

Makishima  
Suzuki  
ill. Yappen

9

Welcome  
to Japan,  
Ms. Elf!



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**"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!  
THEY'RE WRIDRA'S  
BABIES!" SHE SAID.**

Honestly, I couldn't believe it either. Not only had those eggs we touched so long ago hatched already, but the babies looked pretty much like normal humans.



A character with long, dark, flowing hair and purple eyes is shown in a dynamic pose. They are wearing dark, intricate armor with glowing pink accents. A large, circular, pink, eye-like device is attached to their right arm. The background is dark and swirling.

"AHH... I CANNOT WAIT.  
SOON, I WILL PURSUE  
NEW HEIGHTS OF MAGIC  
TO MY HEART'S CONTENT.  
TO THINK THE DAY WOULD  
COME WHEN I WOULD  
UNDERSTAND HOW  
KITASE FELT."

The weapons, products of research and engineering, were works of art in her eyes, and she sighed ecstatically.



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## Episode 4: An Invitation for Chinese Food

A cat with fur as black as night let out a big yawn. Its fangs were still small, but its body had grown slightly since spring. This cat lived in Kitase's mansion, though it wasn't always there, and only appeared when called for by Kitase and Mariabelle with a Magic Tool.

Kitase was just an average office worker but had the ability to travel to another world when he went to sleep. Mariabelle the elf had been visiting Japan ever since she had learned of his power, and Kitase had been enjoying his time in the fantastical dream world. They had invited the cat to Japan almost as an afterthought, and it had spent most of its time curled up somewhere comfortable. It preferred lying on beds, chairs, and under the bed, much like an ordinary cat would. This "cat" was none other than the familiar for the Arkdragon Wridra. Anyhow, it could easily understand human speech. Even in modern Japan, which lacked the foundation to activate magic, it could somehow conjure magic from nothing. Although, no one there would understand the significance of this even if they had it explained to them.

The Arkdragon was an incredible being who could generate magic by simply breathing, a skill which she had acquired in the savage yet advanced ancient times for survival. However, this black-furred creature was only a familiar and a cat. Wridra didn't see magic as anything special, so it didn't often act as if it were superior to others. The familiar could create a system to allow magic to activate in Japan if it wished to, but it couldn't be bothered. There weren't even any enemies or monsters to defend against, so it would have been pointless.

Yet the black cat lay next to the window, looked at the sky, and exhaled. Wisdom far greater than that of a mere mortal was visible in its golden eyes. Kitase didn't realize it, but there were complex rules in play for Wridra to exist in the so-called real world.

Long ago, Wridra sent her familiar to Japan after accepting an invitation from the boy and the elf. When she had awakened, bare-skinned and unable to bring



anything from her world with her, she had instinctively sensed a message: “Do not upset me.”

She still remembered that sensation like a drop of cold water falling on her face. But she felt no fear and was aware that someone had sent her a clear message upon arriving in this land. This meant that “someone” was still watching. As long as they supervised her, she couldn’t cause any trouble, or that mysterious stranger might become agitated. The situation was rather simple yet multifaceted. To upset someone was an emotional matter, as one could not tell what would set off a completely unknown entity. Judging by the rather ominous tone, this entity didn’t think well of Wridra. After she had spent so much time in this land, no one else seemed to be aware of this situation.

The black cat yawned in the bed that the autumn sun kept warm, seemingly unconcerned. All it cared about was keeping this bliss. Wridra intended on spending her time in this world as a “mostly normal cat,” which might have been the best way to please the mysterious entity.

As the cat scratched the back of its head and rolled over, a young man’s voice called from the entrance, “I’m leaving now. I’ll get in touch in the evening again.”

“Okay, take care. It’s supposed to rain in the afternoon, so you should take an umbrella. Oh, and...” The elf trailed off. She was in an apron, and it was clear from her expression that she wanted something. She glanced at the cat, and it pretended not to notice them. The two casually moved out of sight, even though the cat could see the elf stand on her tiptoes.

These exchanges were rather irritating. Kitase and Marie could suck go suck face for all Wridra cared, but their poor attempts at hiding when they did these things made her sick. If they did it openly, she would undoubtedly think, *Get a room.*

There was silence for some time, then Kitase awkwardly said, “I’ll...be going now.”

After he left, the elf girl stood there for a moment longer, then fanned her rosy face as she walked back into the room, her slippers plopping on the floor with each step. At this time, the familiar had already curled up with its butt



turned toward her, so Mariabelle couldn't see the furrow-browed, extremely grumpy face it was making.

Said routine always took place at the entrance, and the elf girl became the head of the house while Kitase was out for work. Unlike Wridra, she didn't plan on spending the day lazing about. She often walked around busily, doing laundry, cleaning, hanging the futons out to dry, and getting any shopping done before noon if she needed anything. She was quite the hard worker.

Wridra watched contemplatively through the eyes of her familiar. Elves grew up fast from a dragon's perspective. Mariabelle had already learned to speak the language of this world after only a few months and had adapted to life here without issues. She even enjoyed television and reading novels, and kept herself entertained even without Kitase.

Mariabelle the elf girl had come to this foreign world alone, and there must have been times when she felt uncertain or lonely. Wridra had once asked her about it when she was studying Japanese. Of course, this was when Wridra had come to Japan in her core body, not as a familiar.

"Lonely? Hmm, I don't know..." Mariabelle had said. "It's strange, but I can focus on my studies more when I'm here. There's so much to discover, and I've been too busy to feel lonely."

Apparently, Mariabelle enjoyed her time studying in silence with her table lamp, her favorite stationery, and a dictionary. She had learned how to make the best of her alone time. There was no need to bother her more than necessary, so the familiar continued to lie around and get the occasional belly rubs.

As it was comfortably dozing off, Mariabelle asked, "Wridra, would you like to go shopping? We can get your favorite treat, oranges!"

The cat's golden eyes snapped open. Oranges were refreshingly sweet citrus fruits. Although real cats didn't like them, they were delicious treats for the familiar's taste buds. It meowed, then made a beeline for the elf girl. Mariabelle stood at the entrance and smiled when she saw the cat coming.

Wridra didn't mind going on walks with her. Mariabelle often spoke to her even when she wasn't in her humanoid form, and the riverside road was perfect



for a relaxing stroll. They often encountered dogs and cats on the way, but their instincts were far keener than those of humans. Animals quickly realized the familiar was no ordinary cat, but they only stared without daring to bark or bite.

However, this form wasn't without its issues. Supermarkets handled food items, so they didn't allow animals inside for sanitary concerns. The familiar meowed as Mariabelle waved goodbye and stepped into the building.

Since those were the rules, getting upset about it would be pointless. Wridra's familiar was a legendary being on the inside despite its looks, and she was a proper adult from the elf girl's perspective, so she should've been allowed in. She wasn't angry about it, of course, but had to admit it was frustrating that she couldn't get inside when she knew there was all sorts of tasty food. Even though she wanted to get in so badly that she walked in circles around the store, she was by no means annoyed or angry. If one thought the cat looked like it was about to shout profanities, it had to be their imagination or a trick of the light. This was the familiar of the great Arkdragon, after all.

Wridra was also quite simple. When the automated doors opened as the elf girl stepped out, the familiar ran over to her, excited for the oranges.

Mariabelle crouched and said, "Have you been behaving and waiting out here? Good. Look how yummy these oranges look! Let's go home and try them." She held up the oranges, which glowed in the autumn sun. The black cat moved its nose closer and sniffed, taking in the sweet, citrusy scent and narrowing its eyes. Wridra's eyes opened again, and she realized something: inside the bag were snacks, juice, and other indulgences that had nothing to do with dinner. Mariabelle quickly moved to cover them with her hands and said, "It's not what it looks like. One of our rules says we can buy ourselves a little reward if we go grocery shopping. It's not as if I'm wasting money for no reason."

She put a finger to her lips and gestured as if to say, "This is between you and me."

Indeed, nothing was wrong with it if they had such a rule in place already. The cat was basically acting as a bodyguard throughout their trip, and Wridra deserved a reward. She would also partake in the snacks and persistently urge



the elf girl to share.

“Yes, yes, I get it. You can have some too, so you don’t need to keep meowing like that. You adorable little thing,” added Mariabelle, rubbing the back of the cat’s neck.

Still, Wridra had to admit it wasn’t too bad receiving so much affection from a cat lover while in her cat form. She didn’t even mind when Mariabelle picked her up and breathed deeply to smell her. It made her chest a bit ticklish and even brought a smile to the real Wridra’s face in the other world. Thus, it was a win-win for both the elf and Arkdragon.

The days spent in this country were peaceful yet boring. But the problem was that Wridra didn’t mind spending all day just relaxing and doing nothing at all. It was time for a blissful nap after returning home and enjoying the sweet oranges. Mariabelle’s lap was the perfect place for a nap, and Wridra had made a habit out of lying there even if the elf was in the middle of studying. Fortunately, Mariabelle didn’t seem to mind it either and constantly patted some part of the cat’s body as she worked. As a cat, the familiar couldn’t help but purr from the warmth and comfort.

A fresh coffee aroma filled the room, and the pleasant sound of music lulled the cat to sleep. The elf girl continued to look up difficult kanji in her dictionary to learn how to read them, their meaning, and how to use them. Wridra wished the thickheaded Kitase would realize why this girl had worked so hard to acclimate to life in this country.

It seemed Mariabelle had found a good stopping point. She was dressed in warm knits and leaned back for a big stretch. Her back made an audible crack, having been in one position for so long.

“Ahh, that was a good study session. It must be nice for you. It’s not fair that you can just lie around all day, then learn this country’s language with your skill,” she complained, rubbing the familiar around its mouth. Mariabelle often spoke to the cat like this, but it wasn’t always listening. The main Wridra in the other world was busy raising her whelps and couldn’t always allocate her focus to the familiar. That was why it acted like an ordinary cat for the most part and lazed about unless something interesting like food caught her attention.



The cat finally awakened as the autumn sun was waning. Study time was over, and Mariabelle was now sitting in front of the TV, watching anime in more comfortable loungewear. The tablet in her hand emitted an electronic noise, which seemed to be the culprit that had interrupted the cat's sleep. The familiar leaped onto the elf's lap and peeked at the screen to find she had been messaging Kitase.

"Oh, sorry to wake you," apologized Mariabelle. "He just got off of work. I need to ask him what we'll do for dinner." She spoke rather calmly with a hint of giddiness in her voice. Her toes swayed as she sat in her chair, showing she was in a good mood.

Mariabelle glanced at the cat. The color of her eyes was reminiscent of amethyst, and many would find them breathtaking. Even Kitase often got surprised by them despite living with her, meaning they would be quite a shock for any man seeing them for the first time.

"Can you connect me to him, Wridra?" asked Mariabelle.

The black cat meowed as if to say it was no problem. It yawned, then activated the Magic Tool in its collar. It was an item for long-distance communication and worked by recreating the Mind Link Chat from the dream world. The conversation between the elf and human soon began, and they talked about mundane things, such as how work had gone and what time he would be home. Suddenly, the cat's ears perked up when the topic changed to what they would have for dinner. It had been lying around just a moment ago but was now wide awake.

"Yeah, I thought we could have some Chinese food tonight."

An excited gleam arose in the cat's eyes when it heard the words "Chinese food." Wridra had tried gyoza and braised pork before, and the ramen she had eaten after going to the pool was so good that she had an epiphany that it was the flavor she had been seeking all along. The idea of having Chinese food for dinner was so appealing that she was drooling.

"We haven't been to a Chinese restaurant in so long! But wait, did you get paid today?" asked Mariabelle.

"No, but I ran into Toru in front of the station. He wants to have a little get-

together and treat us out,” said Kitase.

The Ichijos were a married couple who lived on the upper floor of their building. Kitase had randomly run into the husband, Toru, on the way home from work. But Wridra was hardly paying attention, as she became preoccupied with daydreaming about going to an authentic Chinese restaurant. The greatest thing about Chinese cuisine was its exquisite seasoning with the variety of spices and how they cooked the meats so deliciously. All the flavors created were a form of art and seemed thoroughly calculated throughout their four-thousand-year history. Then, the cat’s face loosened into a sloppy smile as Wridra remembered the delectable, tender braised pork.

Now fully alert, the familiar’s eyes shone eagerly. Wridra had set aside caring for her whelps, managing the labyrinth hall, and keeping an eye over the war to focus on the cat’s taste buds. She told herself experiencing new flavors would help improve her mansion and the cooking in the other world. While Wridra didn’t cook, she conveniently ignored that fact.

The cat got up as soon their conversation ended and meowed repeatedly. It ran around Mariabelle’s feet as if to say, “I want Chinese food! I can’t wait!”

“That tickles!” said Mariabelle, giggling. “Oh no, I need to get ready! I think he said we’re meeting up with Kaoruko on the first floor.”

The cat waved as if to say, “Okay, go get ready!” It then lazily sprawled out on the floor. The Chinese cuisine they had eaten before was incredible already, and eating dishes cooked by a seasoned professional was like a dream come true. The familiar rolled around on the floor like Wridra couldn’t contain her excitement. It was terrifying how such a major event could suddenly change her leisurely day. The black-haired beauty controlling the familiar couldn’t help her face from loosening up into a wide smile of immeasurable happiness. Someone could have pinched her cheeks, and she would have laughed and forgiven them. She might have even agreed to add “meow” to the end of every sentence if someone asked. However, her emotions would soon go into free fall.

Upon changing into an outfit for going out, the elf girl said, “I’m sorry, we can’t bring cats into the restaurant.”

That simple sentence was enough to cause the cat to stagger despite having



four legs for support. Wridra could laugh off a barrage of magic attacks. But a single sentence had pierced her through the heart and inflicted catastrophic damage. The creature trembled, then looked up with a look of shock. Wridra was so confused that she thought, *What did you just say, meow? I dare you to say that again, meow.* The cat tilted its head in confusion, and the elf put her hands together apologetically.

“I have to go now. I’ll be sure to bring a gift home for you, so be good and stay home, okay?”

“Wait! Wait just a minute!” uttered Wridra through her cat form. “Bring that sleepy fool Kitase, meow. I’ll prepare a bed in the other world right away, so make him go to sleep and pick me up, meow! Then I’ll be able to go with you!” But her desperate pleas only sounded like meows when spoken out loud. The cat jumped up and down, no longer concerned with the rules of this world, but Marie couldn’t understand its intentions.

Wridra was certain that food tasted best when freshly cooked. Even if Marie brought home leftovers, their quality would be drastically inferior and unacceptable. Not to mention, she couldn’t hold out any longer. Her stomach was already anticipating Chinese food, and something terrible would happen if she didn’t get to the restaurant. Marie didn’t seem to understand just how dangerous an appetite could get if left unchecked.

The cat explained this to the elf, but Marie simply turned to leave out of the front door. Yet the cat was so shocked that all its fur stood on end. It cried out and demanded that Mariabelle bring Kitase, only to hear the cruel sound of the door closing behind her. The Arkdragon was flabbergasted and rendered speechless for some time. While the familiar clawed at the door, the sad truth was that its fate had been sealed.

Wridra cried. Even the great Arkdragon was not immune to sorrow. The cat yowled, meowed, and ran in circles on the bed, but the sadness didn’t subside. It buried its upper body under the futon and cried some more.

Autumn was the season of eating, and it was terrifying. No one in the labyrinth’s second-floor hall would believe that the legendary Arkdragon was crying with her head under the futon in the same position as her familiar. But

someone walked by at that moment—Shirley, the woman who lived with Wridra at the mansion. She blinked her sky-blue eyes and cocked her head in confusion, unable to comprehend what was happening.

§

I exited the bus as a night of light, drizzling rain awaited me. We had been getting a different kind of rain since we entered autumn, no longer the continuous ones. The air seemed to get chillier each time the weather got rainy. I felt lonelier when it rained during this time of year. As I exhaled, the wind carried my faintly white breath away.





Still, I was already across the street from my condo and ready to meet up with Marie and Kaoruko, who should have been arriving soon. I was watching the building and wondering when they would come out when I heard a voice from behind.

“We don’t need to change, do we? We’re just going to get some food.”

It was Toru, who wore a suit just like me and looked more handsome than usual with a coat on. I had gone to dinner with the married couple before. While I usually spent my time in my room and had little interest in social gatherings, I had gone because I wanted Mariabelle to get to know more people. Toru was likely thinking the same thing since he had once told me his wife was from Hokkaido. He must have invited us out because we had few friends and acquaintances, and he wanted to do something about it.

“Of course,” I agreed. “We should go to the restaurant directly. Is it close by?”

“Yeah, it’s right down this street and across the bridge. They’re open late, and you will love their amazing, authentic Chinese dishes.”

“Oh,” I noted as I walked with my umbrella. I didn’t know such a place was so nearby. Usually, I cooked at home because nothing could beat a freshly cooked dish, even if it saved money. Chinese restaurants were also pricey, so I didn’t go often. I explained this to him, and he chuckled.

“Actually, this place is pretty affordable. If you end up liking it, you should take that adorable girl of yours, just the two of you.”

“Was I that obvious? You’re good at reading people’s thoughts,” I said.

“I may work in the government, but half of it is pretty much a service job. Many people aren’t good at communicating there, and the paperwork is a pain. I often have to read people and think ahead.”

I was impressed that Toru and his wife were expressive people who were good at conversing with others. Come to think of it, I had dealt with a very unfriendly person at the government office before. That was a pretty unpleasant experience, but it probably would have gone a lot smoother if he had been there instead.



“You said half of it is like a service job, but what’s the other half?” I asked.

“Hmm... I guess you could say that’s the technical side of things. Making plans for regional development, construction, inspections. That kind of stuff. I basically check whether everything is on track, but it’s a lot of work because there’s so much going on in Koto Ward,” he said. He explained that there was a lot he had to deal with because he was so close with the locals and laughed dryly. “Just look at this stomach.” He pointed at it as he talked. Judging by his wry smile, this was probably a joke he used a lot.

As we continued walking, we saw the two women coming out of the condo. The elf girl Marie was holding up a plastic umbrella, and next to her was Toru’s wife, Kaoruko.

I waved, and Marie jogged over to me. Her beautiful, pale-purple eyes were visible under her brown knit cap with bear ears on them. She folded her umbrella as soon as she got close and stood beside me. I always came home around the same time, and we saw each other every day. Yet we couldn’t help but smile. She welcomed me home, but then her expression turned sad. To my surprise, the next words that came out of her mouth were in Elvish.

“Wridra has been crying. I felt so bad for her. She wanted to go with us so badly. We should bring something tasty home for her.”

“Oh no... I completely forgot about her,” I responded.

So that was why she had spoken in Elvish. We couldn’t really let the others know we wanted to bring home some Chinese food for our hungry cat. I looked over at Kaoruko and bowed my head in greeting. As a Japanese person, the language of elves sounded quite wonderful, almost like a mystical song. Perhaps the couple felt the same way because I could sense them watching us.

“Just bringing something home probably isn’t going to be enough...” I told Marie. “How about we invite her to Japan sometime soon? She might cheer up if we take her out for some good food.”

“Yes, good idea!” agreed Marie. “Heh heh, I’m sure she’s going to be in a bad mood even if we invite her.”

“She wouldn’t turn us down, though. It’s obvious when she’s excited about

something, even if she tries to hide it.”

Marie pictured Wridra’s reaction and laughed, clutching at her stomach. She was very close with Wridra and seemed excited about her friend visiting in her humanoid form. We couldn’t bring a cat into a restaurant, so this was the only way we could make it up to her. Thankfully, we discussed this in another language, since we obviously couldn’t tell the Ichijos that we were bringing a guest from a dream world.

Wridra had been busy raising her children, although we could still invite her here because she had the ability to create clones of herself. We had even helped her relieve some stress from childcare responsibilities when we first brought her to Japan. So, she would probably be pleased if we invited her again.

Kaoruko was waiting for a break in our conversation. We heard a splash as she stepped on a puddle and stared at me. Her black hair danced softly just past her earlobes, and the subtle design of her glasses suited her as a librarian.

“Good evening. I see you two are as close as ever. You seem so different from your usual laid-back self when you speak another language,” she said, putting a hand to her mouth. It seemed she was surprised that an unassuming guy like me started speaking a foreign language so fluently.

Marie gave me a cold look for some reason and said, “You were so excited to learn Elvish. You kept following me and asking me to teach you words. I’m sure you were like that with the Lizardmen too. You should realize that’s not normal.”

She had a point, but I thought I was dreaming back then. Plus, I rarely had the opportunity to study the language of elves. It wasn’t as if I could just go to school, so I wished she could understand I had no other option.

Kaoruko couldn’t comprehend what we were saying and just blinked blankly. It went without saying that not many people were fluent in Elvish. I cleared my throat, then said in Japanese, “Thank you both for inviting us out to dinner tonight. It is our second time now. I’m sorry we’re always taking advantage of your hospitality.”

“Heh heh, we wouldn’t mind going out with you two every day,” said Kaoruko. I was relieved to see they really didn’t mind and genuinely welcomed



our company. I had to ensure we didn't overdo it and make them sick of us.

When Kaoruko smiled, we all began walking together. The condo's grounds were like a park, and the paved paths made it easy to walk even when it was raining. As the Ichijos led the way, many cars drove by on what I assumed to be their way home from work.

I folded up my umbrella, and water dripped down onto the ground. The restaurant's interior had dragon and tiger ornaments, with many orange-colored lanterns illuminating the place. It was a completely different world from the outside, lively with the voices of people enjoying their meals. Perhaps Marie was enjoying the exotic nature of this place, as I saw a smile spreading across her face.

Since Toru had made a reservation, an employee escorted us to a dimly lit room. Marie exhibited plenty of curiosity the entire time, and I couldn't blame her. We could see the kitchen, where they used a circular wok to fry food over a roaring fire. That must have been quite an unusual sight for Marie, as she stared adorably while clutching my suit. Although we hadn't been seated yet, I wanted to pique her curiosity further.

"Flash frying with high heat like that is called bao in China. Some of the kanji you've been learning might come in handy tonight. Chinese cuisine requires mastery in handling fire, so many frying and cooking methods are written in kanji on the menu," I whispered in her ear.

Marie's eyes lit up even more, and her smile widened. Seeing that I had successfully stimulated her curiosity, I couldn't help but smile. Marie looked restless and giddy as we got seated.

I removed my outerwear and sat down after the Ichijos. "Excited?" I asked Marie.

Her brilliant amethyst eyes met mine, and she said, "Yes, very! I love that I get to learn more about Asian culture while having dinner."

"Places where people gather to eat are always rife with culture, not just in this world. I love coming to these places because it feels like you're getting good value when you can learn and enjoy food. But I always cook my own meals in Japan since eating out can be pricey."

From what it appeared, Marie couldn't wait to see what the menu had to offer because she had already taken one of them off of the table. She looked at me with exasperation and said, "I don't understand you sometimes. There's so much delicious food in Japan. I feel like it's a waste." Her expression told me she truly didn't get it. Of course the food here was good, but a humble office worker like me had to be careful about spending.

Shortly after, I glanced at the menu in her hand. Sure enough, it was full of kanji. Even though it was difficult to read even for a Japanese person, Marie eyed it with a look of studiousness, which I found adorable.

I also looked at Toru, who was seated next to me, and said, "You always know the best restaurants."

Toru took his glasses out of his pocket, grinned, and remarked, "When it comes to food, I'm your man. I guess that's why my stomach ended up like this." He exaggerated his laugh and rubbed his stomach, making the girls laugh as well.

Kaoruko and Marie seemed closer compared to when they had first met, and they sat physically closer to each other than usual due to the circular table. Currently, Kaoruko wore a dress with a subtle color and a long skirt to complement her black, shoulder-length hair. She was usually off work on Mondays, and Marie had been taking the cat to hang out with her. Maybe that was why they seemed more like friends now rather than just neighbors.

"Toru is paying tonight, so please eat as much as you want," Kaoruko told me.

"Ha ha ha, the best way to eat Chinese food is to stuff your face without holding back. You've shared food with us before, so think of this as my way of thanking you."

Now that he mentioned it, I had shared some food with Kaoruko whenever I cooked too much or my family sent me things from home. She had already given us more than enough in return, so Marie and I looked at each other and bowed our heads to thank them. It was best to accept their kindness and show gratitude in these situations. Besides, this was Marie's first time trying Chinese cuisine, and I wanted her to fully enjoy it.

I noticed a pair of purple eyes staring at me. With the menu still in hand,

Marie moved her face so close to mine that I could feel her breath. “Which kanji is the cooking method you mentioned earlier?”

Her closeness preoccupied me, but she was far more interested in the menu. I stared at it for some time, then pointed at the characters 葱爆羊肉. Honestly, I wasn’t sure how to read it and only recognized 爆, the kanji for bao. I also knew the items with 炒, or chao, in the name were quickly fried dishes like fried rice. I taught her these characters individually, and it must have looked like I was reading her a picture book from the Ichijos’ perspective.

Toru was so amazed that he had forgotten about deciding what to order. “Your speaking skills are impressive already, but you’re also learning kanji? I’m impressed. You’ve only been in Japan for about half a year, right?”

It was indeed impressive. Marie was intelligent and incredibly quick at picking things up. I had gotten used to it already, but her learning speed was shocking for anyone who didn’t know her well. Marie counted with her fingers and said, “Has it been seven months already?”

I nodded. Marie had been living in Japan for about that long.

“It’s fun learning kanji when you understand their meaning, and I think it’s been helping with my pronunciation. I don’t think it’s so bad once you get used to it,” she said. She looked at me for agreement, but I didn’t think so. It had taken us years to learn kanji. She was only saying that because she was a genius, and Japanese definitely wasn’t an easy language to learn. Toru seemingly felt the same way and gave me a look that said he couldn’t believe how smart she was.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “You’ve been going to Kaoruko’s library, haven’t you? I think that’s great. Yeah, I’m glad.”

Toru seemed genuinely happy for her, but something was odd about his reaction. He wasn’t just pleased because he nodded to himself with a wide smile as if his spirits had been lifted. Marie also looked confused, and I felt like there were hidden implications to Toru’s words. I had once told him Marie was a distant relative here on a homestay program, and it looked like he suspected something else was happening. But I might have been overthinking it and just been on edge because he worked a government office job. I met Marie’s eyes,



and she nodded, as we were apparently thinking the same thing.

“I think people who aren’t good at Japanese should watch anime!” she said confidently.

“Huh? Anime?” Toru and I said at the same time. I was surprised to discover that we hadn’t been thinking similarly at all. Yet Marie’s confidence didn’t waver. In fact, she placed a hand on her chest with a brilliant smile on her face.

“Yes, anime. You have so much fun while learning that time just flies by. It’s a lot easier to get in the habit of learning by absorbing anime and manga rather than reading difficult textbooks. It’s very easy to pick up simple phrases for conversation this way.”

Toru blinked a few times, then looked at me as if to ask, “She’s joking, right?” But no, she was completely serious.

It had actually gotten her into anime, and she had been knee-deep in otaku culture ever since. But I was glad that she enjoyed it, although I wondered if it was right to introduce it to a beautiful and mythical being like an elf.

So I finally gave in and nodded as Toru laughed out loud and stated, “Ah, I see. That reminds me, you did mention you like anime. It’s not just popular in Japan but all over the world. Some people visit this country because of their love of anime. I grew up watching children’s anime shows, and it’s good for learning. But I would get weird looks if I recommended anime to foreigners.”

Recommending anime to a friend or an acquaintance was one thing, though it would be hard to bring that up to someone he was interacting with through work. I would probably feel taken aback if it had happened to me.

Shaoxing wine had arrived at our table, and we started ordering the dish Marie was looking at earlier, along with a few others that looked good. Toru raised a glass and smiled at everyone at the table.

“This is our second dinner get-together. Kaoruko tells me she’s been hanging out with you two. Unfortunately, I’m always stuck at work. Let’s eat and drink our fill tonight. Cheers!”

We clinked our cups together, and our dinner had begun.

It was quite noisy around us, with all of the delicious food and alcohol brought out for us. Japanese people tended to be pretty serious but often loosened up for these occasions. I got nervous because Marie wasn't a fan of crowds and loud noises, preferring quiet spaces instead. She also disliked it when it was too hot or too cold; she was a particular woman. But I realized I was worrying too much when I saw the excitement in her eyes.

"You two went to the same school together?" asked Marie.

"Yes," replied Kaoruko, "we were together throughout elementary, middle, and high school, plus university. He was an upperclassman who lived nearby, but it wasn't like I was chasing after him or anything. We lived in a rural area, so there was a high chance we would go to the same schools through high school."

"Wow, sixteen years together?" said Marie, impressed. "Wait, through high school? Then what about after that?"

Kaoruko had been all smiles until then, when her expression tightened at the question. Her cheeks grew red, and it wasn't because of the alcohol. It seemed she wasn't good at lying or dodging questions.

"For university, well...I actually did chase after him. He was a pretty reserved person, so..." stammered Kaoruko.

I was surprised to hear she was the type to make the first move. Marie appeared to feel the same, as she turned to me with wide eyes, blinking repeatedly.

"Maybe it was a good thing I couldn't drink today," said Marie. "Oh, don't worry about me, I'm just talking to myself. So, how did you win over your reserved husband? I'd love to know."

She eagerly moved closer to Kaoruko, where I could see her interest and curiosity grow. Kaoruko seemed taken aback by her intensity and slightly leaned away, eyes shifting.

"Umm... It wasn't anything special."

"Y-Yeah, there was nothing indecent going on or anything. Right, Kaoruko?" said Toru.

“O-Of course! Nothing indecent... Well, maybe a little bit. Oh! I mean, no! He just helped me study for my entrance exams!”

“Ahh, I see,” Marie said. “You used the entrance exams as an excuse to get closer. That’s quite the strategy. You must have had him over at your house with lots of alone time. Did everything work out as planned?”

“L-Let’s talk about something else! I’m surprised how pushy you get when it comes to these kinds of topics!”

I had to admit my shock. While I imagined women liked talking about relationships, I did not know if elves were the same way. Come to think of it, there weren’t many people around her she could talk to about romance, Wridra included. I let out a thoughtful groan, then joined the conversation.

“I’m a bit curious about it too. I had no idea you two have been together since childhood.”

“We get that a lot. Toru was the cool upperclassman in my neighborhood back then,” said Kaoruko. “He was popular, good at taking care of others, and a student council member. But now...”

“Don’t tell me you think I’m nothing like that now,” replied Toru.

He always joked about being overweight, but his expression was genuine. Even though I felt bad for him, it made me vow to myself to manage my diet carefully. We always went pretty wild in the dream world, so we would probably be fine.

“Thank you for waiting,” a voice said. I turned around to find a female server bringing a large plate to our table. The server placed classic Chinese dishes like fried rice and mapo tofu on the red table. Ankake fried rice with a thick, savory sauce poured all over it sat in front of Marie. Her eyes widened at the size of the dish.

“Wow, I think this is going to fill me up by itself!” she said. “We ordered so many dishes; I thought the portions would be smaller.”

“Chinese food can be hearty. You’ll see why we eat on a spinning table in a second,” I told her as I spun the table a little, and her eyes grew even more. The world was big, but not many cuisines used specialty tables that spun around like



this. Her appetite apparently had higher priority than her curiosity because her eyes were glued to the steaming, inviting dishes.

Many dishes had a lot of yellow from the eggs, but the mapo tofu was bright red in contrast. The white tofu of the dish only made the red stand out even more, and I could tell it was spicy just by looking at it. The fresh, zesty aroma wafted to her, making her emit a noticeable gulp.

“I have a feeling I’m going to gain weight this autumn. It’s okay since I’ll just be more careful about my diet starting tomorrow. Plus, it would be rude to hold back tonight,” said Marie.

“Here, use this. The food is hot, so be careful,” I said, handing her a spoon. I knew it would be pointless to warn her about overeating, so I decided to support her instead. She scooped up a spoonful of ankake fried rice and put it in her mouth. The fried rice, eggs, and sauce hit her taste buds, and the smell of crab immediately filled her nostrils. Although flaky fried rice was delicious, combining it with the starchy sauce added a new depth to the flavor, tasting especially good on a cold day like this.

“Mmf, that’s hot!” exclaimed Marie, breathing as she chewed. “Mmm, the sauce goes so well with the rice!”

Yet the dish was lightly flavored, as it wasn’t meant to be the main dish. That would be the bright red mapo tofu, gyoza dumplings, spring rolls, and braised pork belly they placed on the table. Each dish added to the table made it more colorful, and Mariabelle’s mouth was agape with wonder.

“So much food! I don’t know what to try next.”

Plates of delicious-looking meats and vegetables were placed before us, one after another, with no space between them. We could tell the food was good just by looking at them, and it was no wonder Chinese was considered one of the world’s three greatest cuisines. The aroma of the different spices stimulated our appetites as we thought about what to eat next. Mapo tofu, which Marie was trying, was guilty of this craving. It was full of seasonings with strong scents and flavors, like Chinese pepper, red pepper, and bean paste. I tried a bite and felt relieved when it wasn’t too spicy. Perhaps it had been adjusted to suit the Japanese palate, yet it still included seasonings that numbed your tongue.

“Mmm! It’s spicy, but it’s good!” Marie squealed gleefully. She then took another bite of her ankake fried rice. Its subtle flavor gently enveloped her tongue, and her expression softened. She suddenly craved the mapo tofu even more. “It’s strange that it’s so spicy it almost makes the tofu taste sweet, but I can’t stop eating it.”

I felt like that was the essence of Chinese cuisine. Umami and the flavors of the spices filled your mouth, then you went for the gentle taste of fried rice and soup. And for some reason, you couldn’t stop going back for more spicy food.

At a normal meal, the guest was the main character. They would wipe their mouth with a napkin and elegantly say to their companion, “That was delicious.” But Chinese cuisine was something else entirely. The food was the main character in Chinese meals as its explosive flavors took people for a ride. Szechuan cuisine, which featured a tongue-numbing seasoning called mala, was a prime example.

“Oh no, what do I do? I’m sweating, but it’s so good I can’t stop,” said Marie.

“Here, I’ll help you take your top off,” I offered.

“Oh, thank you. Maybe I didn’t need to dress so warmly after all. I can’t believe I was chilly just a minute ago from all that rain.”

I helped her remove her knitted outerwear from behind, and she was left with her collared shirt and long, chocolate-colored skirt. She seemed to feel better now that she had cooled down and sighed out of relief. Her face was pink, and her complexion had improved from when we started eating.

Marie then picked her spoon up and took a big bite of fried rice. She looked full of life, eyes full of joy and sweat rolling down her face. I liked watching her eat and wondered if I was alone in feeling this way. Her pale skin had turned more red, and there were beads of sweat on her face and neck. I offered her a handkerchief as she continued munching away and moved her face closer. So, I wiped it for her.

“Thank you. All of the spices are making me warm and sweaty. I love how interesting authentic Chinese food is,” she said, then took a sip of Chinese tea. The refreshing tea washed down any excess oil in her mouth, resetting her palate for the next bite.

“The chefs must be fantastic at handling oil,” I mused. “I feel like they’ve researched the best ways of cooking meat, whether frying or grilling.”

She took a bite of gyoza, and the runny mixture of pork fat and vegetable juices filled her mouth. The chop suey’s crispiness and flavor soon followed, leaving a fragrant aftertaste of sesame oil.

“Mmm,” she beamed, taking in the abundant flavor and spices.

Kaoruko had been quietly watching her and took a sip of tea before saying, “I never expected you to be such a big eater. This braised skin-on pork belly is tasty too.”

“Oh, I’d love some! Wow, it looks so yummy!” said Marie, her purple eyes alight with glee.

The braised pork belly was full of flavor, and there was a luster to the tender fatty parts. Just seeing it made one want to devour it right away, but it was out of Marie’s reach. It was now time to show Marie why we were sitting at a table that spins.

“Here, you can spin the table like this,” I said, demonstrating for her.

“Ah! Is that what it’s for? It feels so lazy. But it will take more than that to surprise me.”

I thought it would’ve surprised her for sure. So I asked her why, and she answered as she used her chopsticks to put some pieces of pork on her plate.

“Because if I had been eating in ancient China, I would have realized it would be easier to reach for dishes if the table could spin. So this doesn’t surprise me, and now I get some tasty braised pork,” she said, then put a piece of pork in her mouth.

Maybe it was the Shaoxing wine we had been drinking, but her response made the entire table laugh out loud. The restaurant felt so noisy when we first came in, and we soon became a part of the lively clamor.

I exhaled and could tell I was warmer than usual, a hint of sweet alcohol in my breath. As I picked up my Shaoxing wine, I felt that the chaos from earlier in the



night was starting to calm down. Our table was quieter now that the ladies had left their seats to go to the restroom.

When I tipped the cup of amber-colored wine into my mouth, I thought it had been a while since I'd gone out for a drink. Just then, Toru moved closer to me while glancing around. From the look in his eyes, I wondered if he had invited us to dinner because he wanted to discuss whatever he was about to bring up.

"You know, Koto Ward has the second-highest population of foreign people next to Shinjuku," he said. "But did you know that most of them are Asians, like Chinese and Korean people, and there are barely any Westerners like Mariabelle-chan?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't see many other than tourists," I replied.

I ordered another bottle of wine, then Toru poured me the rest of the bottle we were drinking from. Although I gratefully drank more, I was a bit nervous since I felt he was about to ask me about Marie.

"That's why I thought it was so nice that she learned such proper Japanese," he added. "I figured either you're a great teacher, or she must have really wanted to talk to you in your language."

"She was always a smart one. So, what is it you're getting at?" I asked, being more direct than usual because of my nerves.

He smiled. "This is just my intuition speaking, but she doesn't have Japanese citizenship, does she?"

I took another sip of my drink to cover my thumping heart. The drink had a sweetness to it that left a faint sting in my nose, and the high alcohol content wasn't enough to distract my racing mind. Toru continued smiling, even as his gaze had an air of seriousness.

"Seven months is too long for a homestay program. They're about two to three months at best. She hasn't even been going to school in the first place. Besides, there's no way she would've chosen to homestay with a single man in his condo," he said.

I acknowledged he was right. Claiming that she was a relative from overseas staying over for a homestay program was a terrible idea. I already knew that,

but it left me speechless when he laid it out so bluntly.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” he continued. “I love that you two are friends with my wife, and I want to help you. Or maybe I’m just too curious for my own good.”

He smiled again. I realized there was no hint of hostility directed at me, and the tension in my shoulders relaxed. I finally exhaled what I held in and waited for his next words.

“There are a lot of people without citizenship in Japan right now, and there are some cases where refugees get accepted. I don’t know the details, but your situation is somewhat similar. So, I’m guessing your story about her being your relative is fake.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond because it seemed he had interpreted the situation favorably after seeing how happy Marie had been. Otherwise, he probably would have said something sooner and even contacted a child guidance center. I wasn’t sure if I should tell him the truth, at least partially. If I did, he could offer me help down the line. But I couldn’t tell him about the dream world, so I could only give him half-truths.

While I thought he would continue to watch over us even if I ended the conversation, I would only put off the problem for later and would eventually need to take action. It was a difficult decision I could not make right away, but I knew I should avoid lying to him. Any lie I told would be flimsy under the circumstances, and he would probably see right through it. If I broke his trust, I had to prepare to lose our friendship and return to being strangers.

He told me he had tomorrow off, so he would drink with me for as long as I wanted. There was no ill will in his words, and it made me agonize even harder over my decision.





I wobbled around as I stood on my feet. My vision swayed, and I felt like I would fall if I let my guard down. I looked up, noticing the dimly visible streetlight looked like a beautiful moon in an empty sky.

“Ha ha ha, what’s wrong? Get it together!” said Toru, his face bright red. It surprised me how close he was, having his arm around my shoulder. Then I realized how drunk he was.

This news was horrible, and I was completely out of it. Even though I wasn’t a huge drinker, it’s not like I couldn’t handle alcohol. I drank at home and controlled my intake, but I had never gone out to drink with my coworkers. My body wasn’t used to consuming like this, so it didn’t take long for me to get too inebriated.

“Wait, where are the other two?” asked Toru.

“I think they went home together,” I said. “You wouldn’t let me go, and we went for rounds two and three. Oh man, Marie’s going to be mad when I get home.”

I had sent Marie and Kaoruko home before us. Marie had been worried if something had happened, so I had told her everything was fine. Unfortunately, I would have to explain what had happened tonight when I got home. The server had packed our leftovers in to-go containers for us, meaning the pouting black cat was probably eating them by now, grumbling the entire time. Toru and I had gone to another place for a long night out in Koto Ward. I couldn’t really blame him, since this had all happened because I wasn’t more decisive.

“Ha ha, what’s not to love about being tended to by a pretty girlfriend like yours?” he asked, slapping me hard on my back. “That’s a dream come true for guys like us. Kaoruko is cute, of course... But she ignores me for days when she gets angry.” He suddenly turned sad and began brooding. It was getting pretty awkward until he broke the silence. “You know, it’s hard to believe that you two are so close and together all the time. All you’ve done is hold hands and kiss once in a while.”

“N-Not so loud, please! And even that feels like I’m doing something illegal.”

He was more drunk than I was, even though I desperately tried to keep him upright with his arm over my shoulder. The alley was dark, and all of the stores had their shutters down already. I looked up and sighed, grateful that it had stopped raining.

In the end, I didn't get to talk to him about anything important since our conversation at the Chinese restaurant. Part of it was my fault for not stepping up; I could not tell him Marie was a hundred-plus-year-old elf from a dream world, and all I told him was that she didn't have Japanese citizenship. There was still hope because she could get approval as long as she had the ability to get by in the country without issues. Apparently, he had been so relieved during dinner when he had grasped how much Japanese Marie had learned.

I looked at Toru, thinking he was a good person. Then I noticed his eyes were gradually closing, and I said in a panic, "Don't fall asleep! We still need to get home!"

"Nng..." he groaned. "I don't know why, but you make me sleepy. Ugh, my head hurts... I miss my futon..."

He was totally drunk!

As I repositioned the somewhat overweight man on my shoulders, his head rolled over dramatically to the other side. There was no way this would work. He was way too big for me to hold up, and I didn't know what to tell Kaoruko if her husband ended up getting hurt. Such thoughts ran through my head as I desperately clung to him, but that only made things worse.

*Crack!*

I felt a hard, dull impact. My ears were ringing, and it slowly dawned on me. Toru's head had swung at me with too much momentum, and our heads had collided. I would have usually dodged it, yet I didn't have my wits about me due to the alcohol.

But I had made a critical mistake. I reflected on it with a deep sense of regret and never wanted to drink too much when going out again. Our legs got entangled, and then we fell into a trash pile, a loud crash reverberating in the alley.

Unexpectedly, I snapped awake and stared blankly at the wooden ceiling. I had somehow ended up in a Japanese-style room.

“Huh...?”

To my surprise, it wasn't me who had just spoken. It had come from the naked person beside me, who was settling into a sitting position.

I could feel my heart racing. This couldn't be happening. There was no way. I prayed that this was only a dream, then slowly turned to my side and saw a toned young boy who was anything but overweight. He had the solemn face of an honor student and bold eyebrows. The boy looked down at his own body, flabbergasted.

*Who the heck?*

I had never been so confused in my life.



## Episode 5: An Invitation to a Dream

I loved to sleep. Though, most people felt the same way. Lying down on some fresh sheets, enveloped in a warm futon, and breathing in a peaceful, rhythmic pattern—although I loved playing in the dream world, those moments before drifting off into unconsciousness comforted me. Lately, waking up had been just as blissful. I would see Mariabelle’s beautiful face, and she would ask, “Are you awake?” Then she would tell me how the weather was beyond the half-open curtain. Those moments made my heart flutter in a way that I couldn’t describe.

It was like how I was with the others. Waking up with Wridra could be awkward sometimes because of her complete lack of modesty, but seeing her yawn wide made me look forward to the rest of the day. I had some strange friends like an Arkdragon, a dark elf, and a former floor master. New life had been breathed into the second floor of the labyrinth with the recent renovations.

My day had ended, marking the start of my dream. I had been relieved of paperwork duties and stepped into an exciting world of swords, magic, and fantasy. But here I was in the dream world, sweating profusely, with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“This is a dream, right? How did I get younger? And why am I naked?” asked the boy, surprised. I couldn’t believe it, but it was my neighbor Toru. I had gotten drunk last night and carelessly fallen in an alley, bringing him into this world with me. Despite having sworn that I would never drink heavily like that again, that wouldn’t get me out of this mess, nor would it ease the intense regret tormenting me.

My wish to be in a dream was a rather pointless prayer since we were literally in a dream world. Toru wore nothing under the futon. The same thing had happened to Marie and Wridra, showing that something prevented people from bringing anything with them when visiting the other side for the first time. He looked around my age, at least in this world. I was twenty-five in Japan but

woke up looking like a child in this world. He looked rather young, and his overweight body and face had changed dramatically.

The situation felt daunting until a realization hit me. If I played this right, I might convince him none of this really happened. With a faint hope in sight, I finally felt calm enough to speak.

“Yes, this is definitely a dream,” I said. “Do you remember drinking too much last night?”

“Hm? Oh, right. That makes sense. I was just surprised because it all feels so real. And I got a lot younger for some reason. By the way, who are you?” he asked. I had forgotten that I looked different. Yet he put two and two together because my transformation wasn’t as dramatic. “Wait, I recognize that sleepy-looking face. You’re Kitase, aren’t you? Ha ha ha, you look so young. You look a little bit androgynous, but maybe that’s how you looked when you were a kid. It is just my dream, of course.”

“Uh-huh. Anyway, wake up now. You fell asleep in an alley, so I don’t know where you’ll be when you do.”

He looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about. Thinking about it, I didn’t do a very good job explaining myself because I was in a bit of a panic. If we were to go about our day and wake up at my usual time, we could end up in a crowded shopping district. In fact, that would definitely happen. Not only that, I would make Marie wait for me until morning, which I wanted to avoid at all costs.

I did not need to go into details right now. My mission and method of self-preservation was to make him go to sleep as soon as possible. I gestured at the warm, comfortable-looking futon and said, “Now, why don’t you just lie down? Then you can fall right—”

“So, what’s this initial setup screen thing I see? Is this some sort of game?”

I had completely forgotten about that and went pale. That was how I had forever cemented my dumb-sounding name, Kazuhiho.

“Huh? It wants me to enter my name?” he said.

“Th-This is a dream, so you never know what wacky things will happen!” I

blurted out. “Anyway, you can think about that after you lie down!”

I panicked but tried to stay calm and focus on putting him to sleep. However, my efforts were useless as we heard loud stomping footsteps angrily approaching us from behind the shoji screens. A black-haired beauty in a dress appeared, face red with rage. She had tears welling up in her eyes, her shoulders trembled, and an ominous black aura glowed around her.

“Kitase, you damned traitor! H-How could you snooze off without a care in a world after abandoning me to get Chinese food?! Wait... Who is that?”

Just as I thought, she was upset about us not taking her to the restaurant. We couldn’t do anything about that since cats weren’t allowed to enter for sanitary reasons. Luckily, an unexpected guest had quelled her wrath, though the situation had grown even more dire. Toru had just met a resident of the dream world for the first time, and my plan to put him to sleep was impossible.

“Hmm, you do not smell of this world. Strangely, you seem to be brand-new,” mused Wridra as she knelt down and carefully observed his face and bare body.

Toru was blushing, probably because of how good Wridra smelled and her ample breasts. While the black-rose embroidery on her dress covered them, her cleavage was faintly visible through the fabric. Her allure was enough to make even women blush.

He turned to me and his lips flapped as if he wanted to say, “Whoa, she’s so pretty! Who is she?” But I couldn’t tell him she was an Arkdragon with an estimated level of over one thousand.

Suddenly, Wridra uttered something rather nonsensical.

“Braised pork belly.” We looked at her blankly as her brows furrowed right before our eyes. “I will never forget that smell! The aroma of the Chinese cuisine I love so much still lingers on him! Hah, hah, I see now. You must be that man, Toru! The braised pork belly you had abandoned me for must have been quite delicious, was it not?!”

The beautiful woman from before had transformed into a raging Arkdragon with a sinister aura. Toru gasped, immediately lowering himself to the floor and bowing down in apology. He had done nothing wrong, even inviting us and

paying for dinner out of the kindness of his heart while consulting with me regarding my and Marie's futures. Yet he thought Wridra was angry about something else and didn't budge from his prostrated position.

Working adults in Japanese society had grown used to dealing with problems. One had to read the room and act appropriately to create a smooth and amicable relationship. As a working adult, Toru had dealt with this by sitting up straight with his legs bent beneath him in the seiza position.

"Y-Yes, I'm Toru! I'm not entirely sure why you're upset about braised pork belly, but I wouldn't mind going to a Chinese restaurant with— Wait, I thought I recognized you from somewhere. Did you go on a trip to Chichibu with Kitase-kun?"

"Hmm? Ah, now that you mention it, I have seen you before. I have spent time with your partner several times in the past, but this is the first time speaking with you directly."

"My partner? Are you talking about Kaoruko?"

As soon as he heard his wife mentioned, an emotion other than fear appeared in his eyes. Where was this place? Why did he look like a child again? How did this woman know Kaoruko? Such thoughts ran through his mind, and the feeling of dread in me only grew stronger. It was going to be a pain. My plan to pass everything off as a strange dream was crumbling right before my eyes.

## §

I had already given up on trying to get Toru to sleep. Part of it stemmed from Wridra convincing me that letting him in on our circumstances wouldn't be bad. And I had always put faith in her intuition and found it more reliable than most things, like the weather forecast on TV. As a matter of fact, I never regretted taking her advice. Considering she was sobbing just because she couldn't go to dinner with us, perhaps it was best not to put too much faith in her.

Since I just wanted to live peacefully, I also wanted to keep our secrets to ourselves if possible. But I didn't really think Toru would do anything to jeopardize us, and I was sure he would understand if we explained everything. So I decided to go to sleep and wake up in Japan while Wridra prepared his clothes. After all, I couldn't leave Marie waiting for me all by herself. This had



never happened before, so it hurt me just thinking about her.

Wridra saw how restless I was, and told me to “hurry up and go.” She could be a worrywart like me and was always with Marie in her cat form. Since she protected her whenever we were in the labyrinth, she spent more time with Marie than me. I knew how much she cared for her.

Something else bothered me. But as I mulled over those thoughts, I felt a cold breeze caress my face. My eyes slowly opened, and I saw an empty night sky.

“I fell asleep... I really am good at that,” I said to myself. It seemed I had returned to Japan. I was sure people would be surprised if I told them I had fallen asleep while deep in thought.

I first noticed the knocked-over trash can, then realized I was on the ground face up.

“Oww... My body’s all stiff, and my suit is all wrinkled. I guess it’s not a good idea to sleep outside like this. Toru isn’t here, as I thought.”

It was pitch-black out, and luckily no one else was around. I had made a huge blunder by bumping my head, but at least it was late at night. Still, I wondered where I would wake up since I never lost consciousness like that before. It seemed I had nothing to worry about, as I had reappeared at the same alley I was in earlier. I had expected that Toru wouldn’t wake up here with me since he was still in the dream world. And so I rose, rolling the fallen trash can out of my way.

Despite wanting to check my surroundings a bit more, I had bigger priorities. I looked at my watch to find it was almost midnight.

“This will be my first time going home this late. I hope Marie is already asleep.” Knowing her, I had a feeling she would still be up. I picked up my bag, then started walking with unsteady steps.

I inserted my key into the door and heard a click. The doorknob was cold to the touch, but I stepped into warmth when entering the building and saw Marie rising next to the interior light. She had seemingly already taken a bath and changed into loungewear. But Marie was holding a book, presumably reading as

she waited for me to get home. I felt a pang in my heart as she turned around with a tear rolling down her face.

The black cat jumped off the bed as Marie rushed to me in her slippers. My heart ached again to see she was holding back more tears. She continued to run toward me and dived into my chest to embrace me. I quickly put my arms around her back.

I wasn't sure what to say. We always had fun chatting away, but she remained still with her arms around me and said nothing. I took a few deep breaths and slowly started to speak.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

Marie buried her face in my arms and muttered. I couldn't tell if she was angry, sad, or both. She sobbed a few times, then looked up at me, her purple eyes covered with tears. It was the first time I had seen her cry.

"It's strange. I wasn't supposed to cry. Knowing you, I knew you would be okay, so I waited here, wondering when you'd get home. I was having fun reading a book with Wridra until a moment ago," she said, yet the tears wouldn't stop. I couldn't wipe them away for her with our arms around each other, so I just stared into her eyes.

She had a troubled expression, likely due to having trouble processing her emotions. I expected her to get angry with me, so I was rather taken aback that she was even more bewildered than me.

I was glad I had come home despite the circumstances. Otherwise, I would have made her even more sad. I finally breathed out of relief, then gently stroked her back. She stared at me with those tearful eyes. Her expression had changed, and it seemed she understood her emotions.

"You know, I think my feelings for you are a lot stronger than I realized. That's the only explanation that makes sense. I always knew you were precious to me, but why else would I cry like this just because we were apart for a little while?"

My mind went blank when she said those words in her beautiful voice. It was as if her feelings flowed into me from where her slender body touched mine. She got so caught up in her speculation that she had blurted out her unfiltered

feelings, and her face gradually grew red as she realized what she had just said.

Marie suddenly pushed me away, trying to put distance between us. “I-I just said something very cheesy, didn’t I?!” She still kept me away. I couldn’t see her expression clearly with her face lowered, but she was turning red up to her ears. It was pretty obvious, and I started blushing.

“Um, I didn’t think it was cheesy,” I said. “I’m happy to hear you say that.”

While I clearly expressed gratitude, she glared at me and wanted to say something.

“You don’t get it, do you? Fine. As someone who reads lots of romance novels, let me give you a bit of advice. You should never, ever indulge girls who cry just because their boyfriend is gone for a little while. It’s only going to lead to trouble,” declared Marie.

“Uh? Sorry, but what do you mean?”

Though I hardly ever read romance novels, I’d always wondered about them. I had seen those books on the table and near her pillow, and they had different covers pretty much every day. She must have been going through them at an incredibly fast pace.

Marie moved her face closer to mine, tilted her head, and said, “I mean, this sort of thing will keep happening again and again. You should have reached out to me and explained everything, although it was my fault for letting my negative thoughts run wild. So we’ll call it even.”

Her tears had subsided, and I was relieved she was starting to feel better. I accepted the blame for what had happened tonight and couldn’t help but wonder what she’d meant just now. Thus, I asked her as I removed my shoes.

“What sorts of negative thoughts?”

“Well, what if you just disappeared and never came back.”

That would’ve made me anxious since she would be left in Japan alone, which was a chilling thought. It was strange that thought had never crossed my mind.

Marie reached for my suit to help me remove it. To my surprise, she seemed completely fine now. Our eyes met, and she said, “Oh, did I pique your interest

in my romance novels?”

“N-No, not really. More importantly, if I do ever disappear someday—” I paused, noticing her expression. Her eyes were partially closed, a strange smile on her lips.

“That makes me sad. You don’t think we’ll always be together?”

I worried when trying to figure out why she had said it with that unconcerned expression, perhaps too much.

“No, I do. I want to always be with you and want you to stay by my side,” I said calmly.

“Ah?!” she squealed, then hid her face with the suit she was holding.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Marie? Doesn’t that suit reek of alcohol?”

“...right now,” she mumbled.

“What’s that? I couldn’t hear you.”

“Don’t talk to me right now! Look away and get dressed, okay?!”

“Okay! I’m sorry!” I said. But I couldn’t bring myself to ask what had upset her. I quickly undid my necktie in a fluster, then headed to the dressing area by the bathroom. Since we lived in a one-room condo, it was big enough to fit two. Next to the dressing area was a dresser full of clothes and a closet for suits and coats. More than half of the clothes belonged to Marie. Speaking of, she seemed to have settled, as I heard her footsteps behind me while opening the closet.

“You must be cold. Why don’t you warm up in the shower? And what did you talk about with Toru?” she asked.

“Oh, right, I completely forgot about that. Boy, it was a mess. I ended up accidentally taking him into the dream world. It looks like I’ll have to go and bring him back.”

I muttered about what a crazy night it had been, only to find Marie standing frozen in place. The suit she had been holding fell to the floor, but she still didn’t move an inch. She tilted her head repeatedly as if she had no idea what to think, and I could almost see question marks floating over her head.



“Huh? What? What do you mean? If he’s in the dream world, does that mean you slept with him?”

“Please don’t phrase it that way...and no. We got drunk, and we both passed out in the alley. I have to be careful not to drink so much from now on,” I explained as I picked up my suit jacket. I smoothed out the wrinkles with my hand, put it on a hanger, and placed it in the cabinet. Marie still hadn’t moved.

“S-So, what is he doing now?” she asked.

“Who knows? Maybe he’s been talking to Wridra after getting dressed. I was worried about you more than anything.” I said, yawning. “Whew, I’m tired.”

I considered changing into my pajamas and going to bed without showering. There would be hot springs on the other side, after all. Such thoughts were going through my mind when I heard Marie’s trembling voice from behind.

“Y-You... You really are careless with people other than me. I kind of knew that already, and it made me feel special. But you should realize someone’s life is at stake here.”

“Ha ha, that’s a bit overdramatic. The dream world is safe and fun, so there’s nothing to worry about. It’s not like there are monsters that will attack him or—”

Wait, some monsters attacked humans there. In fact, all monsters attacked humans. They always hated humans, funnily enough.

“I get it!” I said. “If he learns how to fight monsters, he’d have so much fun that he wouldn’t want to return to Japan! Is that what you’re worried about?”

“No, it’s not! You’re always like this. Not everyone thinks fighting monsters is fun, you know! Though, I suppose he should be okay with Wridra there.”

She worried too much. Who wouldn’t enjoy fighting monsters as if you were in a video game? I was about to say it out loud, but she started pushing me from behind for some reason.

“In that case, no shower for you! We’re going to bed!” she declared.

“Oh, if you say so. I have a feeling we’re forgetting something, but... Oh, well.”

It probably wasn't important if I couldn't remember it, so I went to bed as told. This decision was a huge mistake I would end up paying for a few days later. For now, it completely slipped my mind as we buried ourselves under the futon and held each other in a warm embrace.

Maybe I was too careless, as Marie had said. I didn't think of myself that way and hadn't realized another person was concerned for Toru's safety.

We fell asleep to the sound of the wind and chirping insects.

## §

I returned to the second-floor hall once again and found Toru right away. He stood alone at the rest area where he could see the lake glistening in the sunlight. The black cat led Marie and me along a walkway, and as we approached, Toru turned his gaze from the scenery to us and waved.

"Welcome back," he said. "When did you leave, anyway? I didn't expect you to just leave me here... Wait, is that you, Mariabelle? What's with those ears?"

"Oh, uh, should I have covered them up? I'm sorry, I forgot about that. But more importantly, are you really the same Toru? You look so different. Now I see what Kaoruko meant," answered Mariabelle.

I didn't think she had to hide her ears since he was already facing a far more shocking truth: one could travel to and from this fantasy world. These thoughts ran through my mind while I watched a Lizardman bring us some tea. Toru froze like a deer in the headlights as the massive creature stepped into view, distracting him from asking about Marie's elf ears.

"Please make yourself at home," said the Lizardman politely, although Toru obviously didn't understand the monster's language. Still, he seemed to recognize that the creature was not hostile. I looked at him, and he had a troubled smile.

"I think I'm starting to understand why Mariabelle has been staying at your house now," Toru told me, "and also why you've been thinking about Japanese citizenship lately. I'm relieved to know she's not a refugee or something."

To our surprise, he hadn't taken in the situation so quickly. The slight trembling of his hand holding the cup showed that he had grasped the gravity

of the situation. His reaction was a far cry from how I had been playing around ever since I had come to this world. In my defense, I was a child when I first came here. Had I arrived at this age—actually, I would have probably reacted pretty much the same. I couldn't think of many things that were more fun than fighting monsters.

We sat next to Toru and enjoyed our tea for some time. The aromatic tea leaves were some of the greatest things you could find in Arilai. Some people might find the scent too strong, as it could overpower food if paired with a meal. Personally, I enjoyed the refreshing sensation after the floral scent passed through my nostrils. You couldn't find this kind of tea in Japan, and after sipping it for some time, Toru's expression gradually softened.

"That woman named Wridra taught me how to do the initial registration, and I've officially set my name as 'Toru.' It's strange. Other than being much younger and not feeling pain as much, this doesn't feel much different from reality," he said, looking down at his body. The navy yukata he wore suited his black hair well.

The cat meowed as if to say, "You're welcome."

Toru moved his face closer to mine. Maybe I was just imagining it, but he seemed more intense than before. "Now, I'd like to ask something, if you don't mind. This bracelet I got earlier displays strange things like my 'level' and 'skills.' Honestly, I have no idea what they mean... But more importantly, what's your objective?"

I couldn't read the intent of his question, and his silent intensity slightly took me aback. But the so-called objectives that came to mind were all pretty trivial. Marie's purple eyes stared at me, which I took to mean I should answer the question.

"Well, let's see," I began. "For now, we've been making a mansion here, going fishing, and fighting enemies for fun. We've been working on a farm between training sessions, and the pumpkins should be ready for harvest soon. Oh, and clearing the ancient labyrinth is one of our objectives too."

We had just been going with the flow for the most part. Our group wasn't on some grand mission since we wandered over to whatever piqued our interest.

Even though we had encountered some rough battles, something good usually awaited us in the end.

I glanced at Marie as if to say, “That should about sum it up.”

She nodded to indicate, “Yes, so far.”

Toru considered my words, then his black eyes met mine.

“So, do you have plans to invade Japan?” he asked.

“Huh?! Uh, no, not at all. No way. No one can go to Japan unless they’re with me, and even if they do, it’s just to visit a store or recreational facility nearby,” I explained.

“I see,” replied Toru. “I’ve been doing so much overtime and hoped you’d destroy it.”

That disturbing comment came out of nowhere. I felt a bead of sweat roll down my back. Perhaps Mariabelle noticed my reaction because she leaned in to whisper in my ear, “That’s a terrible thing to say about such a peaceful country.”

“Well, I can’t blame him. It’s a pretty stressful society. I hear people find it satisfying when cities get destroyed in monster movies, and I’ve been enjoying violent battles myself,” I said.

“I can hear you, you know,” interjected Toru. “Hmm. Watching this view, I can’t imagine the people here wanting to invade our world. I’ve been thinking of countermeasures for that scenario, but I’m relieved knowing it wasn’t necessary.”

Another disturbing thought. I knew what those “countermeasures” might have been. Toru could report us to the police. In that case, he would need to bring home some sort of proof that this world exists, which could mean trouble for us. It seemed his question sought to determine whether we would pose a danger to Japan. My reply was totally off the mark, but maybe it wasn’t such a bad answer.

Toru smiled at us, almost like a cloud had been lifted. No matter his age, he always had that amiable smile. “So, what is this bracelet? I noticed you two are



wearing one too. Does everyone have one or something?”

“Yes, they’re given out in every country. You can use it to switch out your skills or talk with friends to take down tough monsters. Why don’t you come with me to a nearby training ground? It would be easier to show you,” I said.

After Toru thought about it briefly, he agreed and got to his feet. He chugged down the rest of the tea, and we began to walk along with the black cat. When I told him we put the clear blue lake there to make walks more enjoyable, he laughed as if I were joking.

We soon arrived at the training ground in an open area surrounded by a dense forest. It was about the size of a schoolyard and even had a wooden schoolhouse nearby, similar to a school in Japan. The main difference was that a lodging facility, food storage, and armory were present.

Animals wandered in here from time to time, but they wouldn’t dare get near now. Men were shouting battle cries and holding shields big enough to hide their entire bodies, facing off with a horde of monsters. Blades flashed with the battle cries, sinking deep into the countless monsters they were fighting. Their powerful arms pulled the blades out easily as they marched a step forward.

“Wow, that was impressive. They’re like ancient Roman soldiers,” said Toru, impressed by their flawless movements.

“It’s a shield wall. Unlike with a phalanx formation, they only have about half of their body exposed. But by reducing the density between each fighter, they have increased speed and the flexibility to deal with close combat. Judging from how they pushed back such strong monsters, those men are as powerful as a horse. They also have skills to support them, which explains why they have such superior mobility and firepower compared to Roman soldiers,” I explained.

Toru made a noise that was a mix of surprise and admiration. It clearly impressed him that they were overwhelming monsters that towered over them.

I continued, “They increased their levels by a lot just the other day. By the order of the labyrinth supervisor, Sir Hakam, they’ve been replenishing their ranks, improving their skills, and refining their training as a unit.”

“Wait, you mean to tell me that’s training? You’ve gotta be kidding me. That kind of stuff should be done with CGI,” said Toru, half smiling.

There was a big difference between simply explaining something and having Toru see for himself. The visuals allowed him to take in even more information, so all I had to do was supplement it with a few words. That was why I had brought him here, but it seemed the quality of training had increased since I was here last. This thought was further proved when I heard a loud boom as a cloud of dust flew into the air, and a giant four-legged beast appeared.

The figure leaped in an arc from a distance, and someone shouted a piercing order from the troops. The monster charged toward them with such mass and speed that they would have been trampled to death while screaming in agony, even if they were each armed with modern firearms. Instead, they put up layers upon layers of barriers, which glowed bluish-white as they absorbed the impact of the charge with a deafening clash. Since the collective barrier had deflected the attack at an angle, it sent the giant monster rushing in another direction. This revealed the creature’s flank, and the troops fired crossbows simultaneously from the spaces between the shields.

“Amazing!” exclaimed Toru. “That must’ve been magic.”

“That was the power of miracles. Defensive powers tend to be holy in nature, and Doula’s team, positioned in the rear guard, specializes in it. She leads a giant team called the united front, and Sir Hakam expects a lot out of her in the future.”

Monsters were incredibly formidable opponents, and humans normally stood no chance against them. That was why they banded together in a formation to stand against their inhuman foes. However, it wouldn’t be so easy in the ancient labyrinth. Now that creatures over level 100 were not uncommon, numbers alone would not suffice.

Additionally, the monsters parted to each side to make way for the next opponent. A figure clad in pure-white armor appeared and slowly opened their demonic eyes. The newcomer was smaller than an ogre but had the air of a warrior as they cracked their neck in anticipation of the fight.

It was Demon Arms Kartina, who had once fought to destroy the united front.

Her armor had changed from black to white, but her extraordinary destructive power remained unchanged. Even Toru, a complete stranger to battle, felt the burning tension in the air and understood one thing: no mere human could hope to stand against this being.

Doula, the leader, shouted valiantly from the middle of the formation. Her battle cry made it clear they were fighting for their lives, making their training even more meaningful.

“Diamond! Diamond formation! Now!”

“Aye!”

The formation transformed after she gave the order, and they repositioned themselves into a sharp triangle. It appeared they meant for this formation to withstand a charge, but would it hold? That question was answered mere seconds later.

Unfortunately, the formation immediately crumpled from the front. The layered barrier shattered into dust, adorning the battlefield with its fragile beauty. The shield, considered an iron wall before, dispersed like trash scattered into the air. Screams were audible from a distance, and the sight made the thoughts of even trained soldiers seize for a moment due to what had happened next. After a short delay, Kartina’s impact rang throughout the battlefield like a thunderous roar. There was no way they could defend against something flying at them faster than the speed of sound.

All this happened in vain, and Kartina walked forward with heavy steps. The sight of Zera’s team flying from the pressure radiating from her body alone was like watching a bird of prey shred a snake from head to tail. I didn’t doubt that everyone wondered if this really was just a training session. The cries for help and angry shouts were just like those of the battlefield in the ancient labyrinth. Beside me, I heard a baffled “No way!” But this intensity was what gave the training meaning and significance.

“Bring it in! Soldiers! Crush her!”

Even among the chaos of battle, Doula’s resounding voice reached the warriors, galvanizing their spirits. The men who were curled up and bleeding on the ground rose again, shield in hand, bloodlust blazing in their eyes. Each

battle in which Doula took command had a major characteristic: they always had a turning point when the battle reached a certain phase. And now, the ground rumbled as countless shields loomed toward Kartina from both sides. This action seemed like a desperate measure at first glance, but the fighters moved with coordination. Clearly, the thought of defeat hadn't even crossed their minds.

Kartina gestured as if she was thinking for a moment, then her body shifted. Two resounding booms followed, shock waves created from how she broke the sound barrier. None of the countless shields around her flew, and they continued to close in on her.

"So they left some barriers here," she muttered, noting the reinforcements from the bluish-white walls.

The large man clinging to her neck from behind, Zera, wasn't much of a threat to her. He slammed his sword against her, but it failed to damage her armor. More importantly, she couldn't help but wonder about those seemingly precoordinated movements from earlier.

But it didn't take long for her to find out why. The main unit under Doula retreated to either side; then a horsewoman arrived, the horse letting out a shrill, crazed neigh. It was Puseri, clad in her twilight armor on horseback. She pointed her spear directly at Kartina, a pitch-black aura emanating from her entire body. No one had ever escaped unharmed once she had set her sights on someone.

The soldiers from earlier used their shields to set up walls on either side of Kartina as if to prevent her from escaping, but there was no time for her to pay them any mind. Puseri charged toward Kartina, her twilight hair streaming behind her, the rumbling of her horse's hooves like rolling thunder.

Just then, I heard Marie's voice beside me. "Oh, this looks like the tactic we always use."

"When fighting quick monsters, you need to prevent them from escaping first. They made Kartina dive deep into the diamond formation, leaving just a long, straight line. I'll bet Puseri's pleased, but it looks like there's more to their plan," I replied. The "tactic we always use" she'd mentioned referred to how we

controlled terrain to shift the battle in our favor. The tactic had endless benefits, such as making the battle a lot easier, taking some stress off of us, and making the enemy uncomfortable.

Kartina suddenly had a spear driven into her body, which folded in half and flew back like a bullet fired from a pistol. But it was far from a critical blow since the spear had only pierced a few centimeters into her.

Zera, who was bleeding profusely, was key to their next move. He persistently clung on to Kartina and smiled dauntlessly as she swung him around.

“I’ll go easy on ya, so shut up and eat it! Blade Blast!”

He tightened his hand into a fist, summoning many bloodred blades. At that moment, he had activated the power of the Thousand house, a bloodline of warriors tempered in perpetual battle. The horrifying sound of the red blades piercing into Kartina echoed in her body as they raged violently inside her.

The troops had decided to take a break from the battle. As they carted off the injured for treatment, Kartina went over the mock battle with the others and complimented them for staying fluid with their tactics. It seemed the training session was incredibly rigorous. Some men lay on the ground without removing their armor as monsters, like ogres, grunted beside them.

Some soldiers shot me hateful glares for slacking off or jealous looks for walking around with an elf girl, but I wished they would cut me some slack. I was showing our guest around, and a kid like me was only getting in their way. But I was glad it gave me an excuse not to join them if I was being honest.

Toru must have felt like we were taking him behind the scenes for a movie or something. Naturally, the people here had facial features and physiques that differed greatly from Japanese people, and there were real weapons everywhere. I understood how he felt as he sighed repeatedly.

“Levels and skills can greatly increase a person’s physical abilities, as you can see,” I explained. “I’m sure you want to get stronger like them, right?”

“What? Why?” he asked, confused. “Though I still can’t believe what I just saw. Those are monsters over there, right? They were absolutely incredible in

battle. I'm pretty sure they'd do well, even if they went against the army."

I was surprised that he was still going on about that. He was in a dream world, so I had expected him to be fired up and shout, "I'm gonna beat 'em all!" Or something like that. Besides, I didn't think the soldiers stood a chance against modern weaponry. Their protective power was certainly strong, but it wasn't something they could keep active at all times. That meant they wouldn't be able to deal with sniping from a distance, and they would also have to counter the threat of a constant barrage of bullets from automatic rifles. My mind had gone there, but Toru was going in a different direction.

"It's true that they're inferior in a lot of ways. Mobility, firepower, and the number of soldiers in their ranks. But imagine what would happen if you gave them modern weapons. That Kartina person seemed like she was holding back."

He was more observant than I thought. Marie, who held the black cat in her arms, had the same surprised look as me. Hesitantly, I asked him, "You really sound like you want Japan invaded."

"Hm? Ah, well, the idea of an unknown force sounds pretty exciting. Plus, that would give me a good excuse to use my PTO. Oh, I'm a government employee. So I'd probably have to work anyway." He chuckled, but I couldn't bring myself to laugh. I didn't realize he had such dangerous ideas.

As our conversation ended, we arrived at where Kartina and Doula were talking. Seeing the commander in the earlier battle and the woman rampaging against her team having a friendly conversation was strange.

Doula turned to me with a mug, her red hair flowing around with her movement. She then said, "You're late. Don't worry, the afternoon training session is when the real fun begins." Even as she smiled, her invitation made my stomach hurt. I must have had a terribly grim look. She stared at me for some time, then laughed out loud. "I'm joking. I'm not so insensitive that I'd get in the way of your date. Oh, who's this? Your older brother, maybe?"

"I guess we look alike because we both have black hair," I said. "This is Toru, and... Uh, I guess he's something like an older brother. He just arrived today." I had answered that way since I didn't want to go into detail on where he had come from. Toru looked a bit surprised but said nothing. He nodded, which I



assumed was due to him playing along until I soon learned it was for a different reason.

“I have no idea what you two are saying,” he said.

“Oh, right. I forgot that we use a common language that you don’t speak. Just leave the introductions to me and don’t worry about it for now.”

Toru had gotten used to Marie and Wridra, likely assuming everyone knew how to speak Japanese. Though, I suspected the floor master Shirley could understand him too.

Doula and Kartina focused on me as I dwelled in my thoughts momentarily. I couldn’t just stand there in silence and had to ensure Toru properly greeted his higher-ups. I decided to give them a quick introduction.

“He just arrived here recently and doesn’t speak our language much. He’s no fighter, but if you see him around, I would appreciate it if you’d be good to him.”



“Oh, so is he a cook or something? Whenever I see someone with black hair like yours, I always assume they’re good at cooking. We have good vegetables and meat here, and my men have been getting more and more skilled,” said Doula.

“You always make everyone else cook. It’s not too late to start practicing to be a better wife, you know,” Kartina pointed out.

“Wh-What do you mean? Of course I cook...or I will, once things in the labyrinth settle down,” said Doula. Judging from her reaction, I felt she wasn’t the best at cooking and housework. I didn’t blame her, though. She was a fighter and in charge of the battlefield, not the kitchen. With her height and robust build, she looked dependable in the eyes of men and women alike. Her facial features differed from the Japanese, so Toru must have felt like there were foreign nationals around him.

I was worried about whether or not he was nervous, yet he stepped forward and bowed politely. “It’s nice to meet you. My name is Toru.”

The flawless form of his bow took the women aback. While they didn’t speak each other’s language, his practiced movements as a working adult made him seem more mature than his appearance suggested. They straightened their postures in a fluster, then bowed their heads as if that had caught them off guard.

“You’re just as unusual as Sleepyhead here. Anyway, I’m sure you all watched that training session. Did you two notice anything?” asked Doula, beckoning us over to her table. On the table were many pieces, like those used in chess, and I immediately realized they represented the formation from earlier. Marie and I looked at each other, and she spoke up.

“There were far too many casualties. It might have worked, but it would be a war of attrition if another monster appeared afterward. There’s undeniably a limit to how effective a formation like this will be in the future.”

“Yeah, it definitely needs some sort of long-range support,” I added. “Some monsters like to fight with ranged attacks. The raid team has two rare and valuable Sorcerers in their ranks, along with Great Aja and his disciple. I’d like to see the power of Sorcery implemented in this unit instead of relying solely on

their force of arms and miracles.”

Doula and Kartina looked at each other and marched toward us without saying a word. I had a bad feeling about it when we were both grabbed, me by my collar and Marie by her shoulders, and dragged into a nearby chair. Maybe they thought they would get more insightful feedback from us. I felt pity for Toru getting left behind, but we had skipped training, so I cooperated for a while.

There were many types of monsters, and I had played in more labyrinths around the world than anyone else out there. I was probably an outlier, considering that I had willingly explored areas no one would dare venture into, as I didn’t have to fear for my life.

As a Spirit Sorceress, Marie had read through all sorts of documents stored in the Sorcerer’s Guild and was a treasure trove of knowledge. The interesting thing about her was that she had mastered techniques no one else could use, like freely controlling terrain. This allowed her to view battles from a unique perspective and offer measures normally considered impossible.

We were busy describing useful ways to confront opponents that laid plant-based traps or enemies that could create an ice domain, not noticing the figure approaching Toru. Society considered the long-eared, dark-skinned elves an abomination, but no one here thought that way. Not only was this particular dark elf cheerful and friendly, but she was a member of Team Diamond, the most powerful group in the raid team. She came up from behind and put her arms on his shoulders as if they were close friends, then put her chin on his head and narrowed her blue eyes mischievously.

“Sup! Been a while, huh? So, I was wondering if you could make me some tasty dinner tonight. You know, that curry stuff. Wait, why are you wearing a yukata, Kazu? It’s a bit early to go soak in the hot springs, don’t ya think?” said Eve with a grin.

Toru felt her suntanned arms around him and heavy breasts pressing against his back; then he froze in place. He seemed confused about what was happening and couldn’t understand a word that the dark elf was saying. But as a guy, her enticing softness and feminine scent had the force of a cannonball

through the heart. His entire body stiffened, and he mouthed, “Who is this? What’s going on?!” I wondered if Eve had mistaken him for me. Toru and I were around the same height and both had black hair, so she probably couldn’t tell the difference from behind.

I excused myself and left the table, to which Eve blinked when she saw me. She exclaimed, “Huh? *Two* Kazus?! Did you learn how to make an illusion with a physical form? I’m jealous... As a ninja, I wish I could clone myself too.”

“No, no, that’s not me. Can you let him go, Eve? I feel bad for him,” I said, but maybe he would’ve preferred if she stayed in that position.

She looked at me with confusion and quickly let go of him. To my surprise, she covered up her chest and had her face turn red. I guessed she didn’t mind being touchy with friends but was embarrassed that she had gotten so physical with a complete stranger. Maybe this was a rude assumption, but I didn’t think she had any shame. So I was a bit relieved by her reaction.

Meanwhile, Toru did not look okay. He had had too much excitement as he wobbled unsteadily and crumpled to the ground. I imagined that was how a young woman would react after someone had toyed with her heart.

“Ahh! I’m sorry! I mistook you for Kazu since you’re the same height and have the same hair color! Please forgive me!” remarked Eve.

“I-It’s okay. That was quite something. I’m truly grateful that I could come to this world. So this is why he enjoys spending time in this world so much... Must be nice!”

What was he saying?! That was quite the assumption, and he was a married man. What was he going to tell his wife? And he had just shouted that in Japanese, leaving Eve standing there, blinking in surprise. Toru looked like the serious type, but he was a healthy young man through and through. I sensed Marie glaring at him with disdain, which pained me because he was such a nice neighbor. Although I felt bad for him and hoped she would let him off the hook, I couldn’t look her in the eye.

I sighed. We decided it was best to go somewhere else so we wouldn’t get in the way of training. There were other rest areas all over the place, after all.

We found a table with an umbrella and could finally relax as the server brought us fresh orange juice. The look in Marie's eyes returned to normal, and I silently thanked the server.

I glanced at the woman in a maid outfit walking away with a tray. If I remembered correctly, she had guided us to Zera's manor. That must mean some of the servants here had been brought from Arilai. They had been severely short-staffed since the raid teams started using this place. Even though Lizardmen were all over the place, they still didn't have enough help.

"As you've seen, the skills you have in this world make a huge difference. You can freely choose from close-range, long-range, Sorcery, and Spirit Magic, but specializing in one thing is generally the most efficient way to go about it," I explained.

"You even learned things like languages and fishing," pointed out Marie.

"W-Well, yes. They're part of the secret to having fun on journeys and can become useful at times. For one thing, it allowed me to eat tasty fish whenever I wanted."

Toru seemed to understand what the stats were all about after my explanation. He made a thoughtful noise as he stroked the accessory on his arm. By acquiring skills over time, one could eventually learn a Primary Skill, which could be considered a reflection of one's individuality. Skills grew stronger by leveling up, and repeatedly increasing one's level was the main way of improving one's skill. Depending on the compatibility between skills, one could easily overpower an enemy or be defeated no matter how much they'd refined their skill. I had emerged victorious over enemies that were twice my level in the past.

"Huh, I see," said Toru. "Can you fly too?"

"Fly? Hmm, I'm not sure. I generally avoided human settlements, so I'm not too familiar with noncombat skills and Sorcery," I said.

Marie answered for me instead. "Normally, I don't think it would be possible with a skill. But there are ways to do seemingly impossible things, like your Trayn, the Journey's Guide, so I wouldn't be surprised if there's a way. Still, I think it would be a lot more realistic with Sorcery."



“Nice, magic! Can I learn it too?” asked Toru.

Regrettably, we didn’t know the answer. People considered Sorcerers the cream of the crop on a battlefield and extremely valuable. Not only did you need talent to handle magic, but you needed good memory and patience to retain and obtain that knowledge, no matter how long it took. There were far too many requirements to get your foot in the door, and if you weren’t naturally gifted with those traits, you needed a long lifespan like an elf.

“You should know if you have the talent after a year or so of training,” related Marie.

Toru looked dejected. “I guess it wouldn’t be so easy. It’s pretty harsh here for a dream world.”

“If you want to fly, there’s a way,” I told him. “We have a Magic Stone called Roon, and you can fly freely as long as you’re on this floor. Though, it’s not a skill, of course.”

“This dream is amazing!”

We had piqued his interest in skills and leveling up. I concluded that he should experience it firsthand, so I suggested, “Why don’t we go to a nearby hunting ground and try leveling up? I’ve tried it with Marie before, and if it goes well, you could get up to level 20.”

That would be quite impressive since getting to level 20 in a single day was unheard of. He might even acquire a Primary Skill, and I was curious to find out what unique character another Japanese person would develop. I was quite excited as I suggested this, but his reaction wasn’t what I had hoped.

“Is your boyfriend okay? His eyes are glittering,” Toru said to Marie.

“I’m sorry, he can be like this. Wait, you’ve already heard that we’re dating?”

He nodded. “Yeah, when we went to drink earlier. He seemed to care about you a lot, so I wanted to hear more about you two. I sincerely suspected you were underage.”

“You’re mistaken. I’m actually much older than him. I’m over a hundred years old!” said Marie as she rose to her feet.

“No way,” he muttered. Elves lived far longer than humans, and it was hard to determine their age from their looks alone. I once heard from her father that mental maturity rather than age affected their appearance. That was why elves who left their village grew up quickly.

“Yes, she’s far older than me. We actually met over a decade ago,” I said.

“Wow, that’s a surprise. A hundred-year-old half-fairy elf. Huh, I think I get it now. You two have a serious, healthy relationship, then.”

“Of course,” said Marie and I in unison, blushing. Our declaration had come out more serious than intended, which was sort of embarrassing. She pinched my thigh, but it only tickled.

Toru gave us a moment to calm down, then said, “I’m glad you two are happy with each other. Now, I can wholeheartedly give you my support. Not only will I tell you about some hole-in-the-wall restaurants and travel destinations, but I’ll help you with anything you need in Japan.”

He winked at me, and I assumed he was talking about Marie’s citizenship. He was keeping it vague so she wouldn’t worry, and I appreciated how considerate he was being. Next to my grandfather, he was the second person in Japan who truly understood me, which meant a lot to me.

But some adults weren’t understanding, namely, the old man called Gaston, who was now stomping toward us with his legs splayed and a grumpy look on his face. He was more short-tempered than anyone I knew and had no qualms about getting in my face, even though I was a child in this world.

“Hey, you little shit! Who do you think you are, bailing on my training like that? After all that time I’ve been spending, kindly teaching you how to improve your crappy energy control!” yelled Gaston.

“It’s not like that! An important guest is here today, so we’ve been showing him around,” I said desperately. I wanted to avoid training with him. Not that I didn’t like training, but energy training was rigorous because it was only effective when you pushed your body to its absolute limit. I worked enough in the real world, so I didn’t want to push myself like that in my dreams. And I couldn’t be the only one who thought that way. I figured Gaston would understand since we had a guest, but I was a fool to think so.

He displayed a creepy smile that sent a chill down my spine.

“A guest, huh?” he said. “I see, I see. That must be real—are you kidding me? Show me a monster that would turn around and leave just because you have a guest over! I’ll tell you what, you can find me one or go through my training. Pick one!” His smile suddenly turned into a demonic scowl, and I knew there was no point in arguing.

I reluctantly decided to go through with the training that included removing my top, shouting weird noises, and holding a pot with my fingertips while standing on one foot. I hated it because I had no idea what the training was supposed to do, and it made every muscle in my body feel like it was on fire. It was just a bunch of guys in these training sessions, making it reek of man sweat, and women always gave us weird looks when we did it.

I sent Toru and Marie back to the mansion, letting them enjoy the hot springs with a view of the lake and some delicious seafood. Words couldn’t express Toru’s happiness, surrounded by the beautiful Marie, Wridra, and Shirley.

As for me, I had to stick my hand in burning hot sand and throw punches while shouting sounds like “Bo! Bobo!” The training was so harsh that I felt like I would cry if I let my guard down. In fact, I shed some tears without even realizing it. I wondered who in the world came up with these training methods, though I might tell them to die if I met them in person.

It was now completely dark out, and I could discern the faint sound of chirping bugs from my bedroom. There was an elegance to it that truly made me feel we were now in autumn, though people overseas might just consider it noise. Strangely, not many cultures appreciated the sound of bugs like the Japanese.

“Ugh, I’m beat. Gaston could’ve gone a little easier on me,” I grumbled. It would have been pointless to complain, as he would have kindly said, “Ah, so you want me to go easier on you,” then put me through absolute hell. I had so little energy left in the tank that I was having trouble sleeping, which was highly unusual for me.

Marie was already asleep, breathing rhythmically with a blissful expression.

She put a hand on my nape and snuggled closer. I felt like I was cuddling with some sort of adorable creature, making me feel at peace.

While I lay there alone with my thoughts, I heard a voice from behind.

“I had no idea a world like this existed. And this mansion... You don’t see quality like this even in Japan. The view and food here are amazing too. I love it so much that I’d like to visit again sometime,” said Toru sleepily, his eyes half closed. While I was out training, he had been enjoying the fantastic food and hot springs here, so it was no wonder he was about to nod off. He struggled to keep his eyes open, perhaps because he wanted to talk about something. “I’ve always thought there was something different about you. Not just because you were always with a girl who looked like a pretty fairy, but it was as if you knew a world no one else did. Simply put, there was this surreal air about you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s hard to describe, but it was like I was looking at a character from a mystery novel or something. Like those unexceptional characters who are actually— Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean that as an insult. Anyway, you seemed mysterious. I talk to a lot of people because of my job and can spot a person’s nature, not just shallow impressions. That’s why I ended up asking such deep questions last night,” he said apologetically, then added that he was too curious for his own good.

When I thought about it, he had mentioned something similar at the Chinese restaurant. I had assumed he reached out to me out of kindness, but maybe he was like a detective in a mystery novel going after one of the characters. Unlike a novel, no mastermind pulled the strings. He had solved the mystery but must have been knocked out of his wits when it led him into a dream world. And now he likely felt that sense of closure that came with finishing a good book. At least it sounded that way to me as I listened to him talk.

“I’m glad I talked to you,” he went on. “I’ve discovered a completely new world, and what a blast it’s been. I promise to not say a word of this to anyone. Partly because I’m so grateful, but I have to admit, a part of it is because I’m selfishly hoping you’ll bring me again.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, let’s come again if our schedules match. But

it will look pretty bad if the two of us go to sleep alone together, so I'd like to avoid that if possible."

"Oh, that would be bad!" he agreed. "You know, in Kaoruko's secret collection— Actually, never mind. It would be great if we could tie a rope to each other or something. I'll put an arm on you tonight and see if that works."

I was curious about this secret collection, but I felt I shouldn't ask and kept my mouth shut. Kaoruko seemed like the solemn type, even though she apparently had some peculiar interests.

"Well, I'll be counting on you next time," said Toru, yawning. "Man, it's like you have some sleep-inducing chemicals coming out of your body or something. Just being near you made me sleepy yesterday too... You wouldn't believe I'm actually an insomniac..."

He fell unconscious and began snoring. What could be coming out of my body? I wondered as my head sank further into my pillow. The futon smelled like someone had left it hanging out in the sun, and I felt Marie's warmth with her arms around me. If anything, it was probably her emitting something sleep-inducing into the air.

The atmosphere in the room made me drowsy while the autumn melody of chirping insects enveloped me. My thoughts dulled until something popped up before I drifted away: it would be early morning in Japan, and Toru would likely wake up in the alley where we had fallen asleep. I decided to call a taxi and pick him up first thing after waking up. It was in the neighborhood anyway, so I could wear a jacket with my pajamas.

With that thought in mind, I fell into a deep slumber.

## §

I expected everything to resolve itself without issues. I went to pick up Toru in a taxi as planned, and no one was around to see us because it was still morning. I had done everything perfectly, so how did things end up this way?

Marie and I had to go to an uncrowded coffee shop in the late afternoon. The Ichijos had been sitting across the table from us, and Toru was nodding apologetically the entire time. Kaoruko had set up the meeting and coldly

glared at us.

I figured the usual clientele here were housewives, but there were some couples here and there because it was a weekend. Several nearby places were good for dates, so perhaps they had just come from one of them. But at that moment, I struggled to think about my surroundings. Kaoruko plopped a sugar cube into her cup, then another, and another. She said nothing, but the tension in the air was palpable.

Toru was the one to break the ice. It seemed he couldn't handle the pressure anymore. "S-Sorry about this," he said to me. "First, let me explain—"

"Please stay quiet," Kaoruko interrupted. "I will ask the questions."

She didn't raise her voice one bit. Although she had barely uttered the words, her voice was as cold as ice. Toru shrank and closed his mouth. We didn't dare speak either.

I had screwed up and had forgotten that even while we were spending time in the dream world, Kaoruko was alone and waiting for her husband to come home. We had gone to the Chinese restaurant around seven at night, but Toru had gotten home at around seven in the morning. No one had reached out to her the entire time, so it was no wonder she was upset.

It appeared I was careless when it came to people other than Marie, just as she had pointed out. I thought of myself as pretty considerate for work, but all I could think about when I got home was having fun in the dream world with Marie. But this was no excuse, of course.

Anyway, we couldn't just sit there in silence forever. Marie was sitting next to me, frightened by Kaoruko's intensity. The weekend was precious to us, so we couldn't waste time doing nothing.

"Well, you see..." I started. "Toru and I were drinking until the morning, and—"

*Bam!*

A loud slam echoed on the table, and silence fell over the café. I could feel sweat pouring out of my every pore. Kaoruko remained still with her hands on the table and her head bowed, her expressions hidden. That slam meant we



had to shut up until she started asking questions. The three of us cowered and sat straight in our chairs.

We couldn't tell her that we had been in a dream world, which was probably why she was so upset. Toru must have only given her vague answers when she had questioned him. He gave me a look that told me it was as I thought, making me clueless about what to do.

Kaoruko stared daggers at me as she moved her face closer and said, "So, where were you, really? There aren't many places around here where you can drink until morning, and he was completely sober when he got home. And when you dropped him off at our place, you were in your pajamas, weren't you?"

There was no lying our way out of this one. If I were in her shoes, the only logical conclusion I could come up with would be that Toru had gone off alone and spent the night somewhere. Even if I told her the truth, we were in a café. We couldn't say anything out loud when people could overhear us. I felt a cold sweat run down me as I realized this was a terrible place to have this meetup. Toru must have been mortified by the situation we were stuck in and finally dropped the bomb...in the worst way imaginable.

"Kaoruko, I need to ask you to do something. Will you sleep with him?"

My face looked like it had been struck by lightning.

Well, he wasn't wrong. The literal meaning of his words were fine, as it would resolve all of our issues. I could teach Kaoruko about the dream world and explain what had happened last night. Yet Toru hadn't realized that his phrasing would cause a big misunderstanding, as proved by the hushed murmurs that rose all around us. I felt like I was going to pass out, and Kaoruko was so furious that her hair looked like it was about to stand on end.

"You'll understand if you do," he went on. "You'll understand what I learned last night and everything he taught me."

*Please, Toru, stop! Stop making that face like a weight has been lifted off your shoulders! Are you trying to end our social lives?! I thought.*

The middle-aged women around us were whispering among themselves, their

gazes going back and forth between me and Toru. The situation was making my stomach hurt, and I thought I might never be able to step foot in this café again.

Things couldn't possibly get any worse. Or so I thought. Marie gently placed her hand on Kaoruko's, then kindly whispered, "That's right! We'll take you to another world. You can have fun with us, just like your husband. That will resolve everything."

*Marie?!*

My eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head in shock. Nothing was wrong with what she said, but it only amplified the misunderstanding. I didn't get why she didn't realize this, or why Marie and Toru's common sense had gone out the window.

I hoped they wouldn't say another word.

"You slept with Toru too?" Kaoruko suddenly asked Marie. She was sobbing, tears welling up in her eyes.

"What? Why me? It was just Kazuhiro who slept with him. Oh, actually, I also slept with him afterward. I'm sorry, I forgot about that."

Kaoruko and I went completely pale. I couldn't believe they spoke out of compassion without a hint of malice. A demon from hell couldn't bring about worse torment if they tried. Marie and Toru were the only ones who failed to read the room. Kaoruko misinterpreted the whole situation, imagining something awfully immoral going on between us.

"This is terrible! Ahh... Waaah!"

She burst into tears, unable to hold it in anymore. I also wanted to cry and didn't know what sort of face I was making. But I probably had a tight smile with my eyes darting side to side. I'd never been in a situation like this before and wished it had all been a dream.

## Episode 6: Tonight, We Welcome Another Guest

A woven wood vine basket had plates and cups piled into it, which appeared used based on how dirty they were. Once the basket was full, someone began stacking them on the table. Eve hummed a tune as she carried the ceramic plates with her well-tanned hands. Her maid uniform indicated she worked at the mansion. A lively lunch had just ended, and it was time for her to clean up. Washing the dishes was the most cumbersome of house chores, but she cleared each table with a cheerful attitude.

“Ah, that chestnut rice was so good. I loved that chewy texture, how it got sweeter with each bite, and the chunks of chestnut in there. I hope I get to eat some again.”

She appeared to be in high spirits from the satisfying meal she had just eaten. As someone with a big appetite, food was a major part of life for her. Outside the mansion was a sunny lawn, and beyond that was a lake. The beautiful scenery certainly contributed to her good mood.

Her long ears and suntanned skin were signs that she was a dark elf. The dress she wore suited her active personality, with a skirt much shorter than the others and sleeves that exposed her arms. Lean muscles lined her toned body, yet her feminine parts were full of shapely curves. Her plain, black-and-white outfit did little to hide her womanly charms. She held the basket with one arm, balanced the rest of the mountainous pile of plates on her head, and stepped out through the back door.

The women who lived in the mansion had to carry out and clean the used tableware and utensils. All of them accomplished their tasks with practiced hands, yet strangely, each was a hardened warrior. People often compared them to a “jewelry box” because they each had different hair colors. The phrase reminded them of their days under the hero candidate Zarish’s curse as parts of his “collection,” but they understood it was meant to be a compliment and didn’t think much of it.

Eve focused on the building's windows. A woman near the second-floor window was writing a letter, then noticed Eve and looked back with her twilight eyes. It was Puseri, heiress to the Blackrose family and the leader of Team Diamond.

Puseri gave off the impression of an uptight aristocrat because of her classy demeanor but was quite playful in front of her team members. She gestured, "It's another invitation from the rich." Soon after, she displayed an exasperated expression, making Eve burst laughing.

The so-called collection was highly attractive and valuable. Several months had passed since Zarish, one of Arilai's most influential men, lost all public trust. The royal family had covered up the information, but another influential party with good ears discovered the truth. Following that, the women had been getting requests from messengers to join another party's ranks.

In the past, the Blackrose family had ruled over Arilai. Not only was Puseri loved by its people for her beauty, but she boasted overwhelming fighting prowess, as demonstrated when she stopped Demon Arms Kartina. Should anyone succeed in bringing her under their control, they could increase their political standing within the country.

One by one, Puseri solemnly ripped the letters with her elegant fingers without raising an eyebrow. The Blackrose family precept was "We have no masters." She often said she would never raise her sword in service of another. Even though Puseri knew it was a waste of time, she understood that kindly responding would help preserve relationships for the future.

Turning down these invitations was Puseri's job as master. She was also the head maid and had tasked the others with housework in order to give herself time to take care of the letters. While she hated being the target of the male gaze, she dealt with it, as it was her job.

"This is quite the hassle. Well, I suppose these letters should stop eventually," muttered Puseri. Seeing that Gedovar, land of the demons, had begun its invasion, many expected the highways to become unusable.

"Good luck!" said Eve cheerfully from the backyard, unaware of her master's plight. The sour look on Puseri's face softened into a smile, and she waved at

the dark elf carrying the plates away.

As for Eve, she had the important job of managing the mansion grounds. She headed over to the cozy washroom at the back of the mansion and pushed the gate open with plates stacked on her head and each hand. Another woman was already inside, and she gave Eve a startled look.

“Sup, Isuka. The others aren’t here yet?” Eve asked as she waved and approached the woman.

Isuka, a half-demon with horns growing out of the sides of her head, stared at the enormous pile of plates with widened eyes, clearly worried that Eve might drop them. Despite usually being calm and collected, it was obvious how anxious she was by the shape of her thin eyebrows. “Put the plates down already,” she mouthed desperately. She wouldn’t have looked so panicked if someone had held a gun to her face.

Eve cocked her head in confusion, the movement making the plates on her head shift. The half-demon girl’s face changed to full-blown panic. For a moment, Eve observed her open-mouthed expression curiously and swiftly placed the plates on her head and hands on the ground. Isuka finally sighed in relief, as if she had been released from paralysis.

“Ugh... I feel like I’m gonna have a heart attack every time you do that. Why don’t you carry a little less at a time?” she asked.

“What, really? This is nothing. It’s not like I’m going to drop them.”

While Eve had never broken any plates, it was quite nerve-racking for everyone around her. Isuka clutched her still-racing heart, then reached for the pump on the well. After a few pulls of the handle, cold water flowed. Eve watched the clear water fill up and took a seat nearby.

Everything in the washing area was made of stone, and that was also the case for the waist-high platform for filling up water. The design allowed the women to wash dishes sitting or do laundry at their feet. The mansion was seemingly nonsensical because the owners built it in the labyrinth, but Eve found it to be strangely well-made with practicality in mind.

The women wore short pants under the skirts of their maid outfits so their

underwear wouldn't be visible when they sat down. Though, Eve didn't care if someone happened to see.

"This is so convenient. We could draw water into the mansion using this waterway, right? The manor of black roses was a historic building, but everything was old. Cleaning that place was a huge pain," she said.

"True. I'm surprised the builders created a well here when the lake is so close," responded Isuka, her long blue hair fluttering with each movement.

The crystal clear water flowing out now connected to the nearby lake. It was close enough to walk there and carry the water back, but this was much more convenient for the servants.

Isuka had a cold demeanor, although that was her default expression, whether she was at the mansion or on the battlefield. Despite her appearance, she also had a humorous side and often joined in on any silly conversation around her. She tended to speak matter-of-factly but enjoyed talking with others.

The women liked that there were fences all over, since it allowed them to sit in the shaded backyard and converse with friends without worrying about prying eyes. Hence, this spot was becoming a place more for relaxation than for work. Some even brought snacks, and no one said anything about it.

Eve had nothing to do until the water finished filling up, so she let her feet dangle beneath her and took some biscuits out of her pocket. She broke one of them in two, then offered half to Isuka, who chomped it down in one bite. Shortly after, she smiled at the rare opportunity to feed a half-demon and enjoyed her half's crunchy texture and subtle sweetness.

"Mmm, that's good. This kind of snack is hard to get around here," noted Isuka.

"Can you tell? A man gave it to me earlier. Maybe I'm imagining it, but I feel like we've been getting a lot of gifts from other teams lately."

"I haven't, though I doubt it's just your imagination."

Eve tilted her head as if trying to figure it out, and Isuka sighed deeply. This dark elf was appallingly careless with her affairs. On top of that, she liked to run

around and often sped off toward anything that looked fun to her. She was sociable and had an attractive body, but she was very childish. People found her quite frank and thoughtful when they spoke to her, which seemed popular with men.

Since Eve specialized in espionage and diversion, others assumed she was a step behind the rest of her team in combat. But she was exceptionally good at coordinating with her allies, having worked her way up to become a mainstay of the team through pure skill.

Although she was attractive and charming, she was naive. Men couldn't help but try to win her over, so they sent her gifts to get her attention. The dark elf didn't realize this, making Isuka sigh again.

"I haven't had any luck with men lately. What's your secret, Eve?"

"Huh? Were we talking about that kind of thing just now?" asked Eve, confused.

"Yes, we were. You're just so clueless that you haven't been following along. Let me ask you, what are you going to do to the man who gave you that snack?"

"I'll bake him something as thanks. Why?"

"What if he invited you to a picnic so you two can eat it together?"

"I'd go with him? Oh, but I'd make a boxed lunch instead of snacks."

Isuka sighed for the third time and buried her head in her hands. Eve would be giving the man all the signs to make him think he had a chance, but she would be completely uninterested. He would not understand she was a child on the inside despite her striking appearance, with her blonde hair, blue eyes, and suntanned skin. Isuka had asked for tips on attracting men but realized Eve's methods were far too advanced for her. She reached for the dishes as if to say this conversation was over, as the water sufficiently filled up the well.

In desert countries, the common method of cleaning dishes was to cover them with sand and wipe them with cloth. It wasn't exactly the most sanitary approach out there. But here, they used a scrubbing brush and a mixture of water and ash. The dirty water went down the waterway into an off-site reservoir, where the master of the lake, Charybdis, cleansed it.





It wasn't as if this mansion had any long-standing traditions, so there weren't many rules. Still, the mansion was strict with anything related to food or sanitation.

"I wonder if it's only to ensure the guests don't get sick," Isuka wondered aloud.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself," said Isuka, but she couldn't help but explore the thought further. This facility and the second floor of the labyrinth had drastic restorations, and there were now more monsters and demons here than anywhere else. How had Hakam and Aja approved this? Why did they have Wridra prepare a training ground for labyrinth raids here? "Wridra must be the one who holds the key to all of this, or maybe she had to because of the war situation."

"Isuka, why are you talking to yourself so much? Talk to me. Come on," said Eve.

While Isuka thought deeply, she found it cute that Eve was begging for her attention like a little sister.

They had been getting daily reports on the war. Gedovar was gradually making progress on their invasion from the east. Arilai had been fighting back but retreated, mainly focusing on blocking supply routes. They had been steadily expanding the war front this way, and this conflict would soon engulf the oasis. That was why Hakam and Aja must have wanted this place more than anything. Since Gedovar would need to fight a siege, rumors abounded that they were not just looking for stockpiles of food, water, and lodging. They also had the ancient labyrinth in their sights.

There had once been a major battle in the second floor of the labyrinth. The casualties from that battle had grown due to the half-demons lurking and biding their time to strike. Besides, the fight with Demon Arms Kartina was still fresh in her memory.

Demons banished from this land had wanted to reclaim the ancient labyrinth for hundreds of years, and they were now invading to crush the Arilai army. The

tides of battle would shift massively if they gained control of the countless monsters in the ancient labyrinth along with the Magic Stones.

Team Diamond wasn't unrelated to this war. There were several demons among them, which was why they had moved their base of operations from Arilai to the mansion on the labyrinth's second floor. However, Isuka had been a slave at a young age and had grown up outside of her country. Honestly, it wouldn't bother her to stand against Gedovar. She preferred to avoid fighting her motherland directly but had already discussed this with Puseri. Fortunately, she was told Team Diamond only had to focus on raiding the labyrinth.

Suddenly, Isuka's focus returned from her thoughts. She noticed Eve deftly washing dishes and glaring at her with a sulky look, perhaps because she had ignored her friend this entire time.

"Looks like you're making good progress," commented Isuka. "You must have almost finished with the... No, you're not. How are there more dishes now than when you started?"

"More dishes came in earlier. We're washing everything, including from campgrounds. Of course we're not gonna finish so quickly. Ah, this is taking a while because you're just daydreaming instead of helping."

Isuka blinked repeatedly. Besides washing the dishes, she had to get Eve in a good mood again. But that wouldn't be hard to do. The dark elf loved to chat, so she would likely forget she was even upset once they started talking. And so, Isuka brought up a topic that floated in her mind.

"You know, I feel like you've gotten softer since being released from Zarish's control. Not just you, but the others too. Maybe that's why you've been so popular lately."

Eve's eyes widened. "Oh, but you've completely changed too. You used to be kind of standoffish and scary, but you're so nice now. I like you a lot better now if you ask me. I like how you're easy to talk to and much nicer than you look."

Both were sitting so close that their shoulders were nearly touching. Isuka had to admit it felt pretty good seeing that genuine smile and hearing that Eve liked her. Something stirred within her when thinking this. The scary thing was that Eve made her feel like she had a chance when she knew the dark elf wasn't

actually interested in that way.

“I see. You’re just a natural-born player. I couldn’t possibly do what you do,” said Isuka.

“Huh? What do you mean by ‘player’?”

“You really don’t know anything, do you? Fine, stand right there, Eve,” said Isuka as she gestured with a finger.

“But I’m still washing the dishes. Puseri’s gonna get mad again if we slack off, you know. Oh, fine.”

Eve stood opposite Isuka and moodily put her hands on her own hips.

“Sit down. I’ll teach you what a player is,” ordered Isuka.

“Wait, you mean on your lap? No, I’ll pass. I don’t need to know *that* badly. I need to get back to washing the dish— Hey!”

Isuka interrupted Eve by touching the back of her knees with both hands, making her knees buckle. Then Isuka capably used her martial arts skills to catch the dark elf’s hips before she fell and drew her closer. Eve ended up sitting deep on Isuka’s lap, their faces close enough to feel each other’s breath.

“This is what a straightforward player is like,” said Isuka. “Seeing you up close... You really are adorable.”

“Hey! Why are you touching my butt?” protested Eve.

“That’s what players do. You touch little boys, don’t you? It’s the same thing. Just friendly physical contact between colleagues.”

“R-Really? I get the physical contact part, but touching me there doesn’t seem right,” said Eve as she looked behind her. It didn’t feel like Isuka was touching her in a way that would be normal between friends, and something told her this wasn’t right. She pinched Isuka’s hand and gave her a cold look. “*This* is what you call a player, then?”

“Hmm, not exactly. It’s not about my enjoyment but about making others feel affection for me. By doing things like this.”

With that, she kissed Eve on the cheek in a gentle manner that felt almost

loving, and Eve let out a soft “Nnh.”

Isuka used physical touch to see whether someone was interested in her. She didn't crave love like some of the others, instead enjoying the tactical exchanges and sweet victories that came with dangling a line and seeing what bit. Yet she didn't mind whether she caught a man or a woman.

Eve, who had very little experience when it came to romance, turned red and said, “Isuka, you should only do this kind of thing with someone you really like. Got it?”

That was a completely unexpected response. In the dim backlight, Eve stared into her eyes with rosy cheeks, and Isuka sensed her heart beat faster. The half-demon had no idea if she had a chance, but she had a feeling that Eve would accept her if she claimed to like her. She was curious about how the dark elf would respond. Simply put, she had the urge to kiss Eve right then and there.

“Natural-born players like you are real dangerous. I give up. You're on a different level,” muttered Isuka with a poker face, even if a cold sweat was beading on her head. Eve was confused, unaware that she was far ahead in winning the other's affection.

Suddenly, they heard the fence creak open behind them. Eve's whole body jerked in surprise, then quickly turned around to find a girl standing there with a blank expression, plates in hand. Miliasha, a descendant of the gods, wore a maid outfit and had white wings growing out of her back. Her big eyes widened even more, and she said, “Ah! I-It's you two! I thought you were washing dishes; why are you touching Eve's butt?!”

Eve let out a shriek of panic. They definitely looked like they were doing something shady, and Isuka still didn't let go of her butt. As she debated whether to say this was a misunderstanding or ask for help, Isuka opened her mouth first.

“You should either leave or close that door, Miliasha.”

Yet Eve stared and prayed that Miliasha wouldn't tell the others. After some time, Miliasha tentatively stepped closer and shut the door behind her. Eve let out a sigh of relief. However, Miliasha quickly walked up to them and sat nearby for some reason. The little girl gazed at them, her wings moving up and down in

anticipation.

“Miliasha, what are you doing?” asked Eve.

“Hm? Oh, I’m just watching you two for future reference. I had no idea you two had that sort of relationship, but it’s quite wonderfu— I mean, I’ll enjoy watch— No, I’ve decided I want to learn through observation. Now, please proceed.” She tightened her little hands into fists and made an encouraging gesture.

Eve felt her panic growing. She had thought help had arrived, but Miliasha’s reaction differed completely from what she had expected. “What?! There’s nothing for you to learn from us!”

“She’s right,” replied Isuka. “Eve just likes having her butt rubbed.”

“No, I don’t! Let go of me!”

“Hmm, so your first time will be in front of an audience. I hope you develop some unusual interests. Now, now, stop moving around. Don’t you want to help Miliasha learn?”

“Not at all! I said, let gooo!” Eve shouted.

The voice reached the ears of someone nearby, who turned on her heel and walked toward where the group was. Her long, twilight hair danced behind her, and her expression became a scowl when she realized what was happening.

“Just what do you think you’re all doing?!”

Eve and Miliasha jerked as if they’d had cold water dumped on them, then slowly turned around to find Team Diamond’s master, Puseri, standing there. Her expression was so terrifying that the two others and Isuka immediately turned pale.

Puseri, as upset as she was, had joined the group in washing the remaining dishes. Eve’s ears drooped sadly from the harsh scolding she had gotten, and she muttered “But... I didn’t do anything...”

Although Puseri had yelled at her, that strange atmosphere from earlier was gone, and the dishes were getting washed faster. The sun was nice and warm

now that it was past noon. Eve began to get bored, so she started a conversation while working on the rest of the dishes.

“Have you all gotten used to living here by now? Personally, I like it a lot better here because of the food.”

“Agreed,” Isuka said. “We get a nice bath here, and the view is great. It would be perfect if we also got paid.”

Puseri perked up. The twilight-haired master of Team Diamond wore a maid outfit like the others despite her standing. But she claimed it didn’t bother her, since she had been used to serving for some time now. She had her hair tied back, and the style suited her.

“I wouldn’t make you all work without compensation forever,” she said. “We are already charging for staying at the mansion and the food at the campgrounds.”

“We’re already making money? I figured you’d like that sort of money management stuff. How’s the business so far?” asked Isuka.

Just then, Puseri put a plate down and smiled. She had a bad habit of wanting to spend money, but she was still the master there and someone of high importance. Though, there seemed to be a hint of greed in that smile.

“What would you think if I told you that you could stay overnight for free outside of this second-floor hall?” she asked.

“Uh, I wouldn’t want to. It’s just a normal part of the labyrinth outside of here. It’s dark and cold, and you can hear weird screams out of nowhere. But here, you get to soak in a bath,” said Eve.

“Yeah, you’d have to be crazy to want to stay anywhere besides here,” agreed Isuka.

Puseri pointed a finger at them as if to say they were spot-on. No one would choose to stay at a place like the labyrinth. “Many considered it normal before, but once someone experiences comfort, it’s difficult for them to revert. There isn’t a single person out there who would willingly sleep in the labyrinth by now.”



Most raid teams stayed at the campgrounds for cheap, but the raid on the third floor would soon start. How would they react when they found out there were accommodations for lodging packages that included food, drinks, and a bath? Moreover, there wasn't a single competitor to deal with. Puseri explained this to the others, and the dark elf's eyes widened.

"Oh man! We're gonna make so much money!" exclaimed Eve.

"Ha ha, indeed. We will bring guests here with Wridra's movement skill. Once they have an unforgettable experience here, they will help us gain more customers through word of mouth. It all depends on our efforts, but we are set up for success," added Puseri.

Since the raid teams could go from the raid location to the mansion immediately, it would eliminate the need for someone to stand watch at night or carry heavy cargo. The rations that had once been the army's pride and joy had sat abandoned for some time, and piles of them remained forgotten in their old headquarters. On the other hand, Wridra could freely obtain food ingredients from distant lands and didn't have to worry about keeping stock.

It was important to note that many raid team members were quite wealthy. When word got out that women of Team Diamond would serve them, men fought over reservations before the grand opening, even though no one was aware of this.

"S-So, I think we're all wondering..." said Eve, "how much are we getting paid?"

"I was planning on bringing this up during dinner tonight, but it will be about double what you were getting. And once the third-floor raid is successful, you will all receive a bonus. Perhaps we will get some first-class furniture when that happens."

The maids all gasped at once. Now that they were free of Zarish's control, the members of Team Diamond had become top earners. Members of the raid team were paid according to their performance, so the skilled women of this team had been getting paid extremely well. Considering their high pay would double, Eve couldn't help but smile and start listing the things she would buy.

"Nice, Puseri!" she said. "I'm so impressed! I thought you were a hopeless

aristocrat who wastes money all the time. You did a great job negotiating with Wridra!”

“Ha ha ha, it was an easy task for someone of my— Hmm? Hopeless aristocrat?” remarked Puseri, tilting her head. She soon forgot about that as Eve patted her on the shoulder.

Just as they finished cleaning the plates, Puseri rose, dusted herself off, and turned around. She then gave an authoritative look as their head maid and master. “Everyone, we have a request from none other than Wridra. We are to welcome some very important guests tonight. I expect no less than top-quality work from all of you as my elite team.”

She smiled boldly, as if they were about to ride into battle against a floor master. There wasn’t a hint of nerves in the women around her, and the demon girl casually responded, “Yes, boss.”

On the roof and beyond the fence, other members of her team had their eyes blazing bright. Seeing her dependable team gathered there, the lady of black roses chuckled. “Whether it be a raid or maid work, Team Diamond shall handle any mission perfectly. Now, it’s time to welcome the guests.”

The maids smiled at once as Puseri gave the order. They looked ready to handle any task, even if that was to wipe out a raging horde of monsters.

## §

No one had yet figured out the identities of Team Diamond’s mysterious guests.

A young girl woke up and sat in a guest room, touching her surroundings but failing to find what she searched for and sighed. Then a black cat trotted through the open shoji sliding door with a pair of glasses in its mouth. The girl turned to the meowing and felt the glasses touch her finger.

“Thank you,” she said in a language foreign to this world, then put them on. “Wha... Ah...”

Small, childlike fingers came into view as the girl held her hands up to the sunlit shoji for some time. As she sat there, the futon she had been sleeping under slid off of her naked body. She looked down and gasped at the sight of

her slim frame and smooth, bare clavicles.

“No way...” she whispered, eyes wide.

The girl hadn't dreamed of being a child again for some time. She'd also often dreamed about flying when she was younger, but even her dreams had become realistic as an adult. She thought perhaps that was what it meant to grow up.

And what would an adult do in a situation like this? Maybe they would dismiss it as a silly dream. Instead, she reached for the shoji, her heart racing with excitement and curiosity. The door slid open, and she saw a well-maintained rustic garden in the dazzling sunlight and a Lizardman with a gardening tool in the distance. He was talking to a woman with cat ears in a maid outfit, both of their tails wagging as if they were in a good mood.

“Wow...” she said, breathing. “Amazing.”

She immediately recognized that this wasn't Japan, but a fantasy world. The verdant greenery and small flowers along the walkways painted a completely different scenery from the one she was used to. Even the sky was more blue than she had ever seen, and a dense forest was visible in the distance.

Her heart raced, and she knew her face burst with excitement, but she couldn't bring herself to rise from her curled-up position. The color of her eyes faded slightly in the sunlight, settling into a shade of indigo. She told herself that this must be a dream, yet she couldn't stop her heart from throbbing from anticipation. In front of her was a world of fantasy that she could never encounter in Japan.

Meanwhile, a boy lying on the futon smiled. The girl was a married woman, despite her appearance, and the boy couldn't look at her in her current state. As a fellow adventure enthusiast, he knew exactly how she felt by hearing her voice.



He also knew there was someone else who should speak to her instead. A different boy approached her, sand crunching with each step.

“Looks like you made it in one piece, Kaoruko.”

The boy’s tone was calmer than that of Kitase. He had brought her a yukata to cover up, and the smile on his face persisted as he draped it over her body. His features had softened when he saw that Kaoruko had forgotten that she was naked.

Kaoruko looked up at him and stared blankly for some time. Then she shouted so loud her voice rang throughout the second floor.

“Whaaat?! Toru? Y-Your face! It’s the same as when we were students! And it’s moving!”

“I could say the same thing,” said Toru. “It’s really like we went back in time. And, well, my face does move. I don’t mind you touching it, but you might want to get dressed first...”

She caressed her husband’s face rather than putting her clothes on. Toru watched her with fondness.

“Oh my goodness, you’re so handsome! It’s like you’re a completely different person!” she said excitedly.

“Ah... That stings. You must have meant it as a compliment, though I must have really let myself go. I should tone down all of the social outings from now on,” said Toru.

Kaoruko began fussing with her hair to recreate her hairstyle from when she was younger. Toru assisted her in getting dressed, somewhat flustered by her gesture. They smiled, feeling like they were reliving their happy days as students. Once they finished adjusting her hair and clothes, they opened their mouths wide and laughed out loud.

“See? I told you I was telling you the truth,” said Toru. “That should put an end to our little misunderstanding.”

“Yes, I couldn’t believe it! I’m so sorry I doubted you, Toru-senpai,” said Kaoruko as a callback to what she used to call him when he was her

upperclassman. Toru nodded, filled with a sense of nostalgia. He then turned toward the bedroom and called out to the boy who had brought them to this world.

“You can wake up now,” Toru told Kitase.

“All right,” replied Kitase. “Well, that was...something.”

“I’ve never had so much trouble going to sleep,” said the elf girl beside him.

“I’m sorry for dragging you two into all of this. I promise to make up for it!” said Toru, kneeling.

It was rare for Kitase to look so troubled. He had quite a laid-back personality and got along well with others in the dream world and Japan, but the group had difficulty convincing Kaoruko to come to this world. Indeed, the path to get here was a long and arduous one. After the shocking confession at the café, they had relocated to Kitase’s mansion since they couldn’t publicly discuss the details. Kaoruko had broken down crying because of a misunderstanding, making it hard to take her somewhere private.

They had spent countless hours trying to convince her. Toru had told her about the existence of the dream world, but Kaoruko had kept her back turned to him in complete denial. The only words she had spoken were “disgusting” and “you make me sick,” soon exhausting Toru. She had screamed and backed away whenever Kitase tried to help, so it didn’t take long for him to get worn out. Kitase couldn’t handle such vehement rejection from women, which applied to most men.

As Marie had consoled him, Kitase remembered something important: they could prove Marie was an elf by exposing long ears. Kaoruko had stared in wide-eyed wonder when the elf girl revealed her mystical beauty. Her tears had receded, and it was time to launch their counterattack. They enthusiastically explained that those ears were unmistakable proof that they were telling the truth, so Kaoruko only nodded in response. The deciding factor was when they had her watch as Kitase went to sleep with Toru, their bodies vanishing from the bed and finally convincing Kaoruko.

It was a long process. Kitase couldn’t help but curl up into a ball when thinking about it.

“Wait... By ‘sleep together’...you literally mean *sleep* together?!” Kaoruko had shouted in surprise.

Having finally convinced her with a great amount of time and effort, Kitase and Toru shook each other’s hands. All they did was sleep, but they had felt an immense sense of accomplishment. Meanwhile, Kaoruko happily navigated through her initial setup screen without a care in the world. Perhaps the saying “all’s well that ends well” applied here.

The black cat meowed to the newcomers as if to say, “Come here already.”

## §

Just then, the cat led the way for the four of us. The bare dirt path was a bit uneven, although it wasn’t an issue because there weren’t any horse-drawn carriages or anything used here. There was plenty of beautiful scenery on the second floor. Flowers adorned the sides of the road, and a spot with a view of the lush, green forest was right around the corner. It was no wonder, since Wridra and Shirley had prioritized the scenery when designing this place. There was a different view to behold wherever one went, so even those who didn’t go out much could enjoy strolling around the premises. Such features had surprised the Ichijos.

“I love this peaceful scenery without any asphalt or telephone poles. It feels so free and open. The sky is so vast, and everything is beautiful. This really is a fantasy world,” said Kaoruko.

Somehow, I didn’t tell her that I had traveled all over this world and that Mother Nature was harsher than things seemed here. I couldn’t count the number of times monsters had nearly eaten me while enjoying the scenery somewhere. But I didn’t want to be a downer, so I just smiled awkwardly instead.

“I bet the elven village you grew up in was unbelievably wonderful too,” she continued. “Oh, I’d love to see it one day.”

Marie’s lips curled into the same awkward smile, likely having identical thoughts. I had been to her village myself, where they specialized in beans and had a dense forest that blocked the sky. It was a mystical place, of course, but not every place had aesthetics as a top priority.



“Y-Yes, it’s a beautiful place. I claimed I would become a great Sorceress when I left, so it will probably be some time before I go back,” said Marie, then she turned to me. “Will you help when that time comes?”

“Yup, I’ll take you near the village with Trayn, the Journey’s Guide,” I said. “Actually, maybe Wridra would get us there faster. It might be easier if we—”

“There’s no need. You will suffice,” said Marie, giving me a cold look.

Her attitude took me aback. Knowing Wridra, she would likely agree if we asked her for a favor. I thought it would be more convenient for Marie if we went there beforehand and got the coordinates to share with Wridra later. Although I explained this, her expression only soured further.

“It’s fine,” she said. “We already greeted your grandfather in Aomori, so next time, I want to show my parents how far we’ve come. I’m sure it would make things a lot smoother too.”

I wondered what she meant by that, and Marie blushed, looking rather upset.

She eventually looked away and said, “Forget it!”

The Ichijos had caught on to something, though. Kaoruko said, “I said I’d like to visit the elven village earlier, but I take it back. You two should go alone. Definitely.”

“Yes, I agree,” said Toru. “The sooner, the better. Why don’t you go the next time you have some time off? We’ll happily see you off with a smile.”

They each patted me on my shoulders from both sides. Marie still wouldn’t look at me, and it had become awkward. The Ichijos were obviously trying to persuade me, and I was finally understanding what was happening. Regardless, Marie was so adorable that I almost couldn’t take it. She squeezed my hand, and it took everything I had to resist squirming around like an idiot.

Suddenly, I heard laughter nearby. I looked toward the source and saw two women standing in the shade of a tree.

“Such a child. I find it quite amusing,” said Wridra, chuckling. “Kaoruko, I suppose this is our first time greeting each other in this world. I see you are still doing well. Hah, hah, now there are four of you little whelps.”

Standing beside Wridra was Shirley, her honey-blond hair wavering in the wind. She had appeared in her human form since she was out in public. She smiled at us, narrowing her sky-blue eyes.

“Wridra-san! I had a feeling you were from this world too. You’re so unbelievably beautiful, and that dress looks amazing on you!” said Kaoruko.

Having fulfilled its duty, the black cat hurried over to Wridra and rubbed its face against her legs. I followed it with my eyes, then shouted, “Ah!” Soon, I noticed she was holding babies with soft, round cheeks.

Marie had been looking rather upset up until this point, but her eyes went wide with surprise. She ran off toward Wridra, pulling me along with her.

“I can’t believe it! They’re Wridra’s babies!” she said.

Honestly, I couldn’t believe it either. Not only had those eggs we’d touched so long ago hatched already, but the babies looked pretty much like normal humans. I had once heard that dragon whelps learned how to transform into human form, which must have been the reason they looked that way. Wridra turned toward us to fully reveal her two kids, a proud smile on her face. There was another child in Shirley’s arms with eyes like beautiful gemstones.

“You certainly took your time getting here, Mariabelle. I was growing tired of waiting,” said Wridra.

“That wasn’t my fault,” replied Marie. “Oh, can I hold them?”

“Of course,” said Wridra, offering Marie one of her children. Marie took the baby into her arms as if doing so were the most natural thing in the world, feeling their weight.

Supposedly, holding a baby filled a person with a peculiar feeling. They were shockingly soft, and their body temperatures were far warmer than an adult’s. The baby instinctively hugged Marie back, and she let out a deep, delighted sigh. She seemed overwhelmed with indescribable emotions and whispered, “You’re so warm.”

The baby was absurdly comforting to hold. Maternal instincts weren’t exclusive to humans; the elf felt it in full force. Wridra’s baby made unintelligible noises in Marie’s ear, and her ears drooped as her heart melted.

“Nngh! What an angel!” she squealed.

“Hah, hah, I suspect you will have one of your own in no time,” said Wridra.

“Huh? Are you letting me keep one?! Wait, I’d be a Spirit Sorceress and a mother... I would need to come up with some sort of gifted education program. I have a feeling this child will make history one day— Hey! Why are you taking them back?!”

Wridra bluntly told Marie, “No.” She took her baby back. The elf girl was devastated, her long ears hanging sadly. Then, Wridra smiled and peered into Marie’s face with her child in her arms.

“Marie, this child is lovely, would you not agree? But this child could not have existed under normal circumstances. I should have extinguished my offspring to return them to me, as is tradition for Arkdragons.”

And so, Marie’s eyes widened. I didn’t understand what she meant by “extinguish” or “return” the children. Even I doubted anyone out there had a deep understanding of the ecology of Arkdragons, but it sounded rather ominous.

Wridra knelt to our eye level, then related, “It is a means to narrow down which offspring to nurture. Only the superior one will remain, and the others will be discarded. There is a limit to my dragon cores, so I must be selective with how I use them.”

I had heard of dragon cores before. Arkdragons contained them within their bodies to fuel their massive bodies and the seemingly endless magical power they possessed. High-ranking dragons could even have multiple cores inside them. If what Wridra said was true, she could share them with her children.

“However, I have broken the rule,” she resumed. “I have not culled my children, as I love them equally... Here, no less, we await the worst of all calamities: war.”

She looked at us as if to ask, “Why do you think that is?” She repositioned her baby in her arms, the movement showing off her generously exposed thighs from the hem of her dress. It was hard to believe she was a married woman.

The dragon’s lips curled into a smile when she saw Marie struggling to find an

answer. “I find joy in watching you two grow. The thought of watching my children grow up as well brings me happiness like no other. It is only natural for me to wish to raise all of them. Though, I must admit that I did not expect them to learn how to take up a humanoid form.”

She chuckled to herself and smiled warmly.

When Marie noticed Wridra’s motherly expression, she realized something: the Arkdragon had never cared about elves or humans, but her values had changed after spending so much time together with us. Perhaps she had called her minions to the mansion, where she could connect with many people. She sought change through interacting with people rather than through magic.

She looked at her children and stated, “Kitase, I blame you and the others for all of this. Children observe their parents and mimic them to a ridiculous degree. In that regard, dragons and humans are no different. Hold my child for future reference.”

With that, she handed me her child with fluffy pink hair, and I held them out of reflex. It was the first time I had seen a dragon’s baby, and I noted the shape of their eyes and nose resembled that of their mother. They slowly opened their eyes of pink sapphire, taking my breath away.

“Adorable, I know. This one’s name is Yukizona. Babies cannot think much, but they can’t seem to look away from you. It appears they have taken a liking to you,” whispered Wridra, the baby’s eyes slowly closing as she spoke. We soon heard soft snoring, and the child’s body temperature rose even further.

The dragon child had left quite an impression on me. Not only was I captivated by their beautiful colors, but I could sense the energy within them. I handed the baby back to Wridra and knew that I wouldn’t forget that experience for quite some time.

Wridra then handed her child to Kaoruko, who had been watching with fascination. She apparently felt the same thing as me as she handed the baby back and sadly mumbled, “I want one too...” Toru had been watching next to her and consoled her with a gentle smile.

Sometime later, Wridra talked to us about the hardships she had gone

through with raising her children. She was a legendary dragon who could generate nearly infinite magic. But we had seen her so worn out from nursing them in the past that we had invited her to relax at some hot springs. Her whelps' cries once tormented her, but things had settled down lately.

"I thought it was about time they learned from human civilization. If they get accustomed to humans at an early age, they might not grow up to hate them. I was planning to show the married couple around, so I told the staff to welcome you all as guests," said Wridra, leading the way with her babies in her arms. She then turned and smiled just as the massive mansion was visible ahead. The Ichijos stared amazed at the Lizardmen along the way, who bowed their heads and returned to their gardening work.

Wridra's earlier comment had caught Kaoruko's attention, making her hesitantly ask, "So, dragons won't attack people based on how you raise them?"

"Correct," said Wridra. "I cannot say for sure as long as they have the instincts they are born with as dragons, but it is possible to nurture their mind so they will wait and reconsider. They are my children, so their instincts should not be the problem. Still, I do not wish for them to grow too reserved."

Arkdragons reigned from the upper echelons of all dragons. Naturally, they were highly intelligent based on how they had triumphed over powerful foes since ancient times. Even Wridra had become aggressive during her spawning season and tried to burn us to death. That was when I learned firsthand how terrifying dragons could be, yet she had visited human civilization alone and enjoyed alcohol. Maybe it was thanks to that experience that she had hesitated enough to listen to me and Marie apologize.

We soon discovered Wridra wasn't kidding when she said they would welcome us as guests. Team Diamond, dressed in maid outfits, along with Lizardmen wearing outer garments that looked like an inn's uniform, welcomed us all at once as soon as we had arrived at the entrance.

The Ichijos stared in wide-eyed surprise at the ceiling that was about three stories high, making the lobby feel extremely open and spacious. Lavish marble comprised the floor, and the fans for assuring air quality circulated an aroma

characteristic of a luxury ryokan, or Japanese-style inn. There were flowers all over, with receptionists on standby dressed impeccably. They smiled and even delivered a classy greeting, “Thank you for making the journey here.”

I was just as surprised as the Ichijos when I found out the receptionist was none other than Eve. She even had her golden hair neatly tied back, so seeing her standing tall with her back straight made me call out, “Wow, Eve!” Her eyes remained downcast, but she wore a proud look as her ears swayed, her cheeks turning a slight shade of pink.

She made a peace sign from an angle only we could see and said, “Ms. Wridra, Mr. and Mrs. Ichijo, please make yourselves at home.” Although Eve was usually a bit of a goofball, she effortlessly and elegantly performed her duties when needed as Team Diamond’s elite.

“Ah, yes, I don’t understand what you’re saying, but thank you!” said Kaoruko, stunned. She turned to her husband and said, “What is this luxury resort? I might have imagined it, but I thought I saw a hot spring earlier.”

“I-I didn’t know about this either,” said Toru. “I only saw the guesthouse and lake last time. But wow, the interior is really something. It’s so nice and open, and that view out the window! I’d love to sit out there. This is one of the highest quality resorts I’ve ever seen.”

Wridra was clearly in a great mood as she continued to lead the way, but the Ichijos were too preoccupied to notice. She had referenced many Japanese inns and mansions so she could see the reaction they were showing. She had her back to us, but I could picture just how big her smile must have been.

As I followed them, I felt someone grab my arm. Marie and I turned around to find Eve there, her expression different from earlier.

“You’re not a guest. This way,” she said.

“What?! Y-You’re kidding, right?” I asked. “There’s no way you’re making me work by myself. Isn’t that a bit cruel? I was hoping to enjoy the stay here... Hey, Marie, we always stick together, right?” I extended my hand pleadingly, but Marie retracted her hand right before we touched, as if she didn’t want to get dragged down with me. “M-Marie?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t think I’m abandoning you... I want to enjoy a stay at a high-end inn. I hope you understand that it’s not out of self-interest that I’m not helping you,” said Marie. As soon as she assumed that composed, ladylike expression, I had to keep an eye on her. She had a strong sense of curiosity and worldly desires for an elf who dreamed of spending her time elegantly at a resort like this. The elf and dark elf seemed to have agreed simply by exchanging looks. Maybe I had imagined it, but Eve nodded and dragged me away.

“Don’t worry, you can go have fun after working,” said Eve. “Cooking is the one thing Team Diamond can’t do. But Sir Hakam, Great Aja, and a bunch of other officials are coming later, so I was relieved when I heard you were coming. Thank goodness.”

“Wait, officials? As in military-related? Isn’t that going to be a ton of people? Do you really think I’ll have time after cooking for all those— Hey, Eve! Can you not carry me under your arm like a piece of luggage?!”

I looked like a kid in this world, and Eve was a well-trained ninja. It quickly became clear there was no point in resisting, so I let her carry me out of the back door without fighting, letting her dump me in the kitchen. If I could have summed up my feelings in one phrase, it would’ve been “Boo-hoo.” Eve wasn’t joking about what she said earlier, and she made me pick up a kitchen knife to get to work.

At that moment, I sighed. Nothing was less appealing than working in my dreams, making me wish I could have kept enjoying my adventure to my heart’s content.

## §

Shirley looked around with her sky-blue eyes. The setting sun dimly lit the mansion, and women hurriedly walked around, perhaps due to the guests coming and going. She wasn’t afraid, but she sneaked into the mansion to avoid being seen by others. While she didn’t feel guilty about being there or think someone would hurt her, others observing her made her incredibly nervous. She had grown up in the forests and in the labyrinth, recognizing humans were more clever than animals and had more complex thoughts than her. Without



her blindfold to avoid eye contact, she tended to hide behind walls as she moved around.

They had once called her the god of death and the floor master. Many even called her the guardian of the forest before that, but that was because she simply liked to maintain her dwelling as she pleased. She didn't think she had done anything praiseworthy. She was a beautiful woman by appearance, though she was someone else entirely on the inside. For example, she felt little emotion for people's lives and deaths. What mattered was whether released souls were well circulated, as she considered a human's death meaningful if it led to long-lasting prosperity.

Lately, everyone had been calling her "Shirley." Even though the scenery on the second floor had changed drastically, the greatest change to Shirley was that people now called her by her name all the time. She tiptoed around, ensuring no one was nearby as she carefully pressed forward. Once she looked around the corner, she found someone in front of her and recoiled in shock. If she could speak, she probably would have screamed. She fell back on her butt, her face looking as if her soul had escaped from her mouth.

"Shirley?"

She let out a sigh of relief as soon as she heard the voice. While she accepted the outstretched hand and stood up, her breathing remained shallow for some time. Her hypothetical heart would have been beating like a jackhammer.

The boy smiling at her was strange, showing her the same smile as when they had first met. Others always feared for their lives and ran away whenever they saw her as the floor master. Yet he had walked with her hand in hand and complimented her humble garden. He was an honest person and somewhat reminded her of a small animal. When she had visited that land named Japan some time ago, he had shown her his true form as a fully grown adult. She was shocked when she had seen him like that if she was being honest.

"Sorry to scare you. Are you okay?" he asked.

Shirley nodded. He had an innocent-looking face, but his appearance in Japan came to mind, and she quickly averted her gaze. Her face grew hot for some reason, yet he casually stared right at her.

“You look even more human each day,” he continued. “You’re not translucent, and I can see your clothes. I can’t really call you a ghost anymore.”

She looked down at her own body. Before, she had floated around when they held hands. But more souls circulated as development on the second floor proceeded. Shirley, who was at the center of it all, had changed. The illusion of her body had advanced, and he could feel her skin when he held her hand.

Yet for Shirley, that semitransparent form was most comfortable. She had been keeping up this physical form out of consideration for people around her but felt she wouldn’t have to put up a front around him and could relax. It was a type of human transformation technique, and she had learned to change forms with little effort by simply thinking about it. As she expected, the boy was not afraid and had a smile spread across his face.

“Seeing you in that form takes me back! I remember we used to pretend to be ghosts before. Oh, can you hold my hand?”

Shirley made a face as if to say, “Gladly,” and squeezed his hand. His simple nature made her inner child come out whenever he was around. Not only that, but Shirley loved holding hands. Being led to places she didn’t know filled her with excitement, and she was so light that she could easily let another person pull her by her hand. She found the smiling boy adorable, smiling with him.

Unfortunately, their little walk came to an abrupt end. The boy led Shirley to a dim kitchen, and she tilted her head in confusion when she saw the piles of food and pots.

“I’m sorry, Shirley, but can you help me? You know how to cook, right?” asked the boy. He squeezed her hand a bit, perhaps to ensure she wouldn’t flee.

She wasn’t sure why he looked so desperate until she suddenly realized they were close enough that their shoulders were touching, her face growing hot again. Unwittingly, her emotions had been wildly volatile as of late. She understood that he had tricked her into going there. But the thought of cooking together sounded as wonderful as walking with him. Her eyes lit up with excitement, so she nodded without thinking twice. It sounded like it would be a lot of fun, with her expression reading, “Great! I love cooking, but it’s a different story when it’s for so many people.”

He must have been at his wits' end, as he sighed then told her he would teach her the recipes. He motioned for her to follow, and she went after him, feeling giddy.

"We're cooking for a huge group today, so we should make something simple, like fried skewers. All we must do is cut up the ingredients and deep-fry them. It'll still be a race against time, and people will get bored if all we serve is fried food. We could serve some mixed rice in between... Oh, you'll know what kind of dish it is when you try it," he said.

He immediately chopped vegetables, sticking skewers through them, and covered them in something called "batter." Just as the boy tossed them into a pot, the loud sizzling noise surprised Shirley. Until this point, all the cooking at the mansion had consisted of broiling or simmering. Deep-frying was a new method, which led to Shirley curiously peering over at the pan while putting both hands on Kitase's shoulders.

"We've been getting more fresh harvests of vegetables lately, so I want to introduce more ways to cook up some tasty dishes. It's kind of funny how the Lizardmen want to expand the fields because they loved the food so much. They've been asking to work voluntarily," he said, his voice gentle and soothing. As she listened to the steady rhythm of his speech, she was beginning to feel sleepy.

Strangely, Shirley felt he could have been much older than her. She groaned and stared at the ceiling for some time, deep in thought. Then the image of him as a young adult came to mind, like a cloud hanging over her head dissipated all at once. She nodded to herself, glad that she had solved that mystery. He always sounded so calm and comforting because he was actually an adult. She remembered how surprised she had been when he was taller than her and had said, "Good morning" through the mirror. It was no wonder he didn't feel childish.

She had held on to his shoulders as if it were the most normal thing in the world but quietly let him go. Unaware of it, she found herself feeling somewhat embarrassed. Yet she thought he wouldn't mind if she grabbed hold of him for a bit longer. She had done it all the time in the past, and it wasn't as if someone would scold her for it. Subsequently, she reached for Kitase's shoulders again,

but he turned around and startled her.

“Okay, it’s done. Shirley, try it with a bit of salt first,” he said, handing her a deep-fried skewer. She had nearly forgotten about the food, but the delicious aroma of the steaming, light-brown skewer caught her attention. He held it up for her to take, and she accepted it without thinking.

Due to the somewhat harsh and bitter taste of eggplants, children particularly disliked the fruit because of their distinct grassy smell. To top it all off, they weren’t even that nutritious, so some would be disappointed to find them on the dinner table. But they had made it to Japan from India. Since there were over a hundred different varieties of eggplant out there, they weren’t unpopular by any means. No one could have predicted they would end up in the fields of the labyrinth’s second floor.

Shirley took a bite into the deep-fried eggplant; then her sky-blue eyes lit up with joy. Her teeth sank into the crispy fried batter with a satisfying sound, and the eggplant’s juices oozed onto her tongue. The spongy vegetable had soaked up the oil during the frying process, with its characteristic grassiness disappearing. Its aromatic flavor filled Shirley’s mouth, immediately impressing her because it didn’t taste like an ordinary vegetable, as the scorched parts contributed to its fragrance. The former floor master craved more with each crispy, juicy bite, and she instinctively accepted the next skewer that Kitase handed her. She covered her mouth with her hand and couldn’t think of anything other than chewing and enjoying her food. She never knew vegetables could taste so good.

“Glad you seem to like it,” said Kitase. “Now, Shirley, how would you like to learn my secret recipe? You could make this tasty dish whenever you want and share it with your friends. Interested?”

Kitase couldn’t wait to have a cooking buddy. Otherwise, he could imagine getting stuck as the chef in the dream world forever, meaning he might sleep every night feeling depressed. It went without saying that when he had run into Shirley earlier, he had approached her mostly out of self-interest. But Shirley was oblivious to his intentions and gave him a thumbs-up with excitement in her eyes.

Kitase smiled, then slowly crumpled to the ground. All his hopes and dreams would have dissolved if she had refused. That might sound overdramatic, but being forced to cook every time he dreamed would have been nothing short of a living nightmare. But he had made one miscalculation, which he found out as soon as they had started their lesson.

“What? You’ve never held a kitchen knife before?”

Shirley nodded. The dishes she had made were simple ones that only involved mixing and heating, so she had no idea what to do when Kitase had handed her a knife. She began swinging it, and he quickly jumped away from her.

He wouldn’t give up yet and said, “Well, that’s okay. They say prep work is the foundation of cooking, and using a knife to prepare your ingredients will make a huge difference in taste. I’m sure you’ll learn how to use it in no time.”

Again, he was complimenting her for his self-interest. When he stood behind her and gently held her hand, Shirley forgot to breathe. Although, her body didn’t require her to breathe. He was so close that her mind was spinning.

He whispered into her ear, “Now, let’s give this a try.”

The spinning went into overdrive. Shirley could feel his warmth from where he was touching her on the hand and back and screamed internally. She could only hear his soft voice in her ear without seeing his comforting face, which she didn’t think was fair.

“For the most part, you want to curl your fingers inward like this so you won’t cut yourself. Yeah, like that. Very good.”

She wasn’t good at all. Her body was as stiff as a board, with the eggplant getting cut into uneven, misshapen pieces. Shirley wanted to apologize for mutilating the freshly harvested vegetables but could feel his breath with each soft whisper and felt like she would faint. Lately, she was having trouble understanding her feelings. Her nervousness was through the roof, and she could feel her senses sharpening as if they were dying to feel his warmth directly. She wanted to dash out of there, yet didn’t want to move from this position. While her mouth felt like it would loosen into a smile, she had to stay on high alert the entire time.

“Yeah, that’s good. Just loosen up your fingers a bit more, and it’ll be perfect,” said Kitase, but that advice would be hard to execute unless he stepped away. Eyes downcast, she moved her lips as if to say, “Okay.”

She told herself that she had to focus, or she would let him down. Kitase seemed truly troubled earlier. He had always been a kind friend, so she wanted to do what she could to help. Shirley took several deep breaths, then focused on the knife. Wridra had specially made it and had etched the character for “dragon” into it. It could easily slice through anything and had never been nicked or chipped from use. Shirley concentrated on the blade and pleasantly surprised Kitase when she began cutting up vegetables.

“Very nice. I’ll start frying the ones you’ve cut so we can divide up the workload.”

Kitase stepped away, and Shirley found herself half relieved yet half disappointed. But she was soon relieved when he stood shoulder to shoulder with her, and she wished they could stay together like this without end. She wasn’t sure why—she still found it scary when other people looked at her—but seeing him smile made her feel warm inside. He was cute, kind, and knew all sorts of things she wasn’t aware of. Because he was a patient and thorough teacher, she learned a lot about living with humans through him. Development on the second floor had progressed, and Shirley’s daily life had changed at an alarming pace. As her role as the floor master had ended, her surroundings were becoming filled with brilliant color, as if she had woken from a dream.

With Shirley worried about her thoughts, she cut her finger with the knife. She had always had a habit of making careless mistakes and wanted to stay focused. Luckily, she couldn’t injure herself with a knife in her ghostly form.

However, Kitase’s face suddenly turned pale. When he quickly grabbed her hand and pressed his soft lips against the tip of her finger, Shirley cocked her head in confusion, thinking she actually would faint this time. Despite not feeling anything from her head to toe, the sensation of his lips against her finger was very real.

*Why are you so kind?* she screamed internally. Shirley couldn’t speak, but even if she could have, only incomprehensible gibberish would have come out

of her. His mouth was warm to the touch, and she couldn't take her eyes off of his tongue as he moved away. She placed a hand over her pounding chest, then heard him make a confused noise.

"Wait... You can't get hurt because you're a ghost, right?"

Shirley's face was beet red as she mouthed, "No, I can't." He apologized, but her emotions were still going haywire. While he always had made her lose composure, even if she enjoyed cooking with him, there would be commotion if she let her guard down. She liked spending time with him because he always went out of his way to be considerate. Kitase helped her choose the next ingredient to work on and promptly gave her pointers, which were things she couldn't experience in the labyrinth. But he stood a bit too close, stirring her heart inadvertently. She didn't actually have a heart, but she could feel it beating hard.

That was why she felt unimaginable relief when she heard footsteps approaching, and the elf girl peeked into the room.

"I was worried, so I came to help. And it looks like it's a good thing I did. Are you okay, Shirley? He can be a bit much with cooking," said Marie.

"What? That's not true, right, Shirley?" asked Kitase.

Hit with two questions at once, Shirley staggered to her feet. She would usually laugh it off as if it were no problem at all, but today's cooking session was far too intense for her. Shirley sank to the floor as if her legs gave out and clung to Marie's slim body. Kitase had done nothing wrong, though Shirley looked up at Marie, teary-eyed, as if she had just been through hell.

"What?!" said Kitase, dumbfounded, as Marie patted Shirley on the head to comfort her.

A sweet and delicious treat could become poison if taken in excess. The Ichijos arrived later and surprisingly found Marie and Kitase having a lively conversation. Dinner preparation went much smoother with more helping hands while an inviting aroma filled the mansion.

Shirley had been enjoying her time with people whom she thought were children, not realizing they were all adults.

One of the best things about fried skewers was that they paired perfectly with alcohol. Combining the in-season vegetables, fish, and chicken with glasses of golden beer was simply bliss. The beer was ice-cold, and its fine bubbles seemed to cleanse one's throat as they drank it. Hakam and Aja, some of the higher authorities of Arilai, took a big gulp together and let out a satisfied sigh in unison.

Wridra, the owner of the establishment, watched them with a smirk. She wore a black, subdued dress that elegantly showed off her slim neckline and clavicles. Yet Wridra had an air of masculinity when she devoured the skewers with big bites. Even though influential people sat at her table, she wasn't interested in pandering to them or acting subservient.

"Mmm, delicious. Hah, hah, those children of mine have always been engrossed in strange things such as cooking and fishing," said Wridra, then turned to Hakam. "I am pleased to see their exotic and quirky dishes are to your liking."

"These truly are amazing," said Hakam. "I've never been a fan of the stuck-up food they serve at the castle. I'm not interested in luxurious cooking that's only focused on presentation. I'd even prefer military rations over it."





A wrinkled hand landed on Hakam's shoulder. It was Aja, the man who had been continuously standing on the front line despite his old age and wanted nothing more than to see his disciples grow.

"Heh, me too," agreed Aja. "He and I have known each other for a long time, and we always used to sneak out of the castle to drink some cheap booze nearby. This genuine taste is right up our alley. Of course, it doesn't hurt that beautiful women are here too."

Aja grinned, and Wridra returned a dry smile. He clearly wasn't just complimenting her but Team Diamond as a whole, who were the servers of the night and adored by all of Arilai. While the drinks weren't high in alcohol content, the refreshing aftertaste and the comforting buzz they provided were addicting. Their seats faced the garden, and the orange lanterns lighting the night sky provided a nice ambience.

"Ah, I'd love to go right to sleep, but there's far too much to do," Aja said regretfully.

Hakam, once known as Desert Tiger, nodded in agreement and sharply gazed at Wridra as if he were on the battlefield. "I trust that you remember what I said to you before. You're free to do with this second floor as you please, but there are steps you must take to make it officially yours. You must make a mark and prove that this place benefits Arilai and make the royal family acknowledge your importance."

"Hah, hah, I know that full well. But know this: I am not lending you my assistance here for your or anyone else's sake. It is for myself, for a grudge of sorts."

The black-haired beauty smiled and crossed her legs. Other important figures of the battlefield, such as Doula, Zera, the members of Team Diamond, and Aja's disciple were present. But Wridra's indescribable intensity sent chills down their spines.

Hakam cleared his throat as if to snap himself out of it. "We sent a spellcaster to investigate using a Magic Stone and discovered the existence of a mysterious entity on the Ancient Labyrinth's third floor. Aja should fill you in on the details."

“Indeed,” said Aja. “We had them use the ancient scripts as reference for their research. Supposedly, means to control monsters can be there, and we suspect those are what the enemy army is after. Whatever it is, that must be what the rebels used to send monsters at us. The third floor has completely transformed because of it.”

In other words, this would be the decisive battle between Arilai and Gedovar. The invaders planned to seize the monster-controlling device and march into Arilai’s royal capital, laying waste to their enemies with the horde of monsters from the labyrinth under their control.

“Hm,” Wridra pondered. She recalled the time she had gone after the rebel leader and had seen a dim room lined with strange devices with a black water tank in the center. There was more to the device than being some convenient item that could control monsters. But it would amplify Gedovar’s military power as they had intended. If that happened, they would be practically impossible to defeat. They wouldn’t last a night against the Gedovar forces, even if they had a “tower” protecting them. Wridra tried to direct her consciousness toward the battlefield, but the voices around her interrupted her efforts.

“Sir Hakam, Great Aja, please try some mixed rice. The vegetables cooked with it give it a nice, crispy texture.”

Wridra turned to the speaker and saw Mariabelle dressed in a maid outfit. The elf smiled at her, and Wridra smiled back, then beckoned her over with her finger. Mariabelle curiously moved closer, and the Arkdragon reached toward the elf’s mouth.

“It appears you have been doing a little taste testing,” she said as she picked a piece of rice from the corner of the girl’s mouth.

Mariabelle stiffened awkwardly, her cheeks rapidly turning pink. She covered her face with her tray and quickly walked away, leaving Wridra chuckling amusedly.

The mixed rice was indeed delicious. Chopped wild vegetables accented the chewy, mildly flavored rice, further stirring one’s appetite. The white-haired Aja displayed a wrinkly smile.

“Ah, this is delicious,” he said. “There’s something comforting about it. The

food here never ceases to amaze— Ah, but we're getting off topic."

"Right," said Hakam. "Anyway, we simply can't allow them to advance into the third floor. But to stop them, we'd have to allocate our personnel there when we're already spread thin. Puseri, will you come here for a minute?"

A woman with twilight hair and eyes turned as she heard her name. While she had a slender build and wasn't particularly tall, she boasted the highest firepower on the entire raid team. She gracefully stepped toward Hakam and took a seat as requested.

"I want to hear your opinion. As the master of Team Diamond, do you think you should join the battle against the demon army?" asked Hakam.

His was a deliberate question, as several half-demons were part of her team, and he was uncertain whether they should fight against Gedovar.

As he'd expected, Puseri's eyes showed a hint of sorrow as she said, "I must say, I can't agree with that idea. No one wishes to fight against their own people. Though I don't know how this war will shape up, I would rather not take away their option to return to their country if the time comes."

"I thought you'd say that," said Hakam, sipping his drink.

A soldier would usually scold anyone who turned their back on the battlefield, but Puseri was anything but normal. She was the descendant of a powerful bloodline that once ruled over Arilai and had a strong sense of faith beneath her quiet demeanor. The public would have openly revered her if the royal family hadn't kept her in check.

"I suppose that applies to that Demon Arms Kartina," continued Hakam. "It seems she's been walking around calling herself security, though I'm sure the war is on the forefront of her mind. She's powerful enough to turn the tides of battle single-handedly. Should we force her into the battlefield, it would open a whole new mess."

Even though Kartina had accepted Shirley as her master, she could betray them at any time. As the commander of the raid team, Hakam especially had to keep this possibility in mind. However, he already knew those women wouldn't join the battle even before he had asked the question. He sighed deeply, then

looked around at each of them.

“Then we’ll split our forces into two groups as we’d originally planned. One side will face the enemy army, and the other will retrieve the monster-controlling device from the reports,” he announced.

Just then, Kitase and Mariabelle appeared to serve more dishes. Wridra stared directly at them as she said, “Make that three groups. I will go my way.”

She waved her hand before they could raise any questions or protest, and an image appeared midair.

“Ah, so this is the visualization magic I’d heard about. When did you pull this off, Aja?” inquired Hakam.

“That Wridra girl is marvelous. She connected with my Magic Stone team on a distant battlefield as if it were no challenge. You aren’t familiar with the mechanics of magic, so don’t even ask how. It even hurts *my* head to think about,” said Aja.

Visualization magic seemed simple, but it was deceptively complex. The Sorcerer’s Guild in the Alexei region, of which Mariabelle was a part, could use similar techniques. But one could only do that using the Water Mirror Sacred Treasure, considered a national asset. Wridra was sending and receiving signals, projecting them into images, and even filtering them to be more visible at night.

But Hakam had no interest in asking about the finer details of her technical prowess. Getting a glimpse into the opposing army’s forces was far more important to him, and he glared at the image of the battle with great interest.

## §

Surprisingly, the people of Arilai showed little interest in the war, even after it had been going on for some time. Such occurred because Gedovar had been continuously marching westward through Arilai’s desert. The war had not yet reached their neighborhoods, with their only exposure being the rare sight of solemn soldiers. For the citizens of Arilai, there were far more things in their daily lives that were more important than worrying about a battle that didn’t affect them directly.

The Gedovar army’s trajectory had been avoiding the three towers in the

southern regions of Arilai known as the Tower of Conflagration, Tower of Inferno, and Tower of Purgatory.

Said monstrous army marched forth like a thunderous black tidal wave. They were heading directly toward the ancient labyrinth they coveted above all else. After all, their people had a history of living there and devouring humans there, where the very roots of their existence lay. No one yet knew their objective except the upper echelons of Arilai, such as Hakam and Aja.

About three thousand of their forces were left behind near the aforementioned towers while the rest continued westward. Arilai's royal family felt this invasion was an attempt to bait them into action. The invading forces appeared wide-open at their flanks, and the smaller garrisoned forces seemed like a prime attack target. They should not attack under normal circumstances. It was wiser to lure the invaders farther away, where they would split from reinforcements, and destroy them with a devastating blow.

Still, they could not leave the forces near the towers alone for too long. The alliance between the three countries was the only reason they outnumbered the enemy. With their concentrated forces, avoiding battles would only result in wasting rations, funds, and mercenaries over time. It was strange to consider, but mercenaries who die in battle cost less in the long run. That was why the other two allied countries had suggested an assault operation. Arilai had accepted the proposal as an opportunity to test run their forces armed with Magic Tools and to show off their might to the other countries.

Rumors abounded that Arilai had deployed eight hundred lightly armored infantrymen, including two prototypes of a new weapon called Demon Arms. Combined with the personnel from the countries of Toshgard and Ninai, they had nearly five thousand soldiers. It was the first war that had spurred the armies from both sides into action.

A soldier removed their mouth cover and looked up at the glimmering morning star as the temperature in the desert dropped to about ten degrees Celsius. In two months, his breath would turn white with cold. He stood shoulder to shoulder with the others as they marched forward, unable to enjoy the fresh morning air. Feeling resigned, he put his mouth cover back on.

Coarse sand crunched underfoot as they continued walking forward. The repetitive motion was quite tedious. Strangely, the soldier's words vanished when he expressed his boredom aloud. Everything from the shuffling of feet, horses neighing, and clinking armor were drowned by howling wind, which was an unpleasant sound for those who had joined the forces from other countries.

The soldier rubbed his bearded chin and muttered, "How strange... All sound seems to disappear. I guess the rumors about magic in highly specialized desert countries were true. They prioritize concealment over firepower."

"I moved away from the group earlier, and what I saw shocked me," said his colleague. "Our army suddenly disappeared. I could hardly believe my eyes, but concealing our sound and appearance maximized our firepower. As the head of a mercenary group, I'm sure you would understand how terrifying it would be if an enemy suddenly appeared and charged at you from close range."

The man sighed with relief at the sound of his friend's voice. Amid their suffocatingly close-packed march, communicating via Mind Link Chat was their one saving grace.

He was a leader of a mercenary group of over a hundred men. They had joined because it was a well-paying job, and this battle would differ from any other. Their opponents would have monster blood running through their veins.

"If our enemies are part monster, we're going to get a ton of levels by beating them. We wouldn't have a perk like that against human opponents," he said.

"It's going to be pretty sweet getting money *and* levels, boss. And there's gonna be a bunch of them, right? This is gonna be way better than exploring a dangerous labyrinth. I can't wait!" said a newcomer.

The mercenary leader would see how he performed in the upcoming battle and determine how he would fight moving forward. Although the newbie spoke as if he weren't taking their situation seriously, he was a promising talent who had guts and never slacked off or turned his back on battle.

He looked up at the night sky to find it was turning a shade of navy, signaling the approaching dawn. At that moment, he appreciated the heavy silence hanging over them. The desert sky looked like an endless void that was about to suck him in. While he was the leader of a band of mercenaries, he had a soft

spot for beautiful scenery.

As the sky brightened, strong gusts blew through the desert.

The man stood on the sandy surface as the wind howled around him, no longer able to enjoy a conversation via Mind Link Chat. He was in a cold sweat with the enemy army's camp now only fifty meters away, but they couldn't see or hear them.

That demonstrated the power of the desert country's technique known as Haze.

At the head of the densely packed troops, Sorcerers stood in a circle at even intervals. The translucent film spreading over them had been unilaterally blocking out all sight and sound. The mercenary leader could hardly believe their opponents hadn't noticed them from so close.

The campgrounds before them looked very simple, with no tents and only some food in the center. It seemed they had just chosen a place with somewhat solid ground that could hardly be called a camp. Somehow, the enemy troops had varying equipment, standing completely motionless five meters from each other. This was the first time the mercenaries had seen the enemy army.

They couldn't help but wonder why they were just standing there and positioned so far apart. Despite their confusion, the Arilai forces prepared their crossbows as planned. They lined up in three rows of fifty men, readying to charge in after firing a volley of bolts at their unsuspecting targets.

"Oh, that soldier has one of those Magic Stones I've heard so much about. Make sure you keep records," said the mercenary leader.

"Yes, sir. I've heard that Arilai has developed several new weapons since obtaining Magic Stones. Even though they're a part of the alliance, they overthrew the former royal family without regard for their agreement. We'd better receive a handsome reward for keeping an eye on them and fighting the enemy army."

Naturally, other countries were highly interested in Arilai's armaments, as they had steadily built their military presence since discovering the new catalyst



called Magic Stones from the ancient labyrinth. There were even rumors claiming that other countries had requested this entire assault so they could scope out Arilai's new weaponry. The mercenaries would even have additional payment for scouting them out in addition to their regular duties.

The mercenary silently lowered his helmet and gripped his sword, waiting for the battle to begin.

But the rumored Magic Stone weapon made its appearance without warning. Countless beams of light appeared in the sand, and before anyone could wonder what they were, a chain of explosions and raging plumes of blue fire followed them. The dune was lit until a second and third wave torched the skies. These explosions blew away the enemy forces, leaving a fan-shaped trail of destruction.

All the mercenaries stared wide-eyed at the power of the infamous Magic Stones. They were special catalysts made of crystallized monster eggs, supposedly dead Magic Stones that hadn't circulated through the cycle of life. They knew little about this "circulation" process, but some Magic Stones were practically alive and brimming with life energy. But Magic Stones other than those "live" ones were used for their explosive energy, as they'd seen demonstrated. They had launched those from regular crossbows, although both armies had witnessed how terrifying their destructive capabilities could be.

The blast undid the army's concealment, and the cavalry units immediately rode forth. These units comprised specialized mounted soldiers from Ninai and rode horses capable of running freely across sand. A barrier protected the riders as they charged, and they swung their weapons down upon the enemy infantrymen and archers, crushing their heads like ripe tomatoes. Upon hearing the thundering hooves of the riders, the Gedovar army was not only unafraid, but their expressions lit up with joy.

"Aha! Humans!"

"Yesss, humans! Smells good!"

"Devour the dogs of Arilai!"

The childlike glee in their smiling faces sent a chill down the mercenary leader's spine. Just then, they realized this battle would be no cakewalk.

There was no time to waste. The mercenaries readied their next volley of Magic Stone arrows and shot down the enemies before they could transform. Yet they heard bones cracking as their foes grew larger before their eyes. The mercenaries realized the enemy soldiers had been standing so far apart because they would need room to expand into their monster forms.

The Arilai forces nearly lost their intensity as an elephant-sized abomination looked down upon them with a giddy look in its eyes. One swing of its massive arm left the ground shaking and three men dead, all of whom were veteran fighters around level 30 or so.

Then the leader clenched his teeth and shouted, “Charge! Crush them as if they’re monsters in the labyrinth!”

Indeed, they were no different from the monsters they’d encountered in the labyrinth. The enemies were only part monster, but they shared the same roots. Some significant differences between this battlefield and the labyrinth were that there were no obstacles to hide behind and two thousand five hundred monsters to fight against.

Cavalry forces arranged themselves into a formation to focus their collective firepower. They pushed forward from the left side, engulfing the small-and medium-sized monsters and reducing them into lifeless lumps of flesh.

It was a scene straight out of hell, but one of the younger soldiers cheered joyfully at the repeated sounds of leveling up chiming all around them. Leveling up was usually long and arduous, so it was satisfying to hear it so many times.

The mounted forces avoided the sinister monstrosities that were obviously too powerful to take down and pressed forward, riding the thin hope that they could make it out of this alive. Many of them planned to bail if things went south, even though doing so would be a violation of their pact. Their swords, enhanced with buffs, swung as if they had the weight and force of one hundred kilograms. The acceleration from their horses amplified their power, and one of them cut through an enemy’s arm and torso as another soldier tossed a knife into the creature’s eye.

Now the battle had shifted in the mercenaries’ favor. They had fought monsters, and the freakish appearance of their foes didn’t cripple them with

fear. Their leader looked around the battlefield, then felt horrified to find the soldiers at their right flank were ineffective. A raging bull monster charged right through them, trampling men underfoot as if they were nothing. They were like a dam being crushed pitifully beneath a pitch-black tidal wave.

“Second volley! Fire!”

Immediately after the call, the mercenaries unleashed Magic Stone arrows. The commander was calm yet cruel. A blue explosion engulfed the enemies and trampled units, sending a mixture of red and black blood and flesh flying everywhere.

“Leader, we need to move or they’ll get us too!”

An older soldier’s panicked cry snapped the leader back to reality. This battle was challenging and more gruesome than he had imagined. The volley he had just ordered defied conventional logic, but everyone knew he had no choice. He wondered if those brave fallen souls could reach paradise as he took the lead.

The mercenaries didn’t realize this, but it was at this time that Arilai’s Sorcerers had left the battlefield. Magic users capable of using concealment magic were valuable, and the group couldn’t afford to lose them in the first battle. Mercenaries were entirely replaceable. There was no question what would happen to those the monsters devoured and no longer considered useful with what had happened earlier.

As the sun began to rise higher, the leader noticed a shift within the main forces. Two figures were being accompanied by two others as if they were important. Both figures being escorted carried an extraordinarily long sword that made a high-pitched *schwing* sound. A smaller person beside the figures carefully inspected the new armament known as Demon Arms.

“There’s Arilai’s new weapon. Record anything you learn about it,” ordered the leader.

The man beside him breathed heavily, unable to respond. He took a worn-out parchment out of his bag and looked up at him with tired eyes.

“Why now?” he asked. “If only they showed up sooner, we wouldn’t have lost so many men.”

“They probably would have left already if they thought we couldn’t win,” the leader spat.

The ground had turned into red-black mud, starkly contrasting the clear blue sky. But the horrid stench of the bloodstained sands no longer fazed them. They had become numb to the joys and pains of life itself.

In order to stop the aggressively rushing monsters, the mercenaries had to attack their flanks repeatedly. The leader was likely the only one who knew many men had been devoured in the process. It enraged him to think the Arilai government only cared about test-driving their new toy despite so many lost lives.

However, the new weapon’s effects were immediate and dramatic.

The Demon Arms soldiers stepped forward, then sped up in the next instant. Their surrounding space had become distorted, and the heads of monsters were left in their wake. Demon Arms were based on ancient technology known as gilding and allowed humans to achieve speeds far beyond what was normally possible by reinforcing their muscles with thinly processed Magic Stones.

But these were a far cry from the real thing. Demon Arms like the one Kartina had equipped harbored emotions such as malice toward humankind. This copy was simply a tool for enhancing its owner and only thought of killing monsters. And so, the Demon Arms soldiers laughed as they cut down their enemies one after another. They carved a tunnel through the enemy army, leaving their allies flabbergasted.

“Amazing...” said a mercenary, breathing heavily.

The leader nodded. “It seems Arilai has significantly bolstered their military. If we don’t do something about these Magic Stones, they may threaten far more than just the three neighboring countries.”

Indeed, the other countries would need to put their utmost efforts into diplomacy with Arilai from now on. They would now have to grovel in hopes of getting scraps of Arilai’s superior Magic Stone technology. It was probably the very reason Arilai had deployed their new weapon. Not only had they turned the tide of battle, but the other countries had no choice but to bow down to the display of overwhelming power. The leader spat disdainfully onto the sand.

One by one, the monsters fell, effectively ending the battle. It was now only a matter of how much recognition the soldiers could get for their efforts, increasing the price of their rewards and raising their levels. They each moved forward enthusiastically.

The allied army that the mercenaries fought fervently alongside was determined to demonstrate their bravery and worth of being accepted into Eden. Just as they thought victory was assured, they heard a strange sound. It clung to their ears, viscous and grating, making their hair stand on end.

The leader scanned the battlefield for the source of the noise, then wished he hadn't done so. Everyone there realized that the sound had come from their fellow soldiers' blood flying skyward as they were suspended in the air.

Black blood spilled on the sand, coagulated like tar under the scorching sun. The blood gathered at the center of the battlefield, and an ominous feeling came over all who watched, making their skin crawl. All the color in the sky had faded, and a chill uncharacteristic for a desert country spread in the air. As everyone had reached their limit and felt like running away, the blood mass formed a giant tree shape, standing tall in the battlefield.

The monster's name, "Bloodpool," appeared over the red tree, and the soldiers' expressions stiffened. Not only was its appearance terrifying, but thorns of blood jutted out from it, piercing through unfortunate soldiers who were standing too close.

A cacophony of bloodcurdling screams ensured the horror continued. The thorns impaled men at a steady pace, the sound of their death throes forming a morbid rhythm. Unnerving music washed over those present like a tidal wave, making their chests tighten with terror.

Regardless, the mercenaries fighting at the front line were also affected by the dreadful manifestation. The man who had been their leader for many years stiffened and shouted, "Th-This battle music... Don't tell me it's over level 100!"

A bloody thorn pierced his body. He struggled to break free as the monstrous tree drained his blood and looked down at him with shadowy eyes. His heart beating like an alarm bell, he yelled his final order.

"Run!!!"

Shortly after he called for his men to retreat, another order for all armies to flee came through. Soldiers scattered all at once, and the front line completely collapsed. Retreating in the desert proved to be disastrous, though. There were no obstacles to hide behind, their feet got caught in the sand, and no reinforcements were coming. The slow-witted ones and unfortunate ones perished first. They continued to flee as their fellow men were trampled and devoured. Only the victors would escape with their lives.

Luckily, the leader found and caught a riderless horse. As his final task, he put one of his comrades on the horse and told him to record every detail of the battlefield and what they'd learned about Arilai. He turned toward the chaos again after he entrusted the man he had saved to report back to their home country.

The sight filled him with an emptiness beyond despair. Dark red shrouded the sky, with countless soldiers suspended in the air, a scene from a nightmare. Oddly, the leader's expression was peaceful, as if something beyond fear. He lifted his sword, which had been modified to be around one hundred kilograms in weight, as the Bloodpool condensed and transformed into a humanoid shape before his eyes.

He hadn't wished to prove his bravery and be accepted into Eden. It was that when his time came, he had always wanted to die falling forward. To his surprise, the horrifying monster had turned out to be female. Dark red armor covered the figure, but its outline was that of a woman and unexpected yet strangely fitting.

In an instant, the two Demon Arms rushed toward the monster from both flanks. But they perished in vain, as their legs were immediately severed and spears were impaled into their heads. The bloody woman's spear thrust wasn't visible with the naked eye, and only the results of the two soldiers' deaths were left. The leader wondered if he could swing the sword he had raised, but he was only allowed time to have that one final thought.

## §

The screen that stood outdoors displayed the words "To be continued." We had been watching with bated breath all this time and took that as our cue to

sit at the table.

Marie was directly in front of me and looked as if she wasn't sure what to do, looking drained and without the energy to speak. Her expression seemed to say, "This is your fault for showing her so many movies." Movies had influenced the editing techniques for changing up the tempo of the battle, and Marie was guilty of showing Wridra movies too.

We were so overwhelmed because the footage we had seen was far more intense than any movie. I had some things to say to Wridra, but she was sitting away from us next to Hakam and Aja. Marie and I stared at the Arkdragon for some time, and she gave us a smug smile from afar.

"Hah, hah, I take it my editing skills thoroughly impressed you," she told us via Mind Link Chat. "No one else could have cut out all of the grotesque imagery while maintaining the action-packed thrills like I have."

I had forgotten she could communicate with us even without the special bracelet the rest of us needed to access Mind Link Chat. As always, the Arkdragon far exceeded what was normally considered possible. Her cheeks turned rosy as she watched us with satisfaction, but I vowed I wouldn't give her the compliment she wanted.

"The scary part is, it didn't even use any CGI! It would be a hit if we released it in Japan," said Marie through Mind Link Chat.

She was right. I could see that boom in popularity if it had included a caption that it was real footage. Wridra's image projection magic had become even more advanced from all of the movies she had been watching. Again, I wouldn't compliment her because she would definitely let it go to her head.

The Ichijos, who were also seated with us, assumed the footage had been created with CGI. They clapped as if they had just finished watching a short movie. It was probably for the best that they didn't know.

Eve, who had been working as the receptionist earlier, was lying on the table face down like us. She groaned, then slowly raised her face and said, "That looked terrible. Is it just me, or did that Bloodpool thing seem as strong as the floor master? Don't tell me there are monsters like that all over Gedovar!"

She hadn't said that to me but to the blue-haired woman named Isuka beside her. She wore a maid outfit like Eve and gently stroked the dark elf's back as if tending to a sick person.

"Of course not," responded Isuka. "Bloodpool is a special being. There is none other like her. She probably had a reason to show herself in the first battle. In my eyes, it was a strong message for Arilai and its allied countries, warning them not to interfere with their efforts to take over the ancient labyrinth. It certainly left a powerful impression on them, I'm sure. Now they won't be able to make a move against Gedovar so easily."

Isuka sighed, then turned her gaze back toward the black screen.

I nodded in agreement. Unlike our raid team, the mercenaries probably hadn't faced a monster as powerful as a floor master. A regular soldier wouldn't even be able to approach such an opponent due to their overwhelming destructive power and magical prowess, as with the first floor master. Shirley's ability to drain energy from others characterized her as the second floor master. The raid team was forced to retreat once because of it, and we would've struggled greatly if we hadn't been able to end the fight quickly.

"Personally, I'm curious whether this Bloodpool is stronger than Kartina. She appeared really strong once she applied the temporary buff from draining blood, so we probably won't know unless they fight. It probably comes down to compatibility when both are that powerful."

Although Kartina was from Gedovar, I doubted they would ever go head-to-head. I was more curious about the fact that Arilai had somehow produced pseudo-Demon Arms. I had underestimated their technology, though it seemed inferior to the freak— I mean, real Demon Arms that could surpass the speed of sound. I couldn't imagine how that fight would have turned out if Wridra hadn't damaged her.

"I really can't stand war..."

The comment originated from the elf girl lying face down on the table. Looking at her face, I noticed she looked rather pale and disheartened. I couldn't blame her. Despite its heavy editing, seeing such a gruesome battle was mentally taxing. I touched her cheek and asked her if she was okay, and she



looked up at me with a sad expression.

“I’m scared. I couldn’t keep casting magic in the midst of all of that,” she said.

“I can’t blame you. Unlike in the labyrinth, we’d be fighting with flesh and blood on both sides of the battle,” I told her.

“Well, it’s not just that...”

Marie was usually so talkative and cheerful, but it seemed like the color in her eyes had faded. She blinked slowly, then her eyes moved side to side as if she couldn’t make up her mind. Finally, she opened her mouth to speak again.

“It’s not just the fighting on the battlefield. If the other side loses, the people of their country are going to suffer terribly. Their lives will be ruined. That battle will decide the fate of the citizens too. That’s what scares me.”

Eve, Isuka, and I nodded because she was right. Maybe the other two had looked so down earlier for the same reason. They each placed a hand on Marie’s back.

“Zarish was in the country where I lived, and we lost a war right away. Everyone was running away, and a cavalry came after us. I got scared, so I took Zarish with me and fled. I’ll never forget that sight,” related Eve.

“Gedovar is my home,” said Isuka. “My feelings of resentment come out on top because I was sold into slavery, but I’m sure the people I saw there when I was younger feel differently. I care more about minimizing the damage done rather than which side ends up winning.”

Marie finally rose from the table, although I could tell from looking at her that she wasn’t feeling like herself yet. But her expression had changed into that of determination, and she had recovered some of her vigor.

“Let’s destroy this monster-controlling device that’s said to be on the third floor. Maybe then, Gedovar’s army will give up on the ancient labyrinth. At the very least, we should be able to stop unnecessary harm,” she said.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I agreed. “We aren’t Arilai’s soldiers and can’t fight for them on the battlefield, but we should be free to fight in our way. That also goes for Team Diamond. Let’s do what we think will be for the best, and maybe

our actions will end up helping more than anyone.”

Even though Marie was small, she nodded firmly because she was a capable Spirit Sorceress undaunted by fearsome monsters. Emboldened by her bravery, the two members of Team Diamond nodded, raised their clenched fists toward us, and said, “We’re in.”

Unbeknownst to us, Hakam and Aja overheard our conversation at their table away from ours. They had been silent and dumbstruck until then by the horrors they had seen, but Hakam said, “We can’t let the children get the better of us.”

“Right,” replied Aja, and they both stood up.

“We know which route the enemy is expected to come in from. Let’s check in on the defensive force and your ‘bombardment,’” said Hakam.

“We’ve even called in the old soldier looking for a place to die. Even Gedovar’s main forces won’t stand a chance. They’ll watch their soldiers die one by one in their futile efforts,” said Aja, laughing out loud.

The peculiar aura of those who knew battle intimately radiated around them. No one knew that we, women and children, had ignited their passion. Well, except Wridra, who was quietly smiling to herself.

Once the military higher-ups and Eve’s group had left their seats, the black-haired beauty turned to us as if we were finally moving on to the main topic. She stood before the black screen and stared directly at us as.

“Kitase,” started Wridra. “I thoroughly enjoy when a movie makes it appear as if it had ended and there is more to it. It does not happen every time, but I always look forward to it. So, I watch the credits roll until the end. I feel it would be quite a waste if I missed out on an extra scene.”

She spoke as if she were performing, and I wondered what this was all about. But I got my answer right away. A blue sky suddenly appeared on the black screen, and we all squinted at the sudden brightness. Dunes appeared, followed by a brown, jagged mountain range. This scenery was the postcredits scene she was referring to in her speech.

“Hah, hah, only those who have stayed until the end get to enjoy this footage,” she added.

Despite her cheerful tone, there was a dangerous gleam in her eye. Her lips curved into a smile, yet her hand gripping her glass revealed the tension she felt.

Marie and I exchanged looks, and the scene changed once again. What we had assumed to be mountain ranges suddenly moved, and we realized we were actually looking at dorsal plates. A silver-white eyeball looked toward us, and the shock wave from its roar dispersed every cloud in the vicinity, leaving us in awe. The shock wave reached the dunes, flooding the screen with white noise akin to the destruction of the camera. I stared, eyes wide.

“Don’t tell me that was a dragon just now?! A dragon that big has to be a legendary class! Wridra, where was that footage from? Let’s go, let’s go take a look!” I said excitedly.

“You really can’t help yourself with massive creatures like that,” pointed out Marie. “I’d bet you would have taken time off tomorrow if you had work.”

She was right, of course. You wouldn’t see a legendary dragon in person every day, and if I missed that chance, I might have never— Actually, I *had* been seeing Wridra practically every day. Not that I didn’t appreciate her, but, well... Yeah, maybe I didn’t appreciate her enough.

Normally, I would have expected Wridra to allude to the fact that she was a legendary being, but she said nothing. Being curious, I looked at her and how she smiled. It wasn’t her usual joyous display, instead having anger seething deep within her.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Wridra?” I asked.

“Hah, hah, oh, it is nothing... I simply find it amusing. We, the ancient dragons, had once agreed to stay neutral in this world of gods, monsters, and humans. Yet this one has decided to side with Gedovar!”

We were shocked as a myriad of cracks appeared in Wridra’s glass, and a dark aura emanated from her. The Arkdragon had been protecting Marie while she stayed neutral, as she had mentioned. She mainly used her powers for entertainment, to make the mansion and hot springs. One would have considered it a waste of her abilities, though it was perhaps a deliberate effort on her part to stay neutral. No, this probably resulted from her doing whatever

she felt like.

I couldn't help but wonder about the giant dragon who should have been a neutral entity like Wridra. Judging by her reaction, there was no way they were completely unrelated. Marie thought the same thing and hesitantly asked, "Wridra, do you know that dragon?"

"Hah, hah. Not only do I know him, but so do these children," she said, lifting her babies. It could only mean one thing...

"That's your husband?!" we stood and shouted simultaneously.

I had never seen her husband before, and she had never spoken about him from what I could remember. Since she had children, it stood to reason that she would have a husband, even if she had always been a free spirit and seemingly single.

As a lover of romance novels, Marie couldn't hide her excitement from this revelation. Her purple eyes lit up with curiosity, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, Wridra muttered with a ferocious grimace, "I will put down that scum myself."

Those words immediately shut Marie's mouth. Wridra was furious, and this clearly wasn't the time for the kind of romance talk she had hoped for.

Based on the footage we had seen earlier, the war with Gedovar wouldn't be easy. Still, I never would have imagined a marital quarrel would end up being an even bigger problem.

Marie and I thought like that as we watched Wridra smiling grimly.

## Episode 7: To the University Library

I brushed my teeth beside the lovely Ms. Elf, and she glanced at me through the mirror. She blinked, her purple eyes like sparkling gemstones under the morning sun. Her hair was white like cotton, and her youthful skin looked radiant. She wore pajamas with a sheep design that included cute little curled horns on her head.

After rinsing out her mouth with some water, she wiped it with a towel. Her amethyst eyes then met mine directly instead of through the mirror this time.

“The mornings are getting colder and colder,” said Marie. “What do you use to stay warm in this world? I haven’t seen any chimneys on the houses here.”

I rinsed my mouth, wiped myself with the towel she had handed me, and turned to her to respond.

“Usually, we use AC or gas heaters in the city. You can find fireplaces in colder regions like Aomori. Oh, and around here, it’ll get colder than where you grew up.”

“Oh, that sounds awful. I really don’t like the cold. Whenever someone was hogging the spot in front of the fireplace, I’ve always thought about moving them out of the way,” she said as she frowned, which got a laugh out of me.

The forest where she and her elven tribe lived had a very mild climate. It only snowed lightly there, if at all, and she didn’t do well with extreme cold *or* heat because she was so used to that comfortable environment. To be honest, I kind of liked it when she complained like this, so I just chuckled as I left the washroom.

Marie followed me with my sleeve in her hand, bringing up one random topic after another. Come to think of it, I didn’t just like when she complained; I also liked talking with her in general. She was in a better mood than usual because it was my day off, and so was I.

We returned to our room to find a woman spreading open the newspaper.

She glanced at us as Marie and I chatted, her long black hair tied back behind her head. But she said nothing and simply went back to her newspaper as if she was used to our noisiness. The woman had taken a liking to wearing glasses, maybe because I had told her she looked smart in them last time. Combined with the long skirt, she almost looked like a different person.

She was usually lazy in her cat form, yet she was enjoying the morning sun with a cup of coffee with plenty of milk today. According to her, she had come to Japan for the first time in a while since there was something she wanted to look into.



“Good morning, Wridra. Have you sobered up yet?” I asked.

“Hah, hah, I can sober myself whenever I wish. Whenever I am inebriated, it is because I choose to be.”

Wridra had a high tolerance not only for alcohol but the cold too. Her outfit left her upper arms bare, even though we were already heading into winter. Her exposed collarbones and smooth, shapely nose made her look like a model. She didn’t like to wear makeup and only used lipstick or gave herself a manicure at most.

She held out her empty mug, and I accepted it smoothly without thinking about it, perhaps because of my time working at the mansion. It was almost like I was her servant, but I shrugged it off and walked toward the kitchen to brew some tea.

Part of the reason Marie was in such a good mood was due to her friend Wridra being present. The elf girl walked over with a bounce to her step and sat next to me, with her eyes full of joy.

“Do you get cold when you’re a cat, Wridra?” asked Marie. “Do you think we should get a heater?”

“A soft futon and some warmth would be nice, although the cold does not bother me too much. Unlike a certain elf who cannot handle a little chill,” replied Wridra with a teasing smile.

Marie puffed out her cheeks a bit and said, “No fair! You can’t compare me to a cat covered in warm, fluffy fur. I may not like the cold, but that went for everyone else around me.”

“Then you should have that man buy you some warm clothing,” suggested Wridra. “Wear something that covers you up to the neck. Even the cold winds should not bother you. That one is thick-skinned when it comes to the cold, so do not hesitate to raise your concerns.”

With my back turned to them, my ears perked up when they mentioned me. I had grown up in Aomori but had moved here in my later elementary school years, so it wasn’t as if I was remarkably tolerant of the cold. This year, it would be best to get some real thermal clothing and a heater.



As I considered this, the kettle went off with a high-pitched whistle. I turned off the stove, then I recalled something.

“Marie, can we use Fire Lizards as heaters? Like when your jellyfish spirits helped us in the summer,” I said.

“Hmm, that would be difficult,” Marie said. “They’re very curious creatures, so it could be dangerous to bring them out here. I might keep them contained. They could wander off and start a fire, which is why they’re prohibited in a lot of cities in the other world.”

That sounded scary. Since we lived in a condo, a fire would put other residents at risk. It was probably better to use a gas-powered heater or something instead.

We had already eaten in the dream world, and there was no need to prepare breakfast. All I had to do was make some tea we’d brought over to enjoy this refreshing morning. Going into the dream world also benefited us financially. We could probably even bring some food back here if we wanted to. Even though Wridra usually did her own thing, Marie was a hard worker and a savvy shopper, so she had been helping me a lot with household finances and chores.

I brewed some tea and turned around to find the ladies talking about their outfit for the day, chattering away as if they were close sisters.

“We’ll be meeting up with the Ichijos today, so you two should try to figure out your outfits soon,” I said.

“Okay!” they said in unison and giggled. I couldn’t help but smile at how in sync the elf and dragon were.

That was how my day off began.

## §

A man groaned as he stared at a car. He was a man who lived in the same building as me and was the husband of Kaoruko Ichijo.

When I saw his overweight body, I couldn’t believe he was the same boy I’d seen in the dream world. I couldn’t blame Kaoruko for getting so excited on the other side after seeing how much he had changed. Yet when he turned around,

he had that same friendly smile on his face.

“I was never really into cars, but I envy you for having one,” said Toru.

“It wasn’t friendly on the wallet, though,” I said. “I’d always dreamed of having a car since I grew up in a rural area, but I was seriously considering selling it before Marie came here.”

Toru made a face as if to say he understood how I felt. Transportation was so convenient in the city that there was no need to have a car. That convenience melded into the high rent, making paying fees for parking and vehicle inspections difficult.

As we were talking, the ladies stepped out of the condo building. Marie waved, and Kaoruko was behind her in an outfit fitting for the autumn season, looking at us with a somewhat embarrassed expression. Her attire was more youthful than usual, and I assumed Wridra had something to do with that. The Arkdragon had been learning more about fashion by the day and making a game out of honing her feminine charm. Toru was dazzled.

“I get it,” he said. “When you’re with an adorable woman, you want to drive them around everywhere.”

“Exactly. That’s why I kept the car, even if I had to tighten my budget elsewhere,” I said.

“You did the right thing,” he agreed, and I nodded.

I opened the passenger-side door for Marie as she stood in front of it, and she smiled. She looked a bit embarrassed as she showed off the flower-embroidered cardigan, even though her eyes sparkled with anticipation as if she wanted compliments. Toru and I swooned, which seemed to satisfy her and deepen her alluring smile.

“Good morning,” said Marie to Toru with a bow, then turned to me. “Sorry about the wait.”

Toru glanced at me as if saying the greeting with her beautiful voice was too much for him. I couldn’t blame him since she had that effect on people. Marie knew this and looked at me with her lovely amethyst eyes.

He looked back at the car and shook his head, indicating he wished he had one too. But I wouldn't let him have it. Guys were capable of communicating wordlessly like this.

"Let's go; we have a lot to research today," said Marie, hugging my arm. I guided her toward the passenger seat, held her by her slender fingertips, and helped her lower herself into the car.

"So, why are we going to the university library?" asked Toru.

"Oh, it was actually Wridra's request. She wanted to go someplace quiet where she could read lots of books. We also like books and thought it would be nice to read together," I explained with a smile, feeling something was up. Wridra had been furious last night, so it was hard to believe she was in the mood for reading.

As for Wridra, she sneaked up behind Toru and plopped her hand on his shoulder. He turned around, surprised to find her beautiful, smiling face right next to him. "Hm, it appears many Japanese men are quite useful. Perhaps it is because the ability to fight is not as important here as in the other world. I hear you helped Kitase cook before. Can I presume you are good at it?"

"Ah." Wridra wanted to recruit Toru as a chef. It would certainly help me out if he worked in my stead, although I didn't want to turn his dreams into nightmares. Seeing that I didn't know whether I should say anything, I stayed quiet. After all, I didn't want to put myself in Wridra's crosshairs.

"Y-Yes, I suppose so. I cook as a hobby, but I do get a ton of ingredients from my family out in the country and have leftovers sometimes," said Toru before turning to me. "I think you mentioned it's possible to bring food to the other world?"

I nodded.

"Ah, then maybe we can bring something over to the manor," he said, which made Wridra and Marie cheer.

When I considered things, I saw that they had shared some food with us in the past. They'd given us some high-quality meat and vegetables, which we enjoyed at our household and took to the other world. As Wridra recalled this,

her eyes narrowed, and she smiled and slapped Toru's back.

"How wonderful it is to have friends. Kaoruko has been quite good to us as well. I thank you for agreeing to show us around the library today," said Wridra.

"N-No, it would be an honor," Kaoruko said. "But are you sure it's okay for me to be beside you and Marie-chan, breathing in the same air— Ah, I mean... What am I saying?!"

I wasn't sure what she was saying either. A cold sweat ran down my face, and Toru had a similar, awkward expression. Kaoruko covered her bright red face, mumbling apologies into her own hands. But Wridra was utterly unconcerned and flashed a cheerful smile.

"Well, let us depart. But I must address something first... Toru, what is with your outfit?"

Toru wore a full suit, which was clearly unfit for a casual outing and seemed a little out of place.

He scratched his head and said, "I'm sorry, I got called in to work after agreeing to show you around today. But I reached out to an acquaintance who will show you around the library even though it's closed today. It would've been a good opportunity to get to know each other better, so I'm disappointed I can't go."

I was grateful that he had gone through the trouble of planning for us, though I couldn't help but notice Kaoruko glaring resentfully at him. I did think it was unfortunate that he was wasting a day off by working.

"It's a shame that your job is taking up so much of your time when you've found something new and fun. Maybe you shouldn't work as much," said Kaoruko.

"I couldn't agree more. Boy, I wish I could stay in the dream world forever," replied Toru sadly.

Working a government job seemed harsh, but maybe I had it too easy because I hardly ever had to work overtime. In my opinion, the important thing was having a good work-life balance.

Kaoruko hadn't finished complaining and looked quite upset. She squinted at her husband and said, "At this rate, I'm going to sleep with Kitase-san before you get home from work."

If we had been drinking something, we would've spat it out at once. Had someone overheard us, they might—no, they *definitely* would have gotten the wrong idea. Toru had learned his lesson from the time he had said something similar before, and I was glad he did. It nearly led to him getting divorced.

"Well, of course I wouldn't mind if you slept with him, but..." said Toru, then turned to me. "I don't need to worry, right? You're not taking this the wrong way, are you?"

"O-Of course not! I know she meant it literally! Just going to sleep, nothing more, nothing less!"

He glanced at Marie, who was tilting her head in confusion in the passenger seat, then finally sighed in relief. I didn't know how I felt about my words not being enough to reassure him. Regardless, I didn't remember doing anything that would make him suspect me.

Truthfully, I was happy that the Ichijos were looking forward to revisiting the dream world. I just wished they were a bit more careful about their phrasing when talking about it. Toru and I looked rather weary from this exchange, yet the women in the back seat were all smiles.

Seeing their cheerful expressions made my concerns seem arbitrary. The weather was nice on this fine autumn day, and we were about to go enjoy our visit to a historic university library.

"Let's get going, everyone," I said, then turned to Toru. "Please let us know once you're off work."

"Sure thing. Have fun!" responded Toru.

We put on our seat belts and waved at Toru as he walked away. Judging by his expression, he seriously considered taking on less work for the first time.

I began to drive the car slowly and safely, noticing that the ginkgo trees lining the streets had turned a beautiful yellow.

The sun was warm, but it was still chilly out when I rolled down the window. It was just before lunchtime on a weekend, so we would surely run into traffic before long. In the passenger seat, Marie seemed to like her autumn outfit a lot as she swayed her feet and turned toward the backseat. She also looked eager to talk to our unusual guest.

“You fell asleep at the mansion before us, didn’t you?” Marie asked Kaoruko. “Did you wake up in the same bed?”

Kaoruko stared at the Arkdragon and elf, and looked a bit surprised when they mentioned her. Maybe she was nervous about being in the same car as the women from a fantasy world. It wasn’t often that most people found themselves surrounded by mythical beings, after all.

“Oh, no, I actually woke up in my bed,” stated Kaoruko. “I was just talking about how strange it was and wondered if it really was a dream at first.”

Even I had wondered about that. They hadn’t been around when I woke up that morning, and I even saw that my front door had been locked. That meant we had gone to the dream world in my bed, but they woke up in their own beds at home. That was indeed strange but convenient. I didn’t want everyone crowding the bed, and I liked taking my time when waking up. Could that be why? Did some higher power make room for us so we could wake up comfortably?

I felt like someone managed our transportation to the dream world. For example, I had fallen into lava and ended up in a safe place some distance away the next time I visited. With the Ichijos, I felt some personal emotional input played a role, where someone decided it would be better to have them wake up at home. If I ever got the chance to meet this mysterious administrator, I would like to ask them what this all meant.

Shortly after, I tapped on the steering wheel and said, “Hmm. So you wake up from your dream if you fall asleep on the other side, even if I’m not there. Maybe you’re just like me, then. If I die, fall asleep, or get vaporized, I wake up in my bed.”

“I-I would like to avoid dying. That’s scary, even in my dream,” said Kaoruko.

“But when my husband took a nap, he said he fell asleep normally. I know I had a poor choice of words earlier, but I sometimes think about how I’d love to go play in that world with you two. Please protect me if I do visit again, Kitase-san.”

She sounded rather enthusiastic about it. I was all for it and was looking forward to showing them around the dream world, but there were a few things I wanted to know first.

“I wonder why you don’t go back to your world when you take a nap there,” I said.

Marie, who was eating snacks in the seat beside me, looked at me with a confused expression. She licked her finger, then turned toward the back seat.

“Come to think of it, I’m not sure. I wonder how it works?”

“That is how it works for me as well. Without Kitase, I could not have returned to Japan or my world. Perhaps those from Japan and us are treated differently. Our world is a dream realm from the perspective of those from this world, but we obviously do not see it that way. I wonder about that sleepy-looking Kitase there. Just look at his face. If he dies in Japan, I would not be surprised if he woke up in our world, mumbling about how well he had slept,” said Wridra, pointing at me in the back mirror.

I also caught Kaoruko giggling through the mirror. Did I really look that sleepy?

Kaoruko was a huge fan of video games, and it was dawning on her that she could visit a fantasy world whenever she wanted. She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and asked, “Do we get to choose any skill we want? I’ve always wanted to be a magic caster!”

“Well, you are in luck,” said Wridra. “It just so happens that Marie and I are adept magic casters. Though, I suspect your trait would be closer to that of an elf.”

That reminded me of the incident a long time ago when Kaoruko had seen an ice spirit that shouldn’t have been visible to ordinary people. I remembered talking about how she might be well attuned to spirits. Curious, I joined in on

the conversation.

“I’d always traveled solo, so I don’t know anything about my trait. I didn’t have opportunities to see other people’s skills. Is it like a person’s natural-born talent?”

“Indeed. It is an ability with high potential to develop and can become one’s defining characteristic. While it could become a worthless skill, it could be charming and useful in its own way. I do not recommend forcing yourself into an archetype such as a Knight or whatever else is popular nowadays.”

I thought knights were cool and wished I could have been one. If I had been bigger, I would’ve liked to wield a metal shield and giant sword. Come to think of it, my weight limitations weren’t as strict anymore after my movement skill had changed.

“Yeah, I’ve decided. I’m gonna get a cool set of armor and cape—”

“No,” interrupted Marie, making my resolve vanish like a wisp of smoke. I looked over to find the elf girl making an “X” with her arms, and a bead of sweat rolled down my face.

“I hate the thought of you wearing such an outfit. If you buy something like that, I’ll write ‘Kazuhiho’ on your helmet.”

“Marie... I wouldn’t just be doing it because I think it looks cool. It’s so I can protect everyone...” I tried to explain, but she wasn’t having it.

“I’ll write ‘Kazuhiho is here’ on your cape too.”

It was no use. Marie wasn’t backing down from this one.

I told her I gave up, and she nodded as if she had been expecting it. Wridra and Kaoruko also nodded. Women didn’t understand that guys loved that look. I believed it was more unnatural to roam around the dungeon in casual clothing. Still, I couldn’t get any of them to agree with me.

As I expected, we slowed down quickly. By the time we passed Kinshicho Station and the Sumida River came into view, we encountered heavy stop-and-go traffic. Instead of getting frustrated, the passengers seemed to have a good time.



“I’ve always felt you were someone special, Ms. Wridra. You seem even more wonderful now that I know you’re a dragon,” said Kaoruko.

“Hah, hah, there are many dragons out there, but very few are as intelligent as I am. You have quite the discerning eye,” responded Wridra, touching the tip of Kaoruko’s nose. Just then, Kaoruko pressed her palms against her cheeks and squealed.

“Since when did she start calling her ‘Ms. Wridra’?” I wondered. Kaoruko was head over heels for her. I debated whether I should tell Toru something or if he’d be better off not knowing. I eventually decided the latter would be for the best, and kept my mouth shut.

“And you, Marie-chan—to think, you’re an elf much older than me. I’d always thought there was a mystical air about you, like a character from a fairy tale. I’m so glad I got to know you,” said Kaoruko, moving her face closer to Marie’s.

Marie was a bit taken aback. Even though she had always gotten a lot of attention, this felt different somehow.

“Th-Thank you, but this is all a bit much. There aren’t too many elves out there, but we aren’t all that rare,” said Marie.

“Oh, don’t be so modest,” continued Kaoruko. “If there were many people as cute as you, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself! Ah, I just might faint from seeing you so up close! You may not know this about me, but I love beautiful women!”

Did she just say what I think she said? Sweat rolled down my face as I drove, but she didn’t mean it that way. She probably meant she appreciated those women the way one would with art, not in a romantic sense. I decided to believe that was the case.

Kaoruko was similar to me in that she loved fantasy worlds from the bottom of her heart. That was why the elves and dragons moved her, making her giddy about visiting the other world. It would explain why she quickly accepted the situation despite it being so unbelievable. So when she said she loved women, she must have meant those from fantasy worlds. Yes, that had to be it. I wasn’t sure why I was so intent on convincing myself, but it made some sense to me.

Her next question didn't just surprise me, but the other two as well.

"So, which language should I learn first?"

Anyone who had taken a foreign language class in school knew how much time and effort it took to learn a new language. What she planned to do was akin to learning English from scratch, and her willingness to take on the challenge surprised me.

Marie put a finger on her chin thoughtfully, then turned to me.

"It would be faster to ask someone who has experience in that field. Which language from our world would you suggest she learn first?"

I'd nearly forgotten that I had learned multiple languages. It was fun expanding my horizons with each new language I'd attained, though they were useless in my world. After I thought about it for a while, I decided to share my perspective.

"Considering what Wridra said about traits, I suggest Elvish. It's uncommon, but everyone here can speak it. The important thing is that you can use it to control spirits. For communicating with other people, the common language is useful too. But..." We hit some more traffic, so I turned around. Kaoruko's eyes were alight with a fascination for the unknown. I felt like I should tell what I truly wanted to recommend. "You should learn the ancient language somewhere along the line. It's the origin and center of all culture. With your drive to learn anything and everything, I definitely recommend you learn it."

I thought I'd seen something change in her eyes, like lights sparkling as she absorbed my words. Maybe I'd imagined it, but that was how it seemed to me.

"I will, Kitase-sensei," she said and flashed a pretty smile, her shoulder-length black hair swaying with the movement. Her eyes were full of joy, and I found her expression dazzling.

We were close in age, but the teacher and student relationship felt right to me.

"Welcome to the dream world," I told her. "And welcome to Toru, even though he's not here. I hope you enjoy learning many things that will enrich your lives."

It felt like some cheesy words of welcome at a school entrance ceremony. As someone who had spent nearly twenty years visiting the dream world, no one else was more qualified than me to say them.

But I wasn't sure how Kaoruko was feeling, though I saw her shudder. She hugged herself as if overcome with a wave of emotion, then let out a heated sigh. She moved her face up to mine, a bit too close for someone who was just a neighbor, and parted her lustrous lips.

"I'm looking forward to it. And...I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about it too much because I can hardly wait as is."

She must have been more excited about it than I'd imagined, seeing that a tear rolled down her rosy cheeks. Then, she quickly wiped it with a finger while surprising me, but her reaction wasn't negative.

Wridra patted her head comfortingly. She was finally ready to step into this new world in earnest. Perhaps she envisioned a future where her friends would welcome her with open arms and discuss what they would do for the day. I wanted her to enjoy the dream world fully and would do what I could to help.

The traffic died down before I knew it, and the drive became much smoother. We had only left about thirty minutes ago, and I was glad to see how close the ladies had gotten already.

I couldn't help but wonder why my words earlier seemed to have affected Kaoruko so profoundly. At that moment, I thought perhaps something I said had tugged at her heartstrings somehow and slowly pressed my foot down on the accelerator.

## §

I watched as a yellow leaf slowly fell to the ground. The cycle of seasons existed here like in any world, and there was a distinct air of melancholy as winter approached. Yet this was the way of nature and something other than what we humans could do. The changing of seasons was inevitable, and I had experienced the transition to winter many times already. It was part of the predetermined events that occurred repeatedly, like working, doing chores, or going to school when I was still a student. I should have been bored of it all by now.

The sight was definitely one I had seen countless times already. I had no reason to have it affect me at my age, or so I thought. Before I knew it, I had stopped walking among the myriad leaves dancing in the air around me. They gently fell into a pile on the ground beside a bench where a beautiful girl who looked like a fairy was sitting.

It was like a page straight out of a colorful picture book. She stared at a ginkgo tree, her feet glistening gold in the warm sunlight, her hair as white as cotton. If fairies did exist in this world and one could transform into human form for just one day, such a fantastic and picturesque view could be recreated.

Mariabelle might have been drawing looks from me and everyone passing by just by sitting on the bench covered in leaves because she was a half-fairy elf. It wouldn't have surprised me if she had told me if she'd been using magic. All she did was look at me with her amethyst eyes and soften her visage into a smile to snap me out of my trance and get my feet moving again.

She stared directly at me as I walked closer, and I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. Then my nerves settled down somewhat as I noticed the black cat sleeping on her lap. A ginkgo leaf was on its head when it awakened, and I couldn't help but chuckle. The creature looked far too cute for the familiar of the legendary Arkdragon.

"Look," said Marie. "I told Wridra I want to go for a walk with the two of us, so she sent a bodyguard."

"It looks just as sleepy as I do, but I couldn't ask for a better guard," I replied.

The familiar hissed, which made us both laugh.

Meanwhile, the cups I had bought earlier were filled with warm café lattes. I handed one to Marie, and her eyes shimmered brighter in the sunlight. There was an air of sophistication about her, as if she were a highborn lady. When she smiled so innocently, I had to take another deep breath to steady myself.

"Hm? What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," I said. "It's just that the sight of ginkgo trees here took my breath away."

"I know what you mean! The beautiful colors on the ground and in the sky

stunned me. I noticed this with the cherry blossoms. In Japan, people planted many trees in the same area, making for incredibly vivid views like these.”

Marie had taken my breath away, but I shut my mouth and reached out my hand instead. She immediately took it in her hand and continued to praise the ginkgo trees as she rose from the bench.

I nodded along as I helped her up, then looked at the trees that were adorably shaped like pointy hats. “Trees are so full of life. I’ve been to many places, and they’ve amazed me wherever I go.”

“They grow to such heights to hoard the blessing of sunlight. That’s why forests are so deep and dark, and they’re hardly ever as colorful as it is here.”

It was strange to listen to an elf girl complain about nature. Having lived in her village, I knew elves were relatable despite their stunningly beautiful appearance. They loved sweets, dressed up to make themselves look pretty, and often asked about human civilization when bored. Marie was especially curious in that sense. I found it relieving that they were just like normal people and could enjoy the same things we did.

“Moments like these truly give you a taste of autumn in Japan,” mused Marie. “In my village, migratory birds are the first signs of the change in seasons. They used to tell me they’d come fleeing because winter was approaching.”

“Come to think of it, I saw birds resting at your house often.”

“Yes, they must have needed to recharge after flying from far away. They had a ridiculous appetite. They would even stare longingly at my meals,” she said. “Oh, as for signs of autumn approaching, you could tell by fruits growing, blue caps, and Sicrasus flowers.”

“Hm? What’s a blue cap?” I asked.

“Oh, you’ve lived in our village and don’t know about blue caps? That’s a shame and kind of unbelievable, to be honest. You’ve really been missing out.”

Why was she looking down on me like that?

I tried to think back and couldn’t recall hearing of this “blue cap,” even though I had only spent just under a year in her village. And so I furrowed my brows

while digging deep into my memories, only to have Marie giggle and hug my arm.

“I’m kidding! It’s just what we call a bridal outfit. Everyone gathers with blue flowers and plants to make the color like a clear river. We didn’t have any ceremonies when you were around, but we use a blue cap in the autumn and white cap in the spring.”

“A marriage ceremony, huh? Well, I wasn’t around for that long, and I figure marriages aren’t too common for elves, considering they live so long,” I said.

“Yes, but they’re so much fun. The food tastes even better when we eat together under the blue sky. If there’s another ceremony...” Marie trailed off, then moved away from me for some reason. The sudden movement felt cold despite the warm weather.

“What’s wrong, Marie?” I asked.

Marie remained facing away from me and spoke up, her voice cracking slightly. “Nothing.” She had tilted the cup in her hand as she moved in a fluster, and mumbled, “Ouch,” as she spilled a bit of its steaming contents.

She stumbled.

“Forget it, it’s fine... Well, it’s not *not* fine. Anyway, this is so nice for a scenic walk. If there were a place like this in our neighborhood, I might walk there every day,” she added.

“Yeah, I thought it would be nice to see the leaves that have changed into autumn colors. I wanted to take us to Kyoto, but Toru just laughed when I asked him if we could stay in any good places.”

“Kyo-to?” asked Marie, blinking her big, pretty eyes. She had never been there before, so it was no wonder she didn’t know about it. On the other hand, I should’ve known that it would be impossible to book a room at such a popular place during this time of year.

“I guess you could consider this an alternative of sorts. Ginkgos are the symbol of Tokyo. Some universities, like this one, have planted a bunch of them. You don’t need to pay an entry fee to see them; it only takes half an hour to get here.”

“Well, ‘frugal’ is one of my favorite words. I always feel good about activities that don’t cost a fortune. It makes me feel less guilty when you buy me sweet drinks like this,” said Marie, smiling and letting her tongue playfully peek out of her mouth. Our little chat had helped me calm down, and I was happy that she’d moved closer to me.

The black cat trotted over to Marie’s feet, which made me smile. She squeezed my hand and spoke about whatever came to mind, and listening to her beautiful voice soothed my soul.

“You may not know this, but the spirits become very active around clusters of trees. On days with fine weather like this, they become so powerful they can affect human emotions. Do you remember when we went cherry blossom viewing in spring? Ah— Actually, you don’t need to think about that,” she said.

“Ah...” I emitted a noise and stopped in place. Memories of vibrant cherry blossoms in Aomori and Marie sitting on a bench returned to me. I had moved closer to her as if drawn in by a mysterious force, and then...

“I told you not to think about it,” a pouty voice said from beside me, and my face grew hot despite the chilly weather.

I couldn’t forget about that moment if I tried, not that I would ever want to. So, I pushed through the embarrassment and held Marie’s hand in my own.

“We should go again some time,” I said.

“Yes, we should.”

She had turned away when she replied, but judging by her tone, she was all for it.

I had lived most of my life with apathy. From my guess, most people did. Views that I saw once a year never moved me, and I only thought about the work I had on my plate. Thanks to her, everything around me seemed to glow these days.

The colorful autumn leaves captivated Marie, and her joy flowed into me, filling me with unbridled excitement. All the city’s rows of ginkgo trees were truly breathtaking. Seeing her smiling in the sunlight, I only wanted to keep walking along the beautiful golden path with her.

I noticed the two others who we were supposed to meet up with. We had mentioned wanting to walk earlier, so Wridra and Kaoruko kindly gave us some alone time together. They sat on another bench along the ginkgo trees and waved at us when they saw us approach.

Distinguished students from all over Japan attended the university here in Bunkyo Ward. Since it was a weekend, the areas open to the public were full of people, including families and young people.

It was my first time here, of course. Beyond the greenery was a giant building. There was an unusual air about it, likely because this university was one of Japan's most difficult to get into. If I had come here alone, my eyes probably would have been darting all over the place like some country bumpkin. But I had some otherworldly companions with me today, and they were simply amazed by the fine school building.

"That's a nice building. Befitting of a prestigious and historic university," I commented.

"Yes," agreed Marie. "Oh, do you remember the gate at the entrance? Wooden gates always look so nice. The roof tiles were a nice touch too. Wridra, don't you think our mansion could use a gate like that?"

"Indeed. It would be even better if we get surrounded by armed swordsmen," said Wridra.

I wasn't sure if she wanted to bolster the mansion's defenses or get attacked. Historical dramas were fiction, but Wridra could cut down enemy after enemy in real life. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure when they had started watching those shows, making me wonder what they did while I was at work. As an aside, Wridra was supposedly a fan of a chivalrous blind swordsman.

The rows of ginkgo trees were a magnificent sight. Leaves fell from them and piled up on the ground, filling most of the view with shades of gold. Everyone who walked this path to school daily must have felt pretty good.

The school buildings on either side of us had a touch of the Meiji-era aesthetic. They contributed to the fantastical air, and Marie couldn't get enough of it. Wridra and Marie wandered off, drawn to the scenery that was brilliant in a way that was different from the cherry blossoms. In the meantime,



their beauty shocked the surrounding people.

I heard the crunch of leaves under someone's shoes and noticed a woman standing beside me. So, I looked to my side to find a pair of black eyes looking back at me.

"Isn't this campus beautiful? This is where my husband and I used to go. We still walk here sometimes when we're in the area." said Kaoruko.

She wore a black-and-white checkered skirt with black tights underneath for a modern look. With the ginkgo leaf in her hair and subtle lipstick color, she fit in quite well with the view here.

Then she bowed slightly and said, "Thank you for earlier. It made me so happy when you all welcomed me."

Maybe she was feeling shy, staring at her fingers as she spoke. She blinked a few times, and her eyes softened into a smile.

"I guess I'd given up. I didn't even realize it until earlier," continued Kaoruko.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She pointed her finger, and I followed it to notice Marie and Wridra walking farther away. The gesture seemed to mean we'd lose them if we didn't follow. We started walking toward the others, and her gaze slowly moved from me to the ginkgo trees.

"We left our hometown, got married, started working, and things calmed down a bit. I thought life would stay how it was for the coming decades," she said softly, and I nodded. I had felt the same way working as an office worker. I wanted to live in peace, causing as little trouble as possible. "The thought of going out and having fun with friends fills me with so much excitement, I can hardly wait. For so long, I'd been separated from my close friends back in Hokkaido."

I finally understood where she was coming from. That must have been why she felt so moved earlier in the car. She had shed tears because she was truly happy about meeting new friends and discovering a new world.

Kaoruko smiled to hide her embarrassment and said, "I'm looking forward to

you teaching me the ancient language, sensei.”

“Are you sure about this? I may look sleepy, but I’m a strict teacher. Will you be able to keep up?” I asked jokingly.

“Of course! I’m the type who can’t put a book down once I start reading, so I’ll probably use you as a dictionary. I just hope *you* can keep with me.” she said with a big smile.

I gestured for her to go right ahead. I didn’t mind if she considered me a cheap and convenient dictionary. Men loved to be used by women, after all. To be honest, I was happy about this arrangement. We had known each other for quite some time, but I felt like we were finally becoming friends.

I looked up and noticed the golden sunlight shining down on me.

“This is some university. It does kind of smell a bit, but I guess that’s part of the charm,” I said.

“Ha ha, you’ll have to bear with that. We should eat some of the trees’ nuts and forget about it,” suggested Kaoruko, raising her pointer finger.

She seemed a lot calmer than in the car, perhaps because she was back in familiar territory. Come to think of it, this was the first time I had walked with her alone. I’d never imagined I would be walking here with a neighbor like this, and it was strange how things worked out sometimes.

The other two seemed to have finished their walk. Marie jogged over, then jumped into my arms without slowing down. I asked her what was up, and she raised both hands toward my face. On her gloved hands seemed to be several seeds or nuts. Something lustrous peeked out from their cracked shells.

“Look, we found a bunch of ginkgo nuts,” said Marie.

“You don’t mind the smell?” I asked. “I remember you’ve eaten them before, and you liked them.”

“Yes, so the smell doesn’t bother me. It does stink, though.”

Based on her huge smile, it was hard to tell if she really thought it smelled. I couldn’t help but smile too, and Kaoruko followed suit.

Beyond the rows of ginkgo trees were fine school buildings that I would

describe as Gothic. Under the warm sunlight, they had a somewhat solemn atmosphere.

## §

The man standing before me kind of reminded me of Kaoruko, with his clean clothes, understated glasses, and relaxed atmosphere. He handed me four ID cards for our group, and I was relieved to find he didn't stare at Marie and Wridra as most people did. It wasn't that they didn't stand out, but Marie was somewhat conscious about drawing too much attention.

"I'd be happy to show you all around as your husband requested," he told Kaoruko. "But first, allow me to say congratulations on getting married."

"Thank you, Hazuki. I'm sorry to trouble you with all this, but I thought it would be a good opportunity to catch up. I'd get to see you working in the university library too."

"No problem at all. It's been a while, but are you still a bookworm like before?"

This Hazuki person already seemed acquainted with Kaoruko. Judging by how she casually touched his arm as they talked, they were quite close. He initially gave off a serious and cold impression, although his expression had softened into a smile in front of her.

"Well then, allow me to show you around. The library is open to the public by appointment on weekdays, but it's mostly reserved for students on the weekends. I found out you're in a hurry, so I'll guide you today."

We bowed and followed him.

Our guide led us through the campus, and a large building appeared where the rows of trees ended. Its Gothic design and the imposing appearance of the masonry were quite eye-catching. The buildings surrounding us were all of Western design, so I felt like we had wandered into a fantasy world.

I turned around, and Marie's eyes were wide as I had expected. Since she had expected this to be an ordinary trip to the library, it was no wonder the impressive building had caught her off guard.

We climbed the stairs at the entrance to find an arching bridge adorned with greenery. Marie had once told me that tightly locked doors protected libraries in her mind. The difference between expectation and reality must have been jarring.

“Didn’t expect the library to look like this, did you?” I asked.

“This place is so big! Wait, this is the library? It’s as big as the Sorcerer’s Guild!”

“Yeah, this place is huge. I wonder if the whole thing is filled to the brim with books.” I said.

Marie excitedly hugged my arms. She must have been amped because I could feel her weight as she squeezed. She beckoned over Wridra, who chuckled dryly and offered her arm to the elf. Marie then walked between Wridra and me as if we were a family. I decided to let her do what she wanted and enjoy our day off.

On Marie’s other side, eyes like black crystals met mine. They burned with curiosity about foreign architecture, just like those of the elf.

“This is an excellent building. I can get a sense of its long history simply by looking at it, and the masonry gives off a different flavor from wood,” said Wridra.

“You’re thinking about your next construction project, right?” asked Marie.

“Hah, hah, this certainly takes me back. There were countless treasuries of knowledge in the old days. The raid on the third floor starts tomorrow; perhaps I will renovate it to this aesthetic.”

*Hm?* I thought. Maybe I had misheard her, but the moment passed as Marie pulled me forward by my arm.

We walked under the arch and approached the doors. Several doors, seemingly made of heavy brass, stood before us. The building exuded an antique feel uncommon in Japan, yet it befitted a historic university.

Complete silence greeted us as we stepped into the building. The heavy stone absorbed the sound, creating a distinctly unusual atmosphere. A red carpet

adorned the stairs up ahead, inviting us deeper inside.

Marie turned to me and couldn't contain her laughter. Her smile positively glowed as she said, "How wonderful! Come on, let's go upstairs!"

She hugged my arm closer, and I could almost feel her heart pounding through my arm. The excitement for the unknown and her love for books were calling to her, and she could hardly contain herself.

The librarian led us farther, slowly opening the door. Then, Mariabelle's eyes lit up even more as she saw what awaited us in the room. Even I couldn't help but let out a "Whoa." I couldn't believe this place was in Japan.

The subdued wooden grain was reminiscent of the Meiji era, and the modern chandelier emphasized the room's elegance. It seemed to be some sort of reading room. There was a long, aged table and chairs, and several students sat there. The glass window nearly stretched to the ceiling, providing a sense of openness. This university facility was the most top-notch in the nation, and the atmosphere was unlike any ordinary library.

Still clinging onto my arm, Marie looked at me and said, "Wow! So this is a library for grown-ups!"

"Such a serene place," remarked Wridra. "It is tasteful and well lit by sunlight. I imagine playing an anime movie would be quite fun!"

I had to ignore that suggestion for now. Meanwhile, Marie spoke to me hushfully but couldn't hide her excitement.

Before, I had heard that the library Marie frequented in the other world was a dark place underground. It was a conglomeration of magic and knowledge and heavily guarded so its secrets would never leak to outsiders. Thus, I wasn't amazed they didn't have a single window there.

Suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around, and the librarian from earlier said, "This way." He pointed outside.

We left the room as directed, and the door closed quietly behind us.

"That was the reading room," he explained. "It's usually more empty on the weekends, but there are a lot of students here who are preparing to graduate

or go on to higher education. I will now help you find books you'd be interested in, but please refrain from talking among yourselves. What sort of book are you all looking for?"

Marie thought about it for a while, then gently smiled and said, "I'm looking for educational books on farming. I'd like to learn about growing crops in a mild climate like Tokyo, from rice and vegetables to fruits. So, Wridra..."

Then Wridra smiled and shook her head as if to say today was all about Marie. The Arkdragon hugged her from behind like an older sister, saying, "Hah, hah, do as you wish and do not mind me. I will find a book to read on my own. In fact, I am interested in this historic building more than anything."

"Oh, are you sure? I can choose whatever book I want?" inquired Marie.

I nodded in agreement. After all, I had brought them here for their sake and wanted them to have a good time more than anything. I wondered what was up with Wridra, though. She had always wanted to go somewhere with lots of books. Not once had she mentioned what books she wanted to read since we'd gotten here. I felt something was going on.

Kaoruko also nodded to Marie's question, flashing a smile like a beautiful blooming flower. This made me realize how well the flower-embroidered cardigan suited her.

"Oh, I'm getting excited," said Marie, then wrapped her arms around me. "Come on, let's find a book before someone takes the sunlit seats."

I had to admit that I loved how full of life this elf girl was. Although I wanted to ensure she got the best window seat available, the seats were reservation-based. There was no need to rush.

Still, I let her push my back as we headed toward the book corner.

It didn't take long before Marie had settled into being a bookworm. One could hear the soft turning of pages near the warm, sunlit seats by the window. Our eyes met, and Marie whispered, "I'm so glad I learned how to read too." She was humble about her reading ability but went through the pages so fast that one might wonder if she was actually reading. Yet, Marie affirmed she was

still absorbing the text at that speed. It made me think how valuable skills like Memorization were, even in this world.

Kaoruko was also reading a book in a nearby seat and enjoying the serenity. Strangely, Wridra was nowhere in sight. I had expected her to be reading next to Marie.

I looked around for her, then felt Marie tug on my sleeve. She murmured, "Let me know what kind of book Wridra is reading."

There was something maternal about her sunlit smile. I blinked, taken aback by the motherly air about her that had seemingly come out of nowhere. She waved goodbye with her fingers, and I quietly rose from my seat to carry out the mission she had assigned me.

I walked around the university library alone, noting how the floor and stairs made of marble and the sculptures adorning the walls set this place apart from normal libraries. The spacious and relaxing atmosphere had a distinct sense of history, and it was interesting to note the smell of books hanging in the air. I couldn't help but appreciate the solemn, serene atmosphere.

This was starting to get fun.

I rarely walked around alone except on my commute to work. There was so much here that made me feel adventurous, and it was refreshing to explore this place by myself freely.

Lamps illuminated the dim areas, creating an ambience of a fantasy world. I found a lone table sitting next to a window with its curtain closed, which I found strangely picturesque. Books were piled upon it, and the empty chair nearby seemed quite comfortable.

"I'll bet it would be nice to relax here," I said.

There was no one around to hear it, or so I thought. I sensed movement and noticed what seemed to be wavering long, black hair. After I blinked, a pair of large, narrow eyes stared back at me.

A figure held a finger up to their lips and motioned me over. I approached, confused, then a slender arm reached out and grabbed me.

“Wridra? Were you here the whole time?” I asked.

“Hah, hah, it is quite amusing when your eyes widen with surprise,” she said, laughing out loud. Her tongue showed slightly between her rouged lips.

It was a bit dark in the room, and I could see specks of dust dancing near the window. The laced black dress looked even better on Wridra with the dark interior as a backdrop. Her outfit and the general impression she gave off had completely changed from before. Still, it wasn’t too surprising when I considered that she was a great Arkdragon. Surprisingly, I could almost sense magic emanating from her, even here in Japan.

“Wait, have you been using a concealment skill?” I asked.

“Hm, I cannot recall. You are always half asleep, so perhaps you didn’t notice,” commented Wridra.





Before I knew it, Wridra had made me take a seat. I then noticed a cup of steaming tea on the table and narrowed my eyes at her. Did the university's rules mean nothing to her?

Wridra smiled, then returned her attention toward the book on the table.

She behaved as usual, but because of a strange change in the environment, she almost seemed different. Apparently, she had the power to make me forget that we were in Japan.

I wondered what kind of book she was reading and looked to find several books on mathematics featuring complex symbols. The table displayed a variety of academic books, including one with *Structural Mechanics* on the spine, war-related history books, and engineering books.

"Whoa, you're reading all of these?" I asked. "Don't tell me you're trying to learn them all at once."

"Nn-hm," she said vaguely.

I couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a yes or no, but I took that to mean she wouldn't tell me. Instead, I followed Wridra's gaze to figure out what she was reading by the movement of her eyes.

Her obsidian eyes moved from the top right to the bottom left. Before she even turned the page, her finger pointed toward another book. She flipped through that new book, found whatever she sought, and reached for another one. She was fast. But her movements were regular, and I could tell she was absorbing information at an alarming pace. Having known her for some time, I wasn't shocked to learn she had such capabilities.

I gave up trying to decipher what she was doing and decided to hang out with her. Then I picked up an old book titled *World History Changed by Japan*.

We spent some time turning pages in silence until she finally said to me in a hushed tone, "I did not expect you to come here alone."

I stared at her, unsure if she was talking to me at first. She was still engrossed in her books, and I might have imagined there was something different about her than usual. I paused, not wanting to interrupt whatever she was doing, and

waited for her to continue talking.

“I will be leaving the party tomorrow. However, I will rejoin you once I finish attending to business,” said Wridra.

“Is this about your husband?” I asked.

Wridra’s gaze finally met mine. She had sharp, well-defined eyes, like those of a cat, and there was a hint of surprise in her expression. Her faint smile faded, and she slowly closed her book.

“Indeed,” she replied. “I must admit, I have been fretting about dealing with him. How unlike me.”

“It’s understandable. I’m sure he’s important to you, and it is a big deal—”

But I swallowed my words as I noticed the hint of danger in her gaze, and in the darkness, I couldn’t help but feel a bit of fear. Her lustrous black hair wavered as she seemed to snap out of it, then scoffed.

“That one is nothing like that. Our relationship differs completely from what you two have. He held me down by force, driven by his instinct to breed.”

She curled her lips as the dark look in her eyes remained, an intensity of a smoldering dragon about her. I had never seen her like this before. If Marie had been here, perhaps she wouldn’t have let herself show such a fearsome expression.

“Is he...stronger than you?” I asked.

“You may not think it possible, but he was. I have since birthed whelps and granted them my dragon cores. I would estimate that he is twice as strong in terms of raw power. Logically speaking, I would stand no chance. However...”

A warmth traveled in my hand as I looked down to find Wridra’s gloved hand holding it. Her body temperature was somewhat high, and I could feel heat spreading through the back of my hand. The sensation distracted me momentarily; then I noticed her brows furrowed.

“I have been harboring a boiling rage within me and often fantasize about ripping him to shreds with my teeth. However, I have begun to see things differently. If I had extended my hand back then, we could have ended up like

you two. It pains me to think about,” she said.

Hearing her admit that it pained her in that uneasy tone made me realize she was speaking as a woman, not the great Arkdragon. She stood before branching paths, trying to find the correct answer.

“What do you want to do, Wridra?” I asked.

“I do not know. Plus, I understand nothing about him. I have not seen him, and he has not seen me, so I am at a loss.”

I nodded several times. There was something important I needed to say to her, something that would help her decide which path to take and guide her to a better outcome.

My mind returned to when I had dueled the hero candidate Zarish. Back then, she had gently warned me not to kill him while he was unconscious. Had it not been for her, I likely would have done something I’d have regretted to this day. I couldn’t emphasize enough how important that decision was for me. She knew what would happen and led me to the right path. It was time for me to repay the favor.

“Wridra, you’re a wonderful woman who everyone around loves. The best thing about you is that the more I talk to you, the more I realize how great you are. I just want you to know I think you’re amazing,” I said.

The obsidian eyes of Wridra held my gaze. She seemed to search for the meaning behind my words, but my message was simple and had nothing for her to figure out.

“You should talk to him,” I continued. “It wouldn’t take three days before he falls for you. No matter how strong an opponent may be, they are no longer an enemy once you get them on your side. If I’m wrong, I wouldn’t mind giving the cat version of yourself my favorite pillow.”

“No longer an enemy...” she repeated.

She didn’t recognize one thing that I—or rather, anyone other than her—did: her charm. Food and entertainment were her weaknesses, and it always made me happy seeing her so expressive whenever she enjoyed them. But I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud.

“I’m not sure how I should explain this feeling. I have a feeling you’d get upset if I said it’s cute, but I wouldn’t say it’s cool either... Oh, I know, I think ‘precious’ is the closest way to describe it,” I said.

It took a bit of searching, but I had found just the right word to describe her charm. I looked at her proudly and found her obsidian eyes glimmering in the sunlight that shone through the window. Her cheeks had a rosy tint, and her slightly ajar lips quivered. I wondered what sorts of emotions she was going through.

Suddenly, I felt her pinch the back of my hand.

“Yeow! Ow, ow! You’re gonna rip my skin off!” I yelled. As my face contorted in pain, Wridra’s expression lightened into a smile. She must have been some sadist because the melancholy from earlier had vanished without a trace.

“You fool. You buffoon. You sleepy-faced delinquent office worker who goes home immediately at the end of the work day,” she said.

“Wait, are you insulting me?” I asked.

“Hmph, I doubt any insult I hurl at you will get through your thick skull. In any case, you propose an interesting idea. When I picture him in the palm of my hand, my worries vanish as if awakening from a dream. It feels like finishing a mystery novel. Your sharp reasoning has cut the problem down in one fell swoop.”

A pleasant aroma filled the air as a cup of tea appeared before me like magic. Maybe this was her way of thanking me.

“Trying to make me your accomplice?” I asked, chuckling.

“I know you. You may look like a straight arrow, but you are the type to plot in secret, waiting for the opportunity to turn the tables. I must say, I do not hate rascals like you.”

She thought too highly of me. At work, people just saw me as an ordinary, harmless guy. But I completed my work quickly so I could go home immediately when business hours were over, which wasn’t worthy of praise.

We suddenly burst into laughter, though we kept it stifled since we were in a

library. I listened to Wridra's soft chuckles as I sipped from the fragrant tea. While I was careful not to spill any on the books, I wasn't proud of breaking the rules. Once Wridra's laughter settled down, she pointed a finger at a book.

"First, I must make sure he listens. With our difference in power, it would only be fair to even the playing field with some underhanded tactics," said Wridra, smiling.

"Oh?" I said, noticing the rather uncouth thing she was pointing at. It was a book about large-caliber rifles.

I wondered what our Arkdragon was up to, yet she narrowed her eyes in an alluring smile as if to say I would have to wait and find out.

Repairing the Ichijos' relationship a little while back was quite an undertaking. Still, a quarrel between two legendary dragons was going to be on a whole different level. It was a dragon we were talking about, so I assumed he wasn't going to die just from getting shot a few times. And so, I enjoyed the fragrance of the tea as I took another sip.

## §

Wridra took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out her arm. Her hand brushed up against a rough, textured surface. It was like a rock or perhaps metal, although it moved as if it were breathing.

The air was cold against her skin, and no one had visited the cave she was in for a long time. All alone in that place, she slowly pursed her lips.

"This may fundamentally change the way I am as an Arkdragon," said the dragon who had lived through the Age of Darkness, Age of Night, and Age of Man. Her voice carried a hint of regret mixed with anticipation and joy at opening a new door.

When she opened her eyes, a dragon covered in scales the color of night with her likeness appeared. It was a strong, majestic being beyond human comprehension, with clear, unclouded eyes.

She thought its eyes had changed as she stroked the dragon's scales. Before, she would have avoided such reckless battles. But her mind had continuously worked on finding a way to win. She smiled, realizing she had guided the boy

into battle in the past, so it would be hypocritical of her to flee now.

Her opponent was unfathomably powerful. The Prominence Dragon, the Arkdragon's antagonistic entity, had absolutely dominated her in their last encounter. Strangely, the sheer fury that had been boiling within her like magma all this time had vanished without a trace.

Energy enshrouded Wridra like a quietly burning flame. Her dress-shaped armor thickened, and her dragon horn and tail strengthened. She had transferred her dragon cores, the source of her power, back into her body. After absorbing three of them, it became clear what she had meant by changing the way she was as an Arkdragon. She had decided not to fight as an Arkdragon but in her draconian form. This was her first time attempting such a thing, and she could not tell how it would turn out.

While Wridra hummed a tune, she created something unknown to this world. With her skill, Creation, complex mechanisms and suspensions were being assembled and attached to a cylindrical object. She made it based on the documentation she had read, which led to differences in the details. Additionally, she modified some parts to accommodate demon matter as an energy source.

The objects burst apart with a loud cracking noise, then reassembled at different angles.

After she put it together, she took it apart again to make improvements. Several cycles of disassembly and reassembly occurred, and various parts formed geometric shapes behind the laughing dragon.

There was a sense of motherliness about her as she said, "Those kids... I am about to face such a formidable opponent, and they ask me when I will return. Do they believe I am going on a grocery run or something?"

The barrel attached to the rest of the gun with a heavy click, and she loaded a bullet brimming with demon matter sealed within it into the chamber. Wridra was having fun with the process, finding it satisfying to go through multiple revisions to create something new.

She took a deep breath and exhaled as she prepared to weave the finest of magic. Moreover, she had a duty to enforce their positions as a neutral party.

A deep silence fell upon the Arkdragon's den.

Though a serious and resolute expression would have been appropriate, Wridra was far too happy for stoicism. She continued creating weapons other than the rifle she had already made, and her den soon looked like a storehouse for heavy weaponry.

The weapons, products of research and engineering, were works of art in her eyes, and she sighed ecstatically.

"Ahh... I cannot wait. Soon, I will pursue new heights of magic to my heart's content. To think the day would come when I would understand how Kitase felt," she said, chuckling.

Although she would soon be fighting a grand and decisive battle, she seemed to be having fun.



## Episode 8: My Darling

As usual, steam rose from the open-air bath in the dim light of dawn. In the meantime, a Lizardman in charge of managing the water quality walked on the other side of the fence. There were no active volcanoes, so the water came from heated mineral springs. The Lizardman used a Magic Tool to regulate the water temperature to ensure the facilities, including the irrigation channel, were kept clean. He was a nocturnal creature and worked through the night without fatigue.

The Lizardman stopped in his tracks. He heard high-pitched laughter in the distance and looked up at the fence toward the source of the sound. Elves, humans, and even demonkin enjoyed the hot springs he had poured his heart and soul into maintaining. It was a strange feeling, but he couldn't stop smiling.

He nodded with satisfaction and went back to work.

Suddenly he noticed a clamor from across the lake. He looked over to find some men being blown away and disappearing into the horizon. Supposedly, human men dreamed of peeping on bathing women, which he didn't understand at all.

He muttered, complaining about how noisy the humans were so early in the morning, then walked away to do some sweeping.

§

"Hmm," I said, furrowing my brows.

I frowned at the recipe for the "Healthy Breakfast Set" on the wall, but it wasn't that I disliked cooking. In fact, I liked it. What I didn't like was that I wasn't even at my company, and I had to work.

Wridra had mentioned nothing about a salary, so it was possible that she intended for me to work for free. But I had planned on making breakfast anyway, and it would be cheaper for me to use the ingredients here. However, I had to buy seasonings from the grocery store because they weren't available

here, so it wasn't as if I was paying nothing out of my pocket. If they scaled up their operations, it wouldn't take long before I would be in the red.

I was stirring some eggs with chopsticks and considering such things when Eve poked her head into the kitchen.

"Hey-yo, you're up early. Can I get a breakfast set too?" exclaimed Eve.

"Good morning, Eve. I had to get up early so I wouldn't be late for the raid again today. More importantly, who was in charge of breakfast this morning?" I asked pointedly.

Eve put her hands together apologetically and pleaded, acknowledging that she had skipped out on her duty. The suntanned dark elf's tied-up blonde hair wavered with the movement, obscuring part of her face. She wasn't in her maid outfit today but was wearing what pretty much looked like underwear instead. Perhaps it was so she could wear her armor over it at any time.

I considered whether to point that out or scold her for not showing up to make breakfast, but I asked something else instead.

"What would you like for your side order, Miss Eve?"

"It'd be great if you had more of that apple juice you gave me before. That would really start my day off right," she said.

It was going to be a busy day with the raid, and I needed Eve to put in a lot of work, so I decided to oblige her. I squeezed out the juices from an apple, and just as I was mixing it with some fresh water, someone appeared from the back. It was an old man in a yukata who sleepily picked up a newspaper from a shelf.

Wridra had made the newspapers as a hobby, and they featured general updates on the war. Some details were kept confidential to avoid suspicion, but it included plenty of helpful information, such as the state of Arilai and rumors among its citizens. Evidently, she only offered it to guests staying in one of the rooms.

Gaston sat at one of the side tables with a thud and touched Eve's butt as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I heard a scream, but I was just a chef minding my business. After getting yelled at for a while, the old man yawned sleepily.

“I don’t give a damn about that ‘self-restraint’ stuff. That aside, I don’t think I can sleep without those tatami things from now on. My back hasn’t felt better. Hey, kid, give me one of those things to take home,” he said.

“Un-freaking-believable!” Eve fumed. “Not only has this asshole not apologized, but he has the audacity to ask for breakfast? I can’t with this guy!”

She insulted him and told him he didn’t deserve any food, but Gaston read his newspaper, seemingly undisturbed. I handed Eve her apple juice, which finally calmed her down.

As I flipped over a thick omelet in a pan, Gaston met my eyes with a sharp glare and said, “There’s tension in the air. My senses tell me Gedovar’s army will be here soon. Yet, Aja and Hakam want to split up our forces to continue the labyrinth raid. Now, of all times, when the enemy could be here any minute. Don’t you think something’s weird about this?”

“Well, the Gedovar army is after the monster-controlling device in the labyrinth, right? Some of us aren’t actually from Arilai, so I think splitting up is a good idea,” I said.

“None of it will matter if we all die. We should take down the enemy first, yet here we are. From where I sit, it seems like they’re just buying time until you lot finish the raid. That must be why Hakam has been so hush-hush about everything. It makes sense why they’ve been sending all the weak soldiers into battle as sacrificial pawns,” he continued.

*So that was what was going on*, I thought as I flipped over an egg. Then I fixed the presentation and placed it on a wooden plate with some bacon and stir-fried vegetables. It was nice how focusing on the cooking helped me avoid Gaston’s intense gaze.

The colorful meal of white rice with some scorched bits, miso soup, pickled vegetables, and thick omelets was mouthwatering. The bacon grease might be too heavy for the old man, so I added extra stir-fried vegetables.

Gaston’s eyes gravitated toward the plate. “Anyway, we can talk about this later. What was that thing again? That square, white thing. That was good. Make more of that stuff, yeah?”

“I liked it too,” Eve blurted out. “It tasted weird at first, but I crave it sometimes.”

They must have meant tofu. I had been giving them new ingredients from time to time so I could find out what suited their palates. Lately, more and more of them had begun to prefer light, healthy food for breakfast. Eating vegetables was quietly turning into a trend, which was good. The people here had a somewhat poor sense of taste, and I had been making dishes lighter in flavor over time to reset their palates. Chewy vegetables helped with that while allowing people to wake up in the morning. It was working because they were enjoying tofu despite it being pretty much flavorless.

“I dunno why, but my body has been feeling great lately. Maybe it’s a message that I’ll finally find a place to die here,” said Gaston.

“They say you get more energetic right before you die,” added Eve. “Are you gonna give me your inheritance when you die?”

“Hell no, not you. Maybe I’ll split it up among everyone else. Aah, I have so much money that it’ll be a pain to count it out. Maybe I’ll just give it back to Arilai,” he replied.

“What?! Hey, you at least owe me for touching my butt!”

It was hard to tell if they were messing around or if they hated each other. Either way, they seemed to like the same kinds of food, and my healthy meals were positively affecting them. Seeing how I controlled their well-being made my work feel worthwhile. I wanted them to understand that military rations were a thing of the past. The way I did stuff was probably why Wridra found me so convenient.

The dark elf and old man sang praises for the food as they drank the miso soup until Doula approached with her disheveled yukata and unkempt red hair. She fumbled around the shelf for a newspaper with a sullen expression, then her mood worsened when she found there were none left. I remembered that Wridra had gone out in the morning and told me she had only made a few of them because she was busy.

Doula looked around and noticed a newspaper at Gaston’s table. She let out a sigh and walked toward us.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said, then turned to me. “Sleepyhead—Actually, I look sleepier than you today, so I can’t really call you that. One Healthy Breakfast Set, please. With tofu, if you have any.”

It surprised me how popular tofu was.

I walked over to the table where Doula played tug-of-war with Gaston for the newspaper. Once there, I gave them some apple juice as a token of apology for being out of tofu.

“You seem to like light flavors,” I told Doula. “I’ve been worried about you staying up late with war councils all of the time, so I’d like to know your food preferences.”

“Thanks for the concern,” she replied. “Hmm, your dishes tend to be lightly seasoned. But I like how they usually have a sweet aftertaste or depth. Can you teach me how to cook some time?”

Doula ran a hand through her red hair, and an accessory on her ring finger glinted as it caught the light. She would soon marry Zera, which might have been why she looked so composed. I told her I would be happy to teach her, and she flashed a feminine smile that was rare to see on her.

The mood changed immediately as the old man, who had given up on the newspaper, spoke up again, “Hey, why didn’t Zera wake up with you, anyway? You two are gettin’ married, right? Get in a quarrel already?”

“What a stupid question. Only children get into fights. We’re just staying in separate rooms, that’s all,” replied Doula.

“Huh? What, you need to be in different rooms because you’d be busy making babies all night otherwise?” asked Gaston.

I could almost hear a *poof* as Doula turned bright red, her mouth flapping although no words came out. She could neither deny nor confirm the question and suddenly punched Gaston right in the face. The old man fell out of his chair and couldn’t get up, though he struggled from laughing too much rather than from the damage.

“Ah ha ha ha! It’s too early for this, Doula! My sides! You’re killin’ me! Ha ha ha ha ha!” howled Gaston.

“Y-You! You have zero consideration for others! Eve, why are you laughing too?!” retorted Doula.

“Pff, *that’s* why you two got separate rooms?! Ow, my sides! Doula, the hellish commander feared by everyone... I can picture the great Holy Knight trying to hold in the urge to make babies... Aha ha ha!”

What a mess. It was supposed to be a refreshing morning with a nice breakfast, but the boisterous laughter from the dark elf and old man filled the air. As I placed a breakfast plate beside Doula, I wondered if it would be better for me to eat and bathe in Japan. Marie and Kaoruko would come out of the open-air bath soon, so I would discuss it with them.

After a long silence, all Doula could manage was to shout, “Jerks!”

## §

Shirley walked along a path with a basket in her arms. She wasn’t in her ghostly form but had physically manifested herself so others could see her.

Dawn was slowly showing, and there was a chill air in the oasis. The sand crunching beneath her feet wasn’t from the ancient labyrinth but created by nature. This place was just outside the labyrinth and used as a campground for a large-scale raid team. While the color of the sky resembled Shirley’s hair, it seemed like it could melt away into nothingness.

The woman walking in front of Shirley, carrying a basket on her shoulder and a bucket in the opposite hand, turned around. While the twilight-haired woman was slender and more petite in frame than the others near them, she hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“You’re a lot stronger than you seem. I didn’t think you could carry such heavy objects for so long,” said Puseri, the master of Team Diamond. Shirley recalled first meeting her in the manor of black roses. It was strange to think back to that night of terror when they were now working together under the same roof.

Then someone who couldn’t speak on Shirley’s behalf spoke from behind her. “If you ask me, Puseri’s the weird one for being able to carry that huge container full of soup. We passed through the entire first floor, and she didn’t

even sweat.”

“You’re right about that. She’s a gorilla with a lady’s face. If you think about it that way, it all makes sense. Remember how she sent a whole horde of ogres flying?”

“What?!” Puseri growled. The two speakers, dressed in servant outfits, were her friends and team members. They had known each other for a long time and were inseparable.

Shirley had once tried to kill them all, and they had once gathered to put an end to her. Yet, by some strange twist of fate, they were now carrying food together. She valued life and death equally as the being who governed their cycle. However, she realized that there was also value in the present.

It was a strange feeling since there was so much she didn’t yet understand. Shirley laughed at the sight of Puseri spitting angrily at her friends.

Lost in her thoughts, Shirley and the group stepped into the rocky mountains that surrounded the ruins. They had taken one of the countless byways to get through. When they exited the other side, they found numerous soldiers waiting there, with blankets that helped them get through the desert night.

A man who had been looking into the distance through a scope noticed the group’s footsteps and turned around.

“Ah, breakfast is here! Thank goodness, it was starting to get chilly.”

“Wake up, boys! These beautiful ladies brought us some homemade cooking!”

About half of them rose, and the others would surely awaken soon. There were only about two hundred, not nearly enough to face the Gedovar forces. With the presence of Hakam and Aja, who were approaching the women, it would be a completely different story.

“A warm meal. What a sight for sore eyes. I can’t make do with military rations anymore. Maybe I’ll bury them in the sand once they grow mold,” Hakam said.

“Hakam, you’re the one who said extravagance is the enemy. Rations are

good enough for a big brute like you,” responded Aja.

The bronze-skinned warrior Hakam had fought in several battles and emerged victorious in just as many. Although his upbringing as a commoner made it difficult for him to rise through the ranks, he was a man of wits, resourcefulness, and explosive fighting prowess.

Aja, the gray-haired man beside him, was a magic user known within Arilai as an oddball. He was a master of Magic Tools and taught Marie how to use Auto Mapping. There were rumors that the old man was looking forward to the arrival of the Gedovar army. Supposedly, he had been saying this would be a good opportunity for him to demonstrate some large-scale magic, which was quite disturbing—for the enemy, that was.

They opened the lids of the food containers to find white rice that had been compressed by hand, and the seaweed aroma wafted into the air. The food was so-called onigiri, or rice balls, which were easier on the palate due to the kelp mixed into it. The girls didn’t have nearly enough to feed every soldier, but others would be bringing more food later.

After Puseri observed her surroundings, she asked, “So, do we have sufficient defenses? I’ve heard the enemy will be upon us soon.”

“They’re not perfect, but they should be good enough,” answered Aja. “Thanks to your friend’s Premonition, we’ll at least avoid the worst-case scenario.”

“Premonition” was an ability that belonged to Puseri’s nomadic friend, Hakua. She was a fortune teller by trade and adept at predicting the future. But it was difficult for her to read the entire outcome of the war due to it having so many branching possibilities. There was no such thing as absolutes in this world, and the Gedovar army could massacre every last one of them.

Dawn had fully arrived as sand danced in the wind along the horizon. The massive Gedovar army was kicking up dust, charging at a much larger scale than expected.

The decisive battle for life or death was finally about to begin. Just then, the desert sky cleared up beautifully, as if to spite those who would soon meet their end.



Wridra was flying across the blue sky, her wings filled with Spirit Power. Every bit of wind she gained powered her flight, and the wind pressure didn't bother her due to her spirit mastery. Yet there was a disgruntled look on her face, perhaps because she wasn't gaining enough speed to be satisfied.

She put a hand over her eyes to block the sun and looked into the distance with her dragon's sight only to stop soon after. Her opponent would be there without doubt, so there was no point in using her ability to alert him. Thus, she decided to follow her draconian intuition to fly so she wouldn't need to activate her skill to reach her destination.

"Hmm, I cannot gain enough speed. While it's expected in this humanoid form, being slower than my opponent would put me at quite a disadvantage. I must come up with a work-around."

A high-pitched noise surrounded her as she increased the power output of her black wings. Yet her flight speed was inferior to her original Arkdragon form, as humanoid bodies weren't designed for flying. She already had reduced energy due to granting her dragon cores to her children as it was. If she hoped to win this battle, she would need to find a way to cover her deficiencies.

She didn't have her newly created weapon, the Magigun, on hand. The Prominence Dragon was aiding the Gedovar army, so the Arkdragon Wridra would try to set him on the correct path of neutrality. Since she would try to talk to him first, she did not need to show her hand quite yet.

Wridra figured he wouldn't vanish immediately, but she wasn't sure. As soon as he had revealed himself aiding Gedovar, he had likely been on the lookout for Wridra because she was adamant about dragons staying neutral in human affairs.

Her opponent might decide to strike first. Considering this, Wridra equipped herself with all of the defensive skills she could. This skill, Conversion, was one of Wridra's greatest strengths. It allowed her to adapt to any situation by transferring her plethora of skills into her dragon core; she had learned Japanese a long time ago by using this method.

Fortunately, she knew her opponent's attack methods from their previous

encounter. She raised a finger, and a silver light glowed at its tip.

“Conversion—set resistances for Instant Death, Frenzy, and Mental Assault. Hmm, and I suppose I will also prepare resistances for Dragon Core Breaker. It did trouble me during the ancient war,” she said.

Even though Wridra set up other skills to help her in various scenarios, she wasn't sure they would be enough. In her remaining skill slots, she added Unhindered to counter any teleportation-blocking skills and Shadow Gate, her favorite teleportation skill.

“Ah, I nearly forgot. I must add Inconspicuous to prevent him from knowing where I will teleport. Hmph, fighting ancient ones requires far too much preparation.”

Another issue she had to address was the slow flight speed in her current form. Once they began, there wouldn't be any time for her to address it. Changing the shape of her wings would only do so much, and a ten to twenty percent improvement would be meaningless. She would have to overhaul it completely.

Wridra slowed down, deep in thought. She had to tear down everything she knew and start from scratch. After spending so much time in the human world and observing their impressive and logical technology, she no longer thought of them as diminutive creatures.

“I must alter my thought process completely... What is the fastest vehicle in Japan?”

Fighter jets came to mind. Some models could move three times faster than the speed of sound, which should be more than enough for her to compete.

Movement speed was crucial in battle, as a lack of it would mean she couldn't catch up to a fleeing opponent, and they might trap her if she fled. International treaties had been established to limit the movement speed of tanks, even during war, when they first appeared in the mortal realm.

As a dragon, Wridra was unsure whether this would be a good idea. A dragon's identity was tied to their wings, and it was unheard of to sever them from her body.

Wridra detached her wings from her body, a pale light appearing at the cross section as she did so. Any other creature would have bled as they were separated, but dragons were unlike other creatures. They had originally resided in a place similar to the Spirit World, and their very existence was a contradiction in this world. Dragon cores were the key organs that made their existence possible, and their destruction could make them disappear.

If she made one wrong move while detaching her wings, it could cause her stored energy to go haywire. This feat was only possible for a master of magic like herself.

There was tension in the air. Wridra spoke under her breath, believing this was the right move.

“Dance, dance, my wings. Thou shall gain new form and be permitted flight. Dance, dance, dragon wings. Awaken, and fly as your heart desires.”

The impromptu spell she had cast in the language of dragons was to grant independence and a sense of self to her wings. Magic flowed through them like blood in veins. Sweat dripped from her head as she focused on the advanced magic. She chanted her incantation, solidifying a force field in one hand while activating Creation with another. A shiver went down her spine at the undertaking that had likely never been done by anyone.

“Now, it is time for a fun math lesson. Hah, hah, it is amazing how inquisitive the human mind is. A single mathematical formula can hint at the wonders of the universe.”

“*Open*,” she chanted in her mind, then clapped her hands, one presiding over “creation” and another presiding over “independence,” together. By pure chance, the movement left her in a position as if she were praying, allowing a new creation to be born into the world.

An object appeared amid a dark mist, shimmering like a black crystal. Sharply angled wings jutted out at both sides, and its very form suggested it could fly at extraordinary speeds.

Wridra grinned. She ran her finger along the leather chair, which appeared to have its plastic covering peeled off, and touched the lever and LCD monitor that she had clearly added purely out of preference. As she had given it awareness,

the object spoke in a feminine voice.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, my master. How are you?”

“Not bad,” Wridra said. “I expect you to make me feel better.”

Thus, the black-haired beauty raised the hem of her dress-type armor. Her armor changed shape where she grabbed it, fitting perfectly into the seat as she mounted it. The vehicle resembled a single-seat fighter jet, except the wing size was drastically different.

“As you wish, Master. I was born to fly, after all,” said the aircraft.

Several rings went off like chiming bells. Wridra’s eardrums shook as the aircraft generated Spirit energy. The sound was elegant, and together with its slender and lustrous appearance, the aircraft had a distinctly feminine appeal.

“All systems go. Welcome, Master, to the world beyond sound.”

Wridra felt her body sink into the seat. Of course, she could handle the pressure without problems. Her eyes were glued to the aircraft as it accelerated without her feeling the slightest vibration. She sped through the air, reaching the mountains on the horizon in the blink of an eye. And so she laughed joyfully, impressed by the performance befitting of the Arkdragon’s wings.

“This is far better than I had imagined!” exclaimed Wridra, chuckling. “Yes, I like you. I shall grant you a name... From now on, you will be known as Kalina.”

“To be named by you is truly the greatest honor. I swear that whatever opponent you face, I will bring you a spectacular victory,” said Kalina, tilting to one side, then to the other in a gesture of joy.

Wridra looked at the expanse of blue skies through the window and noticed dark clouds in the far distance. The clouds seemed to forewarn the fierce battle to come, but the Arkdragon only smiled.

“Will I be able to fix a large magical gun onto you?” she asked.

“Certainly. I will learn the resistance for any weapon if you allow me a few seconds, so please choose whatever you’d like,” replied Kalina.

Wridra couldn’t help but chuckle.

However, the Arkdragon wasn't foolish enough to immediately charge into the enemy right away. One mistake would spell the end for her, unlike Kitase, who could simply return to Japan when he died. That was why she thought that stupid couple was so carefree about everything, as she grumbled.

Observing Mariabelle made it clear how crucial advance preparation was. Her effort into adapting to the situation and terrain had always paid massive dividends.

Later, Wridra landed the aircraft on mountains and the desert several times to spend some time for magic preparation. Kalina watched the entire process, then asked, "Master, why are you opening your Shadow Gate in various locations?"

The Arkdragon put her hand on the driver's seat as she climbed into the aircraft and nodded. A veil had enshrouded the area, blotting out the bright sunlight.

"I must plan ahead to cover areas where I am inferior to the opponent. I will use distance to my advantage and these traps," explained Wridra.

She pointed with her finger, and the scenery in the air distorted. It became clear she had connected the space there with her den, which she was using as an armory, and she began setting up the explosives from there all around the desert. Even though these weapons had complex mechanisms, they had one simple purpose: annihilating the enemy.

The aircraft rose into the air with a whoosh, covering the explosives in sand. But Wridra still didn't think it would be enough. She wanted one or two more decisive countermeasures for her opponent, who boasted an inexhaustible life force and cruelty. Kalina's voice spoke up as she ascended and watched the ground get farther away.

"Is it not possible to avoid the battle with the Prominence Dragon? Perhaps you have the choice not to fight, Master."

"This is a matter of my way of life against his. Words alone will not settle it. A fool will not understand until he gets sense beaten into him," replied Wridra. Her smile suggested that she was dying to fire off her newly acquired weapon. Kalina said nothing, as if her silence was out of pity for her master's opponent.

Wridra continued working until around noon when she finally decided her preparations were satisfactory.

Meanwhile, the Gedovar army charged into the oasis like an avalanche.

Wridra's armored feet sank into the fine sand down to her ankle, and the faint smell of sand rose. She was in some mountains, far from Arilai's desert. The eastern winds carried sand and threw it upon the craggy mountains. Steam rising from the ground partially obscured the black, jagged mountain ridges that the Arkdragon could see when looking up.

She touched the moist sand and felt some geothermal heat. At that moment, Wridra noticed an odd smell and realized it was sulfur. Because of this, she believed hot springs could be made there and scanned the desert to see if it would be suitable for a recreational space.

Suddenly, faint tremors shook the land. Sand slipped through the Arkdragon's fingers, so she rose in anticipation of her opponent.

Black vapor rose from the quaking ground only to cover the area and wither what little plant life remained. Wridra watched the world becoming increasingly barren, with darkness engulfing the sky as if it had abruptly transitioned into night. She looked up at the faint outline of the sun in the sky, and a voice spoke from behind her.

"Huh, I worried after noticing you dressed like that, but look at you... All slotted up with defensive skills because you're afraid of me. Why did you even bother showing up?"

The speaker, a man with fluorescent red hair that crisscrossed around his forehead, loosened his necktie with his fingers. The Prominence Dragon had pale skin that didn't seem to get much sun, and his golden eyes were narrowed in a carefree smile as he stopped just outside of sword range.

"Ah, I am surprised to see you can match my draconian form. That was quite the cold greeting for someone who traveled this far to see you, Lavos the Prominence Dragon," stated Wridra.

Although Wridra didn't show it, she felt disturbed that Lavos knew which skills

she had equipped. She had taken precautions against leaking information, but this was the Prominence Dragon's realm. He had likely been observing her ever since she stepped foot in the mountains. It annoyed her to think he held off on showing himself until he could confirm all the skills she was using.

"You came just to see me, did you?" asked Lavos. "Well, I'm sure you already know what I have to tell you. Your job is to change diapers. If you want to look like a human, why don't you learn to cook and sew like a human wife should?"

Wridra was ready to argue but held her tongue when she realized his comment wasn't too far from the truth. Even if she didn't cook, she stayed at the mansion to manage things and make clothes.

"Hah, the human realm is quite entertaining. Though I am certain you consider it worthless," said Wridra.

"You're right, it is worthless. All they care about is protecting themselves and living only to trample upon others. What was it you talked about all of the time? Ah, yes, neutrality. I don't understand how you can stay neutral after watching those humans and their ear-piercing shrieks. Shi-shii Alaaba."

Lavos pointed a finger at Wridra, making her feel like every bone in her body had turned to ice. The next moment, she heard what sounded like a crystal shattering and realized he had broken through her Dragon Barrier— No, somehow he had broken it from within. Lavos must have used Divine Haze.

She waited as Lavos approached her with a nonchalant expression.

There was no way he had neutralized all of her barrier layers, more than ten, in a mere instant. The more likely explanation was that the Prominence Dragon had altered his nature to match that of the Arkdragon. This synchronization allowed him to bypass her barriers, just as water mixed with water, and oil mixed with oil. His skill Divine Haze gave him the power to change his own existence to his will.

Lavos slowly walked circles around Wridra, pressing his finger against her back and stomach as he passed by.

"Wingless, and now with fewer dragon cores. You grow weaker without me lifting a finger. Maybe I'll take your last dragon core for myself," he said.

“The Age of Night is no more. You should have been satisfied with reminiscing on your glory days. Nothing is more pitiful than the demise of a dragon driven by greed.”

The man’s finger jabbed into her throat with a thud. She resisted it to the best of her abilities, but blood dripped down from the fresh wound.

“What? I didn’t say you could speak,” said Lavos, staring intently at Wridra.

He dug his fingers deeper, drawing another line of blood. Wridra’s obsidian eyes narrowed as the bit of compassion she had for him vanished completely. Her black hair floated menacingly into the air despite the lack of wind.

Lavos’s smile grew bigger. “Nice, I like that look in your eye. There’s an obstinance to it that reminds me of Gedovar and their desire to bring back the Age of Night. I’m sure you’re here to stop me from helping them, but seeing your face like that just gives me the urge to make you submit to me.”

What looked like black tattoos appeared at his fingertip. They expanded like vines, forming geometrical patterns on Wridra’s neck. Seeing that Wridra’s will had generated them to prevent him from pushing any deeper, the man smiled again and moved away from her.

“So, should we start? I saw you setting up traps around the desert, so you obviously came here expecting to fight. If you lose, I’ll make you my eternal slave. When I get bored of you, I’ll remove your dragon core, and let’s see... I could use it as decoration in my home,” said Lavos.

A vein popped out in Wridra’s forehead, her eyes becoming that of a ferocious dragon.

“I had faint hopes that perhaps you would be willing to talk as a husband, but that is not the case. Hah, hah. It is I who will make *you* my slave. I cannot wait to see you roaming around with a cleaning rag in hand,” declared Wridra with an intense smile.

The vines dug through the ground, obscured by the darkness. Lavos took notice but spread his hands as if to say she could do as she wished. Once more, the vines entangled Wridra and enshrouded her in shadows as they covered her in layers.



Both glared at each other, their lips still curled into smiles. Wridra soon disappeared, and Lavos's smile widened.

"Beating my wife once in a while sounds like a good time. Now, how should I make you cry this time?" he said, licking his fingers.



With a flap of black cloth, Wridra appeared beneath the clear skies. Her face was completely devoid of expression, though she was seething on the inside. Kalina had been waiting nearby, and her monitor blinked before speaking.

“Master, I now understand what you had meant earlier. Such an arrogant man is unworthy of being your husband.”

Kalina’s voice was unusually emotional. Still, Wridra was too upset to reply and shoved her arm into the shadowy pocket that appeared midair and pulled out an extremely heavy cylinder. As she held it, there was a thud, and a crack ran through the rock she stood upon.

“Hmph, he has not changed one bit. Prepare for battle, Kalina. I will knock some sense into that complacent fool,” said Wridra as she laid her gun down.

There was no need for anger in this fight. Wridra would need to be calm and collected to find the perfect opportunity to strike. She flipped her long black hair and proclaimed, “Conversion: remove Dragon Core Breaker Resistance and Instant Death Resistance. Set Dragon Eyes and Optical Flow.”

Conversion rendered her immobile for approximately one minute. Since she would be left vulnerable during this time, she had to be careful about when to use it.

In the meantime, Wridra collected her thoughts on the Prominence Dragon. She sat atop the rocky mountain and looked across the horizon to a point about fifty kilometers away, where her opponent should still be standing. Even a dragon should not be able to notice where she had gone right away.

The Prominence Dragon was a master of chaos and destruction. He was intelligent to boot, so outwitting him would prove difficult. Fortunately, she knew several of his skills from their previous encounter. The ones she knew of were:

Blackout, which inflicts mental damage to an opponent within view until they’re driven mad.

Divine Haze, allowing him to modify his own existence.

Platinum Breath, a beam of total destruction.

Death Sentence, which sends an organism into a chain reaction of destruction.

Wither, which limitlessly shrinks matter and is capable of destroying atoms.

These were all top-tier, devastatingly powerful skills. Entering Lavos's skill range or touching his dragon breath would mean instant death. Even if she landed a hit by some miracle, his defensive skills would protect him from any damage. His life force was so robust that he could live for a week even if decapitated, and his sadistic nature made him a nightmare to fight against. Any of his opponents would realize they were nothing but food and drive themselves mad. These traits comprised the terrible Prominence Dragon. Wridra quietly laughed, thinking that Kitase would be the only one happy to see him.

As for Wridra, her specialties were quite unusual: spatial control, Magic Tool creation, accuracy improvement, and sharpening her dragon instincts. None of these categories related to destruction.

She had removed her resistances earlier, such as Dragon Core Breaker, because Lavos had shown an interest in taking it, and she suspected he wouldn't choose Instant Death as an attack method against her. He would prefer to make her suffer.

"Target detected. Sending you the coordinates, Master," said Kalina.

"Hmph. It appears he has no intention of hiding. Let's see how he likes this one."

Wridra tightened her leather gloves and lifted the Magigun with one hand. The giant rifle, three meters in length, had been designed with her strength in mind. It was far heavier than it appeared, so it could withstand its own incredible firepower.

The Arkdragon lay on the ground, unconcerned about getting dirty, and readied the weapon. Her dress-shaped armor transformed, impaling the ground to provide stability. She drew the bolt and loaded a bullet filled with condensed magic. It loaded into the chamber and glowed purple as if thrilled to see battle.

A bell-like chime accompanied the appearance of several layers of lenses over

Wridra's left eye. The purple phosphorescence also appeared here, then rotated around the target to adjust the aim. Only she could see the Prominence Dragon armoring up in the distance.

She set her sights, let out three breaths, then quietly squeezed the trigger.

*BOOOOOOOM!*

A crack ran across the slope of the rock face, and the summit crumpled from the impact. The sheer amount of mass that had been discharged made the world monochrome for a moment.

The bullet full of demon matter was about as big as a relay baton. It accelerated over multiple stages and corrected its trajectory according to Wridra's orders, speeding directly toward the target. The mountain on the horizon was approximately fifty kilometers away. A regular sniper rifle would not reach such distance, but nothing was impossible for the Arkdragon.

"Landing in five, four, three..." Kalina counted down calmly, and the dragon observed.

Wridra saw the Prominence Dragon turn toward her, and for a brief moment, she saw his limbs come into view.

The rocky mountain seemed to have been vertically hit as a light shone straight toward the summit, bringing destruction fifty kilometers away. The ground rumbled after a delay, and Wridra quickly rose before even checking the aftermath.

"He is onto us. We must move," said Wridra.

"He noticed from that far away? It seems he isn't considered a legendary dragon for nothing. His destruction will be a worthwhile endeavor."

Wridra chuckled in agreement, then they both stepped into a shadowy gate, leaving their spot before the sound of impact even reached them.

After some time, the Prominence Dragon awakened. He rose from the mountain ridge, emerging as the legendary dragon.

The sky roared.

The ground rumbled, displacing sand from the cave ceiling and causing it to trickle down to the ground.

Long ago, the Neko tribe had dug out the rocky mountains to excavate Magic Stones. Judging by the sheer number of fine markings left by their metal tools, it appeared to have been quite the undertaking.

But humans clad in leather armor had claimed the area, and they could no longer find them. They had to crouch through the narrow cave, revealing the clear blue skies through one of the peepholes. Their surroundings were pitch-black due to the backlight, casting shadows on the crouching humans' faces.

The rumbling, indicating the approaching Gedovar army, had been going on for some time. They were simply moving toward this land, which made them even more ominous.

A soldier reached toward his chest, revealing what appeared to be a pendant connected to a delicate chain. It was an inexpensive, simple trinket made by carving a piece of wood with a knife. Yet the man held it close, then reverently kissed it as if it were a noble's hand.

Someone skilled had made the pendant in their spare time, as it was no exquisite work of art. It had a warmth to it, and the carving of a beautiful girl almost seemed like she was smiling at him with her sky-blue eyes.

The pendant had become quite a hot topic some time ago, and the good-natured man who had carved it made some for everyone on request. He had refused any payment, claiming it would be rude to the second-floor master, and they had all been carrying them under their shirts.

This man had been holding on to it since and realized its proper usage: providing peace of mind. The peephole revealed a horde of monsters that kicked up dust like a sandstorm, making that terrible sound as they drew closer. There had to be more than ten thousand of them.

Their movement continued to create the tremors, and their attack hadn't even begun yet. Displaced sand fell upon the man's leather armor. He had known sand since the moment he was born, and even the blood of his ancestors had likely become a part of it.

Strangely, the man felt grateful. Grateful that his fear was vanishing as a fighting spirit replaced it. He gripped the pendant tightly, then pressed it against his forehead as if receiving a blessing from a goddess.

“We, the people of the desert, will not fear the fearsome. We will stand against the undefeatable and protect the splendor of the oasis.”

The others around him also uttered the ancient words, and silence fell over the cave again. Just as everyone had prepared to face their deaths, a visitor arrived. He looked around his quiet surroundings and let out a sigh of disappointment.

“Well, aren’t you a bunch of downers. Did I walk into a funeral or something?”

The speaker was an old man with a slight slouch, though his physique and attitude were unlike a normal man of his age. Several men jumped to their feet when they realized who it was.

“Captain Gaston!”

Surprise and joy covered their faces as they greeted their master and noted that the members of Team Ruby had reunited at last.

Gaston chuckled as his men gathered one after another, then said, “Hmph, I did you all a favor, but here you all are. Why the hell would you request to be appointed to the front lines?”

“Could say the same to you, captain. We thought you joined the labyrinth raid,” said a man, smiling as they bumped fists. He was the vice captain and someone with a sharp mind and combat skills, who was now full of vigor in stark contrast to just a few minutes earlier.

“Heh, well, things were obviously more dire over here,” said Gaston, grinning. “Hey, ya bastards! You’re not going to hell without me!”

“Ha ha, they say Team Ruby doesn’t die even if you stab us in the head. We must’ve gotten our toughness from you, but we wish we didn’t. When will we finally get to die?!”

The two men bared their teeth with devilish grins and laughed out loud while the others around them stared blankly.

Team Ruby was a different breed because it was persistent, stubborn, and grossly combative. Each member was powerful and brawny, even repelling Shirley on the second floor several times. They received the nickname “barracudas” because they raced each other to get at the enemy first, which showed how abnormal they were.

Once they finished laughing, the vice captain sat down beside the peephole with the old man. He put his pendant away, then said, “So, Captain Gaston, how was the third floor of the ancient labyrinth? Was it so fun that it was worth leaving us?”

Gaston’s expression grew grim. He had been told in a fortune that he would find certain death there, but he couldn’t possibly tell his vice captain that he ended up becoming healthier during his time there. The training was only moderate exercise, enjoying hot springs, massages, beer with fried fish, and plenty of sleep on comfortable tatami mats.

“Well, never mind that,” said Gaston. “Ah, so that’s the Gedovar army. They brought quite the company, huh? This is gonna be fun!”

## §

Aja let out a contemplative sigh.

The staff he had set on the ground was unsupported, though it remained upright. Magical energy radiated from him in waves, and countless pale-blue lights floated around him. He was using magic to capture the sight of the impending Gedovar army, a technique he had learned from the elf girl. Yet he hadn’t perfected it, so he could not find out the enemies’ skills.

“It’s hard to believe she can simultaneously distribute the sheer amount of information to everyone. That elf is extraordinarily talented.”

Spirit Sorceresses were quite rare, but there had been a few of them throughout history. As far as he knew, a select number had succeeded in their endeavors. More often than not, they fell behind their peers due to the high amount of experience required of a hybrid job.

When Aja thought of his and Marie’s first meeting, she was like a child in appearance and ability. It was mind-boggling to think how much she had



progressed in a mere six months or so. He was uncertain what was responsible for her sudden growth. However, he suspected it had to do with the boy who was always with her or the many friends she associated with.

“Say, Hakam, do you mind if I ask you a question?” Aja called out to the man putting on some accessories behind him.

“What is it? If you want me to leave a will, do it later.”

Aja chuckled as he would have usually angrily spit at him. But the wisecracks didn’t bother him on the battlefield.

“That Shirley girl... You are aware of who she is, aren’t you?” Aja asked.

“Well, yeah. She gave us quite a lot of trouble on the last floor. Wridra told me that place is full of greenery now because of the sealed floor master’s powers, but it doesn’t work like that,” responded Hakam.

If that were possible, humans would have found some way to capture and use monsters. Hakam thought the more likely explanation was that the monster floor master had willingly cooperated with transforming the second floor. The aged mage Aja and Commander Hakam had an eye for discerning the true nature of things; if they didn’t, they could end up leading their brave men to their deaths.

“As long as she doesn’t mean Arilai any harm, there’s no reason not to treat her respectfully and keep her secret. It would be a different story if she meant harm, but that group is a sensible bunch. Very pleasant too.”

“What do you mean? She’s *been* causing harm. You have the instincts of a wild animal, and you haven’t even noticed?” Aja asked.

Hakam thought about it momentarily, rubbing his chin with furrowed brows. After preparing his equipment, he flipped open the tent curtain and asked, “Did something happen?”

The old man followed, his face wrinkling as he grinned. “She stole Team Diamond from us. They were a national treasure.”

“Hah, you’re not wrong. Some have also gone soft, parading around in maid outfits,” agreed Hakam. “You lot better not have offered tribute to those pretty

ladies!”

His voice reverberated through the spacious cave. About ten were seated, their foreheads and the backs of their necks adorned with wirelike accessories. Several of them were shaken, their expressions filled with guilt, while others managed to suppress their reactions.

One of the younger men turned around and said, “Sir Hakam, please! We’re trying to focus on the Magic Stones, but you’re putting thoughts of Eve’s ass in our minds!”

“Hah, the greatest contributor can go ask Eve for a massage. I’ll allow it. Don’t you boys want her to ease your tension after taking a hot bath?” Perhaps Hakam said this as a joke or simply to lift their spirits, but he immediately realized he had made a mistake. An insane number of reactions arose from the soldiers in Mind Link Chat, and it was too late for him to take it back without destroying their morale.

He wondered if he could make it happen by offering her money and whether she could give one of his men a massage while lightly dressed. Just as he glanced to his side, Aja held up his staff as he laughed and said, “Don’t bring *me* into this.”

Suddenly, a sharp voice spoke directly into their minds.

“Reporting! The Gedovar army has arrived! I repeat. The Gedovar army has arrived! They have now entered the optimal attack zone! The number of units separated from their main forces is approximately two thousand!”

Hakam rubbed his chin. They were outnumbered ten to one. Although the allied army were in a favorable position, a three-to-one advantage would lead to a successful siege, and Gedovar’s numbers were far more than that. Not to mention, they barely had any defensive structures and needed to protect their tunnel at all costs. Just the other day, the allied army had taken heavy losses against enemy forces of a similar size—nearly half of their men had ended up in monsters’ bellies.

“Hm, a report from the scouts. No need to use your bombardment, Aja. Let them step into the booby-trapped passage,” Hakam said, unconcerned.

Under his leadership, the enemy army was drawn into the passageway between two rock walls. Aja, anticipating his moment of glory, let out a disappointed sigh.

## §

A leglike tree trunk stomped down with a thud, sending sand flying into the air. Monsters leaped toward the path leading to the ancient labyrinth, their eyes glowing red with bloodlust.

An oasis in the middle of the mountain was shaped as if a giant knife had cut a wedge into it from above. Just as the monsters moved through the straight path, they crushed the stone altars and murals the Neko Tribe had left. The sun had already reached its highest point, intensifying the contrast between light and shadow. They marched with the intensity of countless jackhammers pounding the ground, accompanied by rocks breaking under their stamping feet. An elephant-sized beast charging forward was a sight to behold, and seemed impossible to stop.

On the giant's backside, an eyeball glanced around. The other monsters also had eyes on their backs, all of which were restlessly observing their surroundings.

The vanguard monsters had powerful bodies that could withstand ambushes and keen abilities suited for seeking out enemies. They were clad in ten-centimeter-thick armor that covered their entire bodies without breaks, like a pill bug, and also had the eyeball on their backs. Plus, these monsters could send information on their surroundings directly to their commander, who was ready to respond to any situation.

However, something was amiss. The general of the vanguard unit, who was sitting cross-legged on a monster and carrying a sword on his shoulder, scanned his surroundings.

Two walls sandwiched the path, and he expected obstacles to stand in their way, though no obstacle would stop their advance. He felt many eyes on him, so he knew they weren't alone.

"Did they cower from us in fear? No, that would be foolish to assume. It's more likely that this is a trap. Humans are shrewd little creatures. I will peel

them like pomegranates,” said the general, cracking his knuckles as he pondered about the war a bit longer.

Initially, the monsters had expected this base to be a larger-scale defensive position. The ancient labyrinth they were after was here, and they would seize not only powerful Magic Stones but control of the monsters lurking within it. Arilai’s defeat would come about if they successfully took control of it, so they naturally believed their enemies would concentrate their defenses there. But Arilai had stationed hardly any of their forces here.

“A shame because if they had brought Arilai’s national army here, we would have trampled them with ease.”

However, the Arilai soldiers didn’t come out from their defensive wall. Given the choice between dying earlier or dying later, they must have chosen the latter and abandoned the ancient labyrinth. They had supplemented their lack of soldiers by allying with three countries, but they would surely crumble when they realized the true nature of this war. Their fates were already decided; stepping out of their castle would see them flattened underfoot. Even if they abandoned the labyrinth, they would eventually perish.

The general covered his head with a black hood and drew in a breath, detecting a hint of a familiar scent in the bone-dry air.

“This is the land in which we were born. I’m sure of it. I can’t stand seeing this holy land under the control of those feeble humans. We’ll take it back in one fell swoop.”

He gave the order to continue their march without slowing while staying alert of their surroundings. Then, something abruptly blocked off the bright sunlight. The monsters had been sucked into the tunnel.

## §

“The vanguard units have entered the tunnel!” someone reported in the darkness.

Hakam nodded with his eyes closed. His movements had become more measured as the situation grew more tense, and his mind worked incessantly to ensure their survival. The two hundred soldiers were nowhere near enough to

defend their base. A single mistake in this exceptionally challenging mission would mean the end for them all.

Several pieces representing soldiers sat on a board. Hakam explored his options for using and timing the pieces at his disposal. He then spoke to one of those pieces, the aged soldier waiting at the end of the tunnel.

“Are you ready, Gaston?”

“Heh. Team Ruby’s ready and waiting. Over,” replied Hakam calmly without the usual snarky comment. Even if he were trampled to death by the enemy army, he would likely laugh and say, “Can’t win ’em all.”

Hakam rose and had a few men accompany him as he walked toward the narrow tunnel, where the enemy rushed through a path just beside it. The ground rumbled ceaselessly, and the clamor made it sound like some areas were in danger of collapsing.

About two thousand invading units from the monsters’ main army had gone out. Perhaps half had entered the narrow, sturdy passageway. Hakam slowly walked through the rocky tunnel, his men standing around him with crossbows and giving him a bow of respect.

Glimpses of monsters crawling in the darkness were visible through the peepholes throughout the tunnel. Just a while longer, and Hakam could enjoy a much more interesting view. He would be somewhat bored until then, or so he thought, when something odd caught his eye.

A threadlike object stretched out from an ordinary rocky area, disconnecting and reconnecting repeatedly, sometimes releasing what looked like spores. It reminded Hakam of fungi, but it was forbidden magic known as Dark Sorcery.

Eventually, Hakam arrived at a spot where a petite girl awaited him. Her tiny fingers peeked out of her sleeves as she held a holly staff in both hands. A pair of sickly, glazed eyes looked up at the commander, and she tilted her head as if to ask what he wanted. She was his second “piece” and one who could turn the tide of the battle.

“It’s time, Luna Evircha. Show me the power of Team Diamond’s one and only Sorceress,” he said, then the girl motioned for him to come closer.

Supposedly, Luna had the ability to manipulate her biometric age and was older than she appeared. He couldn't help but crouch down to her eye level as if with a child, though she could have been older than him for all he knew.

Hakam could see her black hair beneath her black robe as she pointed at one of the peepholes. He approached it as instructed, then she tapped the wall with her staff. Suddenly, the stringy object from earlier accelerated. It attached, assimilated, and expanded to bubble up and form an umbrella shape like a mushroom growing at a fast-forward speed. Just then, Hakam witnessed a rare look at Dark Sorcery for the first time.

“Arc.”

It was the first time Hakam had heard Luna speak, noting that her voice was surprisingly childish. Whoever was on the receiving end of this spell that had taken a month to prepare was in for a treat.

The fungi flooded the tunnel, releasing spores into the air as they matured. When one breathed them in through the nose and mouth, they would attach to mucous membranes and multiply. They absorbed nutrients from the host and spread more fungi, making even the heaviest armor powerless against them.

A marble-sized ball of fungi floated through the air before coming to a halt in front of the previously indicated peephole. It attached itself to the hole, then spread out in a circle so the spores wouldn't spread to their side, as the spell would only affect a predetermined area. One could also use it defensively by spreading out the fungal film.

Hakam rubbed his chin, impressed. It was no understatement to say she could single-handedly change the tides of battle. Yet this alone wouldn't be enough to defeat the massive enemy horde and would merely slow them down at best. The spell's wide application weakened its effect as spores gradually consumed the enemies from the inside. Nonetheless, Hakam fully understood the terrifying power of the spell that could kill anyone who suffered its effects for too long.

“Let's hope they enjoy this little autumn mushroom dish. Team Ruby, make some traffic at the front,” he ordered.

“Already done,” replied Gaston through Mind Link Chat, making Hakam

chuckle.

A moment later, he heard a heavy thud in front of him, followed by another. There was likely a pileup happening right around now. He watched through the hole as the wave of traffic gradually approached him, then rose to his feet.

He called out to his soldiers, "Save the Magic Stones for the later battle, and use the oil for now."

Black oil was poured through several holes, then quickly set ablaze, causing blue fire to burn hot. It wasn't just regular oil, but holy oil blessed by Advanced Holy Knights from the church.

"Gaaaaaargh!"

The piercing scream had come from monsters immolating in the divine fire. They burned in a cluster, trampling their own allies as they tried to flee from the holy flames. The crowd of monsters pushed each other from behind as Hakam's forces shot arrows at them, and spores infected their wounds.

Hakam watched through the peephole protected by Dark Sorcery, his face glowing pale-blue from the fire. "We have no need to put up obstacles here. Your bodies will fit the role just fine."

Screams and heat filled the tunnel as the archers continued firing at the eyes and mouths of their targets.

It would be a little longer before Hakam unleashed his third piece.

§

A massive arm reached toward the sky and repeatedly slammed onto the ground, creating a violent sandstorm. It would certainly be unpleasant to be on the other end of an attack that resembled a baby throwing a tantrum. Shortly after, everything suddenly turned dark as a mouth full of fangs bore down like a scene from a nightmare.

Under the blazing sun, a man walked away from the oasis with his sword in hand. Light shone off his blade as he buried it deep into the giant's monstrous eyeball. He felt it writhing through his sword, and before the monster could scream out in pain, someone else impaled it from the other side.

The monster spit out blood as it let out a death rattle. Both men twisted their swords, then pulled their hilts out with one swift motion. These blades, which had Magic Stones sealed within them, exploded in the creature's head and created a substantial explosion.

The skull ruptured, and the impact embedded the monster's head deep between its shoulders. Black blood spurted out like a fountain. Unlike the labyrinth, the oasis was blessed with natural light. Still, being unable to see the gruesome details so clearly would have been preferable.

Gaston looked around as the giant fell to the ground. His team member, utterly unperturbed by what had just happened, chuckled as he replaced his blade and said, "These swords with Magic Stones pack an extremely satisfying punch."

"Don't forget, we only have so many of them," Gaston warned. "Anyway... Even if we knock a few of them down, the tunnel's so tall and wide that we won't be able to block it off completely."

A few of his men had been injured, but Gaston felt relieved to see they were staying alert in the thrill of battle. Although the men didn't stand out compared to Team Diamond, they had kept up with the level 120 veteran for many years. They had distinguished themselves from ordinary soldiers through the countless battles they had fought together.

Each member was at the end point of the tunnels where the monsters were invading from—an oasis in the area carved out of the mountain's center. The ancient labyrinth was just ahead, and their defenses would crumble if the monsters managed to get through. Team Ruby had been chosen as the guardians of this last bastion.

Seemingly endless plumes of black smoke came out of the tunnel. The soldiers had burned the monsters with holy oil, and their carcasses were coming out of this exit as they turned to ash.

If the monster corpses had not turned to ash, they could have been used to blockade the hole and prevent enemy reinforcements from arriving. Had that been the case, countermeasures would have been necessary to deal with the stench and prevent the spread of disease. This action would have had its



disadvantages.

Fortunately, spring water came out from a nearby wall, alleviating the heat carried by the wind. Perhaps that was part of the reason the two men weren't too fazed when a giant monster stepped out of the fire with a heavy thud.

"That's a big boy. Maybe this one'll be big enough to plug the entrance," said Gaston.

"We could give it a try. It might at least buy us some time," replied Hakam.

Their swords gleamed in the sunlight as they lined up with the aged captain at the center. They moved forward slowly, breathing out through gritted teeth. With their black armor, slightly hunched postures, and glowing eyes, they resembled a claw of panthers. The monster facing them had golden eyes that could be seen deep in its iron mask. It rose, going from standing on four legs to two, and let out a ferocious roar, its body still enveloped in flame.

"Aaaaaaaaargh!!!"

It was a grating, high-pitched scream. The monster's cheeks tore apart as it released a miasma, then spat a black beam from its mouth. Color had disappeared from its surroundings for a split second, and fire erupted from the sand where the beam landed.

The destructive flame burned violently in a straight line, threatening to burn Gaston and his men. A moment later, the giant monster released a high-pitched, abrupt cry of pain. But the men looked up to find the old captain digging his sword deep into the creature's neck.

"That's enough of that, ya little shit. Come on, try screaming again," Gaston growled.

The giant shuddered. By the time it had noticed Gaston, its neck had already been half severed. It quickly slapped its shoulder, but the old man had already begun slicing the monster's backside. The monster flailed its arms a few times before Gaston fully removed its head. Even though the creature's expected level was in the 80s, Gaston had made quick work of it as if it were child's play. It was no wonder he was said to be the strongest fighter in all of Arilai.

Suddenly, Gaston's eyes widened. Someone was climbing up the giant's back

as it toppled to the ground. The stranger wore a large black hood, with the body beneath it chiseled to perfection. As they charged toward Gaston, the tip of their curved, single-edged weapon swayed quickly.

“Hng!”

Metal clashed, and the impact ran through Gaston’s arm, causing him to be tossed into the air. The newcomer had thrust their blade toward the old man’s throat. Gaston blocked the follow-up attack in the air, then the two landed without losing their balance.

Gaston rubbed his numbed arm as he stared at the stranger and remarked, “Not bad. Let’s have your name.”

“Captain Bare Beholder,” stated the monster as it ripped the hood off.

Countless eyeballs were under the long black hair spilling down from its head. The eyes constantly scanned their surroundings with a strong-willed expression, while its lips were like a straight line. The creature wore a tattered black cloth and was considerably bigger than Gaston, even though he was considerably tall. It then pointed its long katana, far bigger than what an ordinary man could wield.

It continued speaking, “You seem to be searching for a place to bury your bones, old soldier. I will end you here and now.”

“You can try, eyeball boy. You’ve got me feeling all giddy,” Gaston said.

The air felt as if it had gotten even hotter as the two faced off, murder in their eyes.

In such a situation, the fighters would usually observe their opponent and steady their breathing. Yet the two immediately walked toward each other with large strides, closing the distance without regard for each other’s attack ranges.

## §

Far below the monsters roasting in the tunnel, warriors had begun marching forward. Once again, they were heading into the third floor of the labyrinth to continue their raid where they had left off.

The fully armed warriors marched in complete unison, except for a few—

Mariabelle, Kartina, and me. Today's march was far more boisterous than our usual labyrinth raids because of the group marching with well-timed steps, but we were taking it easy. We didn't like moving at their quick and energetic pace, nor were we used to doing so. When I turned around, I even saw Marie's mouth firmly curved into a frown.

She was clearly in a bad mood, and I could see tension in how she held her staff with both hands. I offered to hold it for her, but she shook her head. A Sorceress's staff was as important as her own life, and this one was made with precious ingredients from the Arkdragon. So I couldn't blame her for not wanting to let it go.

"How are you holding up, Marie?" I asked. "Are you tired?"

Her purple eyes met mine. We were about the same height in the dream world, so her eyes felt especially close.

"Yes, I'm getting tired and a bit disappointed. I've been looking forward to going on a raid again. It's a shame we have to run there," she complained, sweat trickling down her forehead.

It seemed her mood was only worsening every time I looked at her. I looked up, feeling resigned.

As a Spirit Sorceress, she likely thought it was pointless for her to do any physical training. We usually walked at a slow pace during our adventures, so the fatigue and inability to take our time exploring the labyrinth was stressing her out. Our usual tank, Wridra, wasn't here, making things worse.

I recalled the time we'd first visited the desert together. Marie was in a terrible mood back then and complained nonstop. Honestly, I found it endearing and cute. Now that I was older, I even enjoyed it when kids acted childish with me.

"Don't get the wrong idea," Marie said. "I'm not in a bad mood because I'm tired. We might run into monsters again now that Shirley isn't with us, yet I don't even have time to set up Prison Keeper for us. I don't like it."

"That's true. Even if you did put your tower up, we're moving so fast that we'd leave its range of effect in no time." I said.

The tower was the first Primary Skill that Marie had learned, and it allowed her to detect monsters within a certain range. Not only did it reveal their locations, but it also analyzed their levels and skills. It also had an additional Auto Mapping effect thanks to Aja's teachings. We really missed out by not using this incredibly convenient feature that prevented ambushes and kept us from getting lost.

More importantly, I had to find a way to get Marie some rest. She couldn't chant her incantations if she was out of breath, and we had no guarantee that any resting points would come up.

"Oh, how about I carry you on my back? I've been training, so I'm stronger than I look," I suggested.

"What? No, no, that's okay! I'd be too embarrassed..." she said and turned away. I couldn't blame her, considering there were so many people around.

As I tried to come up with another solution, a woman's voice spoke out from behind Marie.

"Don't you have that thing you can ride, Kazuhiho? Why don't you use it?"

"Oh, you're right, Kartina," I said as I snapped my finger. "Thanks for the reminder."

A self-satisfied expression spread across Kartina's face. The tall, well-trained soldier was at a phase where she wanted to enjoy conversing with others again. Having mastered control over the ancient equipment known as Demon Arms, she had fought a deadly battle with me not too long ago. It was more like I was on the receiving end of a one-sided beatdown for a while. If it wasn't for Marie and Shirley's help, I probably would've been killed a few times. Come to think of it, Kartina had never killed me, so maybe she wasn't as bad as the others. Wridra, Marie, and Shirley had each killed me before, and I was sure others had nearly killed me too. But I had to give Marie a ride so she wouldn't be so tired.

I moved off to the side so I wouldn't get in the way of the others, then took a light-blue gemstone out of my pocket. It was a Magic Stone that a Neko had refined akin to a monster egg that would transform into its original form only when needed. I called out the creature's name and tossed it into the air, with smoke erupting from it before it materialized into Roon.

“I’d feel bad being the only one taking it easy...” Marie said.

“Wait,” Kartina said. “I’d like to try riding on the back.”

Kartina placed a foot on Roon, and its body leaned heavily toward her side. Roon waved its wings in protest, so Kartina quietly removed her foot with a dejected expression. Marie and I nearly said something but noted how it would be uncouth to mention a woman’s weight, then exchanged looks, unsure of what to do.

“You don’t need to say anything! I know!” Kartina said, raising both her hands. “My armor’s heavy, and at this point, I’d look weird wearing anything else! Just forget about it.”

I wasn’t so sure. The freckled woman’s face had rather sharp features, but I thought she would look good in the right outfit. Marie seemed to think the same thing as she eyed the other woman.

“Well, you have long legs, so I think a mature-looking outfit would suit you. Even a simple pair of jeans and boots would accentuate your nice figure,” she said.

“You have nice, broad shoulders and a sculpted back because of your training too,” I added. “I think you’d look good in a punk rock style.”

Marie and I discussed the types of clothes that would suit her, perhaps due to the Arkdragon’s influence. Kartina stared at us in wide-eyed bewilderment.

“Ah!” effused Marie as if she had remembered something. “I know! The butler outfit I saw in Kaoruko’s book! I think that would be perfect!”

“Butler outfit” made me picture a bespectacled, gray-haired old man in a tailcoat, though I wasn’t sure if that was what she meant. Incidentally, I’d once heard that the white ties butlers wore at weddings was to signify the difference in standing between themselves and their master. It would not have been appropriate for a guest of honor to wear.

Yet Marie seemed convinced this style suited Kartina and moved closer to her, face flushed with excitement.

“Come on, you should try it! It would look so good on you!”

“Uh, well, I don’t know... Oh, look! We’re getting left behind! We should catch up with the others!” exclaimed Kartina.

I looked over to find we had lost sight of the others and could only hear their footsteps in the distance. As Marie got on Roon, I caught Kartina whispering into her ear, “T-Tell me more about it later.”

We chuckled, then Roon quietly floated through the air. The path was wide, while the ceiling was higher than the previous floor. While we had to be mindful of the people around us, we would be able to fly without much trouble.

Suddenly, Marie made a face as if she had realized something again.

“Wait a minute...” she said, tapping the back seat on Roon with the tip of her staff. The leather seat flipped up, and a stone tower emerged from it.

“Is this the watchtower you were talking about earlier? I didn’t know you could use it like this,” Kartina said.

“Heh heh, do you remember how the towers I’ve summoned in the past disappeared after we finished with it? So I figured it would be okay to put one up on Roon,” replied Marie.

Roon the Magic Stone curiously looked up with its beady eyes, totally unaffected by Prison Keeper.

“We can scan our surroundings like a patrol plane,” I said. “Oh, that’s a type of vehicle we have on the other side. It flies around and observes the land and sea. Though the biggest perk right now is that you get to take it easy.”

Marie flashed her white teeth with a satisfied smile.

As an additional benefit, I got to take it easy too. I had been running with Marie out of consideration, but I had the ability to teleport to wherever I wanted.

“Let’s catch up with the others,” I said, taking a sip of water from my canteen as I teleported forward several times. Roon followed soon after, and I teleported again once they caught up. It was easy and efficient, my favorite way of raiding labyrinths.

“Hey! No fair! How come I have to run by myself?!” I heard Kartina shouting

from behind us sometime later, but she would just have to deal with it.

“Hmm, what should we call the combination of Roon’s flight and Marie’s skill?” I wondered aloud.

“Hey! Stop pretending you can’t hear me!” Kartina complained. “Um... How about Hawk Eye?”

“Sorry, but you’re the one who suggested she ride Roon,” I said. “It’s not the most creative name, but how about Sky Eye?”

The three of us continued throwing ideas back and forth as we made our way deeper into the labyrinth. Kartina continued complaining but was probably a lot more mobile than us with her wings.

We eventually arrived at our destination, where the raid teams of over thirty members led by Zera and Doula were resting to have some food and water. Doula, the commander of the operation, noticed us approaching and turned around, her red hair wavering with the movement.

“I’ve been watching you. Next time we have something bothersome to deal with, I will assign it to you two. I’m sure you’d figure out an easy way to take care of it in no time,” said Doula.

“What!” I protested. “I don’t want to spend all of my precious time in the labyrinth working.”

Doula sipped water and grinned at me. Zera stood beside her, huge as ever, and drank from the same canteen without hesitation when she handed it to him. She wiped the water that spilled from his mouth with a piece of cloth, which reminded me that the two were married.

“Now, we’re back at the point where we abandoned the raid last time we were here,” Doula said.

“Mm-hmm. That’s when you determined the team wasn’t ready at the time,” Zera replied, and they looked at the path ahead.

This was a troublesome path on the third floor. Marie’s scan revealed that it branched out into many narrow paths where monsters lurked. As the commander, Doula had decided the team needed to hone its abilities or we

would have suffered heavy casualties. They had since returned to the second floor with Hakam's approval and trained to prepare for the next raid.

The third floor was quite unique. On the first and second floors, a floor master seemed to lead the monsters, but they each attacked invaders purely on instinct. Yet here, the monsters seemed to have an uncanny amount of coordination. There were many times, like during the battle with Kartina, when they formed groups and properly prepared before deciding to attack us.

"I think there's a control room somewhere on this floor where monsters are being given orders from. If we can seize it, we should be able to hinder the enemy army's invasion," Doula said.

"I don't think you should count on that too much," Zera replied. "They're monsters. I really doubt they're going to cooperate with us."

Doula nodded stiffly.

Hopeful speculation could be dangerous. If things turned out contrary to one's expectations, that hope could quickly turn into despair. Of course, I wanted her to be right too.

To my surprise, Doula showed us a confident smile.

"You should trust a woman's intuition once in a while," she said. "Right, Marie? I'm sure it was your intuition that led you to choosing your boyfriend."

"Hm? W-Well, I suppose so," Marie replied.

Doula gave me a look as if to say, "See?"

That sounded like a rather ambiguous reason to be so sure about it, although I noticed Kartina averting her gaze. Perhaps Doula's words held more truth than I believed, given her supposed neutrality and apparent concealment.

For now, I set aside this hope for the future and focused on getting through the path ahead. Doula looked around to check everyone's equipment, then pointed ahead.

"Kazuhiho, Eve, scout ahead!" she ordered.

We were up. When I thought about it, I had teamed up with Eve to lead an attack before. Maybe Doula had noticed how well we worked together back



then, showing how shrewd she was.

“I wonder if this is also that ‘woman’s intuition’ she was talking about?” I wondered aloud.

“Hm? Dunno what you’re talking about, but she’s counting on us, so let’s show her what we’ve got, Kazu,” said Eve, putting an arm around my neck.

I glanced to my side, and Eve’s suntanned exposed skin filled my vision. Strangely, she was wearing much lighter armor than last time. Muscles made her abs appear toned, revealing her well-trained thighs beneath the fabric she wore around her waist.

“I see you’ve changed your equipment,” I noted.

“Yeah, armor’s just gonna get in the way. This suits me better. I’m more used to it anyway,” Eve said.

She flexed her bicep, wrapped her hand around the other hand’s index finger to strike a ninja pose, and winked at me. A traditional ninja would dress more modestly, but I didn’t want to put a damper on my tag team buddy.

I smiled at Marie, who was hydrating with her canteen, then walked forward with Eve. Up ahead was a dark passage full of danger. As soon as we started walking, we heard the heavy clang of armor along with footsteps. I was too focused on the path ahead to turn around, but there was probably a row of armored men with shields and spears at the ready.

But I didn’t want to raise tension, so I said in a laid-back tone, “Oh yeah, I might have forgotten to ask this, but did you know ninjas originated from Japan?”

“Seriously?! No way, I wanna know more! Are real ninjas as amazing as I’ve heard they are? Can they duplicate themselves, explode, and breathe fire?”

Eve was far more into this than I had expected. She tugged at my sleeve as her blue eyes widened with excitement. I couldn’t help but feel happy that she had so much interest in Japan. Her fervor reminded me of the ninja and samurai craze that swept over other countries a while back.

I wasn’t sure if this was the best time to discuss this until I thought of

something.

“I know! Marie and I debated where we should go for our autumn trip. And there’s an attraction recreating ancient Japanese culture, with samurai and ninjas...”

“Oh, I’d love to go!”

The others couldn’t hear us because we communicated through Mind Link Chat. But we weren’t exactly sneaky about it either, considering Marie raised both of her hands in the air and had a face flush with joy.

As much as I wanted to take Eve, she had a duty to contain the hero candidate Zarish with her ring. I hoped we could figure something out for her.

Suddenly, another woman’s voice entered the chat.

“I am in! As an avid fan of period pieces, I must visit this so-called attraction you speak of! Hah, hah, how utterly exciting!”

“Whoa, is that you, Wridra?” asked Marie. “Your voice in the chat is pretty quiet. Are you far away? And how are things over there? Do you know when you’ll wrap things up?”

Wridra made a contemplative noise, then we heard a heavy metallic clack. Maybe I imagined it, but it sounded like a bullet in a chamber.

“I will take a while longer. Wait for me to report later with good news,” declared Wridra.

There was a static, then her voice cut out.

Her response indicated her opponent must have been more powerful than I’d imagined. Back at the library, she had told me that there was a sizable power gap between her and her husband, even though both were ancient dragons. I was dying to know what was happening over there, but we had our job.

Eve and I drew our weapons without saying a word. The statues on either side of the passage rotated like trap doors, and giant monsters emerged. They were sticking both arms out like mummies, and separated into their upper and lower sections with a loud crack, transforming so they had four arms.

Meanwhile, the consecutive thuds from down the passage told me more were

spawning in the darkness ahead. Judging by the name “Machlus’s Marionette” that appeared above their heads, they were monsters unique to this region.

The crowned bone puppets swung their four sabers around, with the blades leaving a faint phosphorescent glow in their wake. At the same time, we felt the ground beneath our feet shake, and we moved forward despite standing still. That was quite thoughtful of whoever designed this place. If only the rest of the floor had this feature, Marie wouldn’t have had to exert herself so much on the way here.

“We’re being guided to our deaths while just standing here. I wonder if this is the ancients’ idea of a joke. Anyway, I’ll back you up, so go wild,” I told Eve.

“Okaaay!”

Eve crossed her daggers and smiled. There was nothing ninja-like about her brutish expression, but I kept that thought to myself. We stood back-to-back as we advanced deeper into the dark passage.

As I prepared for battle, Eve extended her arms forward swiftly, and something like a heat haze enveloped her from her fingertip to her shoulder. I strained my eyes, trying to figure out what it was, only for it to come into focus.

The things on her arm blinked their beady eyes and opened their toothless mouths. They were Fire Lizards, a type of spirit Marie utilized often. A row of them was on the dark elf’s arm like sparrows on a power line, watching her as if they awaited orders. I couldn’t help but wish I could summon spirits.

“Merge,” Eve ordered in Elvish.

To my surprise, the spirits sank into her skin, leaving a flame-colored outline around her body. The dark elf turned to me, and I noticed even her eyes had changed color.

“This is my specialty,” she said. “I make myself stronger by absorbing spirits into my body.”

“That’s impressive. You’ve got a knack for this,” I said.

Eve clapped happily and said, “Right?!” I caught a glimpse of fire dancing on her tongue when she smiled, making her look rather intense.

The moment I pointed in a direction, Eve spun like a top. A three-meter-tall monster towered over her with its saber rising above. Most people would falter out of fear, but Eve slipped under the attack and countered by swinging her dagger up at its arm.

She landed several attacks in quick succession, chipping away bone fragments and setting them ablaze with her fire enhancement. I followed up with a thrust of my sword that passed right under Eve's arm, destroying the monster's damaged hand.

"Is it cool if I keep going?" asked Eve.

"Go for as long as you'd like, Miss Eve," I said playfully.

"Ha ha! Then don't mind if I do!"

Sure enough, Eve turned up the heat. Thanks to her new outfit, she was a lot more mobile, and she nimbly raised her leg to deliver a kick, although she appeared to move without putting in much thought, putting her full weight into her flaming kick straight into the target's right femur.

She'd gotten a lot faster than before. By the time she finished slashing with her knife, she was already rotating her body to wind up a kick. Each hit seamlessly linked into the next, making consecutive *crack-crack-crack* sounds as they found their mark. I decided to support Eve by disorienting the enemy so she could keep doing her thing.

Whenever Eve caught her breath between attacks, I made the enemy back off with a heavy swing of my sword. I deflected any attacks she couldn't dodge to let her focus solely on offense. My role here was to shut down the monster so Eve could keep having her fun.

Since I hid behind Eve, her opponents must have perceived my attacks as coming out of nowhere. This action seemed to stress the monster out, its movements becoming increasingly sloppy as its frustration grew. I heard those satisfying cracking sounds again, and Eve was getting into her groove more and more.

"Whoa, all of my attacks are critical hits!" Eve happily cried out.

She laughed as she destroyed the monster before her, making me wonder

how she looked from their perspective. When the second monster arrived only to see its comrade disintegrate in front of its eyes, I wondered if it was thinking, “Is it my turn next?”

The newcomer swung its sword downward but was met with an upward blow on its chin, the impact causing it to become stunned and dazed.

I was glad I had teamed up with Eve in the past. Her movements were still saved in my Memory Slot, along with my movement patterns to pair with them. That was why I could support her automatically while looking for the optimal attack pattern.

Eve no longer used words to give out orders. She dodged a swing of the enemy’s saber by tilting her head, then delivered a perfect counterattack to shatter its skull, knowing I would protect her if needed. The bone puppets suffered a one-sided defeat as they were cut up and set on fire.

The spirit’s fire wasn’t enough to deter the monsters, contributing to their downfall. They weren’t smart enough to put out the fire burning them, so they continued to take consistent damage over time.

One difference from the last time we were here was that the rest of our squad had also been leveling up. Shield-wielding fighters stepped forward with heavy footsteps, accompanied by Doula’s valiant voice.

“Left-hand monster! Aim! Double shot... Fire!”

The shields opened vertically, clustered like stone blocks in a masonry wall. Cross-shaped crossbows lined up through the openings in the shields and fired all at once.

A rain of crossbow bolts pinned the monsters trying to attack from the flank of the wall, the holy enchantment tearing through the puppets and sending bone fragments flying in the air.

“Now! Crush them!”

The wall of shields surged forth on the order, closing in on the giant monster. The well-coordinated soldiers moved in unison like the scales on a dragon, smashing their target with a deafening crash. However, the impact wasn’t enough to break through its bony exterior. The monsters had an estimated level

of 82 and had equipped magical armor, making them highly resilient to physical damage.

But the monster began squirming in pain. Zera stood with his sword embedded deep in the creature's abdomen as the mass of black shields backed away.

"Raaah! Get 'em, boys!" yelled Zera, quickly following up with a vertical and horizontal slash. Then, the monster had spears thrust into its wound one after another, looking as if tentacles had extended from the black dragon scales to impale it.

The relentless spear attacks reduced the monster's HP to zero, and the iron herd withdrew, leaving the fallen monster on the ground.

All these soldiers were strong. The quick-thinking Doula and ferocious Zera combined intellect and instinct to create a complementary pair.

This trap corridor was also known as Machlus's Marionette; needless to say, it was perilous. Monsters continuously spawned from the walls on either side, and the moving floor forced us to keep moving forward. We walked backward continuously to slow down our pace, but the darkness would quickly swallow anyone who got injured and fell to their knees.

However, the soldiers held their line, and we made steady progress as Eve and I tore through the front line.

I noticed a Fire Lizard on the conveyor belt, staring me in the eye as it moved past us. Shortly after it disappeared into the darkness ahead, the spirit exploded. Marie's idea was ingeniously efficient, and the aim seemed to be to destroy the wall where the monsters were coming from by blowing up the rotating gimmick.

"They made this easy by moving the Fire Lizards for us," Marie said. "I can see exactly where to target thanks to Prison Keeper, and I don't even need to aim because the path is so narrow. Now, explode!"

Another Fire Lizard exploded, destroying a monster before it even started moving. Poor thing must have been waiting centuries for its chance to shine. No one expected Marie to be the greatest contributor to this battle by simply

tossing down Fire Lizards from where she sat on Roon. She was even yawning as she did so.

Could we have cleared this area by having her throw Fire Lizards into the corridor in the first place? No, that couldn't be right. The belt conveyor trap was extremely beneficial for Marie. I had to believe we just got lucky, or the monsters would have been too pitiful.

The trap floor stopped with a heavy thud, and only piles of bones and debris remained on the two-hundred-meter corridor. I couldn't help but wonder if this was supposed to be a high-difficulty area. The others must have thought the same because there wasn't a single cheer of triumph from the group.

Anyway, I was glad we had cleared this place practically unscathed. As for Eve, she acted satisfied from the adequate thrill and exercise as she joyously raised both hands high.

"Ahh, that felt awesome! I've never been able to pop off in a raid like this before. Man, that got my blood pumping!" she said, sweat dripping down her arm as she pumped her fist.

Her attitude made me glad since she seemed to have had a blast. I had a feeling that if I invited her to go on a labyrinth run, she would accept with a huge smile.

"Look, I leveled up! I'm 62 now!" she said.

"Whoa, your level is that high already? No way!" I exclaimed, my eyes wide with surprise, as I had assumed her level to be in the mid-50s. Thinking back, the elf and dark elf had dominated most of the battle while I acted in a support role. I nodded, understanding how she had leveled up so quickly.

"Congratulations, Eve. You were definitely the MVP today," I said.

"Yay!"

We high-fived each other, then she smiled and said, "Thanks!" She was practically glowing as sweat glistened off of her face and body. Her revealing outfit was troublesome, but it didn't seem to bother her, so I guess it was all good.

Our group continued forward, finding a hallway ahead, when Doula called out for us to take a break.

## §

Under the blazing sun, smoke rose from the tunnels overlooking the dunes. The general of the Gedovar forces, Hyzoska, didn't even need to hear the reports to know the endless smoke was coming from his army's burning corpses. He rubbed his face, quietly observing the battlefield.

He noted that the enemy had bolstered their defenses as he'd expected, figuring they had likely holed up in a narrow tunnel to fend off the invaders with fewer numbers. It was clear how they had lured the invaders deeper into their territory before attacking. That he still hadn't seen the enemy soldiers told him they had very few defenders.

His color-faded hair, which had once been red like fire, danced in the wind. Under the black leather that partially hid his face, his lips curled into a twisted smile. He was rather fond of their aggressive defense. The enemy wasn't defending to prolong their inevitable death. Still, they had set the Gedovar forces ablaze with efficiency as an intimidation tactic. Their unspoken threat claimed, "Back off, or the casualties will be even greater." They must have had quite the renowned general to pull off such a skilled operation.

Hyzoska turned his back to the ruins. Despite the invitation to play, he unfortunately had other matters to attend to. He was to take the Gedovar forces blessed by the Prominence Dragon southward to settle the war with Arilai and its allied countries.

His men vastly outnumbered the enemy. Now that they had surrounded the ruins, it was only a matter of time before they would crumble. All that was left was for them to win the battle of attrition.

Thunder roared from the dark clouds in the distance. Hyzoska glanced sidelong in the direction of the sound and gave out his order.

"Send Butcher with fifty other soldiers. Don't let up on the attack for at least three days. Assess the situation and slaughter them if their movements have slowed. The main forces will move southward as initially planned."



His intelligent underlings rushed off to relay his orders. He watched them go as he mounted his black horse, then redirected his thoughts from the ancient ruins to the battle awaiting him to the south.

The ancient towers would stand in the way of the Gedovar army's invasion. Each boasted firepower akin to the sun and could incinerate everything in a wide area. They had supposedly been around since the ancient days, but the ancient dragon would remove those nuisances. That miser had promised to destroy the tower in exchange for an exuberant number of gold coins.

There was another roar from the eastern skies. Hyzoska's horse shuddered and let out a frightened whinny.

"That's odd... I heard the thunder, but why was there no lightning?" he wondered as he looked to the eastern horizon.

Then came the lightning bolt. But the flash was bright enough to light the entire sky, and the mountains crumbled under its unbearable power. He couldn't help but gasp at the sight when a voice cried out to him.

"S-Sir! The Prominence Dragon is engaged in battle! Reports say he's fighting the Arkdragon!"

"What?!" he yelled in shock, then the ground trembled as if to confirm the report was true.

Although they could not tell, the sight they had seen was caused by a mind-destructing skill known as Blackout. A deathly purple light flashed from the other side of the mountains.

## §

Voices and static noises echoed through the Mind Link Chat. Kitase and the others were enjoying a light meal before their battle with the floor master. However, they weren't just resting but scanning positional information with the elf girl's skill, making predictions, and preparing for what was to come with Doula and the others. Though, Wridra could tell the elf had a carefree smile as she ate her favorite food.

Wridra chuckled to herself. If some bigwig had been there, perhaps they might have scolded the children for not staying sharp. Fortunately, they had

easily overcome many hurdles in the past. No one could fault them as long as they continued to get results, even if it was comical to her.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, Lady Wridra,” Kalina said.

“Yes, I have a disciple who will not get her act together no matter how many times I tell her. I have only seen her get serious once,” she said as she looked through her sights.

She saw dust rising in the far distance. The Prominence Dragon had returned to his original form, hovering in the air as he flapped his massive wings. It was the perfect chance for her to snipe him, but her dragon instincts warned her of danger for some reason.

“Magic particle emission detected. The Prominence Dragon appears to be waiting for something,” said Kalina.

Wridra pondered what that could be. His biggest problem was the distance between them. Her attack from outside his range of perception had enough firepower to break through his defensive barriers. Even Wridra couldn't confirm the enemy's life force from this distance, yet she was sure she could inflict some damage.

“He could surely escape if he wishes to, but he would not choose that option. He is a disgustingly prideful man,” said Wridra.

“He must be the conceited type. I suspect he is trying to figure out where you are. That creep will not rest until he tracks you down,” stated Kalina in her plain, emotionless tone.

Despite Kalina's harsh words, she likely did this to show Wridra she cared. She completely ignored that this was Wridra's current husband and that her creator wasn't at fault. Regardless, she did want to kill him.

“Shall we set a trap, then?” Kalina suggested.

“He is no fool. I do not think it will work, but we shall try.”

Just as Kalina was about to speak, she swallowed her words. Instead, she set down Magic Tools on the ground. Both had brought these from the Arkdragon's cave, which had become an armory. Having been granted permission to use her

space manipulation technique, she concealed cylindrical metallic objects in the surrounding rocky area.

“Deployment complete,” she said.

Following this, Wridra pulled the trigger. A heavy metallic sound occurred, then a massive bullet was fired. She exhaled as she squeezed to soften the impact of the discharge and strengthened the concealment magic on the surrounding areas.

The shot was far too powerful, and the recoil was enough to distort the space around her. Plasma sparked from the colossal amount of energy emission created. The projectile easily surpassed the speed of sound, but the visual cue could tip off her location before it found its mark. So, she needed to use visualization magic in a wide area to keep herself hidden.

Wridra exhaled again and looked through her sights. The bullet sped forth with lightning speed and pierced through the layers of defensive barriers as if drilling through a giant onion. Her first shot had been the perfect surprise attack. But the barrier had interfered this time, redirecting the attack’s energy upward and deflecting most of its power.

There was a series of electronic beeps, and the bullet redirected its trajectory to fly toward the Prominence Dragon once again. This was a feature Wridra had added after her first attempt was unsuccessful.

With fifty kilometers of distance between them, her shot took about twenty seconds to reach its target. Even from this distance, she felt a chill down her back. There was no thought, only instinct, as she repeatedly pressed the button in her hand and turned away.

Kalina moved simultaneously, lifting her airframe and repeatedly firing her Magiguns toward the ground. Amid the thunderous roar and cloud of dust that enshrouded them, a black, viscous fluid appeared. It turned into spikes, spread all around them and pierced through everything from rocks to the mountain and Kalina. Whatever they were, they tracked down living organisms, spread through them like roots, and destroyed them from the inside.

Kalina immediately detached one of her feathers and let out a blare as her master jumped in. Wridra didn’t even have time to fix her posture before they

broke the sound barrier, shaking from the violent vibrations as they blasted their way through the dark clouds. Kalina repeatedly fired her Magiguns behind her in quick succession, and the guns fell off the airframe as the heat caused the connecting pieces to melt off. Yet it still wasn't enough for them to escape, as even Kalina couldn't surpass the speed of light. There was a whooshing sound as a hellish purple encompassed everything.

“Urgh! This...is Blackout!” Wridra shouted.

“System error. Unable to obtain data. We are at risk of collision—”

“Never mind that! Fly!” ordered Wridra.

A flash of light surrounded them, engulfing them in Blackout. Wridra instinctively knew they would need to fly for at least ten more seconds before escaping its domain.

“Shadow Gate!”

Wridra immediately opened a Shadow Gate and was sucked into it along with Kalina.

Dust erupted into the air as they crash-landed in some distant dunes. While they suffered extensive damage from the impact, they fled without the Prominence Dragon detecting them.

Someone slowly rose at the rocky area where Wridra and Kalina had originally been. It was Lavos in his draconian form. He put his legs up on a nearby rock and stared into the horizon where his opponents had vanished. There, he saw what appeared to be multiple suns rising into the sky. Those were long-range missiles that shed their exterior shells as they increased their velocity.

Lavos stared at the unusual sight and said, “Oh, she still thinks she can win. I hate it when a girl doesn't know her place.”

He licked his fingertip, then the missiles exploded all around him and erupted into a blazing inferno.

## §

An alarm repeatedly blared as Wridra descended to the ground. The blue sky had vanished, and everything around her had gone dark. She checked on

Kalina's smoking frame as she said, "Hmm, he must have located me using magic particles. Well done, I must admit."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. And how did he close such a distance instantaneously?" Kalina asked. No matter how much she analyzed the situation, she could not figure it out.

The Arkdragon crouched and picked up a handful of sand, scattering it slowly as she spoke. "I presume this is what happened: countless magic particles had been created in the air. My bullet came in contact with them, alerting him of the angle of my attack and allowing him to determine my location across the terrain."

Kalina fell silent. Finding her location faster than a bullet surpassing the speed of sound was unheard of. It was impossible. But he had outsmarted them somehow, so there was nothing she could say.

Wridra pointed across the horizon. There, the wounded Prominence Dragon was there, spraying a copious amount of blood into the air.

"Look, he is wounded," said Wridra. "He must have left his main body as a decoy, then cast Divine Haze on one of his dragon cores to approach us."

"So he used that strange technique that allows one to freely modify their existence... That would indeed allow him to travel through the ground, but it's hard to believe such a thing is possible," replied Kalina.

Wridra nodded, knowing she had lost to him once before. Lavos had used an unusual ranged attack to whittle down her life force, eventually outmatching her with sheer firepower. However, she couldn't afford to lose this time. Dragons had been deemed neutral in the world's affairs. If the Prominence Dragon sided with the demons, it would significantly tip the world's balance in one direction. Should such a thing happen, Wridra could no longer spend time with Kitase and Mariabelle. She hated the thought, although she was unsure why.

And so, she would win. She would overcome this hardship, defeat the enemy, and enjoy herself on vacation in Japan. Kitase and Mariabelle would surely praise her efforts, though it wasn't as if she sought their praise.

Then, Wridra stood tall in her tattered dress, determined to emerge victorious. She had to figure out her next move. She could no longer snipe her target from afar, and she had already revealed her super weapon, which had been one of her trump cards.

An idea flashed through her mind. "I will snipe him and draw him here."

"Warning, Master. That is a dangerous proposition. You will surely be subject to even harsher retaliation. Even if you draw him out, it would only be one of his many dragon cores."

Still, Wridra nodded. It would be a highly dangerous move that could put her in a situation where she would have to fight him at close range. She nodded again, and Kalina resolved to fight alongside her master.

The Arkdragon fixed the aircraft buried in the sand and began chambering bullets filled with pure magic matter.

A cylinder fell upon the dunes beneath dark clouds, giant puffs of white smoke trailing from it. The cannon had melted off of the aircraft, unable to bear the heat from consecutively firing. Wridra brought in a replacement cannon with space manipulation, then promptly disassembled and fit it into place. Her mind raced throughout the process, but her eyes showed a sense of serenity.

The Arkdragon could swap out her skills at will. Since she could change them to adapt to any situation, she gained a greater advantage in battle the more she learned of her opponent's nature. On the other hand, she had an unfavorable matchup against those who had highly specialized abilities such as the Prominence Dragon. Her enemy outclassed her in terms of firepower. In addition, Wridra was highly vulnerable if the opponent threw off the plans and countermeasures she had prepared before the battle with unexpected moves. Lavos knew this, which was why he constantly maintained a composed attitude.

Regardless, she considered the opponent equally vulnerable if things played out unexpectedly. And Wridra had to admit that she was enjoying this situation. She was so close to seeing him humbled, his face rubbing up against the ground. Her lips curled into a smile, and her trademark dress-shaped armor vanished into a haze. She had deemed physical defense and autofire

unnecessary for the upcoming battle.

A corset embroidered with black roses appeared on her body, and a garter wrapped around her bare legs. She leaned back, and her lustrous black hair clung to her back.

Even though it was an unusual outfit in the dunes, Kalina found Wridra's appearance strangely alluring as she gazed upon her master. Perhaps it was because Wridra had seemed even more dragon-like than usual, with scales covering her toes and waist while her horn looked like a hair ornament. There was a faint purple glow within the Arkdragon's eyes that Kalina found intoxicating. An air of elegance and power emanated from her, with an unmistakable burning passion deep within her. Wridra was determined to seize victory, even if it took everything she had. She faced an overwhelming opponent, but she wanted nothing more than to make him realize her superiority and crush him into the ground.

The word "evolution" referred to when organisms gradually transformed and were reborn in various ways. At that moment, Kalina was undergoing a similar transformation. She transformed her frame to support her master, acquiring speed, grace, and resistance to impact and madness. Her frame creaked as it changed shape, and the Arkdragon glanced at her.

Kalina gasped in realization, feeling shame for acting without getting her master's permission first. "I apologize, Master. It was arrogant of me to wish to protect you."

In response, Wridra's hand gently stroked her frame.

"There is no need to apologize. I have no reason to scold you when you only acted for my sake," remarked Wridra, with eyes full of compassion. "Hmm, it appears you have potential to achieve the form you seek."

Wridra poked Kalina with a fingertip and was shocked to feel warmth growing inside the ship. Kalina wasn't an individual life-form but something created from her master. As such, there was no way she could feel her own emotions. Yet she was so moved that she felt as if she could cry. A torrent of emotion welled up within her, so brilliant and warm that she wanted to clutch at her heart.

What was this emotion? She felt like an egg having its shell peeled off. The world around her glowed brightly, and her birth mother, the Arkdragon, watched her in wait. Her airframe shuddered as it felt Wridra's breath, and her wings folded vertically. Kalina had easily achieved the form she was meant to be and wished to be. What could this power be?

"I shall grant you the skill, Progress. Rise against our enemy with everything you have!"

"Yes, Master!" exclaimed Kalina.

Her master's voice and the skill bestowed upon her sent an indescribable wave of pleasure through her body. The miracles of achieving what she sought and being able to serve such a strong and beautiful master made her evolve at a dizzying pace. As her joy erupted in a crescendo, she acquired new skills:

Obtained physical damage barrier.

Obtained mental damage barrier.

"Roger that, proceeding with the upgrade. Requesting magic matter infusion as an energy source. Approved. Commencing refinement mechanism for higher purity—implementation complete. Commencing barrier multilayer development—completed. Dubbing it as a 'multilayer barrier.' Requesting refractive capabilities—approved, commencing upgrade," Kalina said.

As the aircraft underwent a flurry of changes, Wridra smiled and walked away, the fine sand crunching under her with each step. When she turned around, the multilayer barrier was in the deployment process as a test run. The Arkdragon turned around again, staring at the Prominence Dragon hovering along the horizon.

"Hah, hah, you have mocked me for releasing power from my own body. Now, behold my answer. I have a warm welcome awaiting you," said Wridra, with a beautiful yet intense smile.

## §

Wridra lifted the Magigun, which was three meters, making it far longer than she was tall. Crackling sounds could be heard as scales grew over her fingers as she held the weapon.



Her boots fit into a platform with a heavy metallic clack. The sandy soil couldn't sufficiently absorb the shock, so Wridra partially buried Kalina in the sand and used her as a platform. She had far more stability than before this way and was convinced this was the proper form for firing the Magigun. Moreover, she had made yet another improvement to her plan.

"I should be able to fire in rapid succession now," she noted.

"Please use your power to your heart's content, Master," Kalina said.

Wridra gestured, glancing to her side for the Magigun. A little farther away were several switches for remote detonation bombs. She took a deep breath to contain her impatience.

"Now for the final confirmation," she said. "After firing my weapon, Lavos will immediately close the distance to attack. You will deploy a barrier in preparation of his counterattack. Meanwhile, I will show him ultimate firepower."

"Please note that judging by the difference in our power levels, I can only hold him off for eight seconds."

"That will do. Afterward, I will use the skills I have learned by visiting Japan. Preparing will take some time, but it should work as long as he is drawn here."

She looked into her sights to confirm the Prominence Dragon was still hovering as magic matter scattered all around him. He knew the Arkdragon wouldn't flee, so he awaited the next attack.

While Wridra observed the enemy, Kalina spoke differently, "Japan... The land that is the root of my birth. I would like to visit that country one day."

"Hah, hah, then you must first learn the art of sleeping. If I remember correctly, there is something called an air show in Japan. Perhaps if you return to the form of my wings... Well, this is a discussion for another time."

Had Kitase been there, he likely would have given her a look pleading for her not to do so. No one in modern Japan possessed such incredible firepower, and Kalina stood out so much that she made the elf look invisible in comparison. Wridra chuckled briefly at the thought of his horrified yet sleepy-looking face, then pursed her lips.

Her target was the Prominence Dragon hovering at her maximum attack range. Three bullets waited in the magazine she had quickly made, and she loaded one into the chamber.

Wridra's breathing felt strangely distant. Dark clouds loomed overhead, and the wind blew fiercely, kicking up sand like billowing curtains and making her hair dance wildly. She crouched upon the aircraft on all fours, her heartbeat growing faster.

She wanted to shoot him. Defeat him. Kill him. She wanted to force-feed hot iron down the throat of the one who had subjected her to such indignity in the past. She wanted to punish him for going down the wrong path as an ancient dragon. The thought twisted her face into a ferocious smile.

"Die, my darling."

Fangs bared, and with her ample chest puffed out, the Arkdragon pulled the trigger.

A thunderous eruption occurred, followed by an explosive impact and aftermath. Kalina couldn't have withstood the recoil if she had fired all three bullets in a row. The single shot propelled her backward, spraying sand into the air until it eventually stopped. Wridra turned around and spat on the ground, not even watching the bullet's trajectory.

"Deploy the multilayer barrier!" ordered Wridra.

"Deploying barrier. I recommend putting on your seat belt for your safety, Master," responded Kalina.

Multiple barriers appeared around them, and something black tried to crawl from the ground beneath them. The Prominence Dragon had used his Divine Haze, so Kalina was buying time until it would penetrate the twelve-layered barrier she had put up.

But the enemy seemed to have realized it was no normal barrier. The alternating layers of barriers resistant to physical and mental damage redirected the attacks at an angle, making them difficult to break. This seemed to cause frustration, as they heard an eerie roar in the distance.

Wridra had eight seconds to work with. She repeatedly pressed the switches

in each hand without hesitation. Kalina put a seat belt on her master and began playing music for dramatic effect. The display showed that music was playing, then Kalina spat fire.

Loud booms erupted one after another, spitting out bullets that were approximately five kilograms each. Full of high-purity magic matter, the bullets instantly locked onto their targets upon firing. They were bullets designed to take down supernatural beings that wouldn't just pierce through their target, but split up and cause a chain explosion once inside. If fired at a whale, for example, the bullets would penetrate directly through its head to abdomen, then burst in quick succession, annihilating the colossal creature. The recent rapid-fire shots could have destroyed an entire country.

Kalina also had a new feature installed that allowed her to nullify her barriers.

The multilayer barriers absorbed magic, and the ground beneath them expanded. Wridra stretched her hand toward it and made a gripping gesture, retracting the black flames as if time had rewound. This magic technique called Reversal converged force into a single point. The color drained away from its surroundings as if pulled into a black hole.

There was a moment of silence, followed by a dull sound, as if whatever was caught in the absorption point had been destroyed. Kalina played the sound of applause, then spoke from the cockpit.



“Bravo, Master. That was an elegant and masterful display of skill.”

“Hah, I am sure he enjoyed it as well,” remarked Wridra.

The music was also perfect for the occasion and could only have been chosen by one who was familiar with the battle. The melody, slightly faster than a heartbeat, aroused excitement, while the heavy bass made the listener’s body tremble. Then, the female vocals joined in, ramping up the passion and excitement even further.

But the icing on the cake was the easy-to-operate grip. It was highly responsive in Wridra’s hand, and completely stable no matter how many times she fired the gun. The muzzle flashed, and the impact shook her body. The Prominence Dragon screamed. She loved it as it was what she had wanted to hear.

“Hah, hah, ha ha ha! You fool! Using the same method again?”

“The barriers are breaking down,” Kalina reported. “There is no greater joy than engaging in this battle with a legend such as yourself, Master.”

A loud thud echoed, then the barriers on the ground shattered. The Prominence Dragon had broken through its multiple layers, but what appeared to be a black bud sprouted from the attack point. Spikes grew from the sinister flower, reaching up for the dark clouds in the sky to pierce through Kalina. However, she and Wridra were no longer there.

There was a deafening boom, and Kalina fired the bullet for hunting supernatural beasts in the diagonal direction from where she was facing, using the recoil to propel her turn. A purple light immediately enveloped her and a quiet *vwoom* sound, and the meager amount of grass and trees around them withered as all living things in the area died. The fauna had bloomed madly instantly, then expired in a flash.

“Master, Blackout has been activated,” warned Kalina. “Commencing injection of magic matter into multilayer barrier. Please enjoy about thirty seconds of shooting in comfort.”

“Do not let your guard down yet. He loves nothing more than to strike where his opponent least expects it,” Wridra said. “Look, his Blackout’s power has just

increased substantially.”

Kalina immediately reassessed the situation. The Prominence Dragon was in his draconian form on land, and the significance of this dawned on her. About three of his dragon cores were now inside his body.

“I take back my previous statement. Please enjoy about ten seconds of shooting,” Kalina said.

“That does sound fun indeed. Oh, and I will take over the controls from here.”

Wridra tilted the control stick sharply, shifting the aircraft’s weight onto one side. The next instant, a white line ran across the sandy soil to the horizon, and a blinding light erupted from the ground. An unfathomable amount of heat was generated, melting the ground and causing it to expand and extend a platinum-colored wall upward.

She had no time to look back to confirm but knew this was Lavos’s Platinum Breath, fired from his main body. It would have been disastrous if they had taken a hit from that while dealing with his Blackout.

Countless vines extended forward and grazed Kalina’s frame. Sparks flew, and Kalina detached the exterior piece before the corruption could spread. They were fighting for their lives, yet instead of panicking, Wridra’s lips formed a faint smile. She considered him a fool for using three dragon cores without knowing what he was in for next. To make himself look stronger, he had chosen the worst possible option.

Purple lights illuminated the land mines she had scattered beforehand, making ominous beeping noises around the Prominence Dragon in his draconian form. Having lost his composure from the countless gunshots fired at him, his face had become that of a hideous monster, in a stark contrast to his earlier appearance.

The swarm of superpowerful guided missiles flying in from beyond the horizon was finally about to be put to use as well.

Wridra had won, thanks to her opponent being too prideful to flee. She had continued fighting at the forefront of danger for this moment. Just before the multilayer barrier was deactivated, the entire area around them turned into a

scene out of hell.

## §

Everything had gone dark, with no visibility for a short distance ahead. The Prominence Dragon Lavos adjusted his tie out of habit, then looked all around him. Strangely, he couldn't sense his domain. Lavos should have been able to see through any darkness. He realized Wridra must have used her powers on him, trapping him in some sort of force field.

Lavos had some idea of what had happened. When the brutal attack struck him, his concentration had wavered just slightly. That shrewd woman must have taken that moment to activate her traps.

He heard shoes clicking against the ground as he got closer and closer. Wridra's black hair melded with the darkness, and her pale skin came into view. Seeing the amused look on her face made him want to hurt her until she broke. For now, Lavos moved his fingertip to create a leather sofa. A stunt like this was possible even without that woman's Creation skill. He threw himself onto the sofa, letting both arms hang off of the backrest.

"Wow, that look on your face... You really think you've won? How simple can you be? Pretty ironic, considering you call people fools all the time," Lavos said.

Wridra approached him without saying a word, the sound of her clicking shoes growing. Her expression remained unchanged, assured in her victory. Lavos's flippant smile grew tighter as he felt aggravated.

"Looks like this force field is containing my power," continued Lavos. "Our little battle here may be over, but I have more bodies. When will you realize that you'll still be disadvantaged even if you destroy three meager dragon cores?"

Wridra had likely exposed all her moves to trap him here. Even in his weakened state, he could still take at least one of her dragon cores out, which would be a net positive result for him. Initially, the unfamiliar magic had thrown him off. He had to acknowledge that she had perfected the technique. She sequentially launched her attacks without any incantations from outside his perceptual domain. While Wridra had caught him off guard earlier and shocked him, Lavos fully understood the situation now.

“If you’re thinking of absorbing my dragon core, you can forget it. We’re completely incompatible. Maybe if you try hard enough, you can pull it off in a few centuries... No, you’re not skilled enough. I possess the ability to use Divine Haze, unlike you.”

The clicking halted as the Arkdragon stopped in her tracks.

The Prominence Dragon looked at her, his trademark fluorescent red hair wavering with the movement. He waited for Wridra to speak, as her only option was to talk things out. As he had explained earlier, he was still in a far more advantageous position. But no matter what demands she would make, he had already decided to dominate her as his personal slave. She had displayed a new type of magic earlier, and he wanted to make it his own.

“Pathetic little man. You still cannot admit defeat?” Wridra said.

“What...did you say?”

Lavos’s expression stiffened for a moment, then he sneered. It was foolish of her to assume she had won at this point already. The oblivious Arkdragon glanced around her, then parted her lustrous lips to speak.

“I call this domain Solitude. A technique I learned from arriving in another world and gaining new wisdom.”

“Another world? What are you talking about?”

Lavos knew of the dimension of spirits and demons, but her cryptic statement likely referred to something else. Her acting as if she knew something he did not was getting on his nerves.

Before he knew it, Wridra created a sofa across from him and took a seat. Her fingers caressed the armrest, which had a dragon design on it. “Never mind that. This skill aspires to create a world for me and me only. It weakens anyone who enters and can make them disappear completely. I doubt it would work on someone nearly as powerful as me, even if you are just a copy of your main body.”

“Since when did you love being alone so much? Come to think of it, you have been holed up in that cave for a while.”



Wridra gestured as if to say she hadn't finished talking. Lavos shrugged, and the Arkdragon continued, "There are a few intriguing characteristics to this domain. First of all, it's completely isolated from the outside world. Surely you must have felt that severed connection from your main body. That is why my victory is assured."

"That's where you're mistaken. I'll burn you to cinders as soon as you step out of this hole. Then I'll chain you up and make you spend the rest of your days serving me."

His eyes glinted dangerously, but the woman picked up a fan from seemingly nowhere and snickered, covering her mouth with it. The blatantly mocking laughter made the Prominence Dragon's expression darken.

"So, what are you trying to do here?" he asked. "I'll have you know, I can easily destroy this meager force field with my Wither skill."

"Hah. If you apologize now, I will still show you mercy. I will allow you to live freely without interfering in the Age of Man. Your answer...is obvious, I suppose. You fool," said Wridra, seeing the contempt on his face. She rose from her sofa and turned on her heel, vanishing into the darkness and leaving Lavos alone.

Despite what he had just said, Lavos didn't believe he could break through this domain. Even if he could, the world he had come from likely wasn't on the other side of the force field. Wridra had said this place was completely isolated from the outside world. If he believed her, it would still be her domain on the other side.

It was hard to breathe. Some sort of presence loomed closer from the depths. Lavos loosened his tie, his expression stiff. Something didn't feel right. Anxiety that he hadn't felt in a long time closed in on him, making him feel as if he had made a grave mistake during his earlier conversation.

In the darkness, low-pitched, rumbling music started playing out of nowhere. Heavy drums began to beat, then a roar came from something giant. The slow tempo reverberated erratically as string instruments joined in to add an element of sorrow.

"What the hell is going on?"

The sound of the hysterical plucking was so powerful that it felt like the performer was dedicating their soul to the performance. The Prominence Dragon had no way of knowing it was from a movie the Arkdragon had seen in Japan; it was music of despair, symbolic of a colossal creature wreaking havoc. It made him feel as if something were about to appear. The melody, quicker than his heartbeats, made sweat pour down his face for the first time in a long while. He felt as if a terrible monster were about to be born, and he couldn't help but wipe his sweat nervously. The music began to intensify.

Then a dragon appeared from the darkness. Eyes burning bright red, the dragon shook the ground as it stepped forward. It was the Arkdragon in her true glory, and the Prominence Dragon couldn't take up his own dragon form due to his main body being separate from this one. The ground continued to rumble as the dragon closed in on its prey, and Lavos couldn't help but partially rise from his seat.

"Stop this distasteful music right now! You want to torment me, is that it?" he shouted.

The Arkdragon opened her mouth full of fangs as if to call him out on his hypocrisy. Purple light glowed from deep within, and it appeared to be the color of despair in his eyes.

Just as a chill went down his spine, he was incinerated in a blast of fire.

§

Lavos woke up, his right hand throbbing in pain.

"Agh! My fingers..."

His body had been so badly battered that he could hardly move. He felt something being pressed hard against the tip of his finger, his bone crunching as it was forced all the way to the base. The same thing happened to the rest of his fingers, and when he turned his vacant eyes toward his hand, he found a golden ring placed on each of his fingers except his thumb.

Wridra stood there in her usual dress, faintly smiling at him. She was beautiful yet terrifying, and a cold sweat rolled down his forehead. It was a skill used by a certain hero candidate—or, to be precise, it had been created by a certain dark

elf's love, which was taken and abused by a man named Zarish.

The skill was known as Engagement.

"Stop...it..."

"It was a good thing I took these rings. I did not think I would ever need it, but here we are. I shall let you in on how it works. Each of these takes about twenty percent of your levels and grants them to me. Of course, that is after I had given it some improvements."

She chuckled as she pushed the final ring in place, but he knew she wasn't done. Just stealing levels from one of his clones wouldn't have been a reason for him to feel such fear. She still must have had something terrible up her sleeve. Lavos moved his eyes, which were the only mobile parts of his body, and saw her smile cheerfully.

"Hah, hah, so you have noticed. You must be particularly perceptive because you are such a coward deep inside. The dark elf's rings have another delightful characteristic. You are right to be afraid; you should be glad that you have such sharp instincts."

Lavos shook his head side to side as far as he could but only made it tremble slightly. He had never known such fear since the day he was born. The primal sense of dread welling up inside him made him want to scream like a child as if he would transform into something terrible.

"No need to worry," Wridra went on. "From today on, you will be my slave. You will spend your days roaming my house with a cleaning rag. I will teach you to cook. I will teach you to change diapers. I will make you a loyal dog that will look after my home while I am out."

"Nooo! Noooooo!" cried out Lavos, his face contorted in despair. Yet Wridra's delighted smile never wavered.

"Hah, hah, as our first collaborative assignment together, we shall destroy your main body. At first, you are to act as if you are not under my control, then we will make our move as your body has its guard down. Let our fun little hunt for my darling begin."

With that, Wridra pushed the final ring all the way down his finger. As his

consciousness faded, he heard her say, “Perhaps I will give the rings to my main body while I am in Japan.”

Wridra showed no shred of concern for her husband, and Lavos the Prominence Dragon felt deep despair once again.

## Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki. I'm relieved to have brought you volume 9 without issue. First, I'd like to thank my correspondent at Hobby Japan and Yappen for the beautiful autumn illustrations. I'm sure Ms. Elf was thrilled by the vibrant ginkgo trees.

It's been quite some time since our last communication, but I hope you've all been doing well. Fortunately, I've been doing relatively well without suffering any major health issues. I should probably get some more exercise, though.

Although this volume was released in October in Japan, the story takes place deep into autumn. As I write this afterword, the stuffy nights that were so difficult to sleep through have changed drastically, and it's so cold that it wakes me up at night. I ended up changing into a long-sleeve shirt and pants in a hurry. I've been wearing my usual outfit for warmer months without thinking about it, but I really should be more conscious of the change in seasons.

Personally, I think autumn is a season that's somewhat less distinctive than the others. Winter has snow, summer has giant columns of clouds in blue skies, and spring has cherry blossoms, so maybe I feel as if autumn is a bit inferior to those seasons. But I believe autumn is entirely different when experienced in adulthood compared to childhood. When the color fades away from the world around us, I'm surprised by how vivid the ginkgo tree on the local campus is. The wind then gets colder and colder by the day. They say autumn can feel lonely, and I clearly remember feeling that way as a child.

When writing this story, I consciously tried to express what I felt as a child into words. I often think about how Ms. Elf would feel experiencing things in Japan for the first time and how to best express things from her perspective. Those memories resurface, and I feel a touch of nostalgia as I write. It isn't often that I recollect sensations from my childhood, after all. There are many moments like these where I feel things that are hard to describe when writing this book.

If all goes well, I'm planning a trip to Nikko next time. Oh, not me personally, but in the story. For me, vacations in the story are just as fun as taking one in real life, so I'd like to continue writing while taking care of my health.

Please take care of yourself as the weather gets colder.

Makishima Suzuki





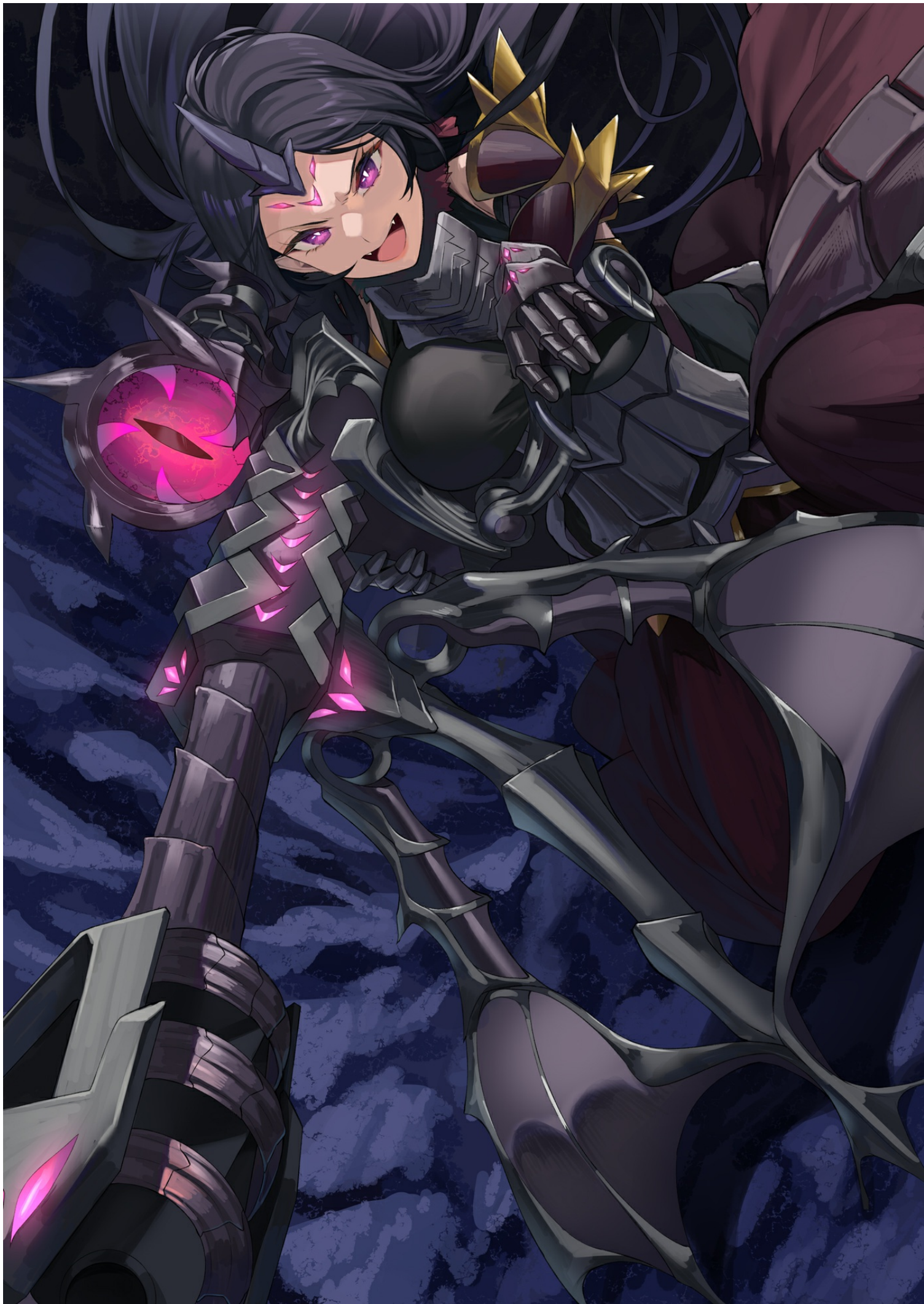














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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 9

by Makishima Suzuki

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2024