wrong with the previous method?" Marie and I nodded in response to Wridra's question. Before, we laid out magic mines to blow up enemies that chased after us. It didn't quite deal fatal damage, but it disrupted them enough for me to deal the killing blow.

"The old way hampered a lot of my mobility. You know, since I can manage without the walls on both sides." Since my build specialized in mobility, evading and escaping from enemies wasn't an issue. Basically, we switched to a plan that could more efficiently take out several enemies at once. I looked down, hearing the echoes of roaring fire and screaming monsters. Marie finished her spellcasting, lowered her staff, and looked at me.

"You should heal up your energy while you can. Here, have some tea."

She handed me a plastic bottle, which I took gratefully. I sat down on the ledge of the platform and Marie sat next to me. It was a horrible view for a date, but this wasn't the time to be picky. And so, I gulped down my drink and

quenched my thirst. I looked up at the ceiling on a whim and made a comment.

“Oh, looks like there’s ventilation in here, too. The air isn’t getting any thinner, and the smoke isn’t building up even with all this fire.”

“I wouldn’t use fire inside labyrinths like this if there wasn’t. They’re burning really well, though. Maybe they had a lot of fat? Hehe, I can’t wait for the next trap.”

I wondered what she was talking about, but my attention was turned to the “first structure” the girl had conjured. Koopahs weren’t the smartest creatures around, but even they wouldn’t just sit by idly as they were getting roasted alive. They tackled the walls repeatedly, forming cracks in the stone walls with each blow.

“I would say we can burn them like this three more times or so. But this method will only work against the weaker mobs. I doubt the smarter ones will even take the bait.”

“Yeah, Koopahs are dumb enough to attack anything that moves. I guess that’s what makes them efficient for leveling with.”

Koopahs were being categorized as a “weaker mob,” but they were actually moderately high level. I supposed “moderately high” was an appropriate description for level 40. But despite their lack of intelligence, they were still a definite threat when there were enough of them. This whole ordeal made me think about why sorcerers were considered the stars of the battlefield. Once a plan fell into place like this, their firepower was bar none. Any who saw the big mob of Koopahs cooking in the blazing fire would likely agree. As for Marie, she was staring at the impressive dragon designs on her staff.

“I owe a lot of these results to Wridra’s help. One day, I hope I can pull this off even without your staff.”

“Yes, not many have the power to control spirits with this much skill. Although, as an elf, you have a long life ahead of you. I would not say it is impossible.” Wridra replied sleepily from beside Marie. She seemed to be feeling pretty lax, with us being relatively safe with our current setup.

However, not everything would be smooth sailing from here. The demon still

hadn't moved from the deep end of the room, and it was still spawning monsters at the same rate. We had managed to heal and level up, while the demon bought itself some momentary peace.

"That endless summoning might be the demon's special ability. Maybe all the Koopahs on this floor were spawned by him. But I don't get why it's just sitting there without making a move at all."

"Yes, I'm sure it can use magic, but it hasn't done a thing. It could be that it has to remain an observer for some reason."

We had been defeating the spawned monsters all this time to test if there was a limit to the monsters it could summon, but judging by the way reinforcements kept coming, it was looking unlikely that they would stop. We still had reserves on the stone structures, but our energy wasn't unlimited. If there was no way to bait it out, we had to go on the offensive.

"Well, I got enough rest, so I think I'll go challenge that demon now."

"Be careful. Few people have successfully defeated a demon that's mid-rank or higher." Hearing that got me even more pumped up. I would've loved to become one of those "few people." Although, I would've had no choice but to run if it wasn't for Marie's magic enchantment.

I noticed the monsters I had drawn into our trap had all been completely incinerated, and the stone door opened again to refill the fuel for more fire. At this rate, it was unlikely that there would be any issues. I kicked off of the platform and teleported to the room's floor. The monsters fervently charged toward the structure Marie had prepared, but the hall was otherwise silent. The creatures collided with each other as they squeezed into the only entrance. Our party had come to raid the labyrinth, so it was a bit odd to see the monsters challenging this miniature labyrinth the elf girl had conjured.

I wasn't the only one observing this view. The man and woman were sitting on the ground with blankets wrapped around them, the woman watching with a dumbfounded expression.

"I went to check up on the other two, but they should be fine for some time. Does it seem like Zera will regain consciousness?"

The man and woman, who were covered in soot and mud, were the two I had just rescued earlier. The woman was holding the man tightly in her arms with her silver eyes fixed on me, still looking confused about what was going on. Her confusion, to be fair, was a pretty appropriate reaction. I gave up on trying to get a reply out of her and turned around, when I heard a *“Thank you”* whispered from behind. I turned back around to face her and found a look of relief on her face. After giving her a wave of my hand, I began walking again.

I stepped off of the stone pavement, then stopped. Before me was a wall with peculiar patterns carved into them, indicating that I had reached the far end of the hall. Then, as if it had been waiting for me, the demon slowly emerged from behind the pillar. I had already seen what it looked like, but the only word I could find to describe it was “abnormal.” The thing was thin as a rail, but its height reached a full three meters or so. It screeched menacingly at me, a noise like wires grating on each other emanating from its vertically outstretched mouth. Now, it was time for some delightful demon hunting. Demons were creatures that originally weren’t from this world, so they couldn’t be harmed by most physical attacks. They had a pesky trait that gave them complete physical immunity, which was why I had received a holy enchantment from Marie. I gripped my weapon in hand as I walked forward, and the demon Raab’s features glowed with a golden hue. With each heavy step, the creature left spiderweb-shaped cracks in the pavement. It spread its ten long fingers at me, though I wasn’t sure why. The fingers were splayed out in a circular arrangement and began making strange ticking noises. I had no idea what it was trying to do. But there was no time for hesitation, and I maintained my pace as I strove forward, trying to calm my quickly beating heart.

“A battle with a mid-rank demon... How exciting. I’ll gladly make more boxed meals if I get to have dreams like this.”

I didn’t know what was going to happen. That was what made it so thrilling. The reason I thought this way was probably because I spent my time in a peaceful place like Japan. I spent my days in complete boredom, feeling powerless to do anything by myself as the days went by. But such melancholy was cast aside as the demon’s finger began glowing brilliantly. In a blink of an eye, a black laser grazed my cheek and passed through behind me, blowing up

the ground it came in contact with and making my excitement soar to new heights.

“A black laser beam?! This is crazy!”

My feet landed on the wall, and I drove my black sword into the surface at the same time. I wanted to enjoy some more over-the-top anime fights, but I pulled out the sword immediately after. The demon had turned its still-glowing hand toward me again. A roaring flame appeared at the wall where I had just been. The magic force shot from my opponent’s hand ripped out a chunk of the wall, then continued to pursue me as I landed on the ground. I was going to be hunted down eventually if I kept this up. Realizing this, I teleported behind the demon’s back right away. My sword was held at waist level and ready to swing, but something resembling a blot of ink in water appeared in front of me. Then, I noticed the pentagram on Raab’s head had a similar blot on it.

“What? A homing attack?! You’ve gotta be kidding!”

Something took a bite out of the location I was just standing in with a *chomp*! A black mass the size of a car had devoured the ground and everything on it with its huge jaws. Flustered, I lost my balance and shouted as I rolled around on the ground.

“Agh! This isn’t just any mid-rank monster!”

The fact that it could switch between far and close range on the fly told me it had quite a lot of combat experience. A rare species with special abilities, and a demon that has existed since ancient times... It had to be about level 82 or so. But this was no time to be making such calm observations. The black clump from earlier was beginning to change shape. A giant, eel-like thing dropped next to me with a *thud*, their numbers increasing rapidly. It was an Unagi Serpent that had been summoned with its special ability. Its gaping mouth formed a round circle, and its maw full of needle-sharp teeth was honestly somewhat terrifying.

“Are you really level 80-ish? You seem higher.”

Supposedly, there were things called floor masters. There were several kinds of labyrinths, from normal ruins to locations that a big boss like the Magi Drake had turned into their own personal stronghold. Then, there were labyrinths like

this one, where it was made up of multiple floors that were managed differently, with varying floor masters taking leadership within those floors. I voiced this out loud, and Marie's voice spoke into my ear.

"If this really is the floor master, it seems far too close to the entrance. I think the reason the other teams pulled back is also because they figured Raab wasn't the floor master."

"I agree, but its magic is really strong. It might be something like a floor master, but not quite. Either way, I guess it's definitely at least a mid-boss."

The tendency to have leisurely conversations at inopportune moments was a bad habit of mine. I cared heavily about facing the unknown through combat with mysterious opponents, but my conversations with Marie were even more important. With the time that I had spent talking, I ended up being surrounded by seven of the giant eel-like monsters. They had white underbellies, and the way they wriggled their bodies coated in viscous fluids made the comparison even more apt. The many rows of legs lining their sides were kind of creepy to look at. But even as they rushed toward me and filled my vision with their form, I only braced myself for combat.

"If they're as dumb as Koopahs, there's nothing to be afraid of."

The giant Unagi Serpent snapped its maw shut, chomping down upon my tasty... illusion. Actually, I doubted it tasted like anything at all. I kicked off of the ground once more, teleporting behind the demon's back. I immediately followed up with a sharp swing at its leg of braided wires, but a shadowy phosphorescence blocked most of my attack. The level 82 barrier was nothing to scoff at, after all.



Kyaaaaaaaaaarrgh!!!

I felt a chill run down my spine as its head twisted around to face me and let out an unnerving screech. This metallic noise was actually the language of demons, and it served as a magical incantation. And so, it pointed its gnarled finger at me once more, firing a thin, string-like substance in my direction. It punctured the stone pavement where I had been standing, but I had already moved to its opposite flank.

“Yikes, Wire Shots? They’re quick and fire rapidly. It’ll be a pain to keep dodging all of those. I think I’ll try attacking a few times.”

I said so with a leisurely tone, but a giant mouth was already looming behind me. The Unagi Serpent swallowed my illusion with glee, and I gave it a sidelong glance as I began my assault on the demon. The light and dark elements clashed, but I pressed the attack to break the barrier with consecutive strikes. Black sparks shot out as I attacked what looked like its thigh repeatedly, but it didn’t let me focus solely on offense. It seemed to switch gears to close range spells. The creature rapidly fired Wire Shots, puncturing countless holes in the stone behind me. I was glad I had some distance between me and Marie so she wouldn’t have to see this. If she did, her heart would probably be pounding crazily like it did when we watched movies together. I kicked off of the Unagi Serpent’s head, then used the momentum of my spin to slice below my feet. I didn’t quite cut all the way through, but its upper jaw was removed as I landed, and its scream echoed in the room as black blood sprayed from its wound.

Hmm, that’s sharp.

I supposed that was to be expected of a sword honed by the Arkdragon and enchanted with holy magic, but I still hadn’t made any progress toward my objective. I’d been keeping up my relentless assault, but no matter how many times I attacked, the strength of the barrier and the demon’s malleable body prevented any damage. We continued to fight without making any decisive moves, but the damage to our surroundings was becoming excessive. The stone pavement was blown to smithereens, and the Unagi Serpents were ripped to shreds and sent flying away.

“This is going nowhere. If I could just get in one clean cut, I could memorize

that movement with Reprise.”

“I may have been able to make an enclosure if I could send the stone spirits your way, but it’s a bit too far. I need to protect Zera, too... Is there any way you can lead it this way?”

That was no easy task. I tried baiting it out by putting some distance between us, but the demon still didn’t try to leave its spot in the back. It was proficient in ranged attacks, so giving it space would only put me at a disadvantage. So... if pulling didn’t work, I had to try pushing. Although, I was going to have the Unagi Serpent do the pushing for me.

I already knew I couldn’t lead Raab away from its spot. But the monsters it summoned were a different story. The creature bit down on an illusion I left there as bait, only to find its master, Raab, waiting right in front of it. It was running around wildly, trying to catch me as I teleported in all directions, and even the demon wasn’t able to dodge a tackle from behind. A tremor shook the ground with a loud boom. Raab was pressed against the pillar by the monster, just as I had planned, and I immediately slicked open the Unagi Serpent’s head to keep it there as long as possible.

“Urgh!”

A wiry finger pointed in my direction, unleashing a beam toward me. But Raab only managed to open holes in its dead servant, and I was already swinging my sword downward. I swung through, cutting right through the pillar and into the demon’s leg. I couldn’t aim for the core at its chest from this height, so I had to cut down its legs first. That was why I had opted to pin it against the pillar and cut its leg while it was immobilized. One of its fibers was cut with a snapping sound, and I quickly memorized that movement with Reprise.

I see, so that’s the angle, huh? I’ll keep it up with the same speed and angle, then.

Kyaaaaaarrgh...

I continued to cut through the fibers on its legs with perfect accuracy. Then, the demon let out a voice like a scream of pain. No, that wasn’t right. As if to demonstrate that it was an incantation rather than a mere scream, mesh-patterned strings expanded from its raised hands. It seemed the demon wasn’t

aiming to kill with that spell. I realized this when the Unagi Serpent that had been leaning on Raab was locked down to the ground. Contrary to its appearance, the string was extremely resilient, and didn't tear even when the monster beneath it looked like a boneless ham.

"Magic specifically for capturing the target, huh? Looked like it was trying to counter my mobility. It's hard to read its intentions with that expression on its face. That was a close one," I commented to myself after taking cover behind a pillar some distance away.

I was able to land some solid hits earlier, but it was obvious that this wasn't going to be easy. My opponent was tough, able to set up spells on the fly, and was quick-witted to boot. The same tactics were probably not going to work again. Its pentagram darkened, and more Unagi Serpents came raining down. I had lost a great deal of stamina, while the demon only sustained minor injuries to its leg, which was already repairing itself by forming new fibers... The Unagi Serpents flopped around as they came for me, though it crossed my mind that they should've been protecting their master instead of moving away. Though, I figured they weren't very intelligent anyway, and that they could be replaced at any time. Meanwhile, I didn't have a replacement for myself at the ready. If I was defeated, my small party of three would fall apart. Sweat rolled down my face; not out of fear, but simply from a lack of remaining energy.

"I might actually have more energy left if Wridra hadn't been training me..."

"I can hear you. Thanks to this so-called comm link, I've learned how this Mind Link Chat works. You can look forward to getting so much training that you will not have the strength left to complain."

"..."

Sweat rolled down my face again, but for a different reason this time. I remembered there was another thing I had gained through this fight. I learned the most effective angle of attack, and it had been recorded in my Reprise skill's memory slot already. The battle would now be decided by how long I could keep the fight at the optimal close range. I contemplated such thoughts as I fed three Unagi Serpents my illusions.

"Marie, how much of your magic reserves do you have left?"

“About half. Keep in mind that my accuracy will degrade over time, too.”

We didn't have much room for error. With Raab being preoccupied with me, the number of monsters in the room was diminishing, but if we left the demon alone, it would start spawning loads of mobs again. That would basically spell the end for us. Luckily, our rescue mission was already pretty much complete. If we wanted to escape, we could've asked Wridra to get the two rescuees out to safety, but there was also something I was curious about. When we had checked the map earlier, everything beyond this hall was missing. It was possible that there was more unexplored territory up ahead. If that was the case, I wanted to defeat the enemy and press on rather than retreat.

“...Yeah, let's give it a shot. If it doesn't work, we'd just need to evacuate.”

“Huh? What are you planning on doing?” I was planning on capturing the demon, defeating all the mobs, and making everyone happy, of course. I relayed my plan through the Mind Link Chat, and even Wridra had an awkwardly tight smile on her face... or at least, I imagined she did.

In the room was the demon and several of the black, eel-like creatures it summoned. I couldn't sense any life in their eyes as they stared at me, motionless. They almost seemed to be smiling at me, as if they knew just how advantageous a situation they were in. After all, I had little energy left, and the Unagi Serpents guarding the demon made it hard for me to finish things quickly. And if I backed away, the demon would simply mass summon more mobs, ruining any chance I had of winning. Whether I went for the offense or defense, I couldn't see things going well for me. That meant the demon only had to launch ranged attacks at me from afar. The energy required to dodge the needles shot from its fingers would put me at an even further disadvantage. And so, I used the pillars in order to conserve as much energy as possible.

“Wow, it's like a machine gun. I wonder if it's considered a physical attack?”

“Machine...? I think you're a little too calm about this. When will you realize it's trying to kill you?” Marie spoke into my head via Mind Link Chat from her position in the distance. Of course I knew it was trying to kill me, but it didn't sound like she was too concerned about that. Now, I knew I wasn't going to be able to win on my own, so I decided to go for a different approach.

“Marie, are you ready to seal off the mobs?”

“Yes, I’ve recomposed the second structure. Activating the trap now.”

She mentioned it before, but I wondered what the “trap” she was talking about could be. Just as I turned around, my vision was filled with red. If I had to describe it, I’d say it was like a blast furnace. I’d never actually seen one before, but the sight of the blazing inferno within the walls that were even higher than the first structure was likely pretty similar. The howl of countless Koopahs screaming in unison could be heard, and I cocked my head, wondering whether such a thing should exist in an ancient labyrinth. Raab seemed to feel the same way, and its beady, inhuman eyes simply stared wordlessly. Personally, I thought just blocking off the entrance and segregating the mobs would’ve been good enough.

“Oh, so Spirit Magic was the trap you were talking about? You’ve been empowering your spirits so you could burn the monsters all at once.”

“That’s right. I had time and magic to spare, so I was making preparations all this time.”

R-Right.

It was a little out of left field, if I was being honest. Marie probably took out more enemies than I did. It just went to show why spirit magic users were so rare and valuable. Unfortunately, though, defeating the mobs was only going to gradually wear us down. We had to beat the demon that was spawning them, or it would mass summon again and we’d be back to square one.

“Okay, let’s start baiting out the demon, then.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

We were ready to wipe out the enemy, even though Marie’s magic and my energy were about halfway depleted. Although... this method would probably have been considered pretty unfair.

“Then, let’s begin,” I told them through Mind Link Chat, and the operation began. Just then, we heard white noise that indicated someone had intruded on the chat that was for party members only.

“...I am not sure if I would even call this a plan. Honestly, I am quite astonished that you can be so cheap.”

“Come on, it’s not so bad. I’d like to see just how far you outclass the rest of us every once in a while.”

As soon as the demon heard her voice, a shudder ran through its body. It seemed so full of dignified majesty with its countless minions, but it was suddenly looking around in a fluster. It may have been trembling from fear. Its wiry body made clinking noises as it walked around with long strides, its minions following close behind. Raab had finally made a move after staying in its spot in the back this entire time.

“Ah! It actually moved. You really are incredible, Wridra.”

“...I am unsure whether I should be happy about this. I feel as if I have become a hunting dog, or something along those lines.”

I couldn’t blame Wridra for feeling that way. The theory we had crafted was extremely simple, and we empathized with the demon so much that it was kind of sad. Why did such a powerful demon refuse to leave the back of the hall? If it had come out, Marie wouldn’t have been free to do as she pleased, and we wouldn’t have been able to rescue the two so easily. Even in war, the basic rule of combat was to take out the sorcerer with mysterious powers. Otherwise, you’ll keep sustaining damage, and even the biggest of warriors can be defeated. But, again, why did it refuse to leave its original spot?

It was hiding because it was afraid. Afraid of Wridra, the legendary dragon who had been protecting Marie. As if to prove this was true, the demon moved away from us as soon as Wridra showed herself from behind a wall. This was why Wridra was so disappointed, and knowing her well, I couldn’t help but feel bad for her.

“Sorry about this. But you only need to watch, like we originally agreed.” I couldn’t help but apologize, despite knowing she couldn’t hear me.

The demon made its way across the stone pavement, making noises like creaking wires with each step. I matched its movement in parallel, but it was still keeping up its long-ranged attacks. Each time it raised its fingers at me, my surroundings were riddled full of holes like a beehive in the blink of an eye. I

could see Wridra sighing behind the demon, but it didn't dare attack in her direction.

"Okay, how about we call this plan Operation Drive Fishing?"

"Oho, you would best remember this. I will drive you to your limit later on, as well."

"Are you two playing around? Don't forget, we're in the middle of executing our plan. Wridra, I need you to lead it a little more to the right. Yes, that's good, hold that position."

Now, there was an important task left for Marie. She was to use the rest of her magic reserves to completely seal the demon away. To pull this off against a demon whose level was more than double her own was an impossible task for an ordinary person. But with the staff Wridra had given her, and this...

"I'm going to apply my secondary skill. Setting Double Cast now."

In that moment, Marie gained the ability to multiply the power of her magic. Secondary skills were skills one could set with special components like magic items to give the user a boost in power. One of the slots that had been open up until this point had now been filled up. It would allow her to expend additional magic energy in exchange for incredible power, which should have come in handy in a pinch.

"Keep going straight... A little more... There, activating the final structure!"

The stone spirits that had been prepared along the ground finally made their appearance. Stone emerged from below, surrounding the demon on all sides. The walls were originally 40 centimeters thick, but they had been doubled in thickness by her Double Cast secondary skill. We had originally planned to use it to keep the mobs at bay, but we made it smaller in scope and increased the thickness and height to use it against the demon instead.

"There, it's trapped. That should give us some room to breathe."

"I don't know how long it's going to last. Don't let your guard down."

The Unagi Serpents tackled the wall as if they had gone mad, and we could hear a noise from inside the walls as if it was being chipped away with a drill.

However, the wall's durability had been increased with Wridra's blessing, so it was unlikely that it would break so easily. I immediately used Over the Road to stand atop the wall, which was a towering five meters in height. My field of view changed in an instant. The demon looked up, noticing me standing there. The improvised jail we had made for it was far too small for its giant body. It couldn't have been more than four and a half tatami mats in size. I was feeling reluctant to go in there...

"Well, I guess having a nightmare every once in a while isn't so bad. It's time for the final round in super close quarters."

The demon's beady eyes turned red like fire, and shadow blobs appeared from the pentagram ornament on its head. I casually hopped into the structure, and the duel between me and the demon had begun. My sword, which had been enchanted with holy magic, cut right through the floating shadow ball with a quick swing. I heard an Unagi Serpent screaming outside at the same time, and I figured my attack just now had ended its life somehow.

"Hm, I think it was trying to summon that thing over here. I might've potentially been crushed to death in this narrow space if I hadn't interrupted it just now." Its summoning had failed, and its game plan had been ruined. The demon's eyes bulged with rage, and it unleashed another screech like wires grinding against each other.

Kyaaaaaaaaaargh!

This was an incantation for a spell. Its fingers came loose like threads, then launched out in my direction. The missiles passed through my illusions and shot sparks into the air like shotgun blasts, drilling multiple holes into the stone wall. *Bang, bang, bang!* It continued firing in quick succession, which I evaded with illusions and teleportation, then scored a hit with my sword to its thigh. The demon's barrier was dense, and cutting through it demanded accuracy and rapid strikes. But luckily for me, we were surrounded by four walls.

My skill, Over the Road, allowed me to move to another point instantaneously, but it required me to step on something with both feet to activate. But in this confined space with walls around us, I was able to constantly stay in close quarters with my opponent. I cut through the fibers of

its thigh one by one, and the demon let out a scream each time. Or maybe that scream was the source of the demon's magic. The thought occurred to me as I sliced yet another shadow blob it produced. This may have been the first time I'd focused so intently during a fight. Getting grabbed, getting cut, and failing to interrupt its summons were some of the many conditions in which I could lose, and I had to avoid each of them and come out on top. Countless needle-shaped objects were launched at my head, but they only managed to hit the illusions I had generated. Though, dodging around wasn't going to get me any closer to my goal. I needed to cut my opponent while dodging its attacks, which demanded dexterity and accuracy. I had to be intricate and precise, but I had to remain calm and build up damage to its thigh, little by little. I honestly didn't dislike this sort of tension.

As I utilized my illusions and instantaneous movement, as well as my legs and brain, my mind gradually became clearer and clearer. Eventually, I found myself in a state of concentration where I could only think of dodging and slashing, and the purity of mind was strangely comforting. The ground shook. After getting its leg cut so many times, the demon had fallen to one knee. I was finally in a position where I could focus my attacks on the core located in its chest area. Realizing this, the demon mutated further by splitting its arms into four. Its wiry body turned even darker, its appearance now befitting of a demon. Strands of steel were launched out and rained down from above, the projectiles bouncing off of the stone walls and wreaking havoc. The walls were crumbling by the second, and little cuts appeared on my body even after evading direct shots. Rubble came down in a shower, but I repeatedly attacked the demon's chest without relenting. My only path to survival was to continue my assault. The fibers on its chest gradually began to split finely, becoming looser with each consecutive strike. The core, which was the source of its life force, finally became exposed, gleaming in a platinum splendor that seemed unfit for a demon.

You're mine!

As I reared back for a powerful swing, a wire suddenly wrapped around my neck. A flash of panic came upon me, and my heart skipped a beat. I was unable to teleport in this position or cut through the wire in such an awkward position.

Two, then three more wires joined in, as if to mock my struggle. Just then...

“You must condense time.”

My teacher’s voice reverberated in my head, and in that moment, the demon’s heart was sliced into four pieces. Raab and I both had a shocked expression on our faces. In a literal blink of an eye, a powerful vertical slash, followed by a horizontal one, had been delivered to my opponent. And strangely, the sensation in my hand felt as if I had merely cut through an apple. I was unable to move from my pose after completing the swings. The pace at which I was improving with Wridra’s sword during our training session was actually terrifying, but this felt different. My sword master had told me that I had learned to condense time without conscious thought. What if I had actually struck with extraordinary speed without realizing it? My heart beat loudly in my chest. The delayed shock hit me like a lightning bolt, as I realized I had stepped foot into a brand new world.

A world that existed in less than a split second... Just how far could I expand that world? Thinking back, my master’s teachings were all guiding me to reach this answer. I finally realized that, despite using the sword for so long, I’d only just reached the tip of the iceberg.

The very air around me wavered with a *whoosh*. The demon’s face contorted in pain and began dissolving into the air, and then there was silence...

“Well done.” A beautiful female voice spoke into my head. I could hear music with an upbeat tempo and a peaceful tone to it playing from somewhere. The level-up tune, which I hadn’t heard in some time, marked the end of the battle, and with my energy being completely depleted, I fell to the ground with my limbs splayed out. My breathing was pretty rough, but I couldn’t help it, given how hard I had just worked. I normally would’ve fled a long time ago, but maybe I had overworked myself trying to impress a certain elf girl. This seemed to be a common theme for me as of late, and I smiled at my own immaturity. Even so, it could be fun trying my best like this every once in a while, I thought to myself. Then, I noticed some faces peering down at me from above. Wridra had an amused look on her face, and Mariabelle was smiling with her staff held behind her back.

“You are a complete mess. I can hardly believe you won the battle.”

“You think so? In the stories I know, everyone usually ends up looking pretty beat up.”

The dragon grinned in response, then gestured at something with her chin. I craned my neck to look in that direction to find the demon on one knee, slowly disintegrating into dust.

“Well, I’m glad we managed to beat it.”

“Hah, hah, you say that as if you are about to fall asleep. You should know that demon is known as Elemaada Raab. It is one of the primeval beings that had been trapped within this ancient labyrinth. Look, the core is about to change.”

Cracks began to form in the glowing demon’s core. Seeing this unfamiliar scene unfold before me, I sat up without even thinking about it, and as Wridra had predicted, it began to change. The platinum radiance glowed ever brighter, and there was something about its purity that reached into my heart.

“The primeval core is completely pure. Therefore, a core without its own will will adopt the will of whoever defeated it. It appears there are some things that can only be gained within the world of condensed time.”

As Wridra spoke solemnly, she bent down and picked up the black sword from the ground. The sword floated into the air when she released it, then overlapped with the demon’s core. Then, the core poured over the weapon like mercury, forming geometrical patterns into the blade. I couldn’t turn my eyes away as the blade changed shape to add a slight curve to its tip and became reborn before my very eyes. Its color was amazingly pure, like that of a shooting star. I reached out my hand, seemingly drawn to it, and touched the transformed blade.

...Astroblade, the sword of stardust. There was an audible click, and I had obtained a new sword. And at the same time, I acquired a secondary skill for the first time in my life.

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I had defeated a powerful demon and obtained an incredibly rare weapon. I

leveled up, and I even unlocked a secondary skill. Not only that, but I felt like I'd learned new skills, too. Nobody could blame me for having the uncontrollable urge to check my newly gained abilities right away. The two we had rescued were right in front of me, looking completely exhausted, but I simply couldn't help it. I actually couldn't take it anymore. All I had to do was touch the accessory on my wrist to see everything I wanted to know.

Fidget, fidget, fidget...

But when I started to reach for it, my hand suddenly stopped. Marie the elf was squeezing my finger in the same way she sometimes pinched my cheek. My desire vanished into thin air. I could check my abilities any time, so it was best for me to save the fun for later. Yeah. I gave Marie an awkward smile, then turned back to our rescues. They were covered in sweat and looked dirty, but their eyes were shining with excitement.

"I'm glad you two seem okay. Are you hurt at all?"

"Fantastic work. I am Doula. I want to thank you for avenging my subordinates." Despite her exhausted appearance, Doula offered us a firm and rugged handshake. Her hair was red like fire, even with all the dirt, and her determined eyes were silver in color. She was obviously taller than Marie and me, and she had the air of a veteran fighter about her.

"I want to express my gratitude, too. I wiped out all the mobs twice, but I couldn't bring down that demon. I really showed you a pathetic side of me back there, huh?" Zera also seemed pretty haggard, but his handshake was strong as ever.

"Not at all. It's incredible that you two lasted an entire night against those numbers. I'm sorry we were so late to arrive."

"Don't be stupid. This might sound a bit cheesy, but I consider you guys my saviors." He smiled, but there was sincerity in his eyes. I understood why. These two were connected by a powerful bond, and if someone had saved Marie's life, I probably would've had the same look in my own eyes. Just then, we heard the sound of white noise buzzing nearby.

"Oh, that must be the boss. Here, it's your job to make a report, right?" With that, Zera produced a Magic Tool from his waist and handed it to me. This

allowed us to communicate with someone far away, and I could speak to headquarters by answering the call. I took the heavy object in my hand, then pressed the red button that would connect the call. I let out a deep breath and gazed at the four faces watching me before beginning my report.

“...This is Amethyst. We’ve successfully rescued the targets and defeated the demon.” I waited several seconds but there was no reply. I cocked my head, and then a stream of many voices suddenly spoke at once.

“Bzz... Is that true? Did you really...?!”

“No way! No goddamn way! Bzzz... Hahaha!”

“Capta... Voice... Really... Bzzz!”

The voices, mixed with static, were so loud that I almost covered my ears instinctively. Those who were listening in from headquarters probably actually did. The next voice I heard was an angry shout.

“Quiet! I told you not to crowd the line! Hm, Team Amethyst, well done on completing the mission. Those two are quite the capable fighters, and it would have been a shame to lose them.”

“Yes, I was surprised to find they had survived through the night in those circumstances. They seem absolutely exhausted, so I’ll get them to the...” Base, I was about to say, but the Magic Tool was taken from me. I looked up to find a burly man’s face, and he smiled before roughly patting my head.

“Doula and I are safe. Yes, I checked and found that the demon was level 82. A dangerous enemy, to be sure. In any case, we’re going to regroup with our squads as soon as we get some rest.”

“Hm, I would think you should prioritize your treatment, but... I will leave that up to you. I’d like to congratulate Team Amethyst again on a job well done. We will have an appropriate reward waiting for you once you return above ground.” Zera gestured to me with the speaker and smiled as if to give me his blessing.

“Oh, I forgot about our reward. There were a lot of things I wanted, so I’m looking forward to shopping once we get back.”

“This is a good opportunity for us to buy new clothes. You only have one set of presentable clothes, Kazuhiho. It can be a little embarrassing sometimes.”

Whaaat? You’re gonna say that while everyone’s listening? But Ms. Elf was deep in thought, mumbling to herself about whether or not she should have something tailor made.

“W-Well, be sure not to spend wastefully. If you’re having trouble, I can recommend some affordable... Hey, I said keep personal talk off of the line!”

Oh, he was just going along with the joke and then pointing out the punchline. I’d seen that sort of humor on TV before.

Now that the demon had been defeated, the other monsters all perished as well, the still-burning fire scattering their ashes into the air. There was a malignant air to the scenery, but we couldn’t help but laugh, for some reason. And so, Team Amethyst had successfully completed their first rescue mission. Zera and Doula had fought throughout the night, and we, too, had expended our vitality and magic to our limits. Now that we were done reporting, we just needed some food and rest.

We relocated to a spot where monster dust wouldn’t come raining down on us, then started to arrange pieces of rubble together. Once we poured some water into a pot and placed it on top, our makeshift camp was complete. We used a fire spirit to heat it since we didn’t have firewood, but it heated the pot nicely, nonetheless.

“This is a nice stove. We can even adjust the heat. I wouldn’t mind cooking on this side once in a while with this.” I poked at the fire spirit as I made my comment, and Marie looked up at me.

“But do we have enough for everyone? We only brought enough meals for three.”

“You’re right. I’m thinking we could add water and turn it into porridge. I originally made it with a lot of flavor, so I don’t think it’ll turn out too terrible. It would’ve been nice if we had some eggs, though.”

Bubbles began to rise from the bottom of the pot as the temperature of the water rose. The labyrinth here had waterways all over it, so we didn’t have

much trouble finding water. This meant cooking in the labyrinth may have been a viable option. The two we rescued were at a spot some distance away, scrubbing their bodies with a piece of cloth and glancing over at us with puzzled expressions every once in a while. I supposed it wasn't very common for people to start cooking right after vanquishing a demon.

"I did not think we would be splitting my share as well..." Wridra was glaring at me with a reproachful look, sitting on a nearby rock with her puffed up cheek resting on her hand. She was wearing gothic-style, dress-shaped heavy armor, but it allowed her to rest easily due to its wide range of motion.

"I'm sorry. I'll be sure to treat you to a very nice meal when we get back to Japan tomorrow."

"Hmph."

Uh oh, she was actually pretty upset. Despite this, she wasn't protesting anymore, so Marie and I shared a smile before starting to cook. I dug into my bag to produce some rice balls wrapped in seaweed.

"Oh, those are the ones you were making yesterday. Did you put the kakuni you got from Kaoruko in there?"

"Yeah, they're kakuni rice balls. It's kind of sloppy, but I'm gonna take these and..." I dropped them into the pot and watched the rice and seaweed soak up the water. The rice, which had absorbed the juices of the kakuni, began emitting a fragrant aroma. There was a twinkle of fascination in Wridra's eyes as she inched closer. I began mixing the pot after waiting for a bit, then tested the flavor.

"Hmm, it's good, but it's a bit lacking in seasonings. Oh, I know."

Marie gave me a questioning look as I pulled a plastic container out of my bag. I removed the lid to reveal the miso and pickled vegetables inside.

"I brought these in case we got bored of the flavors, but let me try mixing them in." I scooped some miso and dissolved it into the pot. After giving it a few good swirls, the color of the liquid turned into a light brown, and the smell of miso filled the air. I gave it another try and found that it accentuated the flavor nicely. The seasoning wasn't overbearing, either, and I suspected that the

seaweed had added flavor to the water as it stewed.

“Whoa, something smells really good... What, you guys cook your own meals instead of bringing portable rations?”

“Oh. Hi, Zera. You look refreshed.”

Zera was no longer wearing his armor and was changing into a spare shirt as he approached the fire. The portable rations he had just mentioned were the military rations soldiers always used. I'd tried one of them out of curiosity before, but I wanted to avoid those if at all possible. The dried meat was still palatable, but I really wasn't a fan of the mysterious solid object that came with it. I figured you couldn't do much about the bad taste, but it included some sort of drug. Not to mention, it was the kind that kept you up at night. How anyone could consider putting that stuff in their pot was beyond me. I nonverbally conveyed such sentiments to Marie as our eyes met, then smiled to cover it up.

Doula finally came back to join us, and I noticed she had a surprisingly cute, freckled face. Her eyebrows had a sense of strength to them, but there was something about her appearance that also gave off the impression of a young girl. She began tying her hair back as she gave me an exasperated look.

“Don't tell me you're really cooking inside a labyrinth? You should stick to portable rations unless you want to get a stomachache.”

“Military rations just don't sit well with me. I think this should be good for digestion, though.”

She let out a tired huff and dropped the issue, turning her attention to where she was going to sit down. After contemplating for a moment, she moved a rock over to sit next to Zera. The porridge began to bubble, indicating it was ready to eat. We didn't have enough bowls to go around, so we shared one per pair (aside from Wridra, who got one for herself) and began our late lunch. We let the ladies go first, and the sound of them sipping the porridge reverberated in the labyrinth. Doula, who seemed disinterested at first, got one taste of the kakuni melting in her mouth, and her eyes widened. She let out a sexy breath, then began swaying her body. It seemed she had just managed to contain a powerful impulse, and she met Zera's eyes with a glistening, girly look.

“Oh? What is it? You want me to have some? I can wait till you're done...”

Okay, okay.”

Zera opened wide and stuffed his mouth with kakuni, then froze. The fatty meat melted in his mouth even before he began chewing, spreading its savory flavor. As it dissolved, a wave of natural sweetness surged forth. There was a dynamic aspect to it characteristic of Chinese-style cooking, and it left a fragrant aftertaste that the body instinctively craved and recognized as nutritious. Quality pork, miso, and porridge mixed with seaweed. With each bite, they released a new depth of savory goodness, and he finally swallowed the medley of flavors after stimulating his appetite to its fullest. Zera slapped his own cheeks with both hands, eyes bulging in surprise.

“Oof...! This is delicious! I’ve never eaten anything like it before!”

“I can’t believe it. It’s so soft, I hardly even need to chew. Here, Zera. Open up already.” With that, Doula naturally scooped up some more porridge with the wooden spoon and brought it to Zera’s mouth. It seemed she was the type to tend to others, and I felt heat in my cheeks as I watched her wipe the porridge running down Zera’s chin with her thumb and lick the food off of her thumb.

I nodded, then asked, “Are you two married?”

Zera spit out his tea, and Doula froze with her spoon still in her mouth. Huh, maybe I was wrong. I thought for sure that they were married. Marie and I blinked at each other.

“Wh-What are you saying...? It’s way too early for that, ya fool!” Zera said, red-faced and in a fluster, but judging by how the corners of his mouth were curled up in a smile, he was far from against the idea. Seeing his reaction, Doula suddenly became quiet and continued eating, her cheeks also fading into a shade of pink. When her eyes turned up to meet Zera’s, there was a surprisingly sensual look to them. They held each other’s gaze for a while, and I was starting to feel embarrassed watching them. Not sure what to do, I turned to Marie to see if she shared the same uncomfortable feeling I was experiencing, and I found she had also turned pink with her spoon in her mouth. She looked troubled for a moment, then removed the spoon from her mouth and scooped up some kakuni with it.

“H-Here. Eat.” Marie inched the porridge toward me, and I was dumbstruck

for a moment.

No, that’s not it... I wasn’t looking at you because I wanted you to do the same thing for me...

I felt my face grow hot as such conflicted thoughts ran through my mind. I mean, I was glad, but I felt embarrassed at the same time. And as if that feeling had spread into Marie, her face turned into a brighter shade of red by the second. Her shoulders finally began to tremble, then she said in a cute, pleading voice,

“H-Hurry up... This is... embarrassing...” She looked as if she was about to cry, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I took a bite in a near-panic, but... Yeah, I could hardly taste the food in this state. I managed to tell her that it tasted good out of obligation, and she replied, “O-Okay,” without looking up. Her long ears were pink to the tips and drooping downward, looking as if steam would rise up from them any minute. She let herself be enticed by the appetizing smell of the food and began to fill her mouth with porridge with an absentminded expression. Then she realized what she was putting in her mouth, and her face turned completely red.

See? You can hardly taste the food like this.

Wridra, who was eating with fervor this entire time, looked up at the ceiling. Her brows furrowed into an odd shape from the heated atmosphere coming from both sides, which seemed to affect even the taste of the otherwise delicious food.

“It is too sweet... As if someone dumped sugar on it...” She uttered to herself, but no one was listening. Nor did they notice the tear rolling down her cheek.

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There were things called floor masters. They were the managers of labyrinths, and there existed one on each floor. Their duties included creating monsters, managing them, and stopping intruders in their tracks. The east section of the first floor had just been unlocked, and the monsters of the entire area were turned to dust at the same time. That was because we had just defeated a level 82 demon. The core of its being had transformed into a sword, which was now hanging at my waist. After receiving such a report from headquarters, the tall

man known as Zera was slowly walking with me down the hall.

“So it was one of the floor masters after all. I guess that makes sense, considering how high its level was.”

“Agreed. It was clearly in a different class than the others, and it was one of the stronger opponents I’ve faced.” I decided not to mention that, out of all of my encounters, the Magi Drake was by far the most powerful. The Magic Tool was displaying the map as I held it up, its open spaces filling up as we progressed through the unexplored area. Zera stared at it as he opened his mouth to speak.

“It really was a close call. Considering that demon’s attack range and power, it could wipe out some squads with one sweep. I warned the boss about it, but the only ones that could’ve beaten that thing are Zarish from Team Diamond and Gaston from Team Ruby.” They were likely the two that Wridra had pointed out at the camp. The youthful man and the burly, white-haired old man. They were both far beyond level 100, and I myself could tell they were even stronger than me.

“But those two would’ve just let us die. They’re an unpleasant bunch. I don’t like ‘em. In that sense, you seem like a much better choice to work with. What do you say?”

“Work with? What do you mean?” Zera grinned, then produced his Magic Tool.

“Why don’t we register on each other’s comm links? Then we could see each other’s positions and communicate directly. If you ever run into trouble, I’ll come help anytime.”

“Ah, that would be great. Please let me know if you ever need help, too.”

“Come on, don’t mention it. Though, to be honest, that’s my main goal for doing this.” Zera laughed and patted me on my shoulder. I was taken aback by his unreserved attitude, but he seemed to be the kind who had a straightforward nature. We brought each other’s Magic Tools closer together, and they became connected with a bluish-white light. This must have been the registration he had mentioned. It was probably something similar to registering as friends in an online game. The Magic Tool began blinking, as if to indicate

that the registration was complete, and Zera put it away with a satisfied expression.

“Now, if my hunch is correct, there should be... Oh, there it is.” There was a large pedestal at the end of the hall, and he casually touched the statue placed atop it. The statue then trembled, stirring up dust clouds as it began to move. My eyes grew wider as the pedestal continued to move, and then it came to a rest with a loud, heavy sound.

“This is...!”

“The path to the rest of the labyrinth. Heh, I can smell the treasure already.” There was a set of stairs leading down toward another path. I could feel a certain “something” from the depths of the darkness within. There was a distinct air to it, like an ancient breath, and the path was opened for what could be the first time in a hundred... No, a thousand years. I turned around to find Zera scratching his head with a gleeful smile on his face. Things moved quickly from there. Zera and Doula’s squadmates regrouped with us, and I watched them embrace for an emotional reunion.

“Congratulations, Captain!”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Should I arrange for the ceremony? How about a nice voyage by sea... or at a lake surrounded by greenery? You could confess your love for one another there for about a week or so.”

“S-Stop speaking such nonsense, all of you!”

Doula and Zera smacked the men on their heads, but they continued to make plans for the marriage ceremony, undisturbed. The treatment seemed incredibly rough to an outsider, but it seemed they were long accustomed to getting hit. Then, Zera approached me with a troubled expression on his face.

“You guys are the ones who opened the new path... Are you sure you’re fine with us going in first?” They had decided to join us, moving forward, and they’d already gotten approval from headquarters to press on. Although, the captains of both squads had already agreed, so they couldn’t really oppose our decision either way.

“Yes, we won’t be able to fight until we rest for a while anyway. There’s a room nearby, so we’re thinking about getting some sleep.” Even if they found something like a Magic Stone, it wasn’t really important to me, anyway. Life in Japan was my reality, and this world was just for play.

“I see... Well, come join us once you rest up. Three squads will give us more options than two. Let’s do some cooperative raid battles sometime.”

“That would be great. Though, we’re a small team, so our progress might be a bit slow.”

We shook hands and waved goodbye to each other. I placed my sword on the table. The weapon was thin and a beautiful silver in color. The occasional gleam it gave off was befitting of its name, Astroblade.

“Wow, so pretty... Do you mind if I touch it?

“Go right ahead. You know, I’ve been really curious about this sword’s capabilities and the skills I learned from leveling up.” The small room nearby was nice and clean, and was likely used as a storage for books. Such rooms were located sporadically throughout the labyrinth, maybe because the manager here had been brushing up on their ability to control demons and monsters.

“Hm, is this why you departed with the others? You have been restless for some time now.”

“It’s common practice to rest after having a meal, right? Now, let’s see...” I touched my bracelet, and my abilities were displayed before me. Marie also opened her status screen, and we both forgot to breathe momentarily.

“Whoa, I leveled up twice! That was a tough fight, after all...”

“Let’s see... Wooow, I’m 42! I can’t believe it!”

I was even more impressed by Marie’s progress. No wonder she suddenly sprang up from her chair as she read it. If I remembered correctly, she was about level 32 when we entered the labyrinth, so her level had already gone up by 10.

“Well, I don’t even know how many of them we defeated. Maybe over a hundred? And it looks like the fact that you beat a lot of them yourself instead

of indirectly had a big effect, too.”

“A-Ahh... What do I do? I’m qualified to become an Advanced Sorceress now... Yes, I need to study when I get back.” The elf girl made a fist, as if to solidify her resolve. She had lived for many more years than I had, and it seemed she’d had her life planned out much better than I did. Come to think of it, she went to a school for the wealthy and was currently on her way to becoming an Advanced Sorceress. A far cry from a rootless vagabond like me.

“That really was amazing, though. Not a lot of people can pull off something like that.”

“That was thanks to the help I got from Wridra’s staff. Direct attacks weren’t much of an option with that big of a power gap, so you could say making use of those gimmicks was the obvious approach.” Wridra smiled upon hearing Marie’s response. She watched the elf with the kind eyes of a proud teacher.

“Yes, it is important to keep striving for improvement. Supplement the areas you are lacking in, and seek greater efficiency where you are proficient. That is the essence of magic.” She patted the elf’s head, who looked a little embarrassed by the praise. Marie had conjured stone walls to lead enemies into a trap and incinerate them with efficiency. The way she secured her territory from attacks and set up a method of attack with the same method was very impressive.

“I’ve been thinking. Labyrinths are built to effectively defeat intruders. I was wondering if I could do the same thing somehow.”

“Hmm. Then maybe we could set up traps too, like falling rock trap holes. If you can expand your domain underground too, that is.”

We gazed at our ability screens as we brainstormed some ideas. As I scrolled down my own list, I noticed there was a skill I didn’t have before. Acceleration LV 1. A rather simple skill name. I also noticed there was a display for a new secondary skill, indicating that I could distribute skill points like Marie. Though, in my case, I only had one. Wridra peeked in from beside me, then said cheerily, “Ah, so you did learn it. That allows you to condense time for a set duration. I hear some humans have even achieved the ability to constantly move at twice the normal rate.”

I let out a dull, “Huh.” Abilities didn’t just spring up out of nowhere. One would need to have the potential to begin with, and they could only be seized through significant effort. I felt as if I had grasped something at the very end of the demon fight that allowed me to come out victorious in the end.

“Thank you, Wridra. You were giving me advice that time during the fight.”

“Hm, I do not know what you are referring to. Regardless, whether you are able to put it to use or not is entirely up to you.” Her obsidian eyes turned to me, and she smiled. She likely saw me as her very own student, like Marie, and was looking forward to seeing my growth. Thinking back, she may have been leading me to this point since she started her impromptu training. In that sense, I couldn’t ask for a better master.

“I wonder what I should put in my secondary skill slot... Maybe I should just go with Acceleration? But I can’t activate it without a weapon... Hmm...”

“Vitality is important in your case, so how about this Stamina skill? Actually, now that you just leveled up, why don’t you swap one out?” She was pointing at my Fishing skill.

Now wait just a minute. Yes, I get it. A Fishing skill would likely be useless when one was trying to clear a labyrinth. Even so, she needed to understand: It may not have had many chances to shine recently, but spending time fishing leisurely was an absolute blast of a time. I had tried explaining my reasoning, but the two of them just gave me an unimpressed look.

“Why are you only talkative at times like these? You sound like you’re just trying to make excuses.”

“Agreed. It is so rare to see him like this, I listened to his blabbering till the end. He must have been quite ashamed about it.”

It was no good. I was a fool to think I could convince these two women. And so, with great regret... I considered being open to the idea of swapping out my Fishing skill.

“Oh, you’re being ridiculous. Just press that confirm button already. Here, why don’t I press it for you?”

“Wait, wait, let me think about it some more. I have a lot of good memories

with that skill.”

She started pushing at my finger from behind, putting me in a state of mild panic. I even used to come to the dream world just to fish some time ago. Well, I could always swap out the skill later when I needed to, so I decided to hold off on deciding for now.

Marie touched one, then two light spirits, making them vanish with a puff of light particles. As the final light became dim, the room became just the right brightness for us to sleep. The girl placed her bag on the floor and leaned her staff against the wall, then glanced toward me. She unbuttoned her collar to reveal her clavicles and walked closer to my blanket-wrapped form. She ran her hand through her silky white hair, then snuggled up into my outstretched arms.

“Ahh, so warm... Can you scoot over a little more that way?”

She inched closer toward me and pressed her soft thighs and butt against me under the blanket, as usual. When I tried to look up to my other companion, Marie’s hand covered my eyes. I was apparently not allowed to look, since Wridra was in middle of removing her armor. After some time, I felt someone sitting down on my opposite side. Wridra wriggled her hips against me as she settled in and eventually came to rest in an adequate position. The soft breath she let out against my neck made me feel ticklish. Marie finally removed her hands from my eyes, and the dim room’s interior came into view.

“Oh, I forgot,” Wridra said suddenly, revealing her beautiful back and ample breasts as she sat back up. I closed my eyes in a hurry, but that sight was unlikely to leave my memory any time soon. It was easy to overlook, but our position was being tracked through the Magic Tool. She was likely managing that now.

“That should do it. Ahh, you are warm as always. It is quite unusual for a child like you to be able to put me to sleep.”

I was about to reply, but Marie snuggled in closer to my neck, making me forget what I was going to say. My eyes met with Wridra’s under the blankets. I gestured for her to go ahead, and she put her arms around me too. The girls of the dream world were able to travel between worlds with me by sleeping together like this. Our worlds were different to begin with, but we all shared the

desire to visit unknown lands. I found that these women were rather pragmatic, because they seemed to be getting used to the intimate physical contact. As for me, I figured it would be quite a while before I could get used to the sensation pressing against my back and the knee placed between my legs. But even such thoughts began to turn vague and distant as I laid there in the cozy warmth under the blankets. I let out a yawn, and we vanished from the ancient labyrinth.

Good night, you two.

Golden Week would be upon us once I managed to get through work tomorrow.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth, Episode 6: Hanging Out in Aomori

I slowly awoke as the morning sun hit my eyes. I didn't quite understand how exactly I was able to travel to and from the dream world. I used to think it was just a dream, and now that I knew I could visit that world freely, I wished this routine could continue on forever. The draconian was sitting up, her pale back muscles and long, black hair facing me. Her beautifully picturesque side profile had an otherworldly air to it, and her long lashes stood out all the more with her eyes closed. It made me happy to realize I was seeing a side of Wridra that no other human had seen before.

"Zzz..."

Wait a second. I thought she had awakened before me, but she was still half asleep. Her face turned in my direction, and then she tried to crawl back into bed with her eyes still closed. The voluptuous outline of her form filled my view, and I quickly closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep in a fluster.

"Nn, getting up in this world is wonderfully comfortable as usual..." she muttered, and an indescribable, hefty sensation was pressed against my cheek. Her supple skin was soft, pleasant to the touch, and smelled faintly sweet. Her arms wrapped around my head, and then I felt her breath against my hair as she continued to sleep.

Then, I realized something. The way she had me in her arms probably looked very bad from an outsider's perspective. Wridra pushed Marie's thigh off of me with her knee, making the elf girl flip over on her back without resistance. She, too, was enjoying a deep, comfortable sleep, and their steady breathing reverberated in my room. Despite the sleepy atmosphere in my room, my heart was pounding against my chest. I didn't get it. What would happen if Marie woke up in this situation? I felt like she would be incredibly upset with me, and any explanation I could give wouldn't be sufficient. I wished Marie would sleep in late, and I wanted Wridra to awaken as soon as possible. My weekday

morning was filled with quite a deal of conflict already.

The window slid open, and Wridra let out a moan as she stretched extravagantly. Her entire body was bathed in sunlight, the negligee she had just created becoming partially transparent. There were purple embroideries around her chest that invited one's imagination to run wild with thoughts of the beautiful body underneath.

"Ahh, Japan. It is quite a sunny day today."

"Wridra, please don't stretch like that in that outfit. And why don't you start wearing pajamas already? It's indecent walking around like that." Marie's cheeks were slightly puffed out, reinforcing the idea that the situation earlier would have led to big trouble.

"Hah, hah, I refuse to wear such clothing in my sleep. It would be a shame to constrict my body when I could sleep in such comfort." She laughed without even a hint of remorse. A human's sense of modesty was foreign to her, and her understanding of our common sense was only what she had learned from visiting human settlements in the past. I picked up two teacups and approached the table where the pouting elf was sitting. A pleasant blue sky could be seen through the window, indicating that it had finally stopped raining.

"How's the weather from tomorrow on?" I placed the cups on the table, and the girl glanced at me. Marie's hair was as bright as the white clouds, and her eyes were like precious gemstones. I secretly noted how attractive she looked when she was outwardly showing her emotions.

"Good. They say it's going to be sunny starting today." The weather was being reported on the TV behind me, and I could tell she was excited for the Aomori trip and view from the bullet train starting tomorrow. The ticket for the ride was on the table, and she had taken it in hand to inspect it several times. Lured by the smell of tea, Wridra came over and sat down next to the elf. The draconian had heard our conversation, but strangely, she was humming and in a good mood, despite all that complaining she had done about not being able to ride the shinkansen. Another thing that caught my attention was the jewel-like mass she had placed on the table. I'd never seen it before... What could it have been?

“Hmhm, it is a secret,” she said without looking up, and Marie and I blinked. Wridra continued to fiddle with the jewel the entire time.

“But I didn’t say anything yet... What are you making, by the way?”

Sure enough, she didn’t answer. I could see the side of her grinning face, but I only felt trouble coming from that innocent smile. Well, Wridra could probably make pretty much whatever she wanted to, and there was no point in trying to figure out what the Arkdragon was thinking. And so, I decided to go make some eggs and sausages instead. Marie also seemed to come to the conclusion that it was better to leave it be, and she started up a new conversation.

“Kazuhiho goes to work on weekdays, so it will just be us here during the day.”

“Hmm, I did not realize he actually worked. It seems all he does is play in his dreams.”

I thought I did a lot of work in my dreams, too. Though, I had fun with it, unlike my job at the company. Ahh, yesterday’s fight was a close one, and it was really exciting.

“He seems like a different person here, but that’s how he releases stress from his job.”

“They say the quiet type tends to bottle things in, but I see he uses his dreams to relieve tension.”

Y-Yeah... They weren’t wrong, so I couldn’t really say anything. But it was kind of making me sad, so I decided to give the fried egg with the broken yolk to Wridra. I scooped it onto her plate to execute my revenge.

“I usually study Japanese in this room, but you might end up being bored. Why don’t we watch anime together in the afternoon?”

“*Animay*? I have not heard of it, but I am all for any form of entertainment. Though, I am not expecting much from something made by humans.”

Oh, statements like that are called “flags” where I come from.

We were departing for Aomori tomorrow, and Marie had a sort of fascination for life in the Japanese countryside. This would serve as preparation for the trip,

so I didn't mind. As those thoughts crossed my mind, I noticed the serious look in Marie's eyes.

“Ah, I see you still don't know anything about the quality of Japanese recreation. It's not just food and hot springs. Anime is filled with beautiful art that's drawn by illustrators who put their souls into each illustration. The stories are incredible, too, but the music is what really surprised me. They reach you deep down in your heart and can make you cry involuntarily.”

It seemed that Marie's love for anime had been ignited. She went on passionately about it being an art form and a complete story within itself. But since Wridra had never seen it before, her reaction was full of question marks.

“Hah, hah, then I shall give it a proper assessment. I am no easy critic, having seen art of all times and places. Unfortunately for you, I can only foresee a future where you end up being disappointed by my evaluation.”

“You're on. Just you watch, it's going to blow away everything you've known!”

It felt as though fire was erupting in the background as the elf and draconian faced off, but the anime package presently being held between them was... a strange sight. Maybe I was imagining it, but I could almost see a fat anime character striking an intimidating pose behind Marie. In her case, anime was part of the reason she had taken up learning Japanese in the first place. I did admire her passion, but there was a part of me that recognized the fact that she was starting to see Japan with rose-colored glasses. I wondered what would have happened to their little competition. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't watch it unfold, since I had to get to work. But it soon slipped my mind, as I got called in for a meeting as soon as I punched in, was informed of a change in direction for our workflow, and had to remake some documents. Being a working adult meant that I was constantly being yanked around for this task or that task, so I doubted the idea that there was anyone who didn't get stressed out from work. Or maybe there were. But the ones I knew, at least, just made excuses to not take on any work in the first place.

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I arrived home and pushed the door to my condo open. The interior was dim,

which reminded me of a time when Marie wasn't around. That was odd; the elf girl usually came running up to me upon my return. Maybe the two of them had gone out and hadn't come home yet. As I was removing my shoes, I noticed that not only were the downlights still on, but the TV was, too.

"Oh, did they fall asleep?" I wondered aloud and walked inside. After taking two steps, I glanced to the side and nearly jumped with a start. A mountain of blankets had been constructed in the bedroom, with Marie and Wridra curled under it, their eyes round and glued to the screen.

"...What are you two doing?" I asked after a long pause, and the girl raised a finger to her lips and beckoned me over. I undid my tie and removed my jacket as I observed them, and noticed that they were in the middle of the movie we had purchased a little while back. They were right about to get to the final scene, and the cheery voice of the sisters could be heard from the TV.

"Ohhh!" Wridra leaned forward, and I could see in her eyes that she had been captivated by the story. She was so into it that she didn't even notice me coming in. When one was so drawn into a story, an interesting phenomenon would occur. They would empathize with and become connected to the characters, sharing their same emotions, such as pain, sorrow, and happiness. This was the moment they had just overcome hardships, and a pretty smile spread over the face of the dragon that was thousands of years old. I was sure Wridra used to smile just like this when she was a child. As the emotional moment passed, that uplifting tune began to play. The music was simple, but also told a story within itself. And so, the dragon's face lit up with happiness.

"Ahh, this is incredible...! I did not know such harmony could be found within this so-called anime!" And she seemed so disinterested back when she had first gotten up this morning, I thought as I started to change out of my work clothes. With the finale coming to a close and the joyous music dying down, the two removed the pile of blankets and stretched. "Ohh... This is quite wonderful. So colorful and full of emotions, with an exceptional charm to it. I was unaware the countryside of Japan was such a fantastical place..."

"Ahem. So you finally understand. Anime puts many drawings together to tell a beautiful story like that. And just so you know, they don't use magic to make it."

They sat down at the living room to discuss the movie they just saw. Marie began preparing tea with a practiced hand, so I also ended up sitting down with them. Wridra had a dreamy expression about her and let out a sigh while holding her cheeks.

“Nnn, it truly was like I was in a dream. This world struck me as constantly busy and full of trifles, but it seems there are some who still have a playful heart.”

“What do you mean? That was just a small fraction of what anime has to offer, and there are thousands of titles out there. You could watch one every day and still take years to get through them all.” Marie ran her hand through her hair with a proud expression, and Wridra found herself at a loss of words. I was surprised, too. Marie looked like she was having the time of her life as she boasted about the topic. “Oh, I’m sorry, I’ve been having so much fun here. By the way, that kakuni we had a while back was a gift from our neighbor. I’ve enjoyed other supremely rich flavors like foie gras—though, you’re probably not familiar with it.”

“What?! Impossible, you could not have received such a treat free of charge... No fair, that is not fair at all! I have been restraining myself from coming here!”

Um... What’s happening?

Wridra whined as she lay flat on the table, and Marie’s cheeks were flushed as she watched the draconian with a gleeful expression. Maybe she’d been wanting someone to brag to for a long time. Wridra was the only one who we could talk to about our secret, and she couldn’t help but think of this situation as “unfair.” I knew from experience that women tended to have a side that enjoyed boasting to others, so I quickly followed up to soften the blow.

“Um, personally, I like the world you two come from better.”

“...Yes, I do like it, as well. If only convenience stores existed there.”

Huh? Well... They didn’t. I’d actually have been disappointed if they did, and I thought being able to enjoy all the nature there was way better.

“I want soft serve, rather than smelly fish. Ahh, the one we had at lunch was so soft and delicious. I wish I also lived in Japan!”

Oh, did she have some today? I nonverbally asked Marie with a glance, and she gave me a proud look. I see. So she bragged about ice cream, too. Wridra continued to sob, then looked up at me.

That's weird, you're supposed to be the great Arkdragon, not a kitten looking for a home. But I'm sorry, I don't make enough to take care of two... Wait, aren't you someone's wife?!

She continued shooting me glances, and I really was at a loss for what to do. I slid the door open after taking a bath to find the two sitting on the bed, and Marie waved at me. As for Wridra, she seemed to be making something like she had back in the morning. Her black eyes looked at me, but she turned away as if she was still upset about earlier. I peeked in to find she was using a string of some sort, and the device was making a sizzling sound. She'd been working on it since the morning, and it made me wonder what she was planning on creating here in Japan. My curiosity was killing me, so I sat down next to her, and she whispered at me to be quiet without even looking up. She was in a state of total concentration, so Marie and I only watched silently. It looked like she was blowing magic particles into a jewel that was about the size of a 500 yen coin. She seemed to be drawing something like a circuit board for a machine. Marie and I continued to stare.

Sizzz...

Smoke rose from the device, and it seemed the precision work was done. Wridra let out a sigh of relief, then snapped the lid shut.

"Now, let us see if it works. Turck Ittshi Aap." The mysterious words were likely advanced words of the language of dragons. The phrase also served as the incantation for a spell, and the Arkdragon had the ability to cast spells by using words of the language. It almost made me forget that we were still in the Koto Ward of Japan. As we watched, a black shadow slowly appeared. It slowly appeared from midair, then landed on its feet with a plop. Its small body was covered in black fur, and it had a long tail. When it let out a small meow, Marie's eyes widened.

"Ah! A cat... I mean, a familiar! You can call one even in this world?"

"It would normally be impossible. After all, there is no underlying mechanism

that allows for magic to be completed here, but with an artificial core like this one, it is a different story.” Wridra grinned as she rubbed the black cat’s chin. Marie couldn’t help but get closer, and the cat turned toward her and sniffed her finger. It took its time smelling Marie, then let out a satisfied meow. It rubbed its fur against her as a sign of approval.

“Wow, it’s warm... Aren’t you a beauty? You’ve got a pretty face.” Marie had gotten used to conversing with cats. After watching her scratch the cat behind its neck, Wridra stretched and let out a yawn.

“Ahh... Of course, I did not create a familiar simply for the sake of it.” She gestured for me to come over. I was a bit anxious, but my curiosity won out. I approached her carefully, and then Wridra put her finger on my chin like she did to the cat, then tilted my face upward. Her slender finger traced along my face, then stopped behind my ear. Then, I heard a sound like some sort of suction, and my shoulders twitched in surprise. When Wridra touched the core that was on the familiar’s collar, I felt strange words being spoken into my ear.

“Communication line has been established.”

Huh...?!

The same voice reverberated from the cat’s ornament, and Marie and I looked at each other.

“Don’t tell me you made the same technology from the dream world?!”

“Hah, hah. Of course, my creations are superior to those created by humans. The effective range, sound quality, and portability are much improved.”

This was very surprising. I didn’t expect her to bring dream world technology here, and Wridra had pulled it off so easily. Then, as if in payback for all the boasting about Japan she had endured, she began to explain.

“Stealing technology is no simple task. After all, one must fully understand the structure, disassemble it, rethink its concept, and rebuild it while fulfilling all of its requirements. Now do you understand the extent of my greatness?”

I was in such a state of shock that I wasn’t registering what she was saying. Marie was in a similar state, her mouth flapping, but no words coming out.

“It’s so impressive that I don’t know what to say. So... what does this mean?”

“We can use this to talk even while I’m at work, I’m guessing.”

The girl let out an “Ah!” and picked up the cat in her arms. The cat rubbed its pink nose on her, and she laughed ticklishly.

“You’re so small, but you’re pretty amazing, aren’t you? Do you have a name?”

I could hear Marie’s whispers deep in my ear. I was starting to understand Wridra’s goal in all of this. Sure enough, she was wearing a smug look on her face when I turned around to face her.

“You will take the familiar with you as a compromise. That way, I will be able to share its sensations. I, too, will enjoy this so-called shinkansen.”

It was no wonder she was so focused on getting this done. She had given us a telephone feature, while allowing herself to enjoy the view of the trip.

“No problem. And we’ll make sure you can join us for our next trip.” She smiled, then told us how to use our new tool. You’d think Wridra was from the future, with all the tools she was making. Well, we had gotten all of our tasks out of the way. We cleared the rescue mission in the ancient labyrinth, Wridra completed preparations for the trip, and the most important part: the tasty snacks were laid out on the table.

“Our long-awaited Golden Week is finally here. Make sure you don’t oversleep from all the excitement. We’ll be heading to Aomori as soon as we wake up.”

The two raised their hands in the air with a cheer, then high fived each other on the bed.

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After making our report, the well-built man looked at us with a level of shock we’d never seen before. His name was Zera, the leader of Team Bloodstone who had become our friend after the rescue mission we had completed just the other day. The red-haired woman known as Doula was with him, and we had just recently met up with each other. The view was much different from the

previous night when we had defeated the demon.

“Huh? Do you realize how much treasure we’re finding? Are you seriously going to head back once?” Spit flew out as he spoke and gestured to the piles of Magic Stones and other spoils. It seemed the treasure room had been unlocked after defeating the demon, and they were all currently busy hauling out their findings. The squad members seemed to be absolutely thrilled as they worked.

“Yes, we have a long holiday coming up.”

Marie and I smiled as I replied, and even Doula had a tight look on her face. The thing was, the Golden Week we had been anticipating for so long was more important to us. Besides, I had already gotten Astroblade, which I suspected was the greatest treasure of all. Zera scratched his black hair, looking as if he still didn’t understand at all.

“I don’t get it. It’s like you guys don’t have any desire for anything... or you only desire something else completely. Well, we’ll take care of things here, so go enjoy your vacation.”

Then, he seemed to remember something. He brought out wrappings that were slightly bigger than the size of my fist and handed the bundle to me. When I unwrapped it, there was a turquoise gem that reminded me of the ocean.

“Here, that’s the biggest Magic Stone we found here. I worry for your future, so at least take this. I’ll send you the rest of your share once we sell off some of the goods.” With that, he pushed the item into my hands before I could even hesitate. I didn’t think someone would end up worrying for my future even in this world... Marie and I thanked him and I decided to accept it without protest. Then, the other squad members joined in the conversation.

“Oh, but aren’t you going on a long vacation for your honeymoon soon too, Captain Zera?”

“You’ve gotten enough funds with this haul. Maybe you should upgrade your trip and deepen your love with...”

The two speakers got a fist to the head, as per the usual routine. But even he seemed to enjoy the sight of the usually coolheaded Doula getting flustered. Zera put his squadmate in an arm lock, but they all seemed to be having fun.

Then, the large man pointed toward me.

“Anyway, think of that as a token of celebration. The first floor seems to have other Floor Masters, so you can go have fun until we’re done clearing them.”

“Yes, thank you. We’ll be going now!”

We said our goodbyes, and then I activated my long-distance movement skill: Trayn, the Journey’s Guide. Marie held on to me as we fell into a world one layer beneath, plunging us into darkness.

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Dazzling sunlight peered in from the sides of the curtains, hinting that this fine weather would go on for some time longer. Marie and the black cat were sitting in front of the TV and watching the weather report. The program stated that the maximum temperature for the day in Tokyo was twenty-two degrees and eighteen degrees in Aomori. Mariabelle the elf was wearing a subdued, green one-piece with cotton long sleeves that were appropriate for the spring season. If she wore high socks with matching stripes, she’d look even more like she came from a fantasy world. The black cat sitting next to her was a resident of another world, too. It was no ordinary cat, but a familiar, and Wridra was its master. I was told its appearance was such that it could easily blend in for our trip, and that Wridra could share its consciousness and perceptions.

Marie turned toward me and said, “What a strange feeling. I’ve been looking forward to this for so long, and it’s finally happening.” I understood how she felt. The wait was so long that I was a bit taken aback now that it had begun. Was it really happening? I knew the appropriate answer to that question.

“Well then, ladies, let us begin our trip. Please take my hand.”

In response, Marie’s somewhat-absentminded look turned into a smile. The black cat stood up from her lap, and Marie placed her slender hand in mine.

“My, how lovely. I think attending to me like this suits you.”

“Hm, I’m not sure how I feel about that. Actually, having people attend to you suits you, too. That’s a compliment, of course.” She acted indignant in response to my comment, and I proceeded to check and make sure all the doors were locked. I turned off the TV, and we left the room. The black cat stepped out of

the front door, and we were greeted by sunny weather when we followed.

Our trip would last for two nights and three days, and our luggage was mostly just our clothes. The shoes that I was also carrying in the bag weren't heavy enough to suppress my light footsteps. As we exited the front door and descended the stairs, Marie started humming a popular song that was perfect for going on trips. It was the song she had sung with the dragon when we went on that trip near the city. The cat walked near our feet as if to play with us, which I found adorable.

"It doesn't feel like we're going on a trip unless I hear this song."

"I have to admit, it does feel like we're officially starting our vacation, thanks to that song. Though, it looks like Wridra is sad that she can't sing along too."

The cat meowed in protest. Its pouty-looking face was very un-cat-like, which made the elf girl giggle in reaction.

Tokyo Station... It was around seven in the morning, and there were many travelers around us. Tokyo Station's layout was quite complicated, and the flow of pedestrian traffic made it easy to get lost. I somehow managed to enter the gate to the platform for the shinkansen heading northeast, then turned to Marie. She was carrying a black-lacquered mesh basket, so she seemed to be having a bit of trouble getting through. I gestured an offer to hold it for her, but she shook her head, so I figured she could handle it. The black cat was inside the basket, meowing softly. I held her hand so we wouldn't get separated and decided to stop by the nearby shops to keep her entertained. We arrived at a shop with a sign that was brighter than the rest, and her eyes widened.

"Wow, so many bentos!"

"Beautiful scenery and delicious food are essential for long trips. Why don't we pick a drink and a bento?"

The boxed meals were tightly arranged in rows, each of them unique in appearance. One was packed with seafood, another featured appetizing sirloin, while another had chicken covered in tartar sauce. The colorful variety of simmered and pickled dishes were sure to catch the eyes of travelers, and the containers themselves were distinct, as well.

“So much variety! Which one should we pick...? What do you think, Wridra? We need to figure out which one is the most delicious.”



“No need to overthink it. Well, go ahead and take your time.” The girl groaned as she and the cat deliberated over her options, the latter meowing occasionally from inside the basket. A small black paw reached out from the basket, pointing at one of the boxes.

“Not that one. I’ve heard these character-themed types don’t taste as good. How about this one? The egg is yellow and pretty.”

The cat meowed as if to argue that the two of them should’ve been prioritizing taste over aesthetics. I was impressed by how they could communicate even without words. I couldn’t help but observe them with great interest as I drank tea from my plastic bottle. Then, the girl turned around to shoot me a look.

“Why are you sitting there relaxing? You need to understand that the good ones have a tendency to sell out before the others. If you don’t hurry, you’ll end up with just tea for your meal.”

“Ah, then I’ll take this shumai bento. Looks like it’s the last one left.” I picked it up, then heard an “Ah!” and a “Mew!”

“Oh, were you planning on getting this one? I don’t mind switching.”

“I-It’s fine! We have plenty of other candidates. That one was the weakest option out of all of them anyway.” The elf girl and cat pointed at me dramatically.

R-Right. I was fine with that. It seemed the shumai bento was the weakest of the elite four. I felt bad for it, so I decided to savor it later.

So, after spending a lot of time deciding on their boxed lunch, they ended up choosing a Makunouchi bento. The colorful simmered dishes, takikomi rice, and other side dishes divided by compartments seemed to fit the needs of both Marie and the cat. The elf girl’s satisfied look seemed to indicate that they had chosen the best possible option. They peeked into the paper bag from time to time, occasionally glancing at my bento and grinning.

Huh, I guess I lost. I guess you just couldn’t beat the Makunouchi bento, my shumai bento. I silently admitted defeat as we slowly made our way up the stairs.

The Tokyo Station platform was surprisingly warm and sunny for May, but the weather report stated that it would drop by about four degrees by the time we'd arrive at Aomori. Even the prestigious spirit sorceress gawked in awe at the sight that awaited us. There was the shinkansen Hayabusa, showing off its deep emerald-blue color like a tropical ocean.

“W-Wooow, it’s so big! This is a shinkansen?!”

“Yup, it’s the fastest vehicle around, proudly made by Japan. Wait, maybe it’s not the fastest anymore? Anyway, it’s a really technically advanced vehicle.” I had shown her a video of it before, but seeing the real deal in person was a different story. Its aerodynamic form reminded me of rides at a theme park, and the neo-futuristic design was exciting to behold. But seeing the way the two of them were frozen in place, it was possible that they were a bit intimidated by it. I pointed at the vehicle and said, “We still have some time, so why don’t we walk up to the front?”

“Yes, let’s! Wooow, this is so incredible! I have a feeling it’s going to be very fast.” It seemed she was looking forward to it. She held the cat mesh basket in both hands, looking around curiously as she followed behind me. The bullet train obviously looked best at the front, and there was a strange charm to it. Its distinctly modern and curved lines gave the impression that an incredible amount of advanced technology went into its design. The other two took in Hayabusa’s glory, mouths agape.

“Such beautiful curves! Oh, is this the highest rank of trains? They must eventually evolve into this once they gain enough experience.”

“Not exactly. This is Hayabusa, a vehicle specifically made for long-distance travel that’s going to take a certain cute elf all the way to Aomori.” I squeezed Marie’s hand as I explained, and her eyes lit up. We were heading to Aomori on this thing. It seemed to finally be sinking in. We took our time looking at the shiny exterior of our ride as we walked. I noted how it managed to be functional yet aesthetically pleasing, and the faint vibrations it gave off could be felt through the platform. The cat also had its mouth wide open, overwhelmed by the train’s sheer presence.

“This is where we get on, right? I wonder how the interior looks.”

“You’ll see once we’re inside. Let’s find out, shall we?”

An announcement in both English and Japanese played through the speakers as we entered through a nearby door. The sounds from the platform immediately quieted down, and we were greeted with an elegant interior with wooden accents. The elf and the cat glanced around, seemingly noting the distinct smell in the air, and we continued onward as I led Marie by the hand. There, we found the first class green seats, with a soft light coming in through the roof of the car. The others widened their eyes in surprise again as they took in the neat rows of seats.

“Our seat is over there. Watch your step.”

“So this is what it’s like inside... The high-rank trains really are a class of their own.”

The seats were subdued in color, as well, and I obviously let Marie take the window seat. We could still only see the station platform, but Marie would have a nice view once we got going. As soon as she sat down, she turned to me and exclaimed, “It’s so fluffy!”

Seeing how she was enjoying it, I was glad that I decided to splurge a little. There was actually another class above our tickets, but this was the best I could do with my income. I figured I would be able to consider it once I got a more stable income at some point down the road. I placed our luggage on the racks above us and put the cat’s basket on the girl’s lap.

“Stay quiet for a while, Wridra,” I whispered through the mesh, and she responded with a meow. Even the cat’s eyes were bright with excitement. I figured shinkansens were designed to entertain their passengers. The tone of the announcements was calm, and the vibrations were quiet, but there was a definite sense of excitement in the air. Marie seemed to feel it too, her cheeks slightly flushed with anticipation.

“This thing goes very fast, right? How fast would you say it is, compared to an animal?”

“I’d say it’s like a falcon. That’s probably where the name Hayabusa came from.” She had a curious expression on her face, so I looked up a peregrine falcon on my phone and showed her.

In the meantime, the time for departure was nearing. All the passengers were now inside, and an onboard announcement informed us that we would be departing soon. Maybe I was nervous, because I could feel sweat in my palms as I closed my hand, and I thought I could even hear the sound of my heart beating. The clean, well-lit platform began moving away, and I saw the bento shop pass by, leaving Tokyo Station behind us. A group of buildings in sunny weather could be seen through the window, and the girl let out a surprised noise.

“Wow, wow! So pretty! Look, all the buildings look so nice.”

The blue sky was reflected on the giant buildings, making me appreciate how nice the weather was today. A cheery tune played over the speakers, followed by another announcement. As it went over the train schedule for the day, I noticed there was another train running below us. There were railroads below and above us, and the other two looked quite adorable looking up with a dumbfounded expression. But as they were enjoying the scenery, the interior suddenly became plunged into darkness.

“Oh, I can’t see anymore...”

“We went underground. We’ll be back out soon.”

“You know, this sort of reminds me of your Trayn, the Journey’s Guide. I wonder if they’re related somehow.”

I wasn’t sure, to be honest. I did have a similar skill in the dream world, but I doubted that was somehow affected by things in Japan.

“Then maybe my Trayn will also have passenger seats once I raise it to max level.”

“Yes, you should give it a try. Then we could enjoy our travels in leisure. Oh, and you should upgrade it so it can travel above ground.”

Huh, I was only joking. She responded pretty positively to the idea, making me wonder how I was going to ask for such a thing from the god of travel. The bullet train came back above ground, and the scenery shifted from skyscrapers to residential buildings. The view passed by rapidly, the pace so quick that Marie had a blank look on her face.

“Ahhh, it’s so fast... The view changes so quickly... This is pretty different from riding a car.”

“I like taking it slow with cars, too. There was a thing called sleeper trains up until a little while ago, where people slept while traveling.”

She listened with great interest, and I started preparing the bento and tea for her. The cat’s pink nose peeked out of the mesh basket and twitched, and it was time for our late breakfast. Marie had chosen a Makunouchi bento, while I had a shumai bento. With the excitingly luxurious shinkansen, clear blue sky, and the beautiful Marie beside me, this was quite a high-quality way for me to spend my time. So much so that it made me think not choosing a higher-class ticket didn’t really matter. We pulled our chopsticks apart with a snap, leaned in close, and whispered “Itadakimasu” to each other. Seeing them from up close, her large eyes were a vivid and pale purple in color.

So, the bullet train had finally started moving. We heard a meow, as if to remind us of the cat’s presence, and Marie and I laughed.

“Mmm, this gentle taste is very Japanese. Would you like some too, kitty?” Marie brought the food closer, and the cat opened its small mouth greedily, promptly chewing away at the fried shrimp. It wasn’t something that should have been fed to a normal cat, of course, but this was a familiar and wouldn’t have technically been classified as a cat, so it shouldn’t have been a problem... Probably. We passed through another tunnel to find fields of farmland under a blue sky, revealing a bright view of fresh verdure. This seemed to be a completely new sight to the both of them, and they momentarily stopped eating.

“Marie, try this one too.” Her purple eyes widened when I gave her the shumai as she turned around, and she brushed her fingers through her hair and opened her mouth adorably. She mumbled “Yummy” with a mouthful of the shumai with soy sauce, and I felt a strange sense of happiness.

Good for you, shumai. You weren’t part of the elite four for nothing.

The cat chewed on pieces of food that had been cut smaller for it, and the two only stopped eating whenever a beautiful view occasionally popped up. The sight seen through the window passed by at an incredible speed. Still, we

were enjoying our trip in leisure inside the train.

I could feel us gradually moving at faster speeds. Hayabusa seemed to be accelerating toward its maximum speed of 320 kilometers per hour, and Marie squeezed my hand with more strength as the speed increased. I looked over to see if she was okay and found her shaking her head, tears welling up slightly in her eyes.

“This is... pretty scary... Can I... hold on to you?”

The elf had clearly never experienced such speeds before, and she seemed to be afraid. I moved the arm rest between us out of the way and gestured for her to go ahead, and in response, she clung onto my arm without hesitation.

“Stay still, okay...? Eep... I think I’m getting dizzy...” I felt a bit bashful about having such an adorable girl clinging on with both arms around me. That being said, she looked pretty cute when she was scared, too. She usually put up a tough front... Wait, did she? Marie was full of emotions when we watched movies together, and she’d been acting rather precocious as of late, so I wasn’t so sure anymore.

Although, I wondered what she was so afraid of. The bullet train was indeed fast, but the interior was very stable, with minimal shaking. I patted her on the back for a while, but then I finally realized what the issue was. She wasn’t used to the scenery going by so quickly, and that had spooked her. I noticed she had calmed down a bit as she squeezed her eyes shut. She finally relaxed her hold on me, then looked up with a sigh of relief. Her face was still somewhat pale, though.

“I’m sorry for bothering you... I feel a little better now.”

“Ah, so warm. But I’d prefer it if you were a little closer.”

She reacted with a “Huh?” and tried to pull away, but I brought her in closer. I held her in our usual sleeping position with her head resting against my chest, and I heard her softly say, “We’re in public...”

“I hear Aomori is cold, so it might be just the right temperature if we stay like this.”

“You’re so silly...”

She seemed troubled at first, but eventually gave in and leaned on me. I felt her relax her weight against me and drew her in even closer. As I held her slender body, softly patting her on the back, I felt her breathing in a relaxed, rhythmic pattern, almost as if she had fallen asleep.

“I already know how stubborn you get at times like this. Then, before I know it, you make me feel better. I was well-known for hating humans, you know?” she said in a pouting tone with her head still against my chest. I was well aware of how much she loathed humans. Somehow, it almost felt as if there was a tone of apology in her voice.

“Of course I know that. You blew me to smithereens the first time we met. That’s why I learned my lesson and decided to capture you like this first.”

“Oh, I’m captured now, am I? Well, aren’t you a dastardly human. I really like the way you smell. So, unfortunately for me, I didn’t even notice I’d been captured.”

Her pale purple eyes began to close. It seemed listening to my heartbeat was making her sleepy. Maybe I was only able to say what I’d said earlier because she was on the brink of falling asleep. Her arm gradually drooped down, and then she fell into a slumber. Seeing her peaceful expression made me smile. I noticed how much I seemed to like watching her sleeping face as I pulled a blanket over her. Moreover, I probably just liked seeing her face free from worry. Suddenly, I heard scratching noises from the mesh basket. I looked down to find the cat looking up at me, its expression seeming to portray dissatisfaction for the drab view from down there. Well, maybe we could get away with it for just a little while. I opened the basket lid, and the cat slid in under the blanket. I felt it climb up my knees until it seemed to have decided on a sleeping spot. It circled around a few times, and then the bulge in the blanket sank down. Seeing this, I whispered, “Good night, you two. We’ll be in Aomori when you wake up.”

The small meow I heard almost sounded like a human had responded. I patted its fluffy fur as the shinkansen entered another tunnel. The windows were somewhat small, so I was worried about whether the others would be able to enjoy the trip or not. But Marie had been excitedly pressing up against the window without seeming to mind. The sleeping cat also looked adorable, all

curled up in the blanket with its head poking out.

I would be returning to the countryside in Aomori soon. I had lived in Tokyo up until the higher grades of elementary school, then lived with my grandfather in Aomori until I became a working adult. Thinking back, I thought my personality hadn't really developed until I moved to Aomori. That just went to show just how little there was for me to gain in Tokyo. There was a strange loneliness to the big city, and the sights were constantly changing. In fact, the views I remembered from my youth were all gone by now. Likewise, my memories from childhood were growing faint, and I felt as if they would disappear completely someday. I could hardly remember my own mother's face.

We continued through the tunnel, and I could see my own face in the reflection of the black window. A young adult that had only cared about the dream world, neglecting reality all the while. Yet, I felt as if the arrival of the elf from another world had begun to change me. As she lived freely and without worries, I made more and more new memories with her. A clear, blue sky appeared with a whoosh. I originally thought the windows were small, but they looked quite beautiful now. I observed the mountains flourishing with greenery in the distance as I enjoyed the warmth coming from the elf and cat.

Aomori Prefecture, Hirosaki City. The window creaked as I slid it up, letting in the air that was unexpectedly warm for the season, but still colder than Tokyo's, into the bus. The old bus slowly moved forward in the sunlight, and the black cat peered out of the window.

"Behave now. Come on, sit over here."

The cat meowed as if to say it was fine, but the girl didn't listen. She lifted the cat to place it on her lap, then looked at the view outside the window. There were no skyscrapers to be seen, or any buildings at all, for that matter. Farmlands and orchards spread out as far as the eye could see, and the elf excitedly proclaimed, "The sky is so nice and big!"

There were many tourists at the stations at this time of year, but few passengers could be found this far out. Thankfully, this meant it was less likely for others to get upset even if we got a little noisy. The towns and buses around

here had an old-school feel to them, and I felt like I had gone back to the Showa era amongst the pervasive sense of nostalgia.

“This place is so different from the Koto Ward. Not just the scenery, but the air feels calmer here.”

“True, the night and the air in the city feels more restless. See those mountains in the distance? The farmland stretches all the way out there.” The girl and the cat turned around in unison, incredulous. Even as a cat, Wridra and the elf were like sisters.

“Hehe, it can’t be. You couldn’t possibly eat all the food that would be produced.” The girl laughed, saying everyone’s stomachs would burst from all that food, but Japan’s population was actually high enough to consume it all. As I explained that the food was distributed down to the supermarkets near my place, the bus took a slow curve along the road. We finally got through the pass, and mountains topped with snow could be seen past the woods.

“Oooh!” Our conversation was forgotten as we took in the impressive view. Which was understandable, considering the highest mountain of Aomori, Mount Iwaki had revealed itself. “It looks amazing. The top is all jagged and white with snow. The air has gotten a lot colder. Maybe it’s always cold up there?”

“Are you okay with the cold, Marie? If you are, we could come down here in the winter to go skiing.”

“Skee-ing?” they both seemed to ask as they looked up at me. People often said that cats would curl up under kotatus, but I wondered if that was the case for familiars and elves, too. While I thought about it, the bus moved along the route to Mount Iwaki. Seeing it again really did make me feel nostalgic. The sight of it growing bigger as we approached reminded me of when I was a child. I was in my grandfather’s car when I first saw Mount Iwaki, and I couldn’t help but yell in surprise when it appeared seemingly out of nowhere. I was quite worn out then, and it had been some time since I’d even heard my own voice, so I vividly remembered being drawn to the grand sight before me. My grandfather had turned around and smiled kindly, and I thought I remembered him reaching over to hand me a sweet snack. Just then, I smelled something

sweet near my mouth. I looked to find Marie holding out some chocolate, her eyes telling me to open wide. I took a bite and tasted a strawberry flavor that seemed like it would be popular with kids, and the fresh mountain air made it taste all the better. The cat ate from Marie's hand and let out a satisfied meow.

"I like this Mount Iwaki. The mountain where you grew up is very beautiful."

"Haha, I didn't actually grow up on the mountains. Well, maybe you could say that."

The coating of snow made it look similar to Mount Fuji, so it was also known as Tsugaru Fuji. I wanted to take her to see Japan's great mountain someday, too. The bus moved along slowly, but it finally sped up when we reached a downward slope. Marie's silky white hair billowed as she let out a surprised noise at the wide view of farmland and orchards below.

Now that we had left the bus, we only had our own two feet to rely on. There were few cars driving by, and the road was a straight line surrounded by farmland. There were houses between plots of plowed fields, with woods on the other side of greenhouses, and mountains even further beyond.

"Ahh, so much open space! I love it! I feel so free here."

The cat cried as if to agree, following after Marie. I understood how she felt. There was such a laid-back air to this place, with scenery that had remained unchanged for a long time. The elf girl stretched as she walked in front of me, and the beautiful sky around her looked healthier than usual. She had such pale, nearly translucent skin. But the sunlight suited the half-fairy elf very well. Her steps were light and accustomed to the hills and fields, and the lively atmosphere about her likely had something to do with it. I was staring at her, lost in my thoughts, when she suddenly stopped walking, waiting for me to catch up. When I finally walked up to her, she flashed me a dazzling smile.

"Hehe, you seem happy too. Does it feel good to be back?"

"Now that I'm here, I have to say it does. I'm finally realizing how amazing it was that I used to walk to school with sights like these." We turned around together to face the enormous, snow-peaked mountain. It was like seeing the Alps... Well, maybe that was going a bit far. "I guess it goes to show that you can get used to anything when it becomes part of your daily life."

“Yes, some things you don’t realize until you take a step back to reflect on it.”

I was surprised I was even able to attend school in a place like this. I was buffeted by powerful winds in the winter, and I remembered shielding my face with both hands and seeing greenhouses flapping around loudly.

“So, where is your grandfather’s house?” I pointed toward the forest, and the elf and cat widened their eyes. The road paved with asphalt came to an end, the rest of it being a path of nature... In other words, dirt. The gentle slope ahead was lined with paths of greenery, and the girl was flush with excitement, rather than being intimidated by it. It seemed traversing the bumpy path was no issue for the elf that had grown up in a forest. In fact, my pace was slower. I’d gotten out of shape from life in the city. As we walked along the path that was just wide enough for a mini truck, we finally found signs of civilization. Wooden fences enclosed a perimeter with animals, which were sticking their heads into fresh verdure.

“Ah, a cow! Look, it’s just like the cows on milk cartons!” the girl cried excitedly, and the brown cow paused its grass chewing. Maybe it was intrigued by the rare visitor, because it slowly walked over to us as it resumed chewing again. “Oh, oh! So big! Wridra, you’re going to get eaten!”

The black cat had been moving closer at first, but ran away with a startled expression as soon as the cow took a whiff with its big nose.

“Ah, so he finally got himself some cows too. My grandpa must still be healthy for his age.” I led Marie by the hand and continued walking, and the cow followed us from the other side of the fence. The elf seemed to be getting used to its large body, or maybe she was drawn to its pretty, beady eyes, because she tentatively reached out a hand. The cow let out a big puff of air from its nose, then licked her hand down to the wrist with a big, pink tongue.

“Nyaa! That tickles... Ahaha, that tickles!” The cow seemed to enjoy the taste, because it kept licking the elf repeatedly, the bell around its neck ringing with the motion. Apparently, the noise had caught its owner’s attention.

“Ahh, is that you, Kazuhiro? You’ve grown so big.”

I turned toward the aged voice to find an old man in work clothes holding a bucket in his hand. He stood straight-backed despite his small frame, his face

full of wrinkles as he smiled.

“It’s been a while, Grandpa.”

“Yes, I’m glad you’re here. Whoa!” He dropped the bucket upon seeing Marie’s face peek out from my side. The old man stopped the bucket from rolling away, blinking his widened eyes repeatedly at the girl.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Mariabelle. I’m sorry to bother you while you’re busy.” She bowed her head, a little nervous. Her polite greeting and eloquent Japanese seemed to put him at ease, his shoulders relaxing visibly. I couldn’t help but laugh upon seeing his sigh of relief.

“Yes, hello. Thank you for coming out so far. So, you must be the girl Kazuhiro wanted to bring along with him.”

“Yes, I wanted to show her what life in the country is like. We thought we could take you up on your hospitality since I had some time off...” In response, he slapped my shoulder with unexpectedly strong arms.

“Haha, what are you getting so uptight about? I thought you’d be a little less modest now that you’re an adult. Hey, Hanako! Don’t be licking our guests now.”

Marie twitched and spun around to find Hanako the cow getting carried away, trying to lick the elf’s hair. Marie let out a yelp and leapt up in surprise, and I laughed with my grandpa for the first time in a while. Then, we all began walking toward my grandfather’s house. Chickens were roaming about, and the girl dodged out of their way as she asked, “Hanako is such a cute name. Can I call her Hana?”

“Huh, there’s a black cat following you, too. I wonder where it came from... But sure, you can call her whatever you want.”

He placed his bucket at the entrance of the house, then opened the poorly fitted door. As he removed his shoes, he said as if speaking to himself, “I was surprised to see a girl with such pretty, pretty hair. I thought Kazuhiro brought over a fairy from a dream world or something.”

His offhanded comment made us freeze in place. Marie turned to me with an expression that said, “*Does he know?*” and I shook my head, indicating that he

shouldn't have. I'd always thought my grandpa could be strangely sharp at times. He looked at us with a puzzled expression, but then his face softened as he laughed.

"I guess that was a strange comment. It's just that the boy used to love sleeping. He always seemed so comfortable whenever he did. My wife and I would always wonder if he was playing in his dream world."

With that, he led us to a household Buddhist altar. We entered the sunlit tatami-floored room and put our hands together. Marie seemed to understand the custom without explanation, and she quietly let the smell of incense surround her.

My grandpa wiped the cat's feet, then said to us from behind with a cheery voice, "You know, I thought you were going to bring your wife today."

Our eyes snapped open. In reaction to the word "wife," I glanced at the girl beside me. Marie was looking at me, hands still together, and our cheeks began to grow hotter. Her wide-open eyes were beautiful, and her lips were scrunched into squiggles, but she didn't deny it. She was probably thinking the same thing. We only stared at each other without saying anything, so my grandpa spoke up instead.

"What's up with you two? Seems like you're not so against the idea. Aha, you're free to quit your job and succeed my farm, if you want." He lifted the cat with his wrinkled, tan arm, and it meowed in response. It almost sounded like the cat was agreeing, but we were having trouble coming up with a reply.

The elf beckoned me over, and I followed her to the back of the house. There was a distinct smell in the house I grew up in, and the creaking hallways and long afternoon shadows all invoked a sense of nostalgia. The cat was already walking around as if it owned the place, and it looked at us with a cool expression. We walked for a little while, and then the elf and the cat both stopped in front of an average-looking door.

"What is it...?"

"Shh, stay quiet. I have a feeling it's here."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but the two of them were looking

at me with serious expressions, as if we were in the middle of a mission. Then, I looked at the old door again, and it came to me.

“Ohh... Then we should definitely stay quiet. I’d open it, but it might hide if it sees an adult.”

“You think so? But we finally found one...” She looked disappointed, and I figured this was the influence of an anime she had watched. It was a story in which mysterious creatures lived inside an old house. She was beginning to get teary-eyed, and I raised a finger in front of her nose.

“It should be fine if it’s just you two. You’re not actually a child, but they’re not smart enough to know that. Go on, try opening it quietly.”

After some hesitation, she hardened her resolve. She nodded, then put her hand on the door and slid it open quietly. It creaked lightly as it opened to reveal a dark, ordinary closet. She looked disappointed, but I gently nudged her from behind to get her inside the closet. Then, I crouched down and whispered with my face close to hers.

“Would you be interested to know there’s a secret passageway here?”

“Y-Yes! Really? Where?”

One comment was all I needed to get her curiosity running wild. She and the cat were dying to know more, tapping their feet out of excitement. I gestured for them to find it, and their adventure began. They opened shelves, peeked into pots, and eventually, the cat meowed. The girl turned around to find the cat sitting on a chest of drawers shaped like a staircase. Marie turned to me, as if to ask if she could climb on, and I gestured for her to go ahead. This sort of thing wasn’t uncommon in old houses. These staircases were there to provide a path to the attic. She carefully opened the hidden door, and they poked their heads into the dim attic.

“Don’t let your guard down, Wridra. I’m sure it’s in here... Ah!”

Startled, they withdrew their heads, and the door leading to the attic was closed with a click. I looked up, wondering what happened, and heard a scurrying noise from above. They must have found a mouse or something. Or maybe it was a mysterious creature that could only be seen by children.

“There was something up there! But I’m too scared to look again. So now... I’m counting on you, kitty.” The cat shook its head vehemently, squirming to escape from Marie’s hold. As they were enjoying their little adventure, my grandfather called out to let us know it was supper time.

“Oh, fine. Let’s come back again when it’s bright out. We’ll make a tactical retreat for now.” The two nodded to each other, then cheerfully called out to let him know we were on the way. I thought to myself how much I enjoyed Marie’s company and joined them in said tactical retreat, but I had a feeling they were more focused on the food they were about to eat.

Our first meal in the countryside looked like quite the feast. My grandfather placed a clay pot upon a cooking stove, then switched it on to light the warm fire. He made broth out of kombu and saw-edged perch, then scooped them out once oil started coming out. He lined up some Chinese cabbage, green onions, tofu, and shiitake mushrooms, and added miso to the broth as it began to boil. Then, he added the ingredients on the cutting board directly into the pot.

“Is that sliced fish and shirako? I thought they weren’t in season right now...”

“Haha, you came all this way. I thought I’d give you the best food in Aomori.” With that, he flashed a charming smile.

He was a strange person, as usual, but the other ingredient he added was even more surprising. It was more vivid than the shirako, and the lustrous, collagen-filled food ingredient was...

“The foie gras of the sea, anglerfish liver. It adds a lot of depth to the soup. Mariabelle, judging by your expression, it seems this is the first time you’ve had hot pot.”

“Oh, no. I’ve had it before, but... not with fish. Doesn’t it make it smell fishy?” He grinned a wrinkled smile, then returned to the kitchen. The pot continued to boil, the smell of miso filling the air.

“Kazuhiro, do you want something to drink? I received some as a gift.”

“Oh, yes please. Is it sake?”

I helped set up the chopsticks and bowls, and the old man placed a bottle of

Japanese sake on the table with a thud. Marie and the cat looked at it with wide eyes.

“Wow, the bottle is such a pretty pink. There are pictures of cherry blossoms on it, too.”

“I was expecting the guest to be someone who could legally drink. Oh, maybe you’ll be fine if you’re not from this country?” Marie nodded awkwardly, and he laughed out loud. He scratched the white hairs on his head, then placed three glasses on the table. We each took a seat, and the clock rang as my grandfather started turning the ingredients in the bowl.

It was already seven at night. Nights came quickly out in the country.

“Well, let’s forget the minor details for today. This sake is popular with the ladies, and I wanted to open it today since you’re here.”

“It’s so nice-looking. Is it mainly for tourists?”

The clear sake was poured into each glass, and I decided to have a taste before we started eating. I poured some on my tongue to taste, then let it pass through my throat as I swallowed. It was surprisingly easy to drink as far as Japanese sake went, and it had a fruity aftertaste. The elf girl seemed to be taken aback by the fruity flavor, as well.

“Wow, it warms me from my throat down to my stomach. It goes down so easily.”

My grandpa smiled, and the pot seemed to be just about ready. He scooped plenty of food into each bowl, and we all said “Itadakimasu” in unison. Marie carefully used her chopsticks to put some food into her mouth. Her surprise was both expected and completely understandable.

“Ah...! It’s melting in my mouth!” This was, after all, anglerfish liver—foie gras of the sea. It dissolved all at once, its rich flavor that could only be found in the ocean spreading through her mouth. One could say that the flavor packed a punch. The shirako, covered in its sauce, also delivered a creamy and robust reminiscent of the sea. Marie couldn’t help but let out an “Ah!” and squirm, then swallowed, staying motionless for a moment.

“It’s delicious! Oh, I don’t know how else to say it. This is fish? How can it

have such a complex flavor? Maybe I'm imagining it, but I'm starting to think it tastes better than meat."

The girl's chopsticks continued moving, as if in search of the secret behind the flavor. I wouldn't have described her as voracious, but it almost seemed like she was lost in the taste. We enjoyed the Chinese cabbage soaked in miso and soup and the soft, fragrant shiitake, then washed them down with more sake.

"Say, Kazuhiho. Why is it that I'm not getting tired of the flavor, even though I keep eating the same thing?"

"The great thing about hot pot is that the flavor grows in depth over time. That's why you can keep enjoying it until it's empty."

"Plus, you can enjoy a fresh and crisp texture by adding more vegetables," my grandpa explained as he added more ingredients into the pot. Marie sipped the soup, then let out a warm breath. The old man had a wide smile on his face from watching the satisfied expression the elf had. Marie expressed her emotions in a candid manner, so it felt like we could enjoy the flavor with her just by watching. My grandpa slapped me on the shoulder, as if to say I'd found a keeper. Some things could be communicated without words, and we naturally smiled at each other.

After we had been drinking for some time, my grandpa said in a puzzled tone, "It seems like you two have been seeing each other for a while, but you still haven't learned Kazuhiro's name?"

"Wha? Isn't it Kazuhiho?" Marie asked with widened eyes, her cheeks a bit flush with sake.

The old man shook his finger, then corrected her saying, "Kazu, hiro." The girl shot me an accusatory look.

Oops... I forgot about that.

"Yeah, I messed up when I was setting my name. It's actually Kazuhiro."

"You misspelled your own name?! Hey, I've been calling you by the wrong name this whole time! I'm embarrassed."

She tugged at my sleeve, but in her inebriated state, she was practically

hugging me. She whispered, “Are you listening to me?” and put her chin on my shoulder... *You’re reeeally close, Ms. Mariabelle.*

“So, what would you like me to call you, Kazuhiro-san?”

My eardrums trembled, and my brain felt like it was melting from her sultry voice. Her warm body, the faint smell of alcohol, and her half-lidded eyes staring directly at me made me feel as if I was getting drunk myself.

“Ah, so she’s the flirty kind of drunk, huh? Good for you, Kazuhiro. You got yourself caught by a real beauty.”

“You aren’t listening to me, are you? I’m going to pinch your cheeks later, so prepare yourself.”

I felt myself sweating. Both of them were several times older than me, and there was nothing I could do with them both teasing me at once. Meanwhile, the black cat was eating away at the food in its bowl, narrowing its eyes as if it was about to start chuckling. Surrounded by a lavish feast and in the company of my foster parent, who I hadn’t seen in a long while, the old living room was full of laughter for some time. The cat diligently went back and forth between the food and sake, which brought on more laughter.

The elf and cat both curled up in the kotatsu after eating their fill. Though, the cat’s protruding stomach prevented it from actually curling up, and it ended up lying on its back instead. As for the elf girl, she was staring at the ceiling with a blank expression, on the verge of nodding off to sleep. She was in a state of bliss from the delicious food and drink, and we found ourselves smiling just from watching her. My grandpa placed his hand on my shoulder, wordlessly telling me to have her take a bath. It surely would have felt nice to fall asleep like this, but the clothes she liked would have ended up getting wrinkled.

“Marie, why don’t you take a bath before going to sleep?”

“Ohayyy... Umm, where is the bathroom...?” She responded with a sleepy expression, then reached out with both hands, as if asking me to pick her up. I pulled her up to her feet, causing the cat to lose its pillow and roll over onto its other side. It must have felt like its sleeping spot had suddenly vanished. Marie finally opened her eyes, which were pretty like marbles, and we walked out to the dim hallway. The cat debated whether it wanted to follow for a moment,

but it seemed to be interested in bathtubs in the rural country. It was clearly still sleepy and stretched its body before finally deciding to leave the living room. The cat tapped its claws against the glass, and my grandpa opened the door to let it out into the hallway. The hallway here was dark and lonely, but the familiar still figured Marie and I would be up ahead. Despite its heavy stomach, the cat stepped out into the darkness with light footsteps.

The poorly fitted door slid open, and there waited a large bathing area. But the dimness gave it an eerie impression, and Marie and I peered in carefully.

“You must have sweat a lot today. Make sure to sit on this chair and wash yourself thoroughly.”

“Y-Yes... But this strange atmosphere is just a little bit scary. Um...” She hesitated, as if unsure whether she should voice her concerns, then looked up to me and asked, “Ghosts won’t appear, will they...?”

Huh... She’s an elf who can control spirits. She should be way more familiar with supernatural beings than me... Despite that, she seemed pretty helpless as she said it, so I didn’t have the heart to tease her. Instead of telling her there were no ghosts, I handed her a present.

“Ah! A red... fruit?” The weighty apple had a shine to it, even in the dark changing room. It was fully ripe and gave off a faintly sweet smell. Marie and the cat widened their eyes and blinked at the sudden gift.

“It’s an Aomori apple that couldn’t be sold because it’s bruised. I heard you can put it in a bath to add a nice scent. Why don’t you two give it a try?”

When I told them as such, their eyes seemed to light up a little. It seemed their fear of ghosts was outweighed by their interest in this mysterious new bathwater additive, and the elf and cat glanced at each other, then nodded vigorously.

“And I can stay nearby if you’re still worried.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t have been scared if you’d just said so from the beginning! Would you like to join me, Wridra?”

The cat entered the bathing area instead of replying, and the girl began to remove her clothes as well. She tossed her clothes into the clothing basket,

then called out that she was ready as I waited for her. And so, the apple's aroma filled the bath, and the cat enjoyed the bath by using a wooden bucket as a tub.

"How's the temperature, you two?"

"It's just right, and the sour-sweet smell is refreshing. Hehe, I feel like this is a bit extravagant. I'm sure it would have tasted sweet and delicious."

I heard the sound of what I figured to be the apple being dropped into the water. The silence that seemed to absorb any sound was likely another thing that could only be found out here in the country. It was like nothing else existed outside of this bathing area. I could even clearly hear her breathing out, and the steam delivered a sweet scent over to me. The girl eventually began to hum, and the atmosphere of the bath became cheery. If a ghost really was there, it would have probably felt compelled to read the room and leave. I'd only ever seen one once, back when I was a child, so I assumed it wasn't around anymore. The cat joined in to the melody with meows of its own, making the song even more fun and lively.

I changed into my pajamas and returned to the hallway to find an elf girl hanging around the veranda. There was a strange sense of transience to her slender frame, but there was also what felt like a motherly air to her as she gently petted the black cat. When I saw her, I found myself immobile for some reason. It was almost as if she would vanish into thin air if I spoke to her. Her pale skin was emphasized further under the moonlight, and her hair that hung straight down to the floor was as white as silk. I didn't think about it much when I was younger, but the veranda out in the country was full of wonder. There was greenery all around us, and the wooden buildings seemed to be one with the surrounding nature. The sight of Mariabelle in this nostalgic scenery made me consider the fantasy-like charm of Japan I didn't know existed. I heard her glass cup clinking and finally found my voice.

"...You got some apple juice?"

"Yes, your grandfather gave me some earlier. Hehe, I didn't expect I'd be enjoying this after my bath. It's sour-sweet and very delicious." She gestured for me to join her. I was a little relieved to find she had accepted me without

vanishing. I sat next to her, just as she suggested, then brought up an idea.

“It’s a nice night. Would you like to take a walk with me?”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful. But I was thinking of inviting you once you got back.” She smiled charmingly, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

I reached out, and she took my hand, her fingers slipping in between my own. Then, we began walking slowly along the path in the night. There was a little bit of wind out that night. The sound of leaves rustling overhead was quite refreshing. The moonlight didn’t quite reach us in the woods, and the path of hardened dirt was a bit hard to navigate. However, it seemed this wasn’t an issue for the half-fairy elf accompanying me. She tapped a floating point of light that looked like a little firefly with her finger. After two taps, the faint illumination expanded, making it easier to watch where we were stepping. I turned around to find her smiling proudly, and she gave me a satisfied smile when I reached my hand out toward her.

“I don’t think people will notice if I keep the light this low.”

“Being able to control light spirits is really convenient, huh?”

The girl had somehow become able to control spirits even in Japan, and she had learned Japanese, a language that was said to be one of the hardest in the world to learn. Her usual demeanor made her seem almost juvenile, so I always found that gap surprising. Marie revealed another side of her while surrounded by trees. There was a mythical air to her, or rather, a quiet liveliness, like a deer one would meet in the middle of the night.

“Ah, the night is so quiet and beautiful. I wanted to thank you for bringing me with you.”

“I was worried you’d be bored out in the rural country. One thing I didn’t expect was for Wridra to join us.” The black cat scratched at my shin, as if to protest. Its eyes were shining brighter than the elf’s at night, and it meowed while hanging onto my pants.

“There’s no way I would be bored. I can’t believe how much I’ve experienced already after just a day of being here.”

“We were enjoying that hot pot for a long time. I hope you both liked it.”

“Yes, it was incredible. I’ve never eaten something with such depth of flavor. I’m sure I’ll remember it every time I hear the word ‘Aomori’ from now on.” I heard the cat meowing in the darkness in affirmation. I was glad to know they had enjoyed the hot pot to the fullest.

“Then, maybe we could make it in the labyrinth. It would warm us up, and it doesn’t take much time to prepare.” I said as such offhandedly and felt a tug on my arm. It seemed I had been pulled back by Marie when she stopped walking. I realized that both the elf and the cat were looking at me with sparkles in their eyes.

“Oh, oh, that sounds great! We should do it. We can bring the taste of Aomori into the labyrinth.” The cat meowed insistently in an attempt to convince me as such. Marie had a mystical, fairy-like air to her until just a second ago, and seeing her desperate expression left me dumbfounded. All I could do was nod in agreement.

“Then, let’s bring Japanese hot pot back with us.”

“Yaaay! Hehe, I have more to look forward to in the labyrinth now.” Marie turned to the cat with excitement, and Wridra leapt into her arms as if she had been waiting. They embraced on the road in the night, which was... a bit of a strange sight.

“My grandpa is also my cooking teacher. I’ll replicate his flavor when I make it.”

“No wonder. I felt like there was something about him that reminded me of you. Especially how he’s so aloof, but seems to know so much.” Huh, I didn’t know I was anything like my grandfather. It felt like she was telling me that I seemed older than my actual age, so I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

The sound of rustling leaves had stopped, and there were no more trees covering us overhead. Once we passed through the woods, we found the footpath stretched on ahead. We happened to look up, then raised our voices in surprise. A blanket of stars that could never have been seen in the city were glimmering in the sky, filling us with a sense of liberation that was unlike what we had felt during the day. We let out a fascinated sigh. It felt as if we were the only ones in the night. There was a sense of loneliness to that, but at the same

time, I became distinctly aware of the person whose hand I was holding. Maybe that was why... When she spoke, it felt as if her voice came from much closer than usual.

“See you later, light spirits.” The faint lights vanished, making the stars shine all the brighter. There wasn’t a single city light around us after walking toward the mountainside for some time, and she uttered, “I wonder if the era of night always looked like this.”

“Ah, you mean in the dream world. Who knows? Maybe it looked like this a long time ago.”

I remembered the day I stepped into an ancient labyrinth for the first time. An art piece depicting a tale of ancient mythology used the same dark navy as the night sky above us. We didn’t know a thing about those days, but one thing I did know was that it must have been very difficult living through those times without someone by your side, like I did now. I knew that if I let go of her hand, I would feel the same as they did. The only one among us who knew of those days was the Magi Drake, and she remained silent. I couldn’t even distinguish her from the darkness, due to the color of her fur. I heard the sound of the rustling trees again, sound finally returning to the world.

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The fusuma panel slid open. We were unfazed by the bedding laid out on the floor side by side and crawled in as if it was nothing out of the ordinary. The bedding smelled of sunlight and felt harder than what we usually slept on, but I was sure it would be comfortable for the night. I pulled the other pillow closer to me, and the elf scooted into my arm. The black cat circled around, as if deliberating where to lie down, then spotted the space between me and Marie and settled there.

“All that walking around was pretty tiring. Let’s get some rest.”

“Yes, let’s. The night was so quiet outside, all I could hear was your voices.”

We heard a meow from under the blanket, and we both laughed. She naturally placed her leg on top of mine, snuggled up to my neck, and then let out a contented sigh. The faint sour-sweet scent was likely from the apple-soaked bath she’d taken earlier. My eyelids grew heavy as I was taking in the

scent. Our breathing grew steady, consciousness beginning to fade away. We stepped foot into our dreams like we were sinking into water.

Some time later, footsteps sounded in the hallway. The old floorboards creaked with each step, and the owner of the house put his hand to the sliding door.

“Are you two still awake?”

The old man intended to ask what time the visitors were planning on waking up, but his wrinkles deepened when he slid the door open. In the silent room was a blanket covering a rather large bulge. Then, the mound slowly flattened before his eyes. All that remained was the warmth on the bedding, but the old man only smiled gently.

“Heh... Go have fun, you two.”

He slid the fusuma closed, and footsteps sounded in the aged hallway again. There was complete stillness once he left, as if the world had been covered in snow.

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I took in a deep breath, gripping the sword that was heavier than it looked. The thin blade looked like it would shatter with one solid hit, but there was an unexpected density to its construction. Breathing out through gritted teeth, I sent energy into it from the core of my body, and Astroblade began to pulsate with light.

Eeeeeee...

It sounded like a whinnying horse—no, more like the engine of a fighter plane. It greedily drew out my energy, and a single streak of light ran through the blade like a shooting star. Apparently, this signified an increase in power level by one rank. I had to lower my stance with legs slightly further than shoulder-width apart to brace myself. Firmly holding the hilt with both hands, I aimed carefully in front of me. Going through this procedure while keeping my energy at its full level took quite the effort. I touched the protrusion on the hilt like a trigger, and the shooting star was unleashed. My surroundings lit up as if it were midday for just a moment, and the flash of light disappeared toward the

rock walls in the distance, leaving a long trail behind. Moments later, I was surprised to find that the tremor was audible all the way to my area. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and let out a big sigh. The light had vanished from Astroblade, but it would return once I charged it with energy again. I decided to check out the spot where my shot landed. After walking through the dim cavern for some time, I found a fractured rock wall awaiting me. When I touched it, shards of the wall came crumbling down. Wridra and Marie looked up at me in the dark cave.

“Wow, you put a person-sized hole in the wall. Maybe the more you charge it, the stronger... or, rather, the faster it gets.”

“Hm, you will be unable to move while charging. Your specialty lies in overwhelming the opponent with quick, successive hits. This ability may not be well suited to you. Not to mention, it drains you of your vitality.”

“That’s the thing. I’m glad it doesn’t need magic to use, but I’m an amateur when it comes to manipulating energy.”

We continued discussing the trial run of Astroblade’s ability. It really helped to have users of spirit magic and sorcery with me as I tried to figure things out. When the dragon whelps waddled over to spectate, the dim caves grew somewhat lively. I’d gotten used to it by now, but I realized it wasn’t very normal to be hanging out in the Arkdragon’s den. Marie turned her pale purple eyes toward me, then parted her lips.

“Speaking of manipulating energy, monks would be the specialists in that department. It can even be used to heal, right?”

“Apparently, but I’m still a complete novice at it. I only know what someone taught me some time ago.” Monks tended to be solid in build, with a penchant for showing off their muscles. My impression was that they were kind of weird, and they liked teaching things, even though no one would ask. Maybe if they used this sword... No, they had precepts that prohibited the use of bladed weapons. Wridra had been watching the entire time, but her sudden comment threw me off guard.

“That hot pot and sake were simply incredible...”

I thought she was putting serious thought into the issue at hand, but her mind

was off in Aomori. But from the perspective of someone who had mastered magic, I understood how hot pots could've been more interesting than the Astroblade... Well, not really.

"It really was amazing. Who knew fish could have such a complex flavor?"

"Oh, are hot pots more important to you too, Marie?" She denied that they were, then went right back to excitedly talking about the trip with Wridra. How delicious the food was, how nice it felt to be there, how fast the bullet train was, and the distinct atmosphere of old Japanese houses... The topics were never-ending. Having been stuck in the cat form without a way to speak, Wridra talked as if she was making up for lost time. I was starting to grow bored, so I felt the urge to fuel the flames a bit.

"You know, there are hot springs within walking distance over there. They have a custom called touji, which is healing your mind and body in the hot springs. Apparently, a lot of people visit from afar to partake in the culture."

""Ooohhh!""

Ah! Their heads trembled vigorously. I mean, it was only our first day there, so we didn't have much time to go. The girls were so intent on exploring that they ended up just sitting under the kotatsu afterward anyway, but these women had a tendency to forget things that were inconvenient to them, so there was no point in mentioning it. Wridra turned away from me, turning her nose into the air.

"B-But... hot springs are expensive, aren't they? I'm worried about your budget."

"Heheh, don't underestimate the rural country. It's only 300 yen there. The yellow-green waters are nice to soak in. Would you like to try it when we go back?"

They agreed enthusiastically, but would a cat have even been able to enter the hot springs? We were still on a long vacation, even in the dream world, so I was mostly here to help Marie. That is, a rare structure spell was said to be contained in the ruins, and Marie hoped to upgrade her spirit magic by learning it. Though, I thought her magic was strong enough, even without an upgrade. That was why I wouldn't have been bothered at all if her research didn't end up

bearing any fruit. I decided to go fishing at a nearby river or something while Marie worked hard...

“Fool, you intend to play around even in your dreams? Now, it is time to train your swordsmanship before you grow fat from eating all that food. You can practice with the new weapon you found.”

It was naive of me to think there was a possibility that this wouldn't happen. Wridra was a cute little cat in the other world, but this was what I had to deal with as soon as we came back. And so, Marie enjoyed her studying while I sweated like a tightly wrung rag... Wait, it wasn't supposed to be like this... In any case, we went back to Aomori afterward. The dream world was starting to feel more frantic than reality. Even I was looking forward to going back to Japan.

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I slid the shutters open, greeted by the pleasant, sunny weather. I let out a big yawn, then turned around to find Marie and the cat doing the same thing. The bedding and tatami under the bright sun felt nice every once in a while.

“Good morning. Nice weather again today.”

“Hehe, it's our second day in Aomori. Hot springs, hot springs!”

The cat raised a paw in triumph, but... cats probably weren't going to be allowed in. Now, it was somewhat confusing, but this black cat was a familiar, and at the same time, it was an entity that was severed from the dream world. So, it couldn't return into dreams even if it slept with me, and it had to be resummoned with the Magic Tool on its collar. I had no idea how it worked, though.

“This kitty has a spell weaved into its core. That's why it can't be separated from the Magic Tool. Wridra disables the spell when we go to sleep, like putting out a candle.”

“Oh, I get it. Then we need to be careful not to lose it.”

Just then, my grandpa called us over for breakfast. Ahh... So this was what it was like to have someone else taking care of everything. I could spend my time in comfort, but I felt a bit guilty... As I dwelled on it, I was offered a Japanese-

style breakfast of sunny side up eggs, rice, seaweed, and miso soup. I experienced a moment of nostalgia as I tasted the flavor of miso soup from the rural country. Oh, and Ms. Elf was adorable, sitting at the dining table, full of curiosity and wearing an expression that said, “I love seaweed!”

“See you later! Be safe now.”

“Okay!” We waved back, a bag containing a towel and a change of clothes in hand.

We were on our way to the local hot springs. It was nice being out in the country for my vacation. The fact that I was able to completely forget about work while just going out nearby was a huge benefit.

“Oh? I thought you forgot about work while in the dream world.”

“Hm, is that what it looks like? I’m not the type to bring work even into my dreams, of course.”

The cat interjected with a meow, as if to say, “So you do forget about it...”

There was someone else we had to give our morning greetings to. A white and brown calf came over from behind the wooden fence.

“Oh, Hana!” Hana flicked her ears, her pure, black eyes looking at us. Hana was far bigger than a human girl, but there was a youthfulness to her big, cute eyes. She moved her recently grown horns closer from between the fences as if to show them off, and Marie rubbed calf’s head around the horns. The sound Hana made when she let out puffs of breath sounded like laughter, and her ears flapped around as if she was loving it. “Sooo cute! Aren’t you a little sweetheart? If only you could come to the hot springs with us.”

“She’ll be happy enough with head pats. Calves love being rubbed around the ears and behind the neck.” I began helping her rub Hana’s head, and the calf’s expression was that of pure bliss. Her eyes drooped, tongue moving sluggishly, and she tilted her head to move closer.

“Oh, my, gosh, so cuuute!”

Apparently, the calf was nothing like what her big body suggested. It seemed Marie was absolutely loving this, and shuddered as the cow let out an “Oof.” As

for me, I was having fun watching Marie's reactions.

Hana waved her tail reluctantly, and we started walking again. We enjoyed a night walk last night, but the path looked completely different out in the sun. Bright greenery, and farmland as far as the eye could see. The lack of anything obstructing my view gave me a strange sense of freedom. We proceeded along the asphalt, the girl and cat stretching leisurely as we walked on.

"I'm surprised by how different the colors are between night and day. It's just like in anime!"

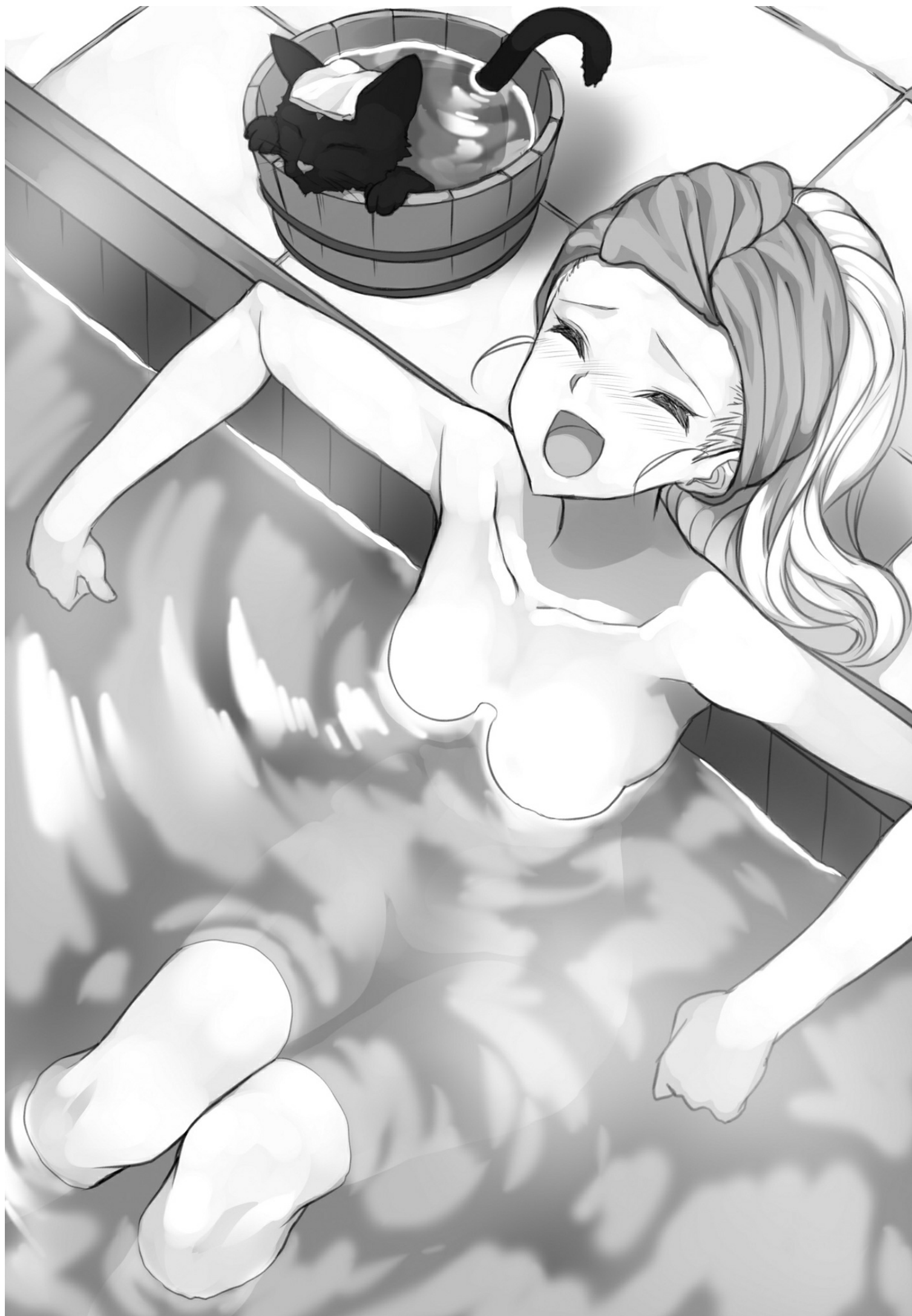
"I'm glad you seem to like it."

It really did make me happy to see that they seemed to be enjoying themselves. We slowly continued walking toward the snow-peaked Mount Iwaki. The hot springs spot had a 170 year history, so its building was quite old. But Marie was a bit different from the average person, and she had started learning the Japanese concept of "wabi-sabi," so she actually had a gleeful expression as she opened the rustic door.

"Oh, I can smell the hot springs already!"

"Huh, you must have a good sense of smell. Maybe it's because the building is small. I'll go take care of the payment first."

The interior looked quite plain and didn't strike me as a hot spring house at first glance. The elf and cat glanced around at all the aged objects around us. They looked at the homely chairs, lanterns, and the old beer vending machine with great interest. I thought to myself that this place was still in the Showa era as I headed toward the reception area. I began to negotiate with the middle-aged receptionist lady, and I was surprised to find she agreed. She looked at the well-behaved cat, then said it could enjoy the hot springs as long as it was from inside a wooden bucket. It was probably because there weren't many people around at this time of day, but maybe she wanted to welcome the cute foreigner with this gesture. Or maybe she just liked cats. And so...



I stepped into the yellow-green water, gradually submerging my body into its warmth. The land of healing hot springs smelled of iron, and when I sat down, I felt a grainy texture under my butt. The water was mild and just the right temperature, and I let out a sigh of content. It overflowed onto the tiles, and I sank my body deeper below. The interior was stained and old looking, but there was an air about it that seemed to welcome me to stay as long as I wanted. I looked out the window with such thoughts, then noticed a tree with colorful flowers outside.

Ah, cherry blossoms... Marie must have been looking at them too. Boy, I was completely fooled by the timeworn exterior. With the water coming directly from the hot spring without added heat or water, it couldn't get any better than this. I submerged myself deeper into the water. Ahh, this is bliss. Who could've guessed I would take such a liking to hot springs just from spending time with a half-fairy elf? I had been enjoying the fantasy world, and before I knew it, I was immersing myself in Japanese culture. It was an odd feeling, like I had been bewitched by a fox. The deep breath I exhaled echoed and dissolved into the steam.

Once I left the bathing room, I put on some clothes and stepped outside to find middle-aged ladies chatting and walking by. "So cute," I heard them say in a Tohoku dialect, with satisfied smiles on their faces.

Apparently, they had taken a huge liking to Marie and the black cat. The women had touched and petted the well-behaved cat as it floated in the wooden bucket with its stomach poking out of the water, narrowing its eyes happily as they did so. Add the fairy-like girl to the mix, and the level of excitement in the bathing room was like that of a festival. Marie told me all about it as we walked around after the bath.

"Hehe, they taught me some words in their dialect. They also told me to go visit them."

"I'm glad you two seemed to have fun. You can make a lot of connections at the hot springs here, so maybe you could become a resident of the prefecture if you spend time here for a while."

Seeing the elf and black cat in such a good mood made me smile, too. Yeah,

maybe she was a bit of an oddball. Just as I found myself immersed in Japanese culture without realizing it, it was possible that I would end up traveling around Japan in search of different hot springs. I opened a can of juice, the carbonation hissing as I pulled the tab. Now, it was time to show the guests around the tourist attractions of my hometown.

A mini truck slowly moved along the road under the bright sun. The slower pace was due to me not being used to manual transmission, and the fact that there were no cars in front of or behind us. I realized I liked driving at a leisurely pace. Wind blew in from the partially open window and stroked Marie's lustrous hair. Speaking of Marie, she was having a staring contest with the black cat... which was playing with a stick of chocolate. The cat was glaring at the snack with a serious expression, then swiftly struck at it with a swipe of its paw, but ended up swinging at nothing. If it missed, it would try again, and if it connected, it would get a bite. By the time I realized the game they were playing, we had already arrived at the city streets. The girl looked up to find vivid colors outside of the window. The cat took the opportunity to take a bite, and the girl let out a surprised voice at the same time.

"Oh, wow... Cherry blossoms!"

"We made it just in time. It's rare for them to bloom at this time of year."

The blooming season this year was estimated to be much later than the last. Kaoruko, the woman who lived in the same complex as me, told me as much. Now that I thought about it, she had given me the advice to keep it a secret until we got here to maximize the excitement. Thanks to her being so preoccupied with the cat, it ended up being a surprise without me planning for it. The girl stared with lips parted, her twinkling amethyst eyes almost as colorful as the cherry blossoms. Perhaps they had managed to stay bloomed until this day just so they could greet the elven guest from a fantasy world. The car in front of us scattered some petals, which flew over and enveloped our mini truck. Marie's eyes widened as they followed the petals, and the sight made me wonder if my earlier thought had been right. The black cat, too, stared with its mouth agape.

"W-Wait, so you mean we came here to...?" I smiled, and responded by turning the handle into the parking lot. And so, the residents of the dream

world had arrived at Hirosaki Castle for sightseeing. “Oh, look, look! Mount Iwaki!” When we left the parking lot, we saw the snow-peaked Mount Iwaki and cherry blossoms swirling in the air. I didn’t expect to see such a magnificent sight at a place like this. I just had to take a picture.

“Look over here, you two.”

“Umm, what are you doing?”

I took a picture with a snap. The two came up to me, wondering about the shutter sound, and I turned the screen toward them. They saw an image of an elf and a black cat turning around curiously, and they let out a surprised “Ah!” and “Mew!” respectively.

“Wow, an image projection spell that doesn’t need incantations!”

Not quite. Well, they could capture images like this with magic in their world, so it seemed they weren’t too terribly surprised. Though, their method was mainly used for scouting purposes. Such thoughts crossed my mind, but the two of them continued staring at the screen. They cocked their heads curiously, and then their round eyes turned toward me.

“This is so much more clear and pretty than magic!”

“Yeah, you don’t really need high picture quality for scouting, after all.”

They stared at it again with a fascinated expression, and I got the sense that they may have come to enjoy it after all. Even though it had been a while since I’d gotten my smartphone, this may have been the first time I’d actually used it for taking pictures. Well, I was the indoor type, or rather, the in-dream type.

“In this world, you’re supposed to use this to keep memories of your trips. So, let’s take a bunch of pictures of you two walking around Hirosaki Castle.”

“Yeeeah!”

Maybe it was just the briskness of Spring, but we were in an excited, jovial mood. Marie and I held hands and began walking, careful not to step on the cat that was playfully walking near us. Now, there was a path lined with rows of cherry trees known as the Cherry Blossom Tunnel. We could ride down the tunnel by riding the boat nearby, but with so many petals in the air, we were

sure to enjoy ourselves no matter where we walked. The cat looked around curiously in the fine weather, managing to keep up with Marie with some effort. Seeing how busy it looked, I picked the cat up in my arms.

“Right, sorry. This is your first time seeing cherry blossoms, isn’t it, Wridra? I’ll carry you, so you can focus on enjoying the scenery.” The cat looked at me with its round eyes, then rubbed its head against my chin as if in thanks. It felt a little ticklish, and I caught a whiff of the smell of hot springs from earlier. Though, I figured I smelled the same way.

And so, Marie ended up holding on to my shirt, looking around in exactly the same way the cat was as we continued walking. The falling petals filled our view with pink, like some earthly paradise, and the elf’s gait began to grow unsteady. I couldn’t blame her, with the sight before us. Spread out before us was the most beautiful view of the year. The girl parted her colored lips and began speaking with a wistful tone of voice.

“The cherry blossoms in Koto Ward already fell a while ago... I didn’t know they’d be so colorful.”

“The cherry blossom front slowly moves northward. We were riding the shinkansen, so we ended up traveling ahead of it.” The girl nodded with a dreamy expression. I was beginning to feel a little worried. Her eyes were relaxed, almost drowsy looking, and her usually pale skin was a bit flushed. I thought about having her rest somewhere, but then she moved her open hand to her side.

Fwoosh...

The sight made the cat and me both widen our eyes. Colorful petals began swirling around her slender hand. They danced in a spiral, the pink color turning into a fascinatingly deep shade of pink. The cat meowed, and Marie seemed to snap back to her senses. The petals dispersed, and I heard people commenting, “That was pretty,” “Did a whirlwind just pass by?” I let out a sigh of relief and looked at Marie to find the color of her eyes looked much more normal than before.

“Oh no, I’ve touched upon the spirits too much. But... this is the first time they’ve come so close to me. I feel like their thoughts and feelings could

overflow.”

That was right. She was a spirit user, which was incredibly rare in this world. It was often said that Spring could play tricks on people, but perhaps that was the work of spirits.

We walked along the vividly colored path for a while, then came upon an elegant view. A gently curving bridge of deep vermillion could be seen, and there was a castle tower beyond the many layers of cherry blossoms. There was a certain grace, tastefulness, and dignified air to the castle, and its harmony with the surrounding scenery felt almost surreal.

“Woow, how wonderful! That’s what a Japanese castle is like? Its pretty colors stand out so much! It’s nothing like those castles that were made by just cutting out rocks and stacking them on top of each other.”

“Now that you mention it, the construction is a lot different from the ones you see in the dream world. So, how would you two like a commemorative photo?”

Marie whirled around happily, and the cat jumped out of my arms in a hurry. The girl picked up the cat, and they raised their right hands in a victory pose. I nearly burst out laughing at their cute pose, but snapped what ended up being a pretty nice picture. Their large eyes and the contrast of black and white made for a well-composed shot. As I was checking the picture on my phone, the other two were over at the bridge, looking below. I walked over to them to see what was going on, and they turned toward me at the same time.

“The trenches were made with a very distinct build. It’s filled with water, and there’s a slope to the walls. I wonder why that is.”

I didn’t expect her to be so interested in the castle’s design. I then remembered that she had conjured defensive structures to wipe out entire mobs of enemies. Maybe she had a strong interest in castles because of that event. I stopped in thought for a moment, then took the girl’s hand. I decided a change of plans was in order and guided the elf girl to the museum.

The museum in the castle tower had swords, spears, matchlock guns, and armor from the olden days on display. To my surprise, the black cat was completely drawn to the Japanese sword exhibit area. It stared with such

intense concentration that the glass around its nose was getting foggy.

“Oh, you were using a weapon like a katana, weren’t you, Wridra? Did you modify it yourself, by any chance?”

The cat nodded. Boy, this kitty sure did like to make things. It reminded me of the Neko in Arilai that refined items out of Magic Stones. Maybe it was just a trait that cats had in common. Just then, I noticed Ms. Elf was staring at a matchlock gun intently. That was odd. I thought the two women would have been more interested in something more feminine.

“Have you not seen guns before? ...Oh, I guess they wouldn’t be common in the other world.”

“Yes, it’s a completely foreign concept over there. The construction is rather simple, but to increase its firepower simply through its structural design...”

Y-Yeah, this was getting a little too real. Even worse, there were cannons in the exhibit, too. I couldn’t help but notice the incredibly serious look on the elf and cat’s faces as they observed. They occasionally met eyes and nodded at each other, which was rather concerning, but I decided not to think about it.

We finally arrived at the miniature model of the castle, but... Wow, the look in their eyes was completely different.

“I see, so that’s why there was water in the trenches. They funneled invaders into a spot that seemed easier to attack, then struck them down. I assumed they would have had trouble defending themselves. It looks like Japanese castles were built with a surprising amount of cunning.”

“Meow, meow.”

“Yes, their long-ranged firepower is what supported their defense. The wide-open area meant, ‘please attack from here so we can kill you.’”

Before I knew it, it seemed like something was awakening within the spirit sorceress. I hoped I was just imagining it. For some reason, the cat nodding to her in agreement was strangely terrifying.

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After our little learning session, we had to go out for something good to eat.

We took an open bench that we luckily found and stuffed our faces with food from a food stall as cherry blossoms fell around us. Each passing breeze carried new petals into the air. I heard a soft exhalation and turned to find Marie motionless, holding dango up to her mouth. She must have found herself mesmerized by the view of the final moments of spring.

“It’s so pretty... It’s almost scary how pretty the cherry blossoms are.”

“But that makes me appreciate how captivating they are all the more. You know, because you kind of get used to seeing purely peaceful sights.” When I replied as such, Marie looked up and put the dango she was holding in her mouth. The cat had already gone through an entire box of takoyaki and was curled up on Marie’s lap, purring contentedly. Marie hit my shoulder lightly, then leaned her head on me. Her eyes held mine the whole time, and I couldn’t keep my heart from thumping nervously, despite my age. I felt something was off, and realized it was the heavy-lidded look in her eyes. Maybe it was the sunlight, but her purple eyes were more vivid than usual, and she was blinking rather slowly.

“...Do I have sauce on my face or something?”

“No, I just wanted to see if I would get tired of looking at your face. After all, there’s no one as easy-going as you, Kazuhiro-san.”

She had been calling my name with “-san” ever since yesterday. Did she know that it made my heart beat faster? She was close enough that I could feel her breath, and her whispers were very effective at getting a reaction out of me.

“The first time I stayed in Japan, the scenery was just like this.”

“You’re right. It was such a beautiful season. Feels like it’s been so long...” The elf giggled and moved in closer to me. My hand naturally rested on her waist, and she twitched.

“But a lot has changed since. It was so fun getting to know you more and more. Hehe, I could never get tired of looking at you.”

That was exactly how I felt. I’d always seen her as just a little girl, but her existence grew bigger inside my heart with each passing day. Whether I was at work or in a labyrinth, I was always thinking about her.

“That’s why it’s strange. The cherry blossoms haven’t changed, but the view looks so different now.”

Don’t you think so...? I thought I heard her whispering in my ear.

My head felt numb. She leaned her head on me again, this time on my collarbone, and I was aware of how close her full lips were to me. With her flushed cheeks and deep pink lips that were slightly parted, I couldn’t tear my eyes away. Yes, her eyes... They still had that dreamy expression. I thought I recognized that look, but it was just like earlier, when she had been overwhelmed by the cherry blossom spirits. That look in her eyes that I saw moments before the colorful petals whirled in the air and she came to. Her pale purple eyes were right in front of me, with petals drifting about her like before.

“Marie, I think the cherry blossom...” Just then, a single petal landed on her lips.

“Oh,” she said, and my eyes were drawn to it. The petal emphasized her soft, colored lips, and there was a mature allure about her that was unlike that of a little girl.

I let out an involuntary noise. They were far, far softer than I had imagined, and I heard a tender sigh that sounded as if it came from far away. The girl pressed herself against me as if asking for more, and maybe the spirit had affected me too, because I felt my head go numb, and I became unable to think. People passed by in front of us. But strangely, I couldn’t hear anything from our surroundings; only her heartbeat. When I came to, the girl was extending her finger toward me and touched my lips. Her pale, slender finger had a petal on it, and she giggled. It would still be some time before my heart could calm down. I thought I was in a dream, enveloped by cherry blossoms, an elf, and a sweet scent. The tourists had enjoyed the fine weather and the flurry of falling cherry blossoms at the cherry blossom festival today. Perhaps unrelated to Mariabelle the half-fairy, we thought about coming back again next year.



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Afterward, we started heading home without saying much else. My body felt a bit feverish, so I kept being careful on the drive home in mind. Even when the girl had her finger on my lips with that dazed expression, I was feeling too shy to meet her eyes. The dinner my grandpa had prepared was delicious as usual, but honestly, I didn't quite remember the taste. This was probably because the elf's sweet taste still remained on my lips. The impression Marie and the cherry blossoms had left on me was just that strong, and they refused to leave my head even when I dunked it into the water. Just then...

Dishes were stacked in the sink. Curtains were spread out beyond the glass window, and I heard dishes clanking as Marie washed them. My grandfather stood next to her, wiping the dishes clean as they were handed to him and putting them away on the rack. He occasionally looked over to his side to find she still had that same vacant look from dinner time, and she didn't even notice his glance. However, the old man knew this was nothing to worry about. After all, it was clear to him that she was in a good mood.

"Something good happen?"

"Ahh!"

The girl nearly dropped the plate she was holding, but my grandpa's wrinkled hand caught it just in time, as if he had been expecting that reaction. Marie thanked him, and the old man smiled without concern. Seeing that expression, Marie realized it reminded her of Kazuhiro's smile. The suntanned and wrinkled skin were different, but there was a familiar comfort in those deep, dark eyes.

"You know, I was surprised. I didn't expect that child to come back to Aomori so cheerful."

Marie cocked her head. She knew he was talking about Kazuhiro Kitase, but she wondered how gloomy he was as a boy to prompt such a comment. Under the dim lighting of the lightbulb above, the old man laughed in a low voice. Still pensive, the girl ran water over a dish, rinsing away the grease and bubbles.

"My daughter was no good at taking care of children, so my wife and I took care of that poor boy." The old man looked off into the distance, as if recalling

those days, and put a plate away on the rack. He gestured for Marie to hand him the next dish with his hand, which reminded her to rinse another. She shot him occasional glances, hoping he would continue his story. “He didn’t have any interest in people, animals, or cooking, and spent his time sleeping instead. He seemed so happy in his sleep that I was afraid he would just vanish someday...”

The elf twitched in response, wondering if he knew about the dream world. He spoke as if he did, but Kazuhiro had shook his head when she asked. Marie handed him another plate and looked up. He dried it off with a towel and narrowed his eyes in satisfaction as he gazed at its luster, then quietly placed it onto the rack.

“But you know, my wife would say... The poor boy would be happier if he didn’t come back from his dreams. ...That wasn’t true. He would come back each time because that fool daughter of mine bound him here.” The old man turned the tap off, stopping the water flow. This was because the girl had been so invested in his story that she was no longer washing the dishes. “Even when he went to the city, he may have been hoping to see his mother somewhere. That’s why I didn’t think he’d ever return, but... Haha, who knew he’d come back with such an adorable girl.”

He patted her head. His calloused hand was a bit rough, but there was a warmth to it. It was as if she could sense his feelings through the warmth of his touch. He must have watched over Kazuhiro kindly, even through difficult times. Marie even began to understand how he must have felt when he first greeted them at the garden outside. She placed the dish she was holding in the sink, then hugged him with hands covered in bubbles.

“Mister...!”

“Heheh, I want you to enjoy yourselves. So, you don’t need to wear those ear ornaments while you’re here. It’s my special privilege to be able to hear stories about your adventures in the dream world.”

This mysterious old man had known about all of it. Kazuhiro had been playing in the dream world since he was young, and his grandfather had naturally accepted it. Surprised by his broadness of mind, the elf removed the cover for her long ears. She stood there insecurely with her true form revealed, and the

old man placed a hand on her shoulder.

“As expected of a half-fairy elf. So lovely, you might appear in my own dreams.”

Mariabelle’s eyes widened. How much did this man know?

As such, I was in for a surprise when I returned from my bath. After everyone had relaxed together, watched some TV, and prepared to go to bed, I finally realized Marie had her long ears exposed. When I began to panic, she and my grandpa burst out laughing, and for some reason, I got told to wake up, since my face already looked sleepy enough. How odd... Since when had they gotten so close? And so, the night in Aomori wore on.

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I looked up to find a beautiful, sunny sky. It seemed the weather held out even better than I thought. Hirosaki station in the morning had many tourists on their way back home, and an announcement was playing over the speakers in front of the ticket gate. My grandfather flashed a confident smile and handed me an envelope. I cocked my head, and he placed it in my hand, telling me to take it.

“Just put it toward your traveling expenses. You’re not a full-fledged worker at your company yet, are you?”

“Huh? I thought I was... Wait, isn’t this a bit too much?” The envelope had more heft to it than I’d imagined, and numbers popped up in my head, calculating the total...

“I want you to use it for your future vacations, or the next time you come back. I’m guessing you still haven’t taken Mariabelle to visit Mount Iwaki.”

He was right. There was a historical shrine, as well as a ski slope there. But even as a working adult, I became very conscious of the weight of this money. Though, Marie wanted to come back too, so maybe we could return to say hello during winter break. My grandfather glanced at Mariabelle.

“Come back if you ever get bored. You’re welcome any time.”

“Yes, thank you. We’ll definitely be back!” My grandfather was taken aback as

Marie jumped at him for a hug. She was just so friendly and sincere. We had been welcomed and enjoyed our time here, and we were lucky to have someone as understanding as my grandpa. As he stroked Marie’s head, it seemed to sink in for the elf girl that it was time to say goodbye, and tears began pouring from her eyes.

“Ahh, this is no good... Now I’m starting to...” I was surprised to find him wiping away tears, likely moved by Marie’s genuine nature. Regardless of her incredible intellect and the hardships she had been through, he knew she was pure to the core.

We waved goodbye and put Aomori behind us. After passing through several tunnels, we laid out our bento meals in our seats in the shinkansen. The scallop bento and Aomori zukushi bento, both of which were Aomori specialties, were full of appetizing colors. The girl smacked her lips appreciatively at the delicious sight, but I caught her looking out the window occasionally. She was likely recalling our time in the deep mountains of Aomori and the fond memories we had made there.

“So, how was the Aomori trip?” I asked as I stuck a piece of scallop into the basket where the black cat was contained. I simply wanted to know their thoughts on their first trip on the shinkansen. The girl turned around, then stared at my face for some reason. She waited for a moment, then gave me a beautiful smile.

“Hehe, it was amazing.”

Her rather succinct sentiment seemed to be filled to the brim with memories. All we had left to do was eat delicious food and enjoy the rest of our days off. We passed through another tunnel, and a refreshingly blue sky awaited us.

Boy, Aomori sure was fun.

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The ancient labyrinth. Just as the demon died, it had left a terrible parting gift. He had opened a gate to the demon realm, marking the start of complete chaos. The horde of monsters that spilled out had been slaughtered, and the gate was destroyed. This process took an entire day, which resulted in the leader of Team Diamond running out of patience and deciding to handle it

rather than leaving it to his subordinates. The monsters had been wiped out, but it wasn't over yet. With the floor master of the first floor having been defeated, the ancient labyrinth was filled with a silence it had never seen before.

The sound of clicking shoes reverberated from the floor to the ceiling, echoing throughout the room. The man was enshrouded with an aura of energy as he walked, and there was likely no one in all the lands who could best him in combat. The dark-skinned elf held her blood-soaked stomach and stared at him with passionate eyes as he approached. Her cheeks grew redder the closer he got, and a shiver went down her spine when he came right up to her face.

“...Eve, are you hurt?”

“Oh, no, please don't concern yourself over it, Lord Zarish.”

The young man cocked his head, as if confused. It seemed that wasn't what he had meant by his comment. “You're the only one who got injured. If you fail again, I'll have some thinking to do.”

“Ah?!”

Her eyes snapped open as if she had ice dumped on her, but the young man was no longer looking at her. He stood up as if he had lost interest, then began walking again. There was actually a different woman who piqued his interest more than her. That woman he had met at the oasis... because of her, his interest in Eve had been waning. A draconian and an elven spirit sorceress—both were quite rare, and his suspicion that there was something about her had turned into confirmation when he heard they were the first to take down the first floor master. Thinking through his various options, he continued walking alone. He was a famous collector, but his collection was limited. He touched the many rings on his fingers; a longtime habit of his. Zarish entered a place out of earshot, put up a magic circle, and then uttered to no one in particular:

“Now, let's begin. Are you all ready?”

His voice sounded in the small room, then faded away without anyone hearing it. Here, in this ancient labyrinth, was where it had all begun.

Chapter of Ancient Labyrinth END

Afterword

This is Makishima Suzuki, the writer of volume three.

Ms. Elf is starting to get accustomed to modern Japan, and I, as the fledgling author, have been watching her progress with a smile on my face. Koto Ward in Tokyo is the main stage of this story, but I come from a more tranquil place in the rural country. Oh, maybe tranquil isn't quite the right word. This is a region where deer will hop out from nowhere on your way to the convenience store. But the nights are quiet and relaxing, and I can't let go of my hobby of gardening, so I don't plan on moving any time soon.

As someone who grew up in a place surrounded by mountains, I can't quite get accustomed to the busy atmosphere of the big city. But Koto Ward is very popular as a residential area, with many places to enjoy like riverbeds and parks, and the four seasons can be experienced to the fullest there. I'm sure our genuine Ms. Elf will love living there. If I ever do end up moving, I'm sure Koto Ward will be my first choice.

If you're wondering why I'm so insistent on Koto Ward, it's because I did research into various regions when looking for a place to live on my own. I'd lived at my family's home for most of my life, and living on my own was a dream of mine. But in the end, that dream never did get fulfilled. That's because I met someone who I fell in love with. Thank you. I'll take your congratulations to fuel my writing. Did my dream of living alone vanish like bubbles? No, it had become a part of my writing, and it feels like I've been getting a glimpse into a second home. Oh, I'm not a Peeping Tom, so please don't report me. I may not seem like it, but I am a novelist. It may be somewhat distant from reality, but it's my dream, after all. I'm sure those two will spend their days with joy, discovering the beautiful wonders of Japan along the way.

In any case, it has been very easy for me to gather resources for my writing as of late. There are even videos of what it's like riding a Tohoku bullet train all the way to the destination out there. As a writer, I couldn't ask for better research

material. I can see what the destination is like right away and get a feel for the actual hot spring sites. When imagining the sights and the people who live there and turning them into words, something strange occurs. After I finish writing, it gives me this refreshing feeling, as if I've gone on a trip there myself. Not to mention, my traveling expenses are zero. When I discovered this wonderful hobby, I was quite moved. I dubbed it "air traveling," and I even recommended it to friends and family, but I still remember the awkward smiles they gave me in response, which is quite unfortunate. It's such a fun hobby... Ah, but there's no point in me going on about my slightly odd interests.

I'm happy to say that this series, "Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!" has been made into a comic by Comic Fire. Volume one of the comics is actually releasing on the same day as this book, so I will likely be running to the bookstore, full of smiles. The illustrations drawn by Aonoesu are so expressive, and they've drawn Ms. Elf so adorably on her first visit to Japan. You're sure to discover new things to love about this title, so if you're interested, I would be thrilled if you picked up a copy. I'm certain you won't regret it, and I hope it will bring you joy!

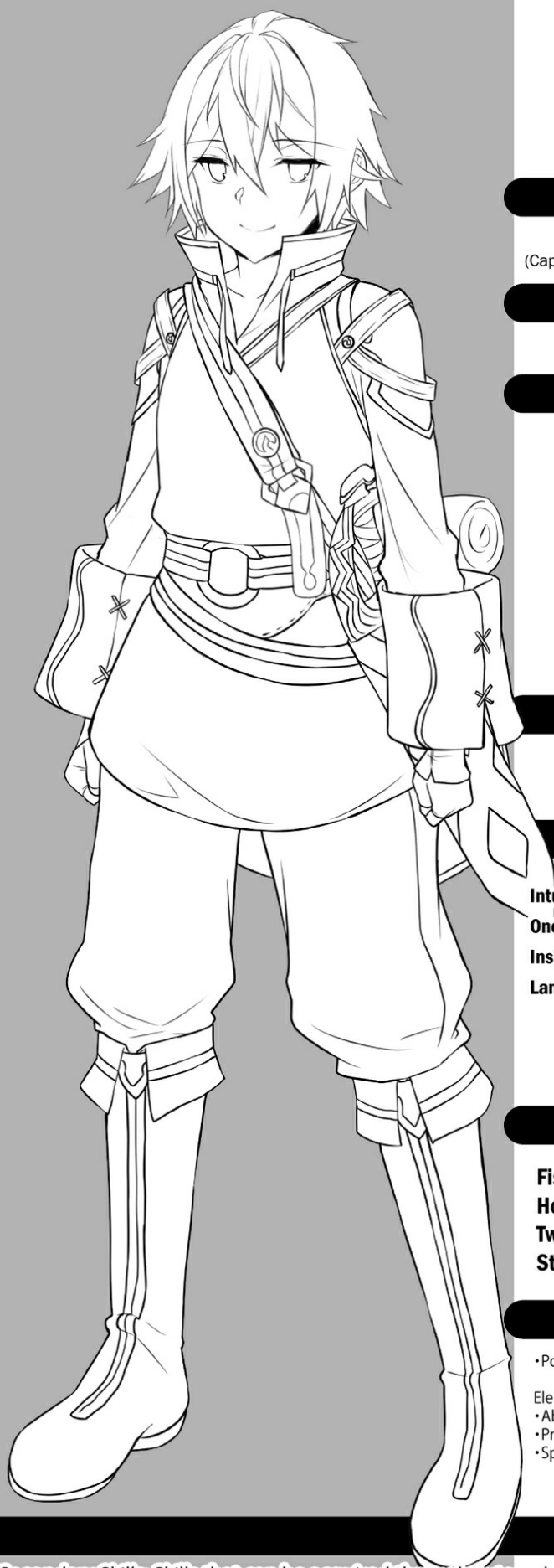
In other good news, volume four has been confirmed, thanks to all your support. Our two protagonists will surely expand the horizons of their everyday life and adventures in Japan and the dream world.

Finally, I'd like to give some words of thanks.

To my editor at Hobby Japan, who has been looking after this series. I'm ever so grateful for the various adjustments and support you've been providing.

To Yappen, thank you for your beautiful illustrations. This time, Yappen has drawn Mariabelle the half-fairy elf, Wridra, and a new character. I'll do my best to express the characters you bring to life in your illustrations. Maybe I put a little too much effort into it, because it ended up thicker than volume two. (laughs) I will etch this volume into my memory as the one that was released in the first month of the Reiwa era.

And a very deep thank you to you, the readers. I hope to see you again in the next volume.



Kazuhiho

(Kazuhiro Kitase)

Attributes

The Moon
(Captivation, Breaking Away from the Past, Escape from Reality, Trauma)

Class / Level

Illusory Swordsman / Level 72 → 74

Primary Skills (Named)

Reprisal

Over the Road

A basic mobility skill that was upgraded to a Named Skill due to the customizations made by the protagonist. Activates instantly, but has a weight limit and travel range restriction, and both feet must be touching the ground to use it.

Phantom Image

Creates an illusion.

Secondary Skills

Energy Cultivation LV 1 → 2

*Requires possession of Astroblade.

Sub Skills

Intuition LV 63 → 71

Acceleration LV 1 → 5

One-Handed Swords LV 49 → 51

Long Distance Movement LV 43

(Restricted to areas with the Travel God's monument)

Insight LV 39

Language Proficiency LV 63 (A~C)

Humanoid Beastmen

Giant Language

Humanoid Reptiles

Ancient Language (Lesser / Greater)

Elvish (Lesser / Greater)

Skill Candidates

Fishing LV 59

Concealment LV 48

Holy Prayer LV 13

Cooking LV 33 → 34

Two-Handed Swords LV 21

Shields LV 29

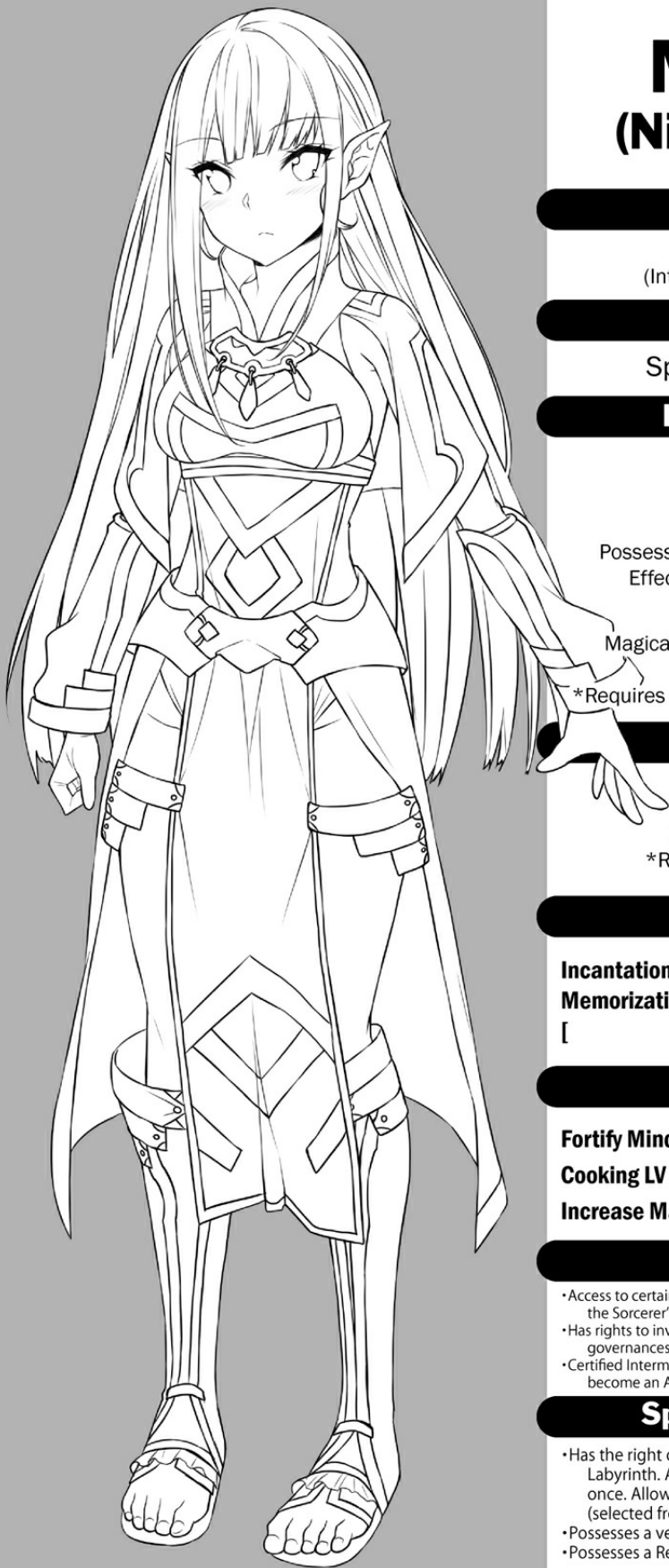
Stamina LV 69 → 73

Special Notes about Party

- Possesses Astroblade.
 - * Astroblade was received as a drop from the Ancient Demon, Elemaada Raab.
- Able to freely travel between regions due to having no affiliation.
- Prohibited from entering specific ruins owned by ruling governances.
- Special Abilities: Greater Pain Nullification, Hypnosis / Sleep Resistance.

Other Special Notes

- Secondary Skills: Skills that can be acquired through external assistance. Depending on the item, "Specified Skills" or "Personal Skills" can be acquired.
- Sub Skills: Skills retained by the user. Cannot be raised beyond one's Class Level.
- Skill Candidates: Candidates that may be upgraded into Sub Skills. Stored as experience, but not actively in use.



Mariabelle

(Nickname: Marie)

Attributes

The High Priestess
(Intellect, Sagacity, Suspicion, Pessimism)

Class / Level

Spirit Sorceress / LV 32 → 42

Primary Skills (Named)

Divine Blessing

A user of Spirit Sorcery.

Prison Keeper

Possesses the authority to oversee her domain.
Effect lingers until structure is destroyed.

Awakened One

Magical reinforcement through the connection
to a dragon, effects increased.
*Requires permission from dragon and possession of staff.

Secondary Skills

Labor LV 2 → 29

Double Incantation 12 → 14

*Requires possession of Arkdragon Staff.

Sub Skills

Incantation LV 29 → 38

Memorization LV 27 → 32

Precision LV 28 → 37

Grand Experience LV 14 → 16

[]

Skill Candidates

Fortify Mind LV 15 → 18

Cooking LV 21

Increase Magic / Spirit LV 23 → 27

Insight LV 12 → 13

Analysis LV3

Other Special Notes

- Access to certain documents and catalyst transactions permitted due to being in the Sorcerer's Guild.
- Has rights to investigate specific ruins under the possession of the ruling governances.
- Certified Intermediate Sorceress. *Has the right to participate in the exams to become an Advanced Sorceress.

Special Notes about Party

- Has the right of priority to exploring the Ujah Peaks Underground Labyrinth. A maximum of four members is permitted to explore at once. Allowed to swap members if belonging to the nation of Arilai (selected from those certified by their country).
- Possesses a very large Magic Stone.
- Possesses a Replica Jewel (Material).

Additional Notes on Stats

- Attributes: Each person is born with one of the Arcanas. 1~2 Arcanas in the regular or reversed position are chosen. One cannot see their own or others' Arcana.
- Primary Skills: The number of obtainable Skills varies based on level. Combining obtained skills will upgrade them into "Named" Skills.
- Sub Skills: Abilities possessed by each person. Secondary Skill Levels cannot surpass the user's Class Level.
- Skill Candidates: Candidates for upgrading into Secondary Skills.











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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 3

by Makishima Suzuki

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