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Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

The FRUIT of EVOLUTION

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MIKU

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U35
illustrator

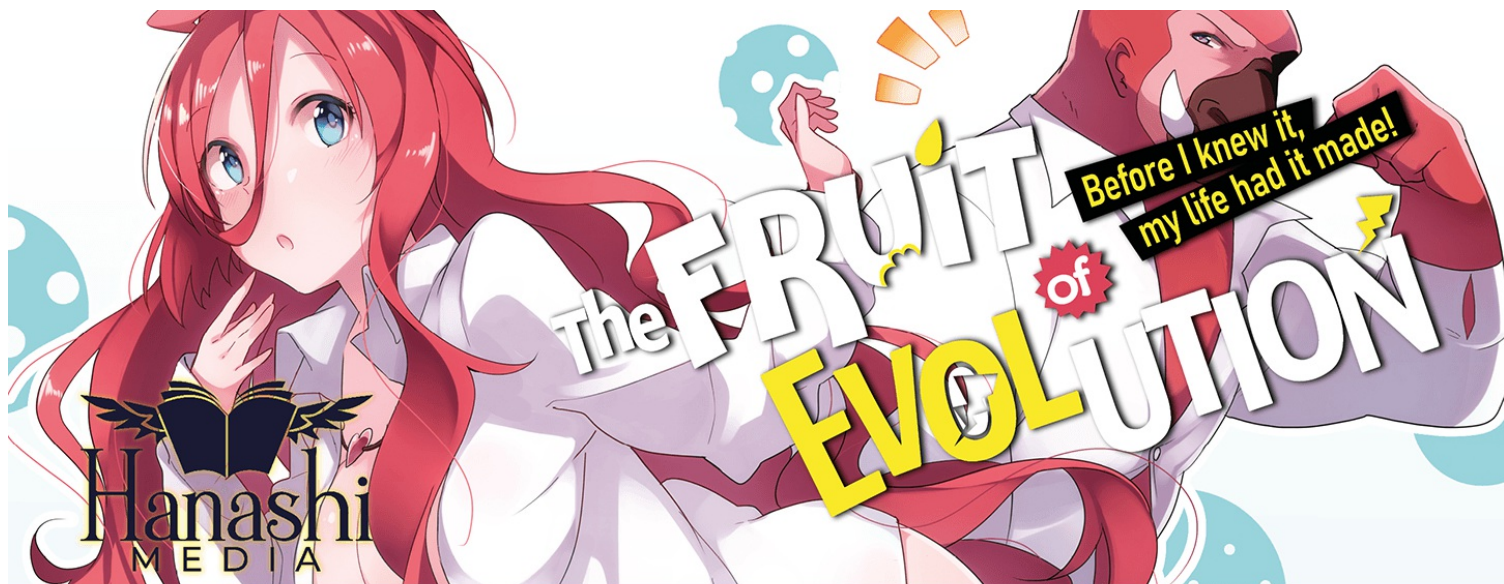
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The **FRUIT** of **EVOLUTION**


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The FRUIT of EVOLUTION

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"Look...look, Seiichi! I did it!
I can talk now, just like you!
I can stay with you!
I...I can tell you I love you again!"





"WHO'D WANT TO SEE
A GORILLA IN NOTHING
BUT A **BUTTON-UP?**"

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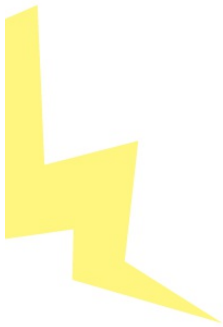
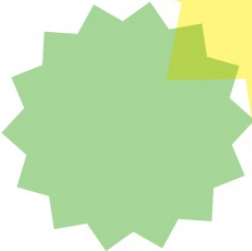
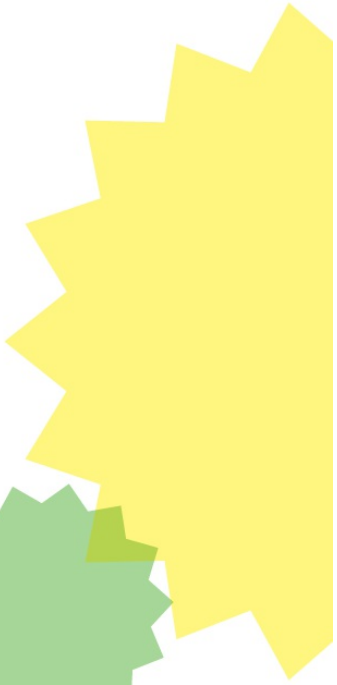
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THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

STORY BY MIKU
ART BY U35



Prologue

I, Hiiragi Seiichi, had never been in such a sticky situation before in my life.

“Want drink?”

“Nah, I’m underage.”

“Then want food?”

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry right now.”

“Then want sleep with me?”

“Tempting, but I’m not tired yet.”

“Then want marry me?”

“How about hell no?!”

A gorilla wanted to marry me.

How did this even happen?! Seriously, just what went wrong with the universe today?!

Okay ... I just need to calm down for a minute. Getting worked up won’t help me.

I looked up at the gorilla in front of me. It wasn’t just any gorilla though. Its thickly-muscled body was covered in bright red fur. Its face was just like that of any old gorilla back on Earth, except for the razor-sharp tusks. It was something far beyond any ordinary ape—a Kaiser Kong. A *female* Kaiser Kong. It wasn’t a kong of the donkey or king varieties either. It was a whole different breed of beast.

It blushed. “Me never sleep with man before. Be gentle.”

“Just shut up!”

I wish it’d kill me already.

I knew they lived in this area before, thanks to the Clever Monkeys and that Acrowolf, but I never dreamed it would be this horrifying.

“Me want ten kids. You want more?”

“Seriously, just be quiet. Actually, how about you drop dead?”

How was I supposed to stay calm like this?! This dumbass gorilla was really throwing me off. If I was gonna get out of this mess, I needed to focus.

I plugged my ears and thought back to what had gotten me into this mess in the first place...

Chapter 1: To Another World

My name is Hiiragi Seiichi, and I was an eleventh-grader at a pretty unusual school. Now, just to be clear, there weren't any psychics or superpowered people or anything weird like you'd find in a manga. No, this school was home to idols. Teen idols, girl idols, guy idols—you name 'em, we had 'em.

Does that mean I was as hot as your average boyband member? Well, that was a no. A big, fat no.

I had all my hair, but that was my most charming feature. Even I knew I was super ugly, and I reeked. Like seriously. It was bad enough that nobody could sit too close to me in class without gagging. Even my teachers begged me to do something about it, but nothing I tried worked. Thanks to that, I was famous in the worst possible way.

I'd also been putting on weight to boot. Literally, I went from about 150 lbs at the start of tenth grade to over 240 lbs now. See, ever since my parents passed away, I forgot all that stuff they told me about eating healthy and exercising, and I just let it all go. Sorry, Mom and Dad.

Now, I'd given up on my looks, but there was one thing about me that I just couldn't stand—my name. Seiichi sounded like such a cool name, like someone who was actually handsome might have. I didn't deserve a name half that good. I wished I could apologize to the whole world for being such a letdown. Sorry, world.

It probably wouldn't come as a surprise, then, that I got bullied like nobody's business. It was like the gods themselves wanted to punish me. I could've gone to a different school, of course, but this one was closest. Besides, given what the other students were like, you didn't exactly need to be an academic genius.

All this makes me sound like trash, right? Go on, laugh. I laughed at myself every minute of every day. I mean whose great idea was it to let someone like

me be born? Even if I could have gone to a better school or something, new bullies would have found me in no time.

Thinking back, I was bullied on the day my troubles really started too.

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“Hey, Porko! Go buy me some bread!”

“Hope your wallet’s as fat as your gut, Porko!”

Cue crude laughter.

At lunch, a bunch of guys called me out behind the gym like always and stuck me up. You know what they say about looks being deceiving? Well, these guys looked like saints but acted like devils. There were some idols at the school—especially the famous ones—who’d treat me decently. But even then, it felt like they were trying to show the world how nice they were for putting up with a monster like me.

I went to buy the bread they wanted from the vending machine, and after I got back, they gave me the “honor” of being their punching bag.

“Have a knuckle sandwich, Porko!” One of the guys slugged me in the gut, and I let out a heavy grunt.

I fell down to my knees, coughing.

“Hahaha, damn, that felt good! Nothin’ like a good ol’ punching bag, right?”

“Hold up, guys, isn’t class starting soon?”

“Already? Dammit, guess we better get goin’. Later, Porko!”

They headed back to class, guffawing to themselves all the while.

I tried to stand up, but my knees weren’t ready to hold me up yet. I couldn’t take even a single step before falling back down. I grimaced, waiting for the pain to subside.

“H-Hiiragi-kun?!” One of the girls noticed me and ran over. “Are you okay? What happened?!”

She had earthy-brown hair that was kept back by a hairband. She had large, double-lidded eyes, and perfectly round dark eyes. Her lips were a delicate shade of cherry blossom pink. She was one of the prettiest girls in school and my classmate, Hino Youko. As it happened, she was also one of the rare few people in school who didn't care about my stink and treated me normally.

"Can you stand?" She reached out to help me up.

"Y-yeah."

I'd like to go on the record and say that I wasn't the kind of sorry sap who'd get the wrong idea if a girl treated me nicely. I knew how I looked. Man, I hated thinking about it. I wanted to cry.

"What happened, Hiiragi-kun?"

"N-nothing you need to worry about, Hino. You'd better get to class. You don't want to be late, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"You'd better get going then. You go first. I don't want anyone to see you with me."

"Why not?"

"People might get the wrong idea, y'know. I'd hate to get you wrapped up in my mess."

"What?"

With that, I forced myself to stand and walked off.

I bet she really was just worried about me but thought she'd better keep her distance. Sure, that caring side was what made her so popular, but I didn't want her to get bullied because of me. I hoped she had finally gotten the hint this time.

Class started and ended like usual after that, but when everyone was getting ready to go home, a chime rang out and the intercom came on.

"Hello, everyone. Could everyone stop what you're doing and sit down?"

Everyone stopped to look up at the intercom, and a moment later, they all sat down in unison.

“The hell?!” someone cried out.

“Okay, who pushed me?!” called another.

Even I was forced to sit down by some invisible force.

“What the heck?” I muttered. I tried to stand up, but—

“I can’t move!”

“What’s happening?!”

Nobody could move a muscle, as though we were all paralyzed. The whole classroom began to devolve into panic, and the intercom came back on.

“Hello there, kids. Let me introduce myself. In this world, I’m who you might call ‘God.’” The voice had a strangely androgynous quality to it, making it impossible to tell if the speaker was young or old, man or woman. “It looks like you’re all rather confused, but that’s hardly surprising. The unknown and incomprehensible have always bred chaos in the hearts of men. Honestly, you’re such comical little creatures.”

Wait, did they just call themselves God?

Normally, I’d assume they had a few screws loose, but that couldn’t explain why none of us could move.

Maybe they’re not nuts. Maybe they’re telling the truth.

“Explaining things to you humans in detail always exhausts me,” the voice continued in a jovial tone, “so I’ll keep this simple. I’ll be transferring each and every one of you to another world now.”

The room went dead silent. Someone opened their mouth to protest, but no words came out. Everyone turned to look at others in confusion for a moment before the intercom turned on again.

“Oh, and since I’d rather not deal with you all squabbling over each other, I’ve taken away your voices temporarily.”

Suddenly, it clicked. The voice really was God—or at least something that carried out God’s will. It didn’t help the situation make any more sense though.

“Anyhow, I’ve decided that Earth has far too many people on it, and, as such, I need to move you somewhere new. You humans have had your way with the planet a little too much, you know. I can’t allow your population to continue increasing as it is. Can’t you hear the screams of Mother Earth beneath your feet? That’s why we gods are shipping you off to other, less populated worlds. In short, we’re saving the world from you.”

I could just imagine the speaker nodding smugly.

“You should all be grateful, by the way. The original plan was to quietly erase you from existence, but I went out of my way to grant you the right to live. I believe you all owe me a thank you!”

Who does this prick think they are?

“Your new home, by the way, is a nice little fantasy world. I think you’ll find it rather similar to the RPGs you play here. Makes sense? Good. Now, this means that you’ll have to cope with a healthy dose of monsters, but you’ll have magic as well. There isn’t any ‘science’ there, however, so I imagine you ‘hip kids,’ as it were, will find it plenty inconvenient—not to mention perilous to boot.”

Oof. Getting erased from existence is starting to sound appealing.

“Since your new world is so dangerous, there’s no need to worry about you humans getting too full of yourselves, and none of the gods will lay a finger on your new home. That means no godly pranks but no miracles either. Instead, you’ll have the full gamut of levels, Skills, and Stats to play with, so I encourage you to enjoy it. Since this world is higher tiered than the one I’ll be sending you to, your Stats will be significantly higher than the natives. Oh, and just so your friends and families won’t worry about you, I’ll be erasing you from all their memories, so you can enjoy your new lives without reservation.”

That higher level thing sounded like a nice perk. We’d survive the first few nights at least. I didn’t know if making our parents forget we ever existed would help us forget our old world though ... not that I need to worry about that personally.

“I have a few parting gifts for you as well. You’ll all have menus from which you can see your Stats, Skills, and even your Titles as well as an Item Box that you can store things in by concentrating. I’ll also throw in a language-decoding ability and an Analysis Skill. Oh, and remember, anyone in your new world can check their own Stats.

“Now, remember to be as positive as you can. It’s nothing but dumb luck that you’re even getting such an opportunity after all. I should also mention that I’ll be sending you all in groups—and I do mean *all* of you, though of course not the building itself.”

Wait, so we just got lucky? And if the whole school’s going, that’s almost eight hundred people. And from the sounds of it, we aren’t even the only people getting sent off.

The “presents” he mentioned were all pretty standard fare too. I mean, without that language-decoding ability, we’d be pretty much screwed from the get-go. I didn’t know what they meant by Skills and Titles, but that Analysis Skill sounded useful at least. Now if I decided to eat something off the floor, I’d know exactly what I was getting into.

“Alright then, that’s enough from me. I’m awfully busy, after all. You’ll all have an hour to prepare, so make the best of it. If you’re in a group, then I’ll be able to send you someplace safe. If you’re alone ... well, not even God knows.”

With that, the intercom cut out. I tried to move, and I found that the power that had been keeping us in our seats was gone.

The room was dead quiet. See, having really weird stuff happen makes you freak out, but if it’s not just weird but downright crazy, then nothing calms you down more. Nobody had the courage to talk, let alone move. It was as if we were still all bound to our desks.

After a painfully long silence, one of my classmates, Aoyama Hiroki, stood up.

“H-hey! Why don’t we go figure out what the hell’s going on here?” Aoyama wasn’t an idol, but he was the soccer team’s captain and ace player. He was stupidly popular with the girls. “If what that nutjob said is true, then everyone in the school’s getting transported. Check and see if the doors open ... oh, and the windows!”

A few more students stood up to try the exits.

“Nope,” said the guy at the door. “It’s not locked or anything, but it won’t open.”

Aoyama nodded. “Alright. I guess ‘God’ might’ve been telling the truth then.” He put his hand on his chin and was quiet for a moment. “Right. We should try to check out our Stats next. If anything comes up, then that’s our answer.”

One of the guys cocked his head to the side. “Huh? Can’t we only do that in the other world?”

“We might as well try. Since the teachers are all in the staff room, we’ve gotta do all we can by ourselves. Let’s see... Status!”

C’mon, Aoyama. God told you to think it, not say it, you poser.

A translucent card appeared in front of him.

“Whoa!” He grabbed it and started reading it over. “He’s right. It’s like I’m some game character. Everyone, check your own Stats!”

Well, at least someone’s taking charge.

I concentrated for a moment and watched as my own Status card popped up.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: Technically Human			
SEX: Creepy Male			
JOB: Filth of Society (Unemployed)			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 17	ATTACK: 1	DEFENSE: 1	AGILITY: 1
MAGIC ATTACK: 1	MAGIC DEFENSE:	LUCK: 0	CHARISMA:

	1		Immeasurable (Too Low)
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dirty Uniform Shirt• Dirty Uniform Pants• Dirty Undershirt• Dirty Underwear			
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis			

Wait, what the hell? What does it mean, “technically” human?! Am I really that ugly?! Why did they need to put me down as a “creepy” male?! Wasn’t just “male” good enough for me?! And those Stats—how is my Charisma not even a number? My Luck’s zero too!

Wait, and why are all my clothes dirty?! They’d better not be dirty just because I’m wearing them! Damn, I think I might cry. How come even my own Stats treat me like shit?! Really, my job’s “Filth of Society”?! I’m a student! That’s a job, honest! Man, I’m not going to last a second in a fight. So what, I’m supposed to just die?!

I stopped to take a breath. I’d never had to retort to so many things at once before.

As I went through five full stages of grief over my Stats, I could hear my classmates’ voices all around me.

“Hey, look, I’m a Swordswoman!”

“Pfft, lame. I’m a Sage!”

“Check it out; all my Stats are at a hundred already!”

“Really? I’m hundreds across the board too.”

Wait, what?! That would be like a hundred times my Stats!

I could feel a dark lump form in my giant gut.

Is this what it’s like to live in a class-based society? Thanks, I hate it.

“Alright, looks like everyone’s seen their Stats,” Aoyama called out with a nod. “Let’s form groups then. We’re almost out of time.”

He looked up at the clock, and I followed his gaze. It was still ticking away, fortunately, but it looked like fifty minutes had already passed since the end of the announcement.

“There shouldn’t be any maximum group size, or at least that’s what that voice implied. We’d better go as big as we can then. If only we knew how to form groups...” As he spoke, another translucent card appeared in the air in front of him. “Oh, is this the group-making function? It looks like all we need is our group members’ names. Alright, we’ll go around and say our names one by one, and everyone just needs to write them down.”

Everyone got up to cluster around Aoyama, and one by one, they started writing down each others’ names. At this rate, I’d get left out. I didn’t want to be the first to die at least.

I waited until everyone else was done to call out to Aoyama.

“Hey, uh... put my name in too!”

Aoyama shot me a frigid look. “Huh? Don’t tell me what to do, Porko.”

“Huh?”

“Who the hell’d wanna write your name?”

“B-but at this rate, I won’t—”

“What, afraid of being alone? Like anyone’d wanna party up with a pig like you. Like, seriously, stay over there. Ugh, I can smell you from here.”

I was struck speechless.

They’re still bullying me when it’s life or death?!

I looked to the others for help, but they all just shot me dirty looks, and a few of them were smirking. Not a soul was on my side.

Dammit, this is some rotten luck. Well, duh. I guess my Luck is zero.

After a long moment, though, one of the guys—Ooki—burst out laughing.

“Hahahaha! Oh, crap, that’s a riot! I’m gonna die!”

They looked at him as if he were nuts. “Dude, what’s your problem?”

He jabbed a finger at me. “Just look at Porko’s Stats! Damn, they’re somethin’!”

Wait, how?! Aren’t I the only person who can see my Stats?

Ooki sneered as though he could read my mind.

“Guess what, shithole? I tried out that Analysis Skill just like that announcer freak said. And man, you’re special ... hahahaha!”

Analysis?! Really?!

The students around him gave him a doubting look, but a moment after they turned to face me, they also burst out laughing.

“How do you even get Stats that shitty?!”

“Damn, that’s a lotta ones...”

“Oh, is he screwed. He’s dead meat!”

They started pointing and laughing like children.

“More like dead weight! Who’d let a guy like him join their party?!”

“Ew... And I thought he was gross before.”

“Oof. How’s it feel to be ‘Filth of Society’?”

Just to be sure, I decided to use Analysis on Aoyama, but as soon as I did, I regretted it.

>The difference between your Stats and the target’s is too great to be revealed via Analysis.

All I could see was his name. Everything else was blurred out.

How are they all this much stronger than me at level 1? I was trash by this world’s standards, and it looked like getting sent to a new world would do jack shit to help me.

I nearly blacked out, but my classmates’ insults only became more intense.

“Just go screw yourself, uggo.”

“Like, seriously. What’d I do to deserve being in a class with you?”

“Hey guys, we can’t *really* pick on him here, but he’s fair game in the new world, ain’t he?”

“God, just die already.”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

“Die!”

Okay, okay, I get it! Seriously, how do you expect me to respond to that?! “Sure thing, will do, mates”? Like hell I’d do that! Death’s scary!

I gave up on getting through to them at all. I couldn’t bring myself to care anymore. So what if I couldn’t join their group? They’d probably just bully me more anyways. *That’s it; find the silver lining, Seiichi. Yep.*

“Ew, is he actually smiling?”

“Hah, what a sicko!”

How about you just give it a rest?! Get a hobby or something!

At that moment, though, the intercom turned on again. Our hour was up.

“Well, it looks like you’ve formed your groups ... except for one of you, I suppose.”

Wait, do they mean me? They mean me, don’t they?!

“I see you’re quarrelling even when your lives depend on it. I should’ve expected as much from humans. You never change, but I’m getting sidelined. I have an apology to make to you all.”

Apology? I don’t like the sound of that.

“Remember how I told you I’d send any groups to safe areas? About that—it seems one of the countries in your new world is performing a hero-summoning ritual.”

Hero-summoning?

“As such, all your groups will be sent right there. I’m afraid they’ve completely hijacked my own transportation magic ... though one of you will fall through, it seems.”

So they all get summoned as heroes to some ritzy castle, and I get dropped someplace dangerous on my own?!

“It seems that your destination world has a Demon King in it now, so the world will be a tad more dangerous than usual. You’ll probably be thrown straight into some fight or another. Since your time will be at a premium, I’ll be putting a book into your Item Boxes that explains the basics of your new world. Aside from that, however, you’re on your own. I’ve done all I can.”

Seriously?! I thought God was supposed to be all-powerful! And my classmates are all going to be fighting right off the bat? I’m almost glad I’m not getting summoned with them. Nope, scratch that. I don’t wanna die alone.

“Oops, looks like the ritual is starting.” Glowing circles of light formed at the feet of all my classmates. “Sorry about this, really. Good luck in your new world. I’ll be praying for your survival.”

With that, they all faded away into glittering motes of light. A few of them stopped to shoot me dirty sneers as they went. That was awfully grown up of them.

I found myself alone in the room.

A long moment of silence passed.

Wait, what about me?! I’m supposed to be going somewhere, right?!

“Ahaha, relax,” came the voice over the intercom. “I’ll send you on your way in a moment. I’m afraid I don’t know where you’ll be headed though. I set the magic to ‘random’.”

“What?”

“If you’re lucky, you’ll get sent to a nice town or something. If you’re not ... well, enough said.”

“Seriously?!”

What a time to have a Luck of zero. I already know how this is going to play out.

The voice wasn’t finished, however. “I’ll admit, though, I’m almost impressed you alone were left out. Even the teachers are heading off to be heroes. How about I give you one last Skill to make up for it then?”

“Really?!”

“Let’s see what I’ve got. Oh, this is a nice one. I think I’ll give you Perfect Loot.”

“Perfect Loot?”

Wow. That’s got one hell of a ring to it.

“Basically, whenever you slay a monster, you’ll be able to take everything it possesses. Just like Analysis, it’s perfectly risk-free. Oh, and like other Skills, it

doesn't consume Mana, either. Feel free to try it out when you arrive in your new home world."

"Okay..."

"Whoops, and there goes the ritual! Looks like your time has come."

I looked down to see that my body was covered in glittering motes of light.

"Good luck in your new world now."

Bit by bit, I started fading from the face of the earth.

Finally, it was time for my story to start!

Or something like that. Forget I said anything.

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Even in the empty classroom, the voice from the intercom continued.

"What horrid little things, humans..." The voice was utterly devoid of emotion. "They're just as the seven sins describe: greedy, prideful, wrathful, gluttonous, lustful, envious, slothful. They haven't learned a thing in all these years. No wonder the earth is on the brink of death.

"Who do they think the world belongs to? Them? Of course not. The earth never asked for them to exist. And yet, they war and quibble over Her bounties, as if they were theirs to claim. Even wars of 'religion' are so utterly mercantile. How foolish."

The voice took on a tint of humor as it continued.

"I'm rather impressed he remained so pure, even in such a world. And to think, he hasn't even considered revenge! Though admittedly, I can't tell if he's truly satisfied with his life or he's simply given up."

The voice chuckled.

"If humanity really is beyond redemption, then you were made in the image of no man, child. It's the rare case like you that makes humans so entertaining, so loveable yet so foul." The voice was filled with warmth, like a doting

mother's. "I suppose I should watch over humanity a little longer. I pray for your happiness, one and all."

And with that, the intercom fell eternally silent.

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"Yep, I've got no idea where the hell I am."

After the whole transportation thing, I found myself smack dab in the middle of a forest. I just hoped there was a village nearby.

"Alright, let's see what I've got on me!"

Silence.

"Dammit, I can't calm down!

"And I can't stop talking to myself! What's wrong with me?!"

"I guess I should pick a direction and start walking.

"Standing around and moping won't solve anything. Besides, I've never been in a forest this dense before, and it's starting to creep me out.

"Nothing's gonna try and eat me ... right?"

I started walking, looking over my shoulders all the while.

I bet I set off a flag there. Oh, I'm so screwed.

Chapter 2: The Fruit of Evolution

I wandered aimlessly through the forest for about an hour, only stopping once to relieve myself in the bushes. My feet were totally dead. I was still wearing my hallway slippers; after all, my actual shoes were still in my cubby back at school.

Besides, who would make a fat guy walk so much? This is just cruel. At least give me a scooter, God.

"I'm so hungry..."

I wasn't just snack-level hungry either. I couldn't remember the last time I had moved this much, and I was ready for dinner.

"Food ... where's the food?"

I took a look around, but I didn't see even a single bug, let alone any tasty little critters. The trees didn't have any fruits, and there weren't any mushrooms around either.

"I'm gonna starve to death, aren't I?! That would suck!"

C'mon, at least give me something for effort.

"Dammit. GIVE! ME! FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD!"

I couldn't not scream. I was too wound up to stay quiet any longer. It didn't fill my belly though.

"C'MERE, FOOOOOOOOOOOOD! LEMME EAT YOOOOOOOOOOU!"

Whew, screaming my lungs out is fun. I'm totally losing it, aren't I?

At that moment, though, I heard a rustling in the nearby bushes.

"Is that you, food?!" I whipped around to face the sound.

"Grrrrrrr!" growled the not-food.

"OH."

Standing there was the biggest wolf I'd ever seen in my life.

"AROOOOOOOO!!"

"I'm sorry! Don't eat me!"

I practically faceplanted as I dropped to my hands and knees to beg.

I mean, that thing's two meters of gray death! And I don't like that look in its eyes! And look at all those teeth! Please, just don't eat me!

"Grarr!"

"Yeah, I thought not!"

It leapt right at me. I only managed to roll out of its way at the last moment.

"Shit! Oh, shit, I'm gonna die!"

I was so glad I took a leak in those bushes earlier. Only a little came out this time!

"Grrr..."

It seemed genuinely surprised I had dodged its first attack. The wolf backed away a few paces, watching me carefully. The look in its eyes wasn't a predator look so much as it was a curious one. Kinda like how babies stick everything they want to know about in their mouths.

Huh, here I was looking for food, and the food was me all along. Somebody help.

Just at that moment, though, the bushes behind me rustled.

"Thank God someone came!" I whipped around at max speed.

"Grrrrrr!" growled the someone.

"OH."

Okay, seriously, who thought it was a good idea for a second wolf to come in?! This isn't fair! I'm so dead!

"Fine, you wanna eat me? Then eat me! Just, um, don't make it hurt."

I stretched my arms out wide and lay flat out on the ground.

But then

“Grarrar!”

“Grrrr. Bark!”

Instead of chewing into me, the wolves started fighting each other.

“Bark, bark!”

“Bark! Grr.”

My wolf-ese is a little rusty, but it sounds like...

“Gimme that food!”

“Screw off, he’s mine!”

...or something like that.

“And goodbye.”

I got up as quietly as I could and fled the scene.

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“Oof.”

My stomach let out another wailing growl.

Five days had passed since I escaped the wolves. I managed to get some decent sleep at night by climbing trees, but I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything the whole time. I probably couldn’t climb another tree again if my life depended on it. It didn’t even have to be meat—I’d take any food I could get.

“I’m gonna die here, aren’t I?”

I pride myself on being positive, and now I’m positive I’m dead.

Not eating for five whole days was tough on a fat guy like me. If I had to, I’d start stuffing leaves and grass in my mouth. Even the dirt was starting to look pretty good.

“Nope, I’m gonna die here...”

My legs gave out beneath me, and I faceplanted into the ground. My face hurt like hell, but I didn't care anymore.

"I need something to eat, anything..."

I tried to take a bite of the ground.

Damn, the ground's hard. No way I can take a chunk outta that.

"I guess this is it," I muttered to myself.

Just as I started to close my eyes for what I thought would be the last time, I heard something. Something that was getting closer to me by the second.

"Ook, ook, eek!"

"Eek, eek!"

"Grrrrrarr!"

I looked up to watch a couple of things that looked like monkeys desperately trying to escape one of those giant wolves.

"Eek, eek, eek!"

"Oooh oooh, aaah aaah aaah!"

"Graaaaarrrrrr!"

The monkeys fled right over my head without so much as glancing at me, and I heard something fall a short ways in front of me. The wolf didn't even glance at me either.

"What was that about?"

I didn't have the strength left to think though.

"Maybe getting eaten alive would be better than this," I found myself mumbling. Nobody was left to hear me though.

"Hahaha."

I chuckled to myself. Thinking back, my life had really sucked. I'd been bullied ever since I was in preschool. Some people hit me; some hid my stuff or doodled on it, or soaked it and I didn't even know who did it. I bet I was only able to hold on this long because there were a few good people out there who

treated me okay. They would talk to me normally, play with me normally, treat me normally. I guess my friends were the only things I ever really cared about. Heck, I'd even count Hino from the class next door as a friend. Oh, and there was Shouta, and Kenji. There was even Kannazuki-senpai and Miu in other years. There were a few other people in my same grade too. None of them were anything like me. Maybe they were just trying to make themselves look good, but all that mattered to me was that they were nice enough.

My family was also okay ... until Mom and Dad died. After that, my relatives all started fighting over their estate, and I could only protect it by living alone. Grandpa technically became my guardian though. And of course, I ended up getting extra fat and ugly after that, but that was my own fault.

It wasn't a great life, but it was mine.

I kinda just sucked, didn't I?

"Haha ... man, I'm weak."

So this is how it feels to die, huh? Can't say I'm a fan.

I kind of wished that someone would feel sad for me. I'd hate it if everyone I thought was a friend just didn't care in the end.

"I guess, if I'm dead, I won't care either way."

As I started to lose consciousness, I looked up at the greenery before me.

"Haha! That's a funny-looking fruit."

All I could make out, though, was a brown fruit on the path in front of me.

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Wait, a what?

My eyes snapped wide open.

"Fruit!"

There was no doubting it. I had no idea what kind of fruit it was. It was brown and the same shape and size as a football, but there was no doubt—it was a fruit. *A real fruit.*

It was what I'd spent five whole days looking for. Mana from heaven.

"FOOD!!"

I wailed like a bat out of hell as I crawled forward towards it. I didn't know how I had that much energy left, but inch by inch, I got closer and closer. Full steam ahead! I had nothing left to lose!

"Ooohhhhh!"

And finally, I touched it.

I grabbed it. It was actually in my hands. It was food. *My food ...* even though those weird monkeys were the ones who found it.

I brought it up to my face to study it. My fingernails were in agony after all that crawling, but I had more important things to think about. I used Analysis on it.

>Fruit of Evolution.

Nothing showed up aside from the name. Everything else was blurred out, just like when I used Analysis on Aoyama. I had no idea what it did or anything, but it didn't look poisonous, and I didn't have any other choice.

"Get in my belly, food!"

I took a big bite out of it. It was about as hard as a football too.

It looks like a big almond; I hope it tastes like one.

"Bleh..."

Nope, no almonds. All I taste is crap. Why would those stupid monkeys wanna eat this?

It was almost unnaturally foul-tasting. The important thing, though, was that it was edible. I continued to choke it down.



As I was eating, though, I noticed something strange.

“Wait, didn’t I split all my nails?”

They were all broken and bloody just a moment before, but they were perfectly healed now. Not only that, but I’d only eaten half the fruit and I felt comfortably full already. I shrugged and forced down the other half regardless.

“Ugh. Man, that tasted nasty.”

I started rubbing my gut when, suddenly, I heard a voice out of nowhere.

>Fruit of Evolution will now take effect.

Wait, effect? What effect?

I sat and waited for something to happen.

And waited.

And waited some more.

Nothing happened.

“C’mon, what effect?!”

Screw you, mystery voice! Even my Stats are the same as always, dammit! Go on, change something, I dare you!

I knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth though. I’d have to be content with being full and alive.

“Alright, so what next?”

Wandering around aimlessly would only tire me out again.

“Well, I’m alive now. Maybe I should follow the mystery monkeys?”

The wolf was pretty freaky, but the monkeys seemed okay enough. Besides, if I saw one of those wolves again, I was pretty sure I’d just freeze up in fear.

Alright, no regrets. I’m gonna find those monkeys, and then I’ll follow them right to where the food is!

“Alright, here we go! All aboard the Find The Monkeys Express!”

With newfound resolve, I set out to find food and not die.

But before that, I'd better take another leak in the bushes. I don't wanna wet myself again.

Chapter 3: Clever Monkeys

“**T**here they are!”

After eating the Fruit of Evolution and searching every last bush and tree of the forest, I finally found a group of monkeys.

“Eek!”

“Ook, eek!”

“Ook, ook, ook!”

They were clustered around a few fruits just like the one I’d just eaten, and they seemed to be celebrating.

“Ooh, now would be a good time to use Analysis!”

I was a little too preoccupied to use it on either the monkeys or the wolf before, but they hadn’t even noticed me yet.

I used Analysis, and the monkey’s name popped up in front of me.

>CLEVER MONKEY: Level 120

What?

Hold on a second! Okay, they’re smart little guys, I get it. But are they seriously a hundred and twenty levels worth of smart?! That’s insane! How’s a level-one wimp like me supposed to stand a chance against them?!

As I was freaking out, though, one of them started acting weirdly.

“What the hell’s that one doing?”

It seemed to be mashing up some weird-looking grass and water with a crude mortar and pestle. After it was reduced to a thick green fluid, it poured the mix into a glass bottle. It looked downright poisonous.

They really are smart, though. I bet normal monkeys couldn’t use a pestle like that.

After a moment, all the monkeys in the clearing perked up.

“Ook!”

“Ook, eek!”

“Eek eek eek!”

They all ran off into the woods together.

Whoa, where’s the fire? Should I start running too?

Since they left the Fruits of Evolution and the weird fluid behind, though, they’d probably be back before long.

“I’d better take what I can from their camp now.”

I waited until I could no longer hear them then carefully crept into the clearing.

“Alright, first the food.”

I headed right for the Fruits of Evolution and I stuffed them all into my Item Box. There were nine of them altogether.

Huh, this Item Box thing sure is handy. I just have to think of what I want to put in or take out and boom, done.

“Wait, didn’t God mention that there was a book about the world in there?”

I was curious but not curious enough to pull it out and start reading now. I didn’t want to risk running into the Clever Monkeys. It’d have to wait.

“Alright, now for the real question. What’s up with these bottles?”

I picked one of them up and looked at the green grass juice inside them.

“Yeah, this looks even more poisonous up close. Blech.”

There were four bottles in all, and there was a large pile of grass beside them.

How’d they get the bottles? They didn’t make them, right? Nah, they couldn’t have. I hope.

What I really wanted to know, though, was what the mystery juice was.

“I guess I should just hit it with Analysis.”

>Ultimate Healing Potion

“Holy crap!”

This thing’s a potion? And the best one there is, looks like. How come stuff that’s good for you always looks so nasty?!

“I wonder what that grass is?”

>Special Medicinal Herb

What is this, Dragon Adventure?! At least it’s easy to guess what it does.

“I guess I’m taking all these too.”

I stuffed all the herbs and the potions into my Item Box.

“Damn, that was a good haul.”

Thanks, Clever Monkeys. I’m now thoroughly scared.

“There sure are a lot of those herbs though. Maybe they grow somewhere around here?”

It couldn’t hurt to have some more on hand. Who knew when I might need them after all?

“Well, I guess that’s mission accomplished. Time to look for more herbs next.”

If the Clever Monkeys had a camp here, then there had to be someplace nearby to harvest more and, if I got lucky, maybe some more fruit or mushrooms.

With that, I left the monkeys’ camp.

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“Hmm...”

I looked down at the pile of grass I’d harvested in disappointment. I’d pulled up everything that looked remotely promising and used Analysis on it, but almost everything I found was just normal, boring grass. It didn’t even look edible.

Well, most of it, that is.

“Just what does this do?”

I finally found some grass that was special, but all my Analysis showed me was a question mark.

“What the hell is ‘?’ supposed to mean? I almost wish it was just blurred out. Damn, I’m dying to know.”

It had to do something, after all.

“Alright, here goes!”

I decided to eat it. Sure, I might get the runs, but at least I’d have some idea what it did then. They say you can’t make an omelette without breaking some eggs.

I just hope I don’t actually break.

Worst case, the effect would only kick in later. If it was poison, well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

“Dammit! The more I think, the less I wanna eat it!”

I clamped my eyes shut, and before I could talk myself out of it, I stuck it in my mouth and chewed it up.

“Eugh...” It was almost painfully bitter. I started coughing and hacking. “Holy crap, that’s foul! Wait, don’t they say the worse it tastes, the better it is for you?”

The next instant, my body froze up, and I fell over.

Dammit, it’s paralyzing grass?! That’s one hell of a bad pull!

“Gah!” I groaned. Maybe I was making a weird pose when I ate it because my whole body ached with pain.

Several minutes passed without anything happening.

Crap. I really hope those wolves and monkeys stay well away from me.

After an agonizingly long hour, I was finally released from the paralysis’ grip. Fortunately, nothing dangerous came across me while I was helpless. I was still hurting all over, but more than that, my heart was still racing from fear.

“God, that was awful.”

At that moment, though, I heard a voice from nowhere.

>You have acquired Skill: Paralysis Immunity.

“What?”

I what-ed the what?

I took a look at my Status.

Hiiragi Seiichi			
Race: Maybe Human?			
Sex: Foul-Smelling Creepy Male			
Job: Wild Hobo			
Age: 17		Level: 1	
Mana: 17	Attack: 1	Defense: 1	Agility: 1
Magic Attack: 1	Magic Defense: 1	Luck: 0	Charisma: Beyond Immeasurable (WAY Too Low)
Equipment: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Sub-Trash-Tier Uniform ShirtSub-Trash-Tier Uniform PantsSub-Trash-Tier UndershirtSub-Trash-Tier Underwear			
Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none">AnalysisPerfect LootParalysis Immunity			
State:			

Oh, it had gotten worse.

So it can't even tell if I'm human anymore? Hey, my Sex also got an "upgrade" too. That's real swell. I can't even tell if my new Job is better or worse than my old one. And how did my Charisma get worse?!

When I got to the Equipment section, I just wanted to cry. Sure, I hadn't taken a bath in who knew how long, and I'd been wearing the same clothes for so long that they were probably extra ripe. And knowing my B.O., I bet they were extra foul, not to mention all the dirt and mud on them, of course.

But more importantly, what was up with that State section? I didn't remember seeing it there before, let alone with that whole Evolved thing.

"Oh, right. I can check my Skill details, right?"

SKILL DETAILS
ANALYSIS: Grants the ability to see some details on a creature or object. Cannot be used on items above a certain rarity or exceptionally strong creatures.
PERFECT LOOT: All monster drops are maximized, and you can obtain everything a monster possesses.
PARALYSIS IMMUNITY: Paralysis has no effect on you.

Okay, so Analysis and Paralysis Immunity were pretty straightforward. But what exactly was included in Perfect Loot's "everything a monster possesses"? And what about that rarity thing in the Analysis description? That one was probably in that book God gave me though.

"Hm ... nope, I still don't get it. And I don't even know the name of this grass."

I decided to try using Analysis on the grass I had left.

>SPECIAL PARALYSIS GRASS: Grass that instantly paralyzes one's body when consumed. Even the strongest of monsters may be affected.

Holy crap, that's intense! And it's "special" tier? How strong is this stuff? I almost feel sorry for any monsters that eat this by accident.

Wait, how come I can use Analysis on it now?

"Oh, maybe because I experienced its effects firsthand?"

That's cool.

.....

"Oh crap!"

So whenever I see a "?" on something, I need to eat it?! I need to go through that again?! That sucks! How many times am I supposed to put myself through that hell?!

"Ah man, I'm tired."

I didn't feel like looking for herbs anymore.

"I guess I'll just take this up tomorrow then."

I'll just rest for today.

I found a safe-looking tree and clambered up it.

If only I knew how to put that Special Paralysis Grass to use...

Chapter 4: Poison Immunity

I let out a low groan. I felt dead. I'd never been so physically and mentally drained before in my life. About a week had passed since I had eaten the Special Paralysis Grass. In all my visits to the Clever Monkeys' camp since then, I wasn't able find even one more Fruit of Evolution.

"Ugh ... this still tastes like total crap," I said between bites of a fruit. It was my lunch for the day and, hopefully, it would serve as a palate-cleanser. I'd been eating one per day, which meant that after this, I had only two left. Aside from that, I'd been eating everything I couldn't use Analysis on and had wound up with quite a few weird immunities.

I took another look at my Stats.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: Filthy Mass That Might Be Human			
SEX: "Male" Filth			
JOB: Extra-Stinky Hobo			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 17	ATTACK: 1	DEFENSE: 1	AGILITY: 1
MAGIC ATTACK: 1	MAGIC DEFENSE: 1	LUCK: 0	CHARISMA:
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">WMD-Grade Uniform ShirtWMD-Grade Uniform Pants			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Killer Undershirt• Killer Underwear
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis• Perfect Loot• Paralysis Immunity• Sleep Immunity• Confusion Immunity• Charm Immunity• Petrification Immunity• Bind Immunity
STATE: Evolved 0/8, Fatigued

Okay, here we go again.

It looks like my Status is starting to forget I’m human. And hey, who knew “filth” was a gender now? Job got another “upgrade” too, it seems. Check out that Charisma there—blank! Words can’t describe how low it is now! Oh, and it looks like my smelly clothes are officially weapons-grade and my underwear can kill people? Sick.

.....

“Just what did I do to deserve this?” I collapsed to my hands and knees. “What’s your goddamn problem, world?! Why can’t I have a single decent Stat?!”

I took a few deep breaths.

Alright, chill out, me.

I decided to double-check my new Skills too.

SKILL DETAILS
SLEEP IMMUNITY: Unnatural sleep induced by external factors has no effect on you.

CONFUSION IMMUNITY: You cannot be confused by any means, including hallucinations and the like.
CHARM IMMUNITY: You cannot be mentally manipulated by seduction-based effects.
PETRIFICATION IMMUNITY: Petrification, including magical and gaze-based petrification, has no effect on you.
BIND IMMUNITY: Your movement cannot be limited or sealed, including effects induced by magic or traps.

Pretty impressive, right? Or I guess they were more useful than impressive. After all, I didn't know when I might run into hallucinations or sleeping gas in a forest like this.

Who knows, they might save my life.

I got all five of these from eating mushrooms that turned up “?” when I tried to use Analysis on them. After finding each of them, I ate them and got affected with their respective ailments.

Man, that sucked.

As an aside, these are the five that I found.

ITEM DETAILS
DREAMUSHROOM: One bite sends the eater off to dreamland. Eat the whole thing, and you'll never wake up.
DANGER SHROOM: Makes the eater see all manner of hallucinations. Highly addictive.
EROTIC MUSHROOM: A mushroom that causes the eater to be aroused by everything they see and lose all sense of reason.

STONECAP:

A mushroom that turns the eater's body to stone, starting at the feet. Eating the whole thing petrifies the eater completely, making any form of countermeasure impossible. The effect fades with time.

IRKSOMUSHROOM:

Eating it renders the consumer unable to move from the spot, but it has no other effects on the eater's body.

I took only one bite of each of them before throwing the rest away.

I could've died! Whose great idea was this?!

When I ate the Dreamshroom, I woke up to find a Clever Monkey a little ways away, and I almost died of shock. Honestly, it was a real stroke of luck it didn't smell me. I was sure I was a goner!

The Danger Shroom was just a drug, plain and simple. Okay, sure, I actually enjoyed it for a while, but I nearly wet myself when I realized I was headed straight into the Clever Monkeys' camp. It took all I had to stop myself.

Don't do drugs, kids.

As for the Erotic Shroom ... well, let's just say that I disappointed myself in several ways.

The Stonecap was just straight-up body horror. Man, was that terrifying.

I'll admit, though, the Root Fungus was kind of fun. I could move my body perfectly well, except my feet were rooted to the spot, which was new. The only thing was that I was terrified the Clever Monkeys might find me.

"Man, I never wanna eat anything again if I don't know exactly what it is."

What happened to my rights as a consumer, God? Shouldn't I get to know what I eat?!

Man, God isn't answering me, not that I'm surprised. They did mention something about not having any power here.

Anyhow, I was eating a Fruit of Evolution to clear the taste of mushroom out of my mouth. There was one mushroom left, though, and I had the sinking feeling it might be my last.

“This looks kinda iffy ... no, REALLY iffy. No way is this edible.”

The stem was a vibrant purple color, covered with red, blue, and yellow flecks. The cap was perfectly white though. Terrifyingly white.

This thing's screaming “danger” at me! I'd totally die if I ate this! It's poisonous, isn't it? Isn't it?! It's pretty much daring me to try to eat it!

Hold on, though. I haven't used Analysis yet. It might be a normal mushroom, right? So long as it doesn't come up as “?” I won't have to eat it.

“C'mon, God, please have mercy on me!”

I crossed my fingers and used Analysis.

>???: ???

“DAMMIT!”

I never wanna see you again, question mark! Why do I have to keep risking my life for you like this?! Can't you be nice to me just this once?!

“Well, I tried. Thanks for supporting me, everyone.”

I brought the mushroom up to my mouth. I could practically see everyone who had supported me all this time watching and smiling. I wasn't delusional, I swear.

Why am I doing this actually? Who said I need to eat it?

If it really was edible, though, I needed to know. I was running out of Fruits of Evolution, and I needed something to eat after they were gone. Starving really sucked, and I wasn't eager to repeat it.

Wait, one fruit is enough to feed me for a day, right? I already ate, so I can last a while longer, right?

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“Hold up!”

I changed my mind; no way I'm eating this! I'd die for real this time!

"I'm not ready for this. I've been talking to myself for a while now and I'm still terrified of this thing."

Besides, I had people waiting for me to make it out of the forest alive. There were my parents, my friends, my girlfriend...

"Wait, my parents are dead! I have no friends either, let alone a girlfriend!"

Damn, that was a downer. Maybe there's no point to living after all.

I could feel my thoughts start to spiral. My life right now really did suck, after all.

"If I eat this, then maybe I'll be free..."

My grip on reality was rapidly slipping.

Wow, I'm actually thinking about dying, and I don't even know why. Man, that's dark.

"Munch."

I took a bite.

"....."

Silence.

"Wait, I'm okay?"

I'm totally fine. I finally found an edible mushroom! Man, what a find!

"Hell yeah!" I shouted, raising my arms in glee. "Finally, my luck's taken a turn for the better!"

I did a victory dance. "Yahoo!"

What a feeling! I can't wait to tell my girlfriend all about it. Wait, I don't have one.

"Hehe, looks like everything's gonna be gwegh?!" I suddenly spewed blood.

I coughed a few more times and a worrying amount of blood came flying out.

"You're kidding me."

I should've known better. I literally have zero Luck.

"I didn't think it'd be one of those delayed poisons."

Or wait, maybe it's fast-acting, since it's hitting me so hard so quickly?

The one thing I did know, though, was that I was pretty much screwed.

"I should've known. I should've known, dammit!"

How did I not see this coming?! I should've saved that victory dance for later at least! Screw me!

I fell to my knees, coughing and hacking.

Man, what a crappy feeling...

"So poison's how I die, huh?"

And here I thought starving to death sucked. Can't I die a warm and fluffy death?

There was nothing I could do against poison though. I lost all strength in my limbs and collapsed. I couldn't even breathe properly. Those Special Medicinal Herbs probably couldn't help me since they only seemed to heal wounds.

Man, if only I had some Antidote Grass, or would it be Detox Grass? Not that it matters now.

"If I'm gonna die, I might as well eat these."

I used the last of my strength to pull my last two Fruits of Evolution out of my Item Box.

"Haha! It's thanks to you I didn't die before now, little guys..."

I stared at them as I lay powerlessly on the forest floor. If those Clever Monkeys hadn't dropped that first fruit, I'd have died way back then. They sure tasted bad, but I wouldn't have made it this past week without them. I owed them so much, and I didn't even know what they did.

"Thanks."

With that, I ate one of them.

Munch, munch.

.....

“...I think I have enough room for another.”

Munch, munch.

With that, I ate my last Fruit of Evolution.

.....

.....

I jumped to my feet. “How am I not dead yet?!”

How?! Why?! Where did all this energy come from?!

“Dammit, and I was so proud of that touching death scene! I hope nobody saw that!”

That’s like full-face blush-level embarrassing! And seriously, what happened to that poison?!

As I grappled with my shame, a single possibility popped into my head.

“Wait ... maybe those Fruits of Evolution saved me?”

That’s the only explanation. It had to be.

“So eating them saved me—eating them?”

Right. I ate them.

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“Dammit, stomach, throw up! THROW THEM UP NOW! You can keep one, just give me the other!”

I desperately tried to vomit, but to no avail.

“If they can really get rid of poison, then why’d I go and eat them both?! Man, I knew they had to have some crazy-useful power like that!”

Eating one had healed up my broken nails after all.

“How am I so stupid?! I wish I could go back in time to before I ate them and beat the shit out of myself!”

Wait, if I could go back in time, I should just go back to before I ate that mushroom.

“Oh, fine. It’s not like I can un-eat them now.”

>You acquired Skill: Poison Immunity. Skill: Analysis has Ranked Up into Mid-Analysis.

That weird voice again. Seriously, who is that?

“Wait, Mid-Analysis?”

Up until now, I’d just gained new Immunity Skills. I’d never had a Rank Up before.

“I don’t get it.”

I checked my Status again.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: Epitome of Human Possibility			
SEX: Male			
JOB: Extra-Unlucky Hobo			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 17	ATTACK: 1	DEFENSE: 1	AGILITY: 1
MAGIC ATTACK: 1	MAGIC DEFENSE: 1	LUCK: 0	CHARISMA:
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">WMD-Grade Uniform ShirtWMD-Grade Uniform PantsKiller UndershirtKiller Underwear			
SKILLS:			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mid-Analysis• Perfect Loot• Paralysis Immunity• Sleep Immunity• Confusion Immunity• Charm Immunity• Petrification Immunity• Bind Immunity• Poison Immunity
STATE: Evolved 0/10 (MAX), Fatigued

Wait, what?

It looks like I’m actually human again and a male to boot. But what’s “Epitome of Human Possibility” even supposed to mean? Talk about overreacting. And my Charisma is still blank?! Not that I care.

Under Skills, though, there were two new entries.

SKILL DETAILS
MID-ANALYSIS: As Analysis, but with more details provided.
POISON IMMUNITY: Most poisons have no effect on you.

Crap, that’s nice.

Poison Immunity is God tier. Now I can eat whatever I want off the ground and never get sick.

Wait, why would I do that? I guess I’m out of fruits, but still...

Mid-Analysis was also welcome. Hopefully, I’d never see another “?” again.

The whole Evolved status still didn’t make sense to me, though, and not even Mid-Analysis explained what that meant.

“Well, at least I’m alive! That’s enough for now.”

I couldn't remember the last time I felt so refreshed. Man, not thinking rocks. Life is awesome!

But I feel like I'm forgetting something...

"Ook, eek!"

"Huh?"

A Clever Monkey was staring right at me from a nearby treetop. It only took me a moment to realize why.

I had made WAY too much noise!

Chapter 5: First Battle

“Ook, eek!”

The Clever Monkey hopped down from its tree.

“I’m sorry!” I got down on all fours and bowed to it. Taking the initiative is important, after all!

How did it get so close to me without me picking up on its aura? Err, wait, I can’t sense auras or anything. Never mind.

But man, those monkeys were scary up-close. I decided to just wait it out.

I waited. And waited. Nothing happened.

Isn’t it going to attack or something? Don’t tell me it’s actually a loveable, peace-loving little primate?

I slowly raised my head.

“Ook!”

“Huh?”

The monkey’s leg was wound up behind it, as if it were a soccer player about to make a shot on goal. It wasn’t anywhere close to me though.

“What are—”

I never got to finish my sentence.

“Eek!”

It completed its vicious kick, sending a razor-thin blade of energy flying towards me.

“Huh?! Oh crap!”

With a loud *shlick*, the energy cut through me. I’d managed to avoid getting cut clean in half by twisting out of the way at the last second, so I only got a

deep slash across my gut.

“OWWW!” I started rolling around on the ground in agony. “I’m bleeding! Shit! Shit! I’M BLEEEEEEDING!!”

How do I still have this much energy?! Like whoa, look at that cut. They’ll need to blur out this bit for the anime.

“Eekeekeekeek!”

The monkey danced in place and clapped its hands in glee.

Dammit, nobody told me these monkeys were sadists!

“Damn, it hurts.”

I pulled an Ultimate Healing Potion out of my Item Box and chugged it down. Despite how nasty it looked, it was pretty tasty. It had a light flavor, like a mild soda, and it was carbonated to boot. I looked down at my gut, and as I watched, the massive gash healed itself right up.

Fortunately, the monkey was too busy laughing its butt off to attack.

Oh, stuff it. Now it’s my turn!

“Hey, assface! How dare you just ignore my grovelling like that?! You better get ready, ’cause I’m gonna—”

“Ook!”

Before I could finish what I was saying, the monkey suddenly zipped right up to me and slugged me in the chest, hard.

“Guogh?!”

I heard something like an unhealthy number of bones cracking, along with a really wet smushing sound. The sheer force of the blow sent me flying back, crashing straight through one tree and slamming into the trunk of the one behind it. I crumpled awkwardly to the forest floor. It felt like I’d broken a ton of ribs, and my internal organs were probably soup. I’d never been in so much pain before.

“Oh, crap...”

“Eekeekeekekeek!” It pointed and laughed at me.

How'd it even move that fast? And that punch...

Sure, I'd been a human sandbag back on Earth, and there was a guy who was literally a member of the boxing club, but his punches felt like kisses from a kitten in comparison.

My body suddenly spasmed, and I started coughing. I hacked up a reddish black lump of something that looked important, making my dirty shirt even filthier.

What'd I do to deserve this? It doesn't wanna eat me, right? I mean, c'mon, if you're gonna eat me, then just eat me! Stop playing with your food!

Or wait ... it's not just torturing me for fun, is it? Man, that'd almost be worse than getting eaten. I guess it might want to drink me like a soup, but I still can't imagine a monkey would want to eat a human.

"Healing..."

With trembling hands, I managed to pull another Ultimate Healing Potion out of my Item Box. Just as I was about to gulp it down though....

"Ook!"

The Clever Monkey wouldn't let me. It zipped toward me again at an incomprehensible speed, and with incredible strength, it grabbed me by the head and hoisted me one-handedly into the air.

"Ow!"

"Ook, eek!"

It smirked at me, the kind of smirk you could practically hear as it spread across its hairy face.

Man, I wish I could slug this chimp.

Seeing it this close up, though, I realized that it was just a little smaller than I was. It was a lanky thing, covered in reddish-brown fur. Sure, I was only 5'7", but I was pretty damn heavy.

How the hell is it doing that? Is it hiding a few tons of muscle under that fur?

"Ook!"

It swung me downwards, smashing my head into the ground once before hoisting me back up. I let out a heavy grunt. My head was in agony.

Honestly, I'm surprised it didn't split my skull wide open. That sure felt like a head-bursts-like-an-overripe-tomato moment. And thanks, neck, for not breaking.

I was soaked head to foot in blood, and I was only barely conscious. The Clever Monkey paused to study me for a moment.

"Ook." It nodded to itself.

What? What's going on? That better not've been a "Yep, I done good" nod! I'll beat your ass, you loathsome little lemur! Not that I could if I wanted to.

It opened its mouth wide.

"Ookookeek!"

Wait, is it seriously gonna eat me? Was that a "Thanks for the food!" or some bullcrap just now?!

I suddenly snapped back to attention, but it still had a vice-grip on my head, and I wasn't exactly in top form.

It leaned in towards my head and opened wide as if to start from there, but it suddenly froze. A moment later, it wrinkled its nose and pulled its head back.

"Ook."

C'mon, cut me some slack! I can't smell that bad, can I?!

It licked its lips, looked me over one more time, and finally seemed to decide on my gut.

Yeah, I bet that's the tastiest part of me. That's a nice, fatty cut right there.

There was no point in resisting any longer. At this point, I was dead no matter how I struggled.

It slowly drew its teeth closer to me, and then...

"O-Ook ... urp..."

It suddenly let me go, and I hit the ground with a thud.



Wait, what?

I couldn't comprehend what happened for a long moment. I struggled to look up, and there I saw the Clever Monkey's feet.

It was sprawled out on the ground, just like I was.

"How?"

My gaze edged sideways, and I spotted the Ultimate Healing Potion I'd dropped within arm's reach.

I bet I could actually drink it now.

I shakily reached out to it and chugged it down.

Man, that hits the spot!

"Urp!"

I should try to go easily on the fizzy drinks though. I don't wanna get gassy.

I stopped for a moment to admire how fast-acting the potion was. All my injuries were gone in seconds. The bloodstains on my clothes were still there, however, and I felt lightheaded from all that blood loss.

"Ouch. I guess it still stings a little though."

I slowly got up and looked at the Clever Monkey. Its eyes were spinning, and it was foaming at the mouth a little.

"Wait, why?"

A moment later, I realized the most likely reason.

"No ... seriously?"

I guess that has to be it.

"Do I really stink that bad?"

Seriously?! How is that even possible?! I mean, I'm so used to how I smell that I can't even tell anymore, but is it really enough to knock a monkey out cold?!

"I don't know how to feel about this."

It didn't seem to like how I smelled at first though. Not only that, but my gut is actually the smelliest part of my body, since it's where the sweat from my neck meets the reek of my armpits apparently. Also, my lower half had its own foul-smelling contribution. All I could smell was my own blood, but I guess the Clever Monkey wasn't so fortunate.

"Really? All this because of my B.O.?"

I walked right up to it.

It frothed at the mouth.

"Whoop!"

I leaned down and stuck my armpit in its face.

It let out a single violent spasm then died.

I solemnly stood up, moved a few paces away, then sat on my knees.

.....

Can I cry now?

※ ※ ※

I looked down at the Clever Monkey's corpse.

.....

*I feel so bad for it now! I mean, yeah, I killed it, but did it have to die like that?!
I feel so guilty, dammit!*

"I'm so sorry, little guy! Forgive me!"

Silence.

"At least answer me, dammit!"

Sure, it's dead, but still.

There was one thing that was painfully clear. This was the first time I'd ever taken a life. Okay, I might've killed a few bugs as a kid because I was bored, but that didn't count. This was an animal. And of all the ways for it to die...

“Dammit, why can’t I take this seriously?!”

I just killed something, so I should be miserable, right? How am I fine?! Should I have killed it differently?! Sorry I reek!

“So this is how I make my first kill in this world, huh?”

Man, I’m worthless, but at least I’m not walking away from this with trauma or anything. If I developed some kind of complex about killing things after this, then I might starve to death later because I can’t hunt. I need protein after all.

“But, uh ... how do I deal with the body?”

I poked it, and with a flash, it turned into little motes of light.

“Holy shit!”

The motes drifted through the air and faded away. On the spot where the body had been was now an assortment of stuff laid out.

“What?”

Are these its drops? Wow, it really is just like a game!

The first thing I picked up was a bone that was a little over three feet long. I used Mid-Analysis on it.

>WISE SIMIAN’S BONE: A large bone that supports a Clever Monkey’s body. Extremely durable.

Ooh, gamey. And you’d think I’d be more squeamish or something around bones...

There were two others just like it.

Sounds like “wise simian” is the fancy name for Clever Monkey.

“I bet I could make a decent weapon or something out of these.”

With that, I stuffed them into my Item Box.

“Next up is ... fur?”

I picked up the brownish pelt and used Analysis on it.

>WISE SIMIAN’S PELT: The fur of a Clever Monkey. Very breathable, but also very flammable.

Cool.

I didn't know what else to think. It felt a lot nicer than I'd expected, so it might make a nice towel down the road.

"Alright, let's see what's next. Wait, what's this?"

It was a bundle of something, wrapped up neatly in a large leaf with some string.

"I guess I should just analyse it, huh?"

>WISE SIMIAN'S MEAT: Clever Monkey meat. Tough and stringy, but highly nutritious.

Oh, food! Food that's meat!

"Nice! Time to finally get more balance in my diet!"

Not sure my bowels are gonna appreciate this though. I've been eating nothing but fruit for so long...

"But I'll eat it!"

"Why?" you ask. Because it's there! Err. Never mind.

"Wait, what's this?"

The next thing I picked up was a small card.

"Guess I'll use Analysis on it."

With that, it felt like I'd taken my first step forward towards my new life. What lay ahead not even God knew.

Chapter 6: A Taste of Perfect Loot

“**A** Skill Card?”

I read the name of the thing in my hands out loud. I had a pretty good idea of what it did from the name alone.

>**SKILL CARD [CUTTER KICK]: Use to acquire the Skill Cutter Kick.**

“Seriously?”

I can get a Skill just like that? I mean I thought as much from the name, but this is ... wow. I bet Cutter Kick’s that Skill that almost cut me in half.

“Whoa.”

That’s cool.

.....

“C’mon, what else is there to say?!”

I’ve never been in this situation before, okay?! I don’t know how to react! Should I start dancing with glee or something? That’d just make me feel bad for that Clever Monkey.

I looked down to find that Cutter Kick wasn’t the only Skill Card lying there.

“What’re these?”

I picked them up and used Analysis on them one by one.

SKILL CARD
CUTTER KICK: Use to acquire the Skill Cutter Kick.

SKILL CARD

FLASH: Use to acquire the Skill Flash.
--

SKILL CARD
ULTRA COMPOUNDING: Use to acquire the Skill Ultra Compounding.

SKILL CARD
TOOL CRAFTING: ULTIMATE TIER: Use to acquire the Tool Crafting: Ultimate Tier.

“Whoa...”

.....

“Really, what else am I supposed to say?!”

I mean, sure, these look really useful, but this is all totally out of left field.

“How do I even use these things?”

They didn’t come with instruction manuals or anything. Just as I was mulling over it, though, they started glowing.

“Whoa!”

Each of them became a glowing sphere of light, and they flew into my chest.

“What the hell?!”

The cards were gone. Then I heard that weird voice in my head again.

>You acquired Skill: Cutter Kick. You acquired Skill: Flash. You acquired Skill: Ultra Compounding. You acquired Skill: Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting.

Oh. That’s just weird.

I couldn't bring myself to celebrate. I had no idea what to do with so many Skills so suddenly.

"I guess I'll check them out."

I opened my Status and used Mid-Analysis on each of them.

SKILL DETAILS
CUTTER KICK: Fires a blade of razor-sharp energy from your leg. Has a maximum range of about 33 feet.
FLASH: Allows you to move faster than the eye can follow. Only activates for an instant at a time, but may be used in rapid succession.
ULTRA COMPOUNDING: When compounding, your yields gain maximized additional effects.
ULTIMATE TOOL CRAFTING: When crafting tools, your yields gain maximized additional effects.

"Ew..."

That's just gross. I mean this is totally cheating! I'm just a normal guy. How am I supposed to use any of this?!

"This is too much for me."

I hope this turns out okay.

I mean, in a forest like this, I needed all the strength I could get. I was terrified that I might get carried away though. After all, none of these Skills were really mine. It'd really suck if I got too full of myself and got killed.

"I'll just have to be careful."

Ultra Compounding and Ultimate Tool Crafting seemed pretty harmless, however, and useful to boot. It felt a little weird to get access to top-level Skills

like that right off the bat, but I guess that just went to show how clever that monkey really was.

I bet the Clever Monkeys did make those glass bottles then.

“‘Clever’ doesn’t begin to cut it...”

I couldn’t make glass, let alone make it bottle-shaped.

“Well, I’ll see what I can do with it.”

I guess getting to know my new Skills is my new goal.

“Alright, what’s next?”

I picked up something that looked like a thin book.

“What’s this?”

The letters on the cover were all foreign to me, but I could still read them somehow.

“Oh, so that’s what this world’s language looks like.”

The words on the cover read, *Clever Monkey’s Knowledge*.

“What?”

So like what the monkey knew, or is this just information about it?

“I guess I’ll take a look.”

I flipped it open to the first page and started reading.

Clever Monkeys are highly-intelligent primates that dwell in high-level dungeons and similar climes. Their hands are nimble and their knowledge of herbal remedies is vast, allowing them to compound remedies and forge tools with ease. They have no language-processing ability, but their crafting techniques surpass those of human civilization. Tools in their hands can accomplish more than the most talented human craftsman.

“Holy crap!”

Aren’t humans supposed to be better than animals at this sort of thing?! I didn’t know animals could even use tools! To be fair, though, I don’t know a lot

about this kinda thing in general. Still, that's pretty amazing!

"Man, Clever Monkeys are something."

I flipped through the booklet a little. The next page I stopped on was blank except for a title.

A CLEVER MONKEY'S LIFE

"Life?!"

Things got pretty big pretty fast.

"What, is this a nature magazine or something?"

I flipped ahead a few pages, and what I saw left me speechless...in a good way.

"So everything that Clever Monkey knew, all its experiences, it's all in here?!"

There were all manner of herbs listed, along with how to prepare them and the precise effects they had. There were also detailed maps of every place in the area where said herbs could be found. Not only that, but there were a few mineral deposits labelled too.

"Whoa ... this is nuts! Holy crap!"

On the last page, there was even a detailed map that had the exact place I'd killed it labelled.

"If this dot is where I am now, then I can finally figure out where I am!"

Finally, my days of wandering aimlessly through this stupid forest are over!

Just as I was celebrating, however, the book burst into light just like the Skill Cards and it flew into my body. Its contents suddenly filled my mind.

"Wow, there's so much ... and I can remember it all so clearly!"

It was almost unbelievable. Everything in that book was now in my head, just like with the Skill Cards.

"Haha ... hahaha..."

Seriously, what's up with this? I kill the monkey and I can just take everything it earned over a lifetime in an instant?

Something was definitely up. Finally, though, it clicked.

“Perfect Loot!”

Right, I can take “everything” a monster had in life. I guess that means its memories too!

“Okay, but that’s not the last of it.”

I turned my gaze to the last things the Clever Monkey had dropped—a treasure chest and a handful of shiny spheres.

“What about those?”

Chapter 7: Evolution

“Are these...?”

I picked up the spheres and used Mid-Analysis.

Clever Monkey			
MANA: 3	ATTACK: 3,850	DEFENSE: 2,743	AGILITY: 4,211
MAGIC ATTACK: 1	MAGIC DEFENSE: 1,456	LUCK: 0	CHARISMA: 10

“Are these the Clever Monkey’s Stats?”

So Perfect Loot even gives me that? Crazy.

But damn is that M-Attack low! That’s as bad as me! And its Luck is zero too; no wonder it died to my smelly armpit. Its Charisma was higher than mine though. I’m less charismatic than a monkey? Wait, what’s this liquid coming from my eyes? It’d better not be more sweat!

“So what do I do with these?”

It seemed like I could absorb the Stats like I did everything else, but it felt even weirder than taking Skills. I just knew I’d screw it up somehow.

As I thought that, though, the spheres turned into light and flowed into me and I heard that voice again.

>Your Stats have increased. Any new Stats over one thousand have been reduced to ten percent of their original values.

Good, so I don’t get all of that Attack all at once. I guess that means I get three hundred and eighty-five Attack, two hundred and seventy-four Defense, and so on.

“I don’t know what I’d do with all that power anyway.”

I felt more relieved than anything. Even if I was as agile as a Clever Monkey, I’d probably just end up running into trees at high speed ... a lot.

“I’ll double-check my Stats after I finish picking everything up.”

The only thing left was the treasure chest. It was small enough that I could hold it comfortably in both hands.

“There’s no lock or anything, so I guess I can just pop it open. I wonder what’s inside.”

I couldn’t hold back any longer. The anticipation was killing me.

“Alright, let’s take a look!”

I popped it open to find a chain and a small sack.

“Wait, a chain?” I took it out of the chest to examine it. It seemed more ornamental than functional, and it was just long enough to serve as a belt.

“Yeah, I bet this is cosmetic.”

I decided to use Analysis on it.

>WISE SIMIAN’S CHAIN: A rare chain that can be worn as a belt.

Equipping it increases the drop rate of rare items in the field.

“Whoa!”

Nice! Thanks again for that rare drop, Perfect Loot!

I was pretty pumped about the effect too. Even with Perfect Loot, there wasn’t much I could do to find things out in the field with my Luck.

“But that ‘Rare’ bit is bolded; that’s its rarity or something, right?”

I’m just glad my drops have nothing to do with my Luck. I wonder if I’m unlucky because I’m ugly or if I was raised unlucky somehow?

“Not that it matters, I guess. Alright, now for this baggie.”

I slipped the chain through my belt loops then pulled out the little pouch. It was small enough to fit in my hand, but it had a nice heft to it.

“I wonder what’s in here?”

I opened it to find a handful of round metal pieces.

“Coins? Let’s see, three silver ones, five gold ones, and one light silver one? Is this platinum?”

This looks like money, but am I looking at a cheap burger or a hotel suite? Not like it matters out here. Well, I bet God’s book has information on that kind of thing. I’ll just give that a read later.

“Alright, that’s all the drop out of the way, but...”

Shouldn’t I be levelling up about now? I mean, sure, it died in a weird way, but I still killed a level one hundred and twenty monster! That’s gotta be worth some experience!

“Any second now, world.”

At that moment, though, I heard the voice again.

>Vast number of experience points confirmed. Now proceeding to Evolve.

“Huh? Evolve?”

I didn’t have to wonder long, however, as my head was assaulted by a horrible splitting pain in the next instant.

“Gah! My head ... owwww! Wait, what?! Why?! Man, this hurts!”

The pain only continued to grow. I flopped down on the ground and started rolling around.

“Owowowowowowowowow!”

S-seriously, what the hell?!

It was so painful that I nearly lost consciousness—but then the sounds started. My skull let out a chorus of cracking.

Those can’t be happy sounds!

“Owowow! What the hell’s going on?!”

Then the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started.

“What?” I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “What was that all—”

My face burst into agony.

“G-GAH?!”

Seriously, what is this?! How can this hurt so much?!

I covered my face with my hands as I rolled around in agony. I could hear all sorts of cracking and squelching sounds coming from my face.

“The hell?! I don’t even wanna know what’s making those sounds!”

Why?! WHY?!

The pain stopped again, just as suddenly as before.

“Wh-what was—”

Next, my torso and arms burst into pain.

“SERIOUSLY, STOP IT!!”

Crick-crack-creak-croak-cronk, squish-squash-squesh.

“O-OW! My bones! My bellyyyyyyy!”

Somebody help me! Help! HELP!!

What’s even happening to me?! This isn’t normal!

“No more...”

I collapsed to the ground. I was hoping that the pain might just knock me out, but I was still wide awake.

How much more of this is there? This sucks!

Tears started pouring down my face as I tried to hold back the pain.

Then the pain ended as suddenly as it had started. I started panting heavily.

What’s going on with my body?! Man, this is almost worse than puberty. Is this what that voice meant by “evolution”? Thanks, I hate it.

“It’s over, right?”

But just then...

“OWWWW?!”

Next was my bottom half. *Everything* in my bottom half.

“NOOOO! Not there! Anywhere but there!”

The crunching, squishing sounds started again.

“Not this again!”

First my face, then my torso, now down there?! Damn, this sucks!

“Seriously, anyone, save me!!”

I’m gonna go nuts from the pain, I swear! Like how am I not totally crippled from this?! I’m kinda awesome, aren’t I?!

“Wait, now’s not the time for patting myself on the back!”

I swear my bones are mush now! And my little man down there’s crying out in pain! Have mercy! I’m gonna lose my family jewels at this rate ... not that I’ll need them out in this forest, I guess, but still! This is an extra-special brand of pain!

“W-why?”

I clenched my teeth in an attempt to stem the pain.

“Hnnnngh!”

Nope, no stemming this! I’m screwed!

I started rolling around in a frenzy again, clutching my groin in a way that polite society might frown upon.

After what felt like an eternity, the pain finally faded. Panting heavily, I started looking around me.

“Please let that have been the last—”

At that moment, I heard the mystery voice again.

>Evolution complete. All Stats have increased by one thousand.

“I-it’s over?”

I get the feeling I said and thought some weird things about halfway through there, but I was more relieved than anything else. I took a few deep, deep breaths.

Alright ... I can finally relax.

After I felt calmer, I opened my Status to take a look.

HIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: New Human			
SEX: Male			
JOB: Homeless			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 1,020	ATTACK: 1,386	DEFENSE: 1,275	AGILITY: 1,422
MAGIC ATTACK: 1,002	MAGIC DEFENSE: 1,146	LUCK: 1,000	CHARISMA:
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">WMD-Grade Uniform ShirtWMD-Grade Uniform PantsKiller UndershirtKiller Underwear			
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mid-AnalysisPerfect LootParalysis ImmunitySleep ImmunityConfusion ImmunityCharm ImmunityPetrification ImmunityBind ImmunityPoison ImmunityCutter KickFlashUltra CompoundingUltimate-Tier Tool Crafting			

STATE: Evolved 1/10 (MAX), Fatigued
CURRENCY: 10,530,000G

“What the *what*?!”

My jaw dropped in disbelief.

“I went from ones across the board to this?! Was the Stats market suddenly hit by massive inflation or something?!”

Shit, evolving is OP! That voice wasn’t joking about that Stat increase!

Wait. “Evolved 1/10”? I need to go through that hell nine more times?! Sure, the stat increase is great, but no way it’s worth it!

“And what happened to my Charisma increase? How is it still blank?! It’s not still at zero, is it?!”

Oh, and apparently I’m a “New Human.” That’s cool, I guess? But how is my level still stuck at one?! That stupid Evolution didn’t suck up all that XP, did it?!

“Wow, this is just depressing.”

I looked down at the ground.

I froze.

What the hell? How? This isn’t possible.

Are those ... my feet?

I hurriedly put my hands to my gut.

“I-I lost weight?”

All I could ever see before was my own fat, but now I could look down and actually see the ground.

“Holy shit! My skin isn’t even baggy or anything!”

I’m skinny now! I actually LOST WEIGHT! That was like the best diet ever!

That wasn't the main takeaway here, but still, it felt like my whole world was turned on its ear.

"Whoa, is this muscle? That's nuts."

My stomach felt almost tight now.

"Ah, well. I guess all this means is that I went from fat and ugly to thin and ugly."

My pants, though, were the opposite of tight.

"Oops, might've lost too much weight there. What do I do about my clothes now?"

They were really, really baggy. Fortunately, I was able to tighten my new belt enough that my pants weren't falling around my ankles at least.

"Not much I can do about my shirt though."

At that moment, I realized another change.

Wait, did I get taller? Like, in the past few minutes?

"Nah, no way. Fat's one thing, but there's no changing my bones so quick, right?"

Not that losing so much weight so quickly is possible either...

"But if all those sounds earlier were my bones changing...I mean, it's believable."

Hmm ... oh, well. Not like it really matters either way.

If going through pain like that was all it took to lose stupendous amounts of fat, though, I bet Fruits of Evolution would sell like hotcakes back on Earth.

Or maybe not. I hope not. Nobody should want to lose weight that badly. Treat your bodies well, people.

"Alright, what's next?"

I sat down to think.

"I used two potions in that battle, so maybe I should start there?"

Thanks to the Clever Monkey's memories, I knew where to get more Special Medicinal Herbs and how to make more potions. More importantly, though, was that I now knew where fresh water was, and my throat felt drier than a desert.

"Okay, I guess my next goal is figuring out how to survive here. Guess that means putting what that Clever Monkey 'taught' me to use."

Daylight's wasting.

"Let's do this!"

"What exactly?" you ask. Um ... something, I guess.

Chapter 8: The Summoned Heroes

I, Takamiya Shouta, had been transported to another world by the mysterious voice from the intercom. “Summoned” might be the better word for it, though, since my schoolmates and I found ourselves surrounded by people clad in long, dark robes.

Chaos rang out around me.

“Is this the new world?!”

“Jeez, I thought my heart was going to stop.”

“C’mon, we all got cheat-level powers, right? This’ll be a cakewalk!”

“I dunno...”

I think most people would either be overjoyed by being taken to another world or they would be downright pissed. I would be the latter.

No ... I am pissed.

My parents were still back on Earth, not to mention all my friends outside of school. I figured that they had all forgotten me already. How many of my classmates stopped to think about that?

Sure, Earth is overpopulated, but why us? Do your damn homework, God. Japan’s population is declining as it is.

I cast a careful look around as I brooded. We were deep in unknown territory, and there was no telling what might happen next. I had assumed we would find ourselves outside, but we seemed to be in a dark room with smooth stone walls. It had to be immensely vast to accommodate all of us.

“Hey, there you are!” called a voice from behind me. “Shouta!”

“Oniichan!”

I turned around to see a pair of familiar faces.

“Kenji? Oh, and Miu! How’d you find me so quickly?”

Kenji laughed. “C’mon, man, I could find your ass anywhere. How long’ve we been buds now?”

“I just followed Kenji-oniichan,” Miu said sheepishly.

Araki Kenji and I had been friends for as long as I could remember. He had short brown hair and a big, warm smile. He was attractive enough to be an idol, though that wasn’t saying much for our school.

Miu was my little sister. She often kept her shoulder-length black hair back with a flower pin, and her pure, energetic nature was simply adorable.

I’m definitely not a siscon though. Nope.

None of us were members of any idol groups or the like, but we had all been scouted numerous times. We simply weren’t interested.

And wait ... how does Kenji and I being old friends help him find me in a crowd like this?

“Come on, Miu,” I said. “You mean Kenji-senpai, don’t you? Same goes for me as well. It’s Takamiya-senpai.”

“Aw! We aren’t even at school anymore! Besides, you’ll always be Oniichan to me! You’re no senpai!”

Actually, I can’t imagine her calling me senpai either.

At that moment, though, two other students called out to Kenji.

“Hey, there he is!”

“There you are!”

I turned to face the voices. “Well, if it isn’t Eri and Rika!”

Niijima Eri was my girlfriend. She was baby-faced and always kept her hair neatly tied back. She was shorter than Miu—quite possibly the shortest person in the whole grade.

I’m not a lolicon, I swear. Honest.

The other girl, Murata Rika, was Kenji's girlfriend. She had wavy black hair and big, soft eyes. She came off as a little spacey, and she acted a bit airheaded at times.

They were both fairly famous idols, or rather they belonged to famous idol groups.

"Looks like we've got our regular cast all together," Kenji said with a sigh. The relief was clear on his face.

Eri cocked her head to the side. "But where are Kannazuki-san and Hino-san? I don't see Seiichi-kun, either."

Man, her slight lisp is as cute as always.

"Don't worry 'bout Hino," Kenji replied. "She's with her other friends now. 'Sides, I wouldn't worry 'bout Kannazuki-senpai. Dunno about Seiichi though."

Miu's face filled with worry. "Wait—you don't think Seiichi-oniichan was that one person who couldn't find a group, do you?!"

"I hope not," I said, my brow furrowing.

Kenji nodded. "I'll just hit up one of his classmates. We'll find him." He looked around and spotted one of them a moment later. "Hey, Aoyama!"

"Huh? What's up, Araki?"

"Know where Seiichi is?"

"Seiichi?" Aoyama gave him a blank look. "We don't have a Seiichi in our grade, do we?"

Oki, one of Aoyama's friends, started sniggering. "C'mon, Aoyama, stop playin' dumb! They're talkin' about Porko. Remember? Oink-oink?"

"Oh, right, that shit stain! And here I thought you meant some stud with a name like that!" Aoyama started laughing. "Yeah, Porko isn't here. We figured we'd cut him loose before he started dragging everyone down, y'know?"

"Anyone that ugly deserves to drop de—"

Oki never got to finish his sentence. Kenji grabbed each of them by their shirt collars and hoisted them into the air.

“What was that, assholes?” His tone was low and menacing. “You’re saying you just left him to die?”

Most people don’t realize just how terrifying Kenji can be once he gets mad. They all just assume he’s nothing but smiles, but he’s 6’1 and boxes in his free time. He can really throw a punch.

The smile rapidly faded from Aoyama’s face. “C’mon, who cares?!”

“Y-yeah!” Oki chimed in. “All we said was the truth!”

“You assholes!”

There he goes. He’s gonna snap.

At that moment, though, a pale white hand came to rest on Kenji’s arm. “Calm yourself.”

Kenji looked up at the hand’s owner in astonishment. “Kannazuki-senpai...”

“Let them go.”

She had black hair that fell to her waist in shining waves, and she gave off an air of superiority. Not only was she the student council president, but she was also one of Kenji and my oldest friends. Her name was Kannazuki Karen.

Kenji never could stand against her. He let them go, and Aoyama and Oki hit the ground with a thud.

He shot her a look. “What’re you saying? Didn’t you hear what they did to Seiichi?!”

“I know. Don’t worry; I’m plenty angry.”

Kenji’s eyes widened and he paled. Even Miu and I swallowed hard.

The memory of that one time she got pissed at Seiichi was still horrifyingly fresh in our minds.

I still can’t believe Seiichi survived that.

Now that I looked, I could see the anger growing on Kannazuki-senpai’s features.

How can she be this terrifying? I wanna go home.

She gave us a thin smile, as if attempting to reassure us, and then crouched down to Aoyama's and Oki's level.

"Not everyone from your class is here. Correct?"

"Y-yeah ... s-s-so what?" He was trembling.

Kannazuki-senpai fixed him with an ice-cold glare. "Why?"

"H-he, uh..." His voice was so quiet it was almost impossible to make out. "He'd only hold us back?"

Her gaze turned sharper still. "How idiotic ... utterly asinine. Your lives as well as the lives of every individual in the school are on the line, and you would *dare* continue your bullying?"

"U-uh..."

"It seems your entire class is nothing more than a festering mass of fools. I have no words for maggots."

She stood up, not separating her frigid gaze from him once.

Damn, that's cold.

Kannazuki-senpai was the heiress to the famous Kannazuki Holdings, and under normal circumstances, she'd be attending a better school for better kids. According to her, though, this school was closest to her home, and she didn't want to part from us.

No, not "us." She didn't want to abandon "him."

Kannazuki-senpai was famous amongst guys and girls alike here, and she was more beautiful than any of the would-be idols. She had the highest of morals, the greatest of minds, the best grades in academics and sports... She was just plain better than everyone else in school, not to mention that she could be generous and considerate too. It was no small wonder she was popular. She was everything that a real Japanese woman could and should be.

I suppose she's not alone in that last quality, but she's the only one we have anything to do with.

Aoyama and Oki still hadn't moved from where they sat splayed on the ground, and looks of horror and shame were frozen on their faces. If I remembered correctly, they were both big fans of Kannazuki-senpai, so I wasn't too surprised.

Kannazuki-senpai herself, on the other hand, was already back to her old self.

"I imagine Seiichi-kun did little to help himself though."

"That's not ... um..." Kenji couldn't deny it.

I'd known Seiichi since we were both little, and for better or worse, he had always been too nice. Eri, Rika, and Hino only got to know him in high school, so to them, he was probably nothing more than another friend. But to the rest of us—to Kenji, Miu, Kannazuki-senpai, and me—he was more than that. He was irreplaceable. He'd literally saved my life before, and just being around him made us all feel better.

And yet, after we entered high school, he stopped spending time with us. He'd done something similar in junior high, but it was worse now. He was preoccupied with the thought that being with us would hurt our reputations, even though none of us cared about that sort of thing. I still trembled when I thought of the time he explained why he was avoiding us. I'd never been more scared of Kannazuki-senpai than in that moment.

Avoiding us didn't prevent him from getting bullied though. Kenji and I were pretty handsome, objectively speaking, and we were fairly popular. There was nothing we wanted more than to use our popularity to help him. We never witnessed him getting bullied directly, though, and whenever we asked, he would always just dodge the question.

When his parents died, he was totally alone in the world. We wanted to support him then, but he still didn't open up to us. Honestly, it was just frustrating. He seemed determined to take everything on by himself.

Kannazuki's expression softened, as if she was also thinking back. "Well, the one thing I can say is that Seiichi-kun will be fine."

Eri and Rika both looked worried. No wonder—we were talking about him surviving alone in who knew where. But Kenji, Miu, and I knew.

I cracked a thin smile.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine.” Kenji nodded.

“Seiichi-oniichan’ll be okay.” Miu smiled.

Sure, we had no proof, but it seemed the natural conclusion. I’d never met anyone more positive than he was. No matter what mess he was in, I had no doubt he’d make it out alive, and probably in a way that none of us would ever expect.

“Isn’t that right, Seiichi?” I whispered to myself.

Chapter 9: Five Months Later

“GRARR!”

“Crap!”

I, Hriragi Seiichi, was fighting my first wolf, or rather, my first level 311 Acrowolf.

“Growrrrr!”

“Guh?!”

Correction: I was getting my ass whooped.

“Grar!”

“Stop! Time out! How about we talk about this?!”

It made a vicious swipe then lunged at me with a snapping bite.

“Dammit ... flash!” I zipped out of the way. “Alright, now Cutter Kick!”

The blade of energy cut a gash in its side, but it was only skin-deep. It let out a shrill yelp.

I had held back as much as I could, since I only wanted to distract enough to get away. I wasn’t trying to kill it or anything.

Alright, now I run like hell!

“Why’d I even have to run into you here, you big, stupid dog? I just want my Heat Rock!”

“Grrr ... grarrr!”

“JUST GO AWAY!”

It seemed determined to hunt me down. While I ran, I thought back on the five months that had passed since I first evolved.

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Thanks to that Clever Monkey’s knowledge, I knew where a river was, so I no longer had to worry about drinking water. I also knew where to get ores—common ones at least. Not to mention that I reeked badly enough to get a Title.

Yeah, I was pretty busy. It didn’t feel that long for sure.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were Clever Monkey meat, which was stringy and tasted like crap but was edible. I even found a few edible plants. By the end of it, I was totally used to fighting those monkeys, and I’d gone through that excruciating evolution thing seven more times.

My Stats had changed a fair bit since my first evolution as a result.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: New Human			
SEX: Male			
JOB: Forest Hermit			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 8,024	ATTACK: 11,088	DEFENSE: 10,200	AGILITY: 11,376
MAGIC ATTACK: 8,008	MAGIC DEFENSE: 9,176	LUCK: 8,000	CHARISMA:
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">WMD-Grade Uniform ShirtWMD-Grade Uniform PantsKiller UndershirtKiller UnderwearWise Simian’s ChainWise Simian Club			
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mid-Analysis			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perfect Loot• Paralysis Immunity• Sleep Immunity• Confusion Immunity• Charm Immunity• Petrification Immunity• Bind Immunity• Poison Immunity• Cutter Kick• Flash• Ultra Compounding• Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting
STATE: Evolved 8/10 (MAX)
TITLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stench Virtuoso
CURRENCY: 84,240,000G

I’m still at level one, not to mention my Charisma. I’m tired of caring about that though. Race and Sex are same as before. But since when did I become a Forest Hermit? Man, these commentaries are getting old.

I was no longer Fatigued, though, and I had Fatigue Immunity now. I was as energetic as ever! Oh, and there were also seven Wise Simian Chains in my Item Box now.

But c’mon, isn’t Stench Virtuoso a little cruel? That hurts, y’know?

>STENCH VIRTUOSO: You can control your body odor at will, to a maximum radius of four inches around you.

The night I got that Title, I cried myself to sleep.

Sure, I’ve been wearing the same clothes for months, and I don’t have the thread or cloth to make new clothes, but still...

I got used to it pretty quickly though. Life’s about compromise, right?

Fighting so many Clever Monkeys got me used to using Skills and I made myself a weapon out of Wise Simian Bones—my Wise Simian Club. I even found more Paralysis Grass and managed to extract the paralyzing part of it and I coated the end of my Club in it. Ever since I realized I could do that, I'd been picking and storing all the Paralysis Grass I could find.

Raising my Stats so much meant that my body felt really light, and I could move in all sorts of new ways now. Not being fat really helped too.

Greater Analysis was also a welcome upgrade. Between that and the Clever Monkeys' knowledge, I had a pretty good idea of what I could and couldn't eat, but there were all sorts of new things still, so I'd gotten a lot of practice with it. Having higher luck also helped, and as a result, I hadn't poisoned myself or anything in a while.

I was also getting to be pretty rich—not that it mattered out in the forest though. Apparently, the coins were copper, silver, gold, and platinum. A hundred coppers made one silver, a hundred silvers one gold, and so on. Ten silvers—as in 100,000G—were enough to live on for a year. When I first learned that, I felt faint ... no, sick.

I mean holy crap! I can live for eight hundred years on this! Damn, this world doesn't mess around.

And that was more or less everything that happened in the past five months. Looking back, I got quite a bit done.

My new goal, though, was to make a medicine called Soul Nectar. From what I learned from the monkeys, it was a restorative medicine that was potent enough to revive the dead, but it couldn't bring monsters back to life. It healed about as much as an Ultimate Healing Potion, and given how much of a pain gathering the ingredients could be, it was no wonder they never bothered making it.

Apparently, I could make it from some local herbs and the like, but there was a certain rare ore I needed—a Heat Rock, a stone that gave off a special kind of warmth. When I went to get one, though, I ran smack into an Acrowolf, and, well ... y'know.

“Grarr!”

“I said, GO AWAY!”

I sprinted through the forest, the Acrowolf in hot pursuit.

How persistent can you get?! Just give up already! If I still had my old Stats, I'd be dead!

Wait ... what if these monsters aren't tough? What if I am just crazy weak?

“Look, I don't want any trouble! Go home!”

“Grarrrrr!”

“Stop ignoring me!”

Dammit, it won't listen! Err. I guess monsters probably can't understand Human-ese, huh?

“Alright, fine! You wanna fight that bad?!” I stopped and whipped around, jumping back to give us a little extra distance. “Go on, take one more step! I-I dare you! I'm not kidding!”

Please don't take one more step. I'll wet myself. I'm not kidding.

I seriously doubted that I could beat anything aside from Clever Monkeys, and the wolf looked crazy tough.

I guess it didn't hurt too much when it clawed my arm though. I guess my Defense is pretty high now. Man, that's a weird feeling.

I dropped my stance a little and got my club ready. Its end was already soaked in Paralysis Grass extract.

The Acrowolf didn't come any closer.

“Wait ... really?”

Just when I thought I'd scared it off...

“Grrrr...”

It turned to face the ground and let out a low growl.

“Huh?”

The Acrowolf suddenly whipped its head up at me and it spat water at me. Not like a little water gun amount—it was like a shot from a cannon.

“Bark!”

“Seriously?! Flash!” I narrowly dodged it. “What the hell?!”

The wolf breathed water at me?! How?!

The blast punched clean through the tree behind where I was standing, then the tree behind it, then the next.

“Oh ... oh, no. Don’t tell me that’s a Skill?!”

No, that felt more like magic...

“Doesn’t matter! I’ve gotta beat this thing first!”

I don’t know when or if other wolves’ll show up. I’d better finish this fast.

“No holds barred now, doggo!”

That first Cutter Kick was only meant to distract it. Now that I had decided to fight, though, I was going to give it all I had. I wasn’t strong enough to win if I didn’t give it my all.

I’m gonna survive this!

“Alright, eat this! Cutter Kick!”

I wound up then unleashed a vicious kick in the wolf’s direction. It whizzed through the air.

Shlick.

The Acrowolf’s head fell to the ground with a plop.

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.....

.....

Huh?

What the what?

The now-headless Acrowolf collapsed, its body fading into motes of light. In its place was a pile of drops, just like when I beat the Clever Monkeys.

“You’re kidding me!”

My scream echoed throughout the forest and there was nothing left alive to answer.

Chapter 10: A Legendary Weapon

“I guess I’ll start by using Analysis on its drops?”

I edged towards where the Acrowolf had died, full of mixed feelings.

ITEM DETAILS
ASH-WOLF’S FANG: A massive tooth from an Acrowolf. Sharp enough to penetrate sheet metal with ease.
ASH-WOLF’S PELT: An Acrowolf’s distinctive grey fur. Very pleasant to the touch and has magic-resistant properties. Makes excellent armor.
ASH-WOLF’S MEAT: An Acrowolf’s meat. Can be eaten raw or in most simple dishes but tastes horrible. Soaking it in saltwater first gives it a nice, salty flavor.

Ash-Wolf? That’s pretty cool. And its fangs can pierce metal? Crazy.

“I bet I could put the fang to good use though. If I put it on the end of my Wise Simian’s Club, I could probably make a spear...”

I didn’t have rope, so I’d have to hope the local vines were strong enough.

“Ah, well. I’ll have time for that later.”

More importantly, MEAT! But I’ll need salt, huh...

I didn’t know of any places where I could find rock salt or anything. Maybe there was a place farther away that the Clever Monkeys didn’t know about.

I’ll get my hands on salt sooner or later, so I may as well hold on to this meat for now.

I popped the drops into my Item Box.

Ever since I got my Greater Analysis, it'd been showing me not only what the item was but how to use it. I hadn't seen any question marks when analyzing weird plants either. Monsters, though, still only showed up as a name and a level. I'd never seen the Status of anything but me.

Not that it really matters; I've only been fighting Clever Monkeys, after all.

"Alright, what's next?" The next thing to catch my eye was a couple of cards. "Skill Cards?"

I have all the Clever Monkeys' Skills already, but I guess I don't have any Acrowolf Skills yet.

I hadn't seen any Skill Cards since the first time I defeated a Clever Monkey. It seemed like it only dropped Skills I didn't already have.

Man, Perfect Loot is so considerate.

SKILL CARD
TWIN-FANG STRIKE: Use to acquire the Skill Twin-Fang Strike.

SKILL CARD
DETECTION: Use to acquire the Skill Detection.

SKILL CARD
MIGHTY CLAW: Use to acquire the Skill Mighty Claw.

MAGIC CARD

WATER ELEMENT (ULTIMATE): Use to gain proficiency in Water Magic.

“Huh?”

A Magic Card? Like that card game with all the pretty pictures and colored borders?

Wait ... if I use it, I can use magic? And not like the “magic” I could use when I was high on those Dangershrooms?

All four cards turned into motes of light and got sucked into me. Then I heard that voice again.

>You acquired Skill: Twin-Fang Strike. You acquired Skill: Detection. You acquired Skill: Mighty Claw. You can now use Water Magic.

“Wh-whoa...”

I’m never gonna get used to this. I mean, who gains this many Skills at once? Why does this feel so disappointing? Maybe it’s because I didn’t do anything to actually earn these Skills...

I had to be strong if I wanted to survive, however, so I decided to forget about it. Besides, there was no way a normal guy like me could get Skills any other way.

Aside from those Immunity Skills, of course—never again.

I shook my head clear of those unpleasant thoughts and checked what each of my new Skills did.

SKILL DETAILS
TWIN-FANG STRIKE: Fires a blade of razor-sharp energy from your leg. Has a maximum range of about 33 feet.
DETECTION: By detecting auras, heat signatures, Mana signatures, and/or life energy, the user can pick up on any life forms within a 33” radius.

MIGHTY CLAW:

A powerful strike with all the user's claws. Can be limited to only a single claw.

I was struck speechless.

How the hell are all these Skills so good?! I mean just look at Twin-Fang Strike! A dodge and an attack?! Counters are OP!

Detection is pretty much a must-have in a forest like this. Those Acrowolves really are amazing. It must've been a fluke I killed it in one shot.

It looks like Mighty Claw will give me another nice bare-hand attack if I need it. I don't need actual claws for it, right? Are fingernails good enough? I'll have to check later.

"Okay, and now to see what that Magic Card did."

>WATER MAGIC: ULTIMATE: You have mastery of Water Magic. You can use any Water Magic.

"Oh, c'mon, this is just cheating!"

I'm more than just a wizard now! I mean, mastery? Already?! Isn't this like stealing that Acrowolf's master's thesis or something? Sorry, Acrowolf! I mean, damn, I feel so guilty now. I didn't do a thing. I just came along and stole all its hard work in an instant. If I had my work stolen like that, I'd hold a grudge for life.

As I thought about it, knowledge of all sorts of Water Magic came flooding into my head.

"Sorry..."

I didn't know what else to say.

"Alright, hopefully this next one doesn't make me feel so awful."

I picked up a booklet that looked just like the one I'd received from the Clever Monkey. *Acrowolf's Knowledge* was printed on the front of it. I decided to open it up and give it a read.

Acrowolves are giant wolf monsters that dwell in high-level dungeons and field areas. They are also known as Ash-Wolves, but they possess no Fire Magic, instead having mastered Water Magic. They gather in packs only to mate and raise young and are solitary for most of their lives. Given their territorial nature, fighting between Acrowolves is common. They have razor-sharp senses that they use to further enforce their territory. They are primarily nocturnal.

“Why’re they called Ash-Wolves then?!”

Their fur’s ash-colored, but there has to be some better name for them, right? And wait, they’re nocturnal. I guess I should be glad they never attacked me in my sleep. Maybe because I always sleep in trees?

I flipped the page.

AN ACROWOLF’S LIFE.

“C’mon, does it need to sound that fancy?!”

Couldn’t they have come up with something more tame-sounding?! Oh, fine, whatever.

It had a few more plants and their effects listed, as well as the names and locations of several other monsters. There was also another map, and as the book got sucked into me, my mental map of the forest expanded again.

There was one spot on the map that was still empty though. I’d assumed that the Clever Monkeys just didn’t go there, but the Acrowolf seemed to avoid that exact same area. It seemed a little too much of a coincidence to me.

“I bet it’d be worth looking into.”

There might be some clue as to how to escape this forest there.

Neither the Clever Monkeys nor the Acrowolf seemed to know anything about escaping from this place.

“Oh, well. I guess the important thing right now is just staying alive.”

I was still level one.

“Okay, what’s next?”

The next thing I saw was the little sphere of the Acrowolf’s Stats.

ACROWOLF			
MANA: 10,000	ATTACK: 9,874	DEFENSE: 1,230	AGILITY: 8,762
MAGIC ATTACK: 5,553	MAGIC DEFENSE: 4,887	LUCK: 20	CHARISMA: 1,000

“Man, that’s unlucky!”

How is every monster I’ve ever seen so unlucky? Is it because they’re unlucky to have ever met me? Dammit! And how is its Charisma so high?! My nonexistent Charisma Stat is jealous!

“Fine. I don’t care. All this means is I get another hundred-point boost to my own Charisma.”

I’ll be super-charismatic one of these days! Wow, I’ve never been so unconfident of anything in my life before.

The Stats were sucked into me all the same, and ignoring the voice that came after it, I moved right on to the treasure chest.

“Alright, what’s in here?”

I popped it open to reveal a shortsword.

“Ooh!”

It was pretty plain-looking, but the small blue gemstones embedded in it glinted with a mysterious light, and I could feel a strange sort of presence coming from it. I picked it right up and used Greater Analysis on it.

>NIXIE-CRYST SHORTSWORD: A blade that holds a water spirit that caused a flood and claimed countless lives long ago. A Legendary weapon—the blade is covered in a sheath of water that ensures it never dulls. When casting Water Magic, the Mana cost is reduced and the effect is greatly increased.

“WHAT?!”

Damn, this thing looks crazy! And it's Legendary!

Legendary would mean that it was pretty darn rare. According to the book I got from God, there were seven different tiers of rarity.

RARITY TIERS
COMMON: Weapons and armor sold at the average armorer. Can be made with ease.
UNCOMMON: The weakest and most common of monster drops. Many have beneficial effects.
RARE: Obtainable from fairly strong monsters. Have abilities that give an edge to their wielder in battle.
SECRET: Found in treasure chests in dungeons or as drops from powerful monsters. Possess powerful abilities.
LEGENDARY: Can only be found as rare drops from powerful monsters or from treasure chests in high-level dungeons. Possess multiple powerful abilities.
MYTHIC: Consists of ultra-rare drops from powerful monsters or from ultra-difficult dungeons. Given their rarity, their exact effects are unknown.
PHANTASM: Unobtainable from all known methods. Effects are also unknown.

Why do they even have a Phantasm tier if they don't know anything about it? Maybe someone somewhere has one but nobody knows how they got it?

At any rate, Legendary was decently high up there.

So the Acrowolf counts as a powerful monster then? And I guess the Clever Monkeys were weak after all. I mean the Wise Simian's Chain is only Uncommon. To think I beat a strong monster like that by accident. Sorry, Acrowolf. That was rude of me.

"Well, I may as well equip it then."

I stuck the shortsword through my belt. It fit nice and snugly, and it didn't feel like it'd slip out by accident.

"Wait... There's something else in here."

I looked back into the chest to find a black bracelet with a small yellow stone embedded in it.

"I guess it dropped this too."

I used Analysis on it.

>BRACELET OF THE NIGHT: Rare equipment. Grants the wearer the ability to see in darkness as if it were midday.

"Damn! Seriously?!"

Acrowolves really are the best. Nocturnal monsters FTW!

Seeing in the dark seemed pretty useful, but it seemed a bit unnatural to me.

"I mean, I'm still equipping it."

Cool equips are cool, period.

"Alright, that only leaves the money."

Not like I need more coin.

I pulled the pouch out of the chest and counted out three platinum coins and seventy gold ones.

"Seriously, I don't need this much!"

Money's useless to me! Well, now at least. I guess I'll need it after I leave this forest.

"Oh, whatever. At least my Status will have some more high numbers on it now, I guess."

I sighed as I stuffed it into my Item Box. At that moment, however, I heard a familiar voice.

>Vast number of experience points confirmed. Now proceeding to Evolve.

“Crap!”

I totally forgot. The Acrowolf was even tougher than the Clever Monkeys, which could only mean one thing.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH! MY HEAD! MY HEAD’S SPLITTING!!”

And here I thought I was getting more used to it! That’s what I get for being careless!

“NOOOOOOOOO!!”

The pain moved on to my face.

DAMN, that hurts!

I frantically clenched my teeth, trying desperately not to scream again.

After my face was done, it moved to my torso. I tried taking deep breaths to hold in the pain. I wanted to scream it all out, but if I was too loud, it’d be the Clever Monkey incident all over again. Finally, my torso pain ended.

I braced myself for what would come next, but that wasn’t enough.

“GAAAAAAAH?! NOT THERE! NOT THERE!!”

My legs were A-OK. They hurt, but not too much to bear. But my groin was another story.

“NOOOOOOO! NOT MY MANHOOD! I NEED THAT WORKING!!”

I-I mean ... I will, right? Eventually?

That was the one kind of pain I still sucked at dealing with, and the popping-squishing sounds coming from there were only making it worse. As a total aside, though, it still worked fine after all my previous evolutions. Whew.

“But m-man, that hurts!”

Okay, not whew! Very not whew! Does it have to be so loud with all the squishing and snapping down there?!

Unless I was mistaken, though, it was bigger than back when I was on Earth. Yet I only really saw it when I was relieving myself in bushes and the like, so it was probably just my imagination.

After what felt like way too long, I was finally freed from my torture. I lay down on the ground for a minute to catch my breath.

I-I guess I should check my Status...

Even if I couldn't breathe, I didn't want to forget that.

Chapter 11: Ambush

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: Super New Human			
SEX: Male			
JOB: Forest Hermit			
AGE: 17		LEVEL: 1	
MANA: 10,024	ATTACK: 13,075	DEFENSE: 11,323	AGILITY: 13,252
MAGIC ATTACK: 9,563	MAGIC DEFENSE: 10,665	LUCK: 9,020	CHARISMA:
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">WMD-Grade Uniform ShirtWMD-Grade Uniform PantsKiller UndershirtKiller UnderwearWise Simian’s ChainWise Simian ClubNixie-Cryst ShortswordBracelet of the Night			
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Mid-AnalysisPerfect LootParalysis ImmunitySleep ImmunityConfusion ImmunityCharm ImmunityPetrification Immunity			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bind Immunity• Poison Immunity• Cutter Kick• Flash• Ultra Compounding• Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting• Twin-Fang Strike• Detection• Mighty Claw
STATE: Evolved 9/10 (MAX)
TITLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stench Virtuoso
CURRENCY: 452,240,000G

“Why?!”

Why is my Charisma still blank?! I know I said I’d given up on it, but still! Can’t there at least be something there?! Does my Status have a grudge against me or something?! And what the hell is a “Super New Human”?! Is my hair going to go blond and stick right up as I fly around or something?!

I couldn’t find any mention of my new Water Magic though. All the information I could need on it was already in my head, however, so I didn’t mind it not showing up in my Stats.

“Looks like I’ll have to evolve one more time though...”

It felt like the only real change was that I got thinner. Considering how painful it was, though, I felt kinda ripped off.

I guess it might be changing something still, I just can’t tell what.

“Ah, who cares?”

No point in worrying about it now, right?

But at that moment, I felt something.

“Huh?!”

Thanks to Detection, I could feel a number of creatures closing in on me. It was nice to know that Detection was a constant effect.

“Wait, am I surrounded?”

I was picking up on readings from all around me. I had no idea what I was surrounded by, of course, but it probably wasn’t anything good.

“Dammit! I haven’t even tried out my magic yet!”

I didn’t have time to lament, though, as my assailants showed themselves.

“Clever Monkeys?!”

There were more of them than I could count.

Are they here for revenge or something?! I guess I could try to grovel again. Pride? What’s that?

None of them moved though. They simply sat in the trees and watched me from a safe distance.

"Hm?"

Just as I was starting to wonder, I heard a voice.

“Me never see human before.”

I whipped around, but I couldn’t find the speaker. It was definitely speaking my language though.

So are there humans in this forest after all?!

I started getting excited, and I strained my ears to see if I could hear more. All I heard, however, was a very different sound, like a low whistling that was slowly growing louder.

“Huh?”

Then something thudded into the ground in front of me with a thunderous crash. The impact sent a cloud of dust and debris into the air, blinding me for a moment. Then a large shape thudded through the smokescreen toward me.

“Wh-what?”

I couldn’t hide my astonishment.

“Human. You fight me.”

My assailant from the sky was a giant gorilla.



“Human. Fight me.”

“Um ... can I say no?”

“No.”

“.....”

Wow. I’ve never had my rights denied by a gorilla before.

I gave up on thinking. Nothing made sense anyways. Instead, I decided to use Analysis on the gorilla.

>KAISER KONG. Level: 775. State—Evolved 9/10 (MAX)

Okay, I’m regretting that now.

“HOW?!”

I mean, c’mon, over level seven hundred?! How is that even possible! And looking at its State there, does that mean it evolved, just like I did?

I rubbed my eyes, but I wasn’t seeing things, unfortunately.

“What wrong?”

“N-n-nothing.”

How’m I supposed to reply to that? I mean, damn, I’m screwed! “Kaiser Kong” sounds like a boss Clever Monkey and everything! It’s here for revenge, isn’t it? No, wait ... if they wanted revenge, they’d all attack me at once. It’s challenging me to a proper duel and everything.

As I tried to make sense of the situation, the Kaiser Kong cracked its knuckles.

“Relax. Me no let anyone interfere.”

That’s not the problem! Not that I could expect some stupid gorilla to understand though.

It lowered itself closer to the ground, ready to spring.

“Me finish quickly.”

Wait, but when it’s finished I’ll be dead, right?

“.....”

“Say something!”

Damn! So it wants revenge after all?!

“Get ready.”

“Wh-whoa, wait!”

It didn't wait. The Kaiser Kong closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye and swung. I ducked out of the way at the last second.

“Wow. Me never miss first attack before. You good.” Its cheeks flushed.

“Why are you blushing?!”

Wait, so is this a lady gorilla? You're kidding, right? Please tell me you're kidding! I mean, I guess there are guy gorillas and girl gorillas both, but ... ew.

“Me like strong males.”

“And I hate all gorillas!”

So it is a female, dammit! Or no ... I guess it could technically be a male. I don't even want to think about that.

The Kaiser Kong made its second swing. I took a light step back...

“Gwegh?!”

The stone it had thrown hit me right in the face.

Ow?!

I was evolved though. I wasn't going to cry out from such little pain!

Man, getting high pain tolerance wasn't on my bucket list.

I was just glad that even after taking a clean hit to the face, I was still feeling fine.

“Hmph. You, stop dodging.”

“Yeah, right! I don't wanna die!”

I could tell just from the size of its arms and the speed of its swings that one clean hit could send me flying. I wasn't confident I'd have any bones left intact after a hit from that.

“This is going nowhere. Cutter Kick!”

I launched a Cutter Kick at full force. The gorilla’s eyes widened for a moment, but just when I thought it’d hit, it smoothly dodged with more speed and grace than I’d thought possible from such a massive body.

“That dangerous.”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

How’d it even do that?! It can’t move that fast! That’s cheating!

“Me use Skills too. Flash Arm!”

As soon as its Skill activated, it disappeared. Then I felt a hit like a wrecking ball to my gut as its fist connected, and I was sent flying backwards. I went through several trees before hitting the ground and unceremoniously tumbling for another few yards. I clutched my gut as I hacked up a mass of dark crimson blood.

“I-I wanna go home...”

At this rate, I’m seriously gonna die.

I pulled an Ultimate Healing Potion out of my Item Box and frantically gulped it down.

“That was too close.”

Man, gorillas are scary. Next time I’m going to a zoo, I’m skipping the whole primate section, I swear. Err, wait, I can’t go back to Earth at all.

The Kaiser Kong closed in on me with terrifying speed, stopping just in front of me.

“Wow. You not die from Flash Arm.”

I knew it! It is trying to kill me!

“Me more interested. Want strong male.”

“Sorry, I have a no-dating-gorillas policy.”

“Me not gorilla. Me, Saria.”

“How the hell can you have such a pretty name with a face like that?!”

I feel cheated! I demand compensation! Somebody save me!

Besides, why does the gorilla get a name? Isn't Kaiser Kong good enough for it?! Not that I really care either way of course.

Man, we're just not on the same page here. Seriously, what's this thing's problem?!

"If Cutter Kick won't work, then take this—Mighty Claw!"

As I ran away from it, I swung my hand as hard as I could, sending five blades of razor-sharp energy whizzing through the air towards her.

"Hup!" It jumped, nimbly dodging my attack.

"Skills nice."

"Is that so?!"

What am I supposed to do now?! Dammit!

I didn't know the first thing about fighting with a shortsword, and I wasn't much better with my Wise Simian Club. I basically just swung it around and hoped I would hit.

I kept my distance from the Kaiser Kong, trying to figure out how best to approach it.

"Now my turn. Air Impact."

As I watched, it floated into the air then kicked off of empty space to come zooming towards me.

"OOOOOOOORGHH!"

"Go away! Stop it!"

I've never seen anything so scary before in my life! That's double-jump-level physics BS there!

I dodged its attack at the last instant by twisting out of the way, and it crashed into the ground right behind me with a thunderous crash.

"Jeez ... I hope it broke its own neck with that."

After a hit like that, it has to have taken some kind of damage, right?

“Me surprised. How you dodge Air Impact?”

“Crap, it’s still alive!”

And without a scratch too. I wanna cry.

“What am I supposed to do if none of my Skills’ll hit?”

I have Twin-Fang Strike, I guess, but I bet it’ll just dodge that too...

“Now Flash Arm.”

“?!”

Not that one again!

I pulled out the Nixie-Cryst Shortsword and my Wise Simian Club, taking one in each hand.

Alright, all or nothing!

“Twin-Fang Strike!”

The world seemed to slow down around me and I could see the Kaiser Kong’s fist as it flew at me. I ducked out of the way as I swung both my weapons at it.

“Got you!”

The Kaiser Kong wasn’t about to be done in so easily though. I could see its eyes widen in slow motion.

Snap!

“Huh?”

It took me a moment to process what happened. Everything should’ve still been in slow motion, but in the blink of an eye, the Kaiser Kong had pulled its fist back and grabbed both of my weapons, one in each hand.

“What the hell?!”

“That close. Me thought me was dead.”

I instinctively knew that having both my weapons stuck like that was bad news. In a snap decision, I fired off a Cutter Kick at it. The Kaiser Kong let go and dodged so quickly that I couldn’t even follow it with my eyes.

“.....”

I broke out in a cold sweat.

This thing's too strong. I knew it; I'm just as weak as ever.

Beating those Clever Monkeys and that Acrowolf had made me a little—no, a lot too confident. Even if I made it out of this forest alive, I'd be some monster's meal before the day was out.

No ... I can't think about that now. If I start spiralling, I'll never snap out of it.

Not one of my Skills worked, though, which meant I had only one option left. I'd have to try out my Magic. Even if it wasn't in my Status, I had all the information I needed to cast it in my head. The catch was I knew the spell names and costs but not the exact effects.

Alright, I guess I'll just pick one of the spells with the highest cost. That should be the one with the highest power, right? Just like Magic Blast in Dragon Adventure!

I even had the Nixie-Cryst Shortsword, which would help jack up the damage of my Water Magic even more. I didn't want to come up short.

Okay, so there are a few spells tied for the top cost. I guess I'll just pick one.

The Kaiser Kong simply gave me a curious look. No doubt it was wondering why I was so quiet all of a sudden. I couldn't miss.

Okay! Time to cast my first ever spell!

I dramatically raised my hand to the heavens. “Waterfall Disaster!”

There! That should be cool enough!

The Kaiser Kong's eyes flew open in shock. “What?!”

Hehehe, it knows this spell, does it? Looks like I chose right!

At that moment, though, I heard a heavy thundering sound from right above me.

“Huh?”

I looked up.

Oh, man, I shouldn't have looked!

"What the *hell*?!"

There was a terrifying amount of water in the air, heading right for me.

"Hold on, not here! Over there! Go over there! I-I'll move, so just wait a—"

The spell didn't listen to me, though, as the full lake's worth of water smashed right into me.

"Gah?! I-I can't breathe!"

The sheer pressure was enough that I couldn't move a muscle.

The Kaiser Kong watched me with a blank look from where it stood, perfectly out of the spell's area of effect.

"I'm gonna die ... I'm gonna die!"

In the end, it took nearly three full minutes for the water to stop.

Chapter 12: Aftermath

The mood in the clearing was now thoroughly awkward.

Man, I can't believe I screwed up so bad. I wish I was dead.

I forced myself to stand from where I was plastered on the grass.

"Hah ... hahaha ... not bad, not bad at all."

"No. You attack self."

"Don't say it!!"

Oh, God, just kill me now! And here I thought I'd be able to bluff my way through it!

I resolved to practice before I tried using any more magic. I wouldn't last at this rate.

"We continue fight?"

"Oh, just leave me alone, will you?"

Seriously, why?

I half-killed myself already and I was totally drained mentally.

Just gimme a break, you stupid monkey.

"Me attack now?"

I wasn't ready to start fighting again. I hurt all over, and I wasn't in any state physically to use my Skills.

No way can I actually beat this thing. I'm dead.

The Kaiser Kong got points for being considerate though. It at least asked before attacking, and it almost seemed to be pitying me.

It's because my Luck went up, right?

I needed some way to make it out of this mess alive though. My Skills didn't work and Magic was out of the question. If I tried to pull out another potion now, I bet I'd get attacked before I could drink it.

I guess it might let me heal if I asked nicely.

"Me wait long enough. Me attack now."

"Huh?!"

It suddenly sprang forward at a terrifying speed. It wasn't using any Skills, though, so I could dodge it if I wanted to—if I was on top form that is. I could barely stand I was so weak, and my legs were quivering with a combination of cold and fatigue from casting what was probably my best spell like that.

"Crap!"

In a heartbeat, it closed the distance between us. I was out of time.

That's it, I'm dead.

But just then, I remembered my secret weapon.

"That's right ... I smell really bad!"

It was bad enough to kill a Clever Monkey after all. And even though I had a "shower" a minute before, that wouldn't be a problem. I had my Stench Virtuoso Title after all! Finally, there was a point in being able to control my B.O. at will!

I still don't know how I feel about it though.

"Bwahahahahaha! Foolish Kaiser Kong!"

"Wh-what?"

It suddenly froze.

Man, what nice manners.

"You don't stand a chance of defeating me now!"

"Why not?"

"Because I have ... A SECRET WEAPON!"

"You, what, mate?!"

How the hell is the gorilla meme-literate? No, that's gotta just be a coincidence.

"Should you dare take another step closer, you'll surely perish!"

"Why?" Its brow was scrunched up in confusion.

Yeah, I'd be confused if I were in its shoes.

Unfortunately for it, though, my stench was my greatest weapon! I sacrificed all my human dignity for this trump card!

I used my Stench Virtuoso to maximize my smell. I now had a 4" field of reek around me that was even stronger than back when I killed the Clever Monkey. Since I had such limited range, though, I started flapping my clothes in an effort to create a slight breeze. Otherwise, its fist would hit before my smell could.

"Alright, come at me!" I flapped my shirt at it in an intimidating way.

The Kaiser Kong gave me a baffled look, and it didn't move for a few solid seconds. Then it suddenly vanished. It probably used that Flash Arm Skill again.

"Me finish this."

By the time I heard its words, it was in my face, its fist rapidly closing in on me.

Crap! I knew it, it wasn't enough! Or can it even smell me?! Why am I relying on my B.O. to kill this thing anyway? I knew it was just a coincidence the Clever Monkey died then!

Just as I had given up, its massive fist froze in the air. It was less than an inch from my nose. I broke out in a cold sweat, but I totally didn't wet myself. Not even a little.

I blinked a few times, but the fist didn't move.

Why'd it stop?

I glanced up at the gorilla's face.

"....."

I shouldn't have looked. I mean, ew!

The gorilla's muscular face was a bright shade of red, and there was a dreamy look in its eyes.

What the hell's going on?!

After a long moment, the Kaiser Kong snapped out of it. It put its hands on my shoulders and gave me a serious look.

Did the smell cause its brain to short-circuit or something?

I returned its look, meeting its gaze. Its cheeks were still a rosy red, and I resisted the urge to retch.

"Me love you."

"Huh?"

Wait, wait, wait, wait. Huh? Wait, what?

I took a deep breath and went over the past minute in my head. It sounded like it just said "love," but that was impossible.

It's not possible, right? Somebody please tell me it's impossible.

"You marry me now."

"....."

Shit, my brain's overclocking. I can feel metaphorical smoke coming out of my ears. What did that fugly monkey just say?

It pulled me closer into a tight embrace and inhaled deeply.

"Male, strong. Pheromones, strong. Looks, cool. Come to nest. Make babies."

After a long moment, my brain finally caught up.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

My scream echoed throughout the forest.



※ ※ ※

“Nope, I still don’t get it.”

Thinking back on everything that had led to this moment didn’t help as much as I thought it would. It was plenty clear how I wound up in this situation, but I still couldn’t figure out why it had to be me.

What’d I do to deserve this?!

“What? You hungry? Want food?”

Saria, that stupid Kaiser Kong, offered me the food it’d made again.

Drop dead, will you?

“Look, what’d I say? I’m not hungry. Can you just let me go already?”

“No. Seiichi husband.”

“Like hell I am! I’m a human and you’re a fucking monkey! Get it?! We’re not even the same species! No way I’ll ever marry you, okay?! Understand?!”

“Me no monkey. Me Saria.”

“Just shut up!”

This is literally painful! Man, I wish I had someone to vent to about this! I needed them here an hour ago!

As an aside, this primitive primate threatened me into telling her my name, so I didn’t have a choice. It threatened to *kiss me*, of all things, if I lied. I had no doubt it could tell if I was telling the truth too.

I wish it’d just killed me back then.

My breathing was a little ragged from all that yelling, but I couldn’t help but take a second look at its food. I mean it looked amazing. I’d never seen any of the meat or vegetables that it’d used before in my life, but it was clearly prepared well. It was the first proper food I’d seen in months, and as much as I hated to admit it, I was hungry.

You’d better not growl now, stomach.

Grrrrl.

“.....”

“You hungry. You eat.”

Somebody save me!

I couldn't lie about being full after that, though, and it looked so eager to please. I let out a heavy sigh as I loaded a morsel of food onto my fork. Even if it was poisoned, I had my Poison Immunity after all. I hesitated for a long moment before raising it into the air.

The food in question was some kind of grilled meat, and I could tell from the smell that it had used garlic and maybe some pepper or something. There was also salad that gave off a tantalizingly spicy aroma. My Analysis told me that it was a Bone Dragon Steak. I was admittedly kind of impressed that it had hunted down a dragon, but I still wasn't eager to try it.

Finally, I clamped my eyes shut and stuck it into my mouth. I chewed it well then swallowed.

“What...?”

My eyes flew open. If this was one of those corny food manga, I bet my whole face would be glowing. That was how delicious the steak was.

E-err, I mean ... I bet this is just some quality meat! Yeah, that's it! I bet this stew here tastes like sewage!

I used Analysis on it, and I discovered that the meat in it was from a Clever Monkey.

Wait...

“Clever Monkey?!”

Oh, God, it's a cannibal! Err ... no, I guess she's a gorilla and it's not technically cannibalism, but they're related, right? Why's she cooking and eating them?!

“Monkeys not friends. Only follow me. Annoying. But obedient. Me lucky.”

Oof. Maybe you should get a new boss, Clever Monkeys. I guess being smart doesn't mean you can't be used, huh?

Clever Monkey meat tasted pretty awful though, which meant that this stew was probably just as foul. Normally, I wouldn't eat anything I knew would taste awful, but I made an exception just this once. I put a spoonful of soup in my mouth, my expectations as low as physically possible.

"Huh?"

How is this good? Like seriously?

That dumb ape puffed out its chest.

"Me make from scratch. Tasty?"

"Seriously?!"

Oh, no. It's legit, a good cook...

As I slumped in my seat, that irritating ape opened its mouth again.

"Seiichi's clothes old. Me made new clothes."

"You made *what*?!"

The Kaiser Kong handed me a white shirt and a pair of black pants. They were honestly higher quality than anything I'd seen back on Earth.

"Me make from monster thread. Strong. Good material."

How?

"You give old clothes later. Me wash in river."

"OH GOD, MAKE IT STOP!!"

How is this ape so good at domestic stuff?! Why?! It's good at cooking, sewing and even cleaning from the state of this nest. She wouldn't just be a good wife, she'd be perfect! Why'd she have to be an ugly-ass ape?!

"Me make good wife?"

"Yeah, a great wife! To a gorilla!"

"Oh me, happy. You so happy, marry me now?"

"To a gorilla, I said! I'm not a gorilla!!"

I wished I could beat her red-furred ass, but I knew she'd rip me in half if I tried.

Damn, life sucks! And wait, didn't she basically just say I'm a gorilla to her? That stings!

I took a few deep breaths to calm down a little. Yelling at her wouldn't get anything done; that much was clear.

The question is how do I escape this hellhole? Where would I go, even?

Come to think of it, that black area on the map seemed like a safe bet. Given how often the Clever Monkeys seemed to follow that ape around, it'd be fair to assume that it didn't know what was there either—or even if it did know, it probably didn't go there often. I only needed to figure out the perfect timing to escape.

Wait ... I guess it really doesn't matter either way, but there's one thing I really wanna know.

"Hey, apeface."

"Me no apeface. Me Saria."

"Whatever. How can you speak my language?"

Not even the Clever Monkeys could talk, but we didn't have any problem understanding one another.

It started beaming at me, as though it were genuinely happy that I asked.

"Me find books in nearby cave."

"Books ... in a cave?"

It reached into a patch of nearby greenery and pulled out a pair of books. They were both really beat up; one was thin and the other textbook thick.

"Me learn words here."

Wow, that's pretty smart for a dumb monkey.

I took a look at the books. The thinner one had *The Essence of Everyday Magic* printed on the cover in faded letters.

“Everyday Magic?”

I opened the cover. Inside, I found descriptions of all sorts of spells that could be used for daily life. One created a small flame and another created a cupful of water. I read about one for drying laundry, one for softening the ground for farming, and more. They were all very specific and limited in their effects, but they seemed legitimately useful. The one that caught my eye most, though, was called Wash. Basically, it removed all the dirt and grime from an object. It didn't seem to work on clothes for whatever reason, but with this, I'd never need to take a bath or shower again.

I haven't bathed in months, after all, not counting my Water Magic misfire, of course.

Apparently, it was the kind of magic that your average person could use. Only merchants or nobles could afford proper baths, it seemed.

“Huh ... this looks pretty useful.”

At that moment, I heard a voice in my head.

>You acquired Everyday Magic.

Wow, uh ... that was quick. Shouldn't learning things take time and effort? Not that I'm complaining.

I moved on to the second, thicker book. It was titled *The Hero Abel's Journal*.

“Huh. The Hero Abel's Journal.”

Man, I kept trying to journal, but I could never keep it up...

“Wait, hero?!”

Like the actual journal of an actual hero?!

I opened it to the first page as I grappled with my shock.

Year XX, Month Y, Day Z. Finally, it's time to set out on my journey! I have our healer, the Priest Pierre, with me, the Warrior Gars, and of course Liliana the Sage and Anna the Hunter. The king gave us our orders personally, and we're going to go defeat the Demon King together! Don't worry, everyone, I'll keep you safe. Let's all fight together!

“Wow, he even sounds like a real hero! And of course he’s going to fight the Demon King.”

Come to think of it, Kenji and Shouta and the others are also supposed to be in pretty much the same boat. I wonder how they’re doing.

I kept reading with them on my mind. The deeper into the book I went, though, the more battered the pages became.

Year XX, Month Y, Day Z. We’ve been on the road for a full year! We’re all doing just fine. Honestly, I’m so glad we’re working so well together. The longer we travel, though, the more towns we see that’ve been ripped apart by the Demon King’s goons. We’ve got to defeat him soon. I’ve gotta show King — from — that he was right to put his faith in me!

Year XX, Month Y, Day Z. I don’t know how to say this. We’ve defeated all of the Demon King’s commanders except one, but the cost has been steep. Gars, my friend and companion for all these years, fell in battle. He died protecting me. I hate being so weak. I’m so angry it feels like I could explode. How could I let him do that?! I’m still so powerless! This is the price I pay for my arrogance. I’m not the amazing hero they say I am. I’ll learn from this, though, and I swear I’ll never let this happen again. I’m still so grateful that Liliana and Anna have been so supportive of me this whole time. I couldn’t do it without them. I swear on your name, Gars, I’ll take the Demon King’s head for you!

“Damn, the hero’s popular. I hope Pierre doesn’t get jealous.”

Year XX, Month Y, Day Z. We finally slew the Demon King. Our celebration was short-lived, however. Pierre—we were wrong to trust him. After the battle, right when we were at our weakest, he attacked us. Liliana and Anna protected me. It’s only thanks to them that I was able to escape with me life. Time is of the essence, though. I need to report this to King — of — — — —.

“Holy crap, Pierre *did* get jealous! That traitor!”

Year XX, Month Y, Day Z. Humanity deserves no salvation. When I arrived back home, I was attacked by the very townspeople I fought to protect. The entire kingdom of — has betrayed me. From what rumors

I was able to overhear, the Demon King's only surviving commander, —, and — were working in league from the very beginning. The Demon King's entire resurrection was the plot of that commander and the top brass of —. None of that matters, however. My beloved Liliana and Anna are dead. As soon as I pen this last page, I will follow them to the afterlife. My life was a waste, a fool's errand, yet I could not bear my memories of my companions being tainted any further. If somebody ever happens across this journal, then I bid you, do not repeat my mistakes. I pray that this world may have a future yet.

Abel

I quietly closed the journal and sat in silence for a long moment.

"Shit! That was *heavy!*" I whipped it at the ground. "Isn't a journal supposed to be full of fun stuff, like what you ate that day or something?! I mean, sure, you write some sad stuff, but nothing that dark, dammit!"

And what, I'm supposed to learn from that somehow? How?! Besides, I couldn't read any of the important names and stuff because the diary just "happened" to be extra beat-up there! That was on purpose, wasn't it?!

I started panting heavily.

"Seiichi? Relax. Me here for you."

"Oh yeah? And what the hell can *you* do for me?!"

"Me marry you?"

"How about you drop dead instead?!"

I swear I'll escape that stupid ape's nest if it's the last thing I do!

Chapter 13: Life Together

A full day had passed since I started living with that stupid ape.

“You want seconds?”

“Fine.”

It seemed just as happy as ever as it heaped a second portion of breakfast into my bowl.

Dammit! If only she wasn't such a good cook!

I scarfed down my second helping, crying metaphorical tears of blood all the while.

“Me go fishing. Seiichi come?”

“Just lemme go already!”

And here I thought I'd be able to make a break for it as soon as that dumb monkey left!

I flopped down on the ground and started flailing around.

“Seiichi?” Its tone was gentle. “Me always here for you.”

“How about you be always somewhere else, you bastard?!”

“Me female. No bastard.”

“Just shut up! Like hell I care what a gorilla wants to be called!”

“Me no gorilla. Me Saria.”

“And guess what, me no care! Dummy! Stinkhead!”

I got the nagging feeling I was being childish about this whole situation, but I didn't even care anymore.

I'll never call it by its name. If I did, I'd, um, lose my pride!

“Oh ... me get it. You say sooner next time.” The ape’s cheeks blushed bright red.

I resisted the urge to vomit. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You no want call me name. You want call me Honey. Darling shy.”

I spewed blood.

How the hell’d it come to that conclusion?! Who the hell said that?! Where?! Why?! When?!

“Just now. Me imagined it. Seiichi cute.”

“Stop reading my mind! And stop blushing like that!!”

Holy crap, it’s gotten worse! Since when could it read minds?! I wish it’d fix its own delusions first!

More importantly, though, I couldn’t stand it if it called me darling again.

“Hey, ape breath!”

“What, darling?”

“STOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!!” I vomited blood reflexively.

This is bullying I swear! My HP’s at zero already!

“Stop calling me darling! Seriously!”

“Why?”

“Don’t give me that! Just stop it!”

“Okay. Seiichi.”

“No using my name either! You don’t deserve to call me that!”

Sure, I told her my name, but I never said she was allowed to use it. Seriously, you’d think she was my friend or something. I think I’d rather die.

“Hmph. You no be selfish.”

“I’m not being selfish! Look, if you do it again, I’m leaving!”

Perfect! Now, if it doesn’t accept my terms, I’ll be able to walk right on out... She’ll probably follow me though. On the other hand, if she accepts, then she’ll

never say my name again! Heh, all according to keikaku! That means plan, by the way. Man, I feel like a proper god of the new world now!

I smirked darkly.

Saria, however, thought for a moment before replying.

“Hmm ... you prefer ‘sweetie’ or ‘baby’?”

“Call me Seiichi.”

Yep, no choice there. And baby? Really?

“Oh. Me also like dear.”

“Please, just call me Seiichi!”

I got down on my hands and knees and started grovelling.

Well played, gorilla. Well played.

She gave me a satisfied nod.

“Me call you Seiichi then.”

Dammit! If only I stood a chance against you in a fight!

As I mulled over my powerlessness and how cruel the world was, that monkey brain hoisted me up by the back of my shirt and headed for the exit.

“We go fishing now.”

“Okay.”

By that point, I didn’t even feel like resisting.

※ ※ ※

“Hup!”

It plunged its fist into the river again, snatching up another fish and tossing it onto the massive pile on the riverbank. It had been at it for half an hour, but it was still going strong.

“Seiichi! Look! Me do good?”

“Uh, sure. Real good.”

It beamed at me then went back to snatching up fish. I continued watching it for a full minute before I finally realized.

Wait, isn't this my chance?

That dumb ape was totally engrossed in its fishing.

I wonder if it can even eat that much. Not that it matters.

I might not get another chance like this again. All I had to do was walk away. Trying my best to be stealthy, I made for the bushes at the edge of the small clearing.

At that moment, though, the bushes rustled.

Oh.

I could see a spider's head poking out from the bushes. This wasn't a tiny, cute little guy though. It was *huge*. Its giant mandible jaws were big enough to bite my head clean off if it felt like it.

It looked at me with its eight orb-like red eyes. I looked back with my two little human eyes. I let out a small sigh then turned back and sat down where I was before.

Huh. I've never seen that monster before.

.....

Shiiiiiiiiit.

That ended my escape plan pretty quickly. I stiffly turned back toward the bushes.

"....."

It was still staring at me. Like *really* staring. If it was actually possible to stare holes in things, I'd be Swiss cheese by now.

The last thing I want is more monster trouble! Why now?!

I turned back towards the river. I was sweating like a hog.

I should've run sooner! Stupid me! Why didn't I leave earlier?!

Regret wouldn't do a thing about that spider though. I slowly turned back around.

Oh, crap! I shouldn't have looked!

It had silently crept right up to me, and it was within biting distance. It let out a low chitter as it opened its mouth wide, clearly intending to munch my head right off.

No-no-no! How'd this even happen?!

I sat there, frozen in shock as it leaned in for the killing blow. Just when I was sure I was dead, though...

"Seiichi! Back!"

"Huh?"

In the blink of an eye, that muscle brain put itself between me and the spider.

"Me no let you hurt Seiichi."

With a single swing of its barrel-thick arms, it slugged the spider so hard it flew spinning back into the underbrush, squealing as it spewed yellow fluid.

Whoa ... what a punch.

I honestly couldn't believe I'd fought that gorilla head-on. I had to have been insane. Honestly, it was a miracle I survived.

"Punch too light. Still alive."

Wait, it survived that? That's downright monstrous. I mean, it is a monster, but still.

The gorilla then turned around to face me, a worried expression on its face.

"You, okay? Hurt?"

"No, I'm okay."

It looked genuinely relieved. "Good."

It was really worried about me, was it? And here I just tried to walk off without saying a thing.

I suddenly didn't feel so good.

Why do I even hate it ... no, her so much anyways? Is it because she tried to kill me before? Or is it just because she's a gorilla?

I racked my brain, but I couldn't come up with a single decent reason. Nobody had ever been that worried for me before, period, except for Mom and Dad, of course.

I've ... I've been pretty awful to her, haven't I?

Sure, it was hard to suddenly get all chummy with her after that fight we had, but she was trying. There wasn't a single good reason why I shouldn't work up the courage to do the same.

I'm still not marrying her though.

I had to admit that it was nice to have someone to talk to, after so many months alone. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to get to know her just a little bit better before I made my escape. We hadn't had any decent time together yet, after all. She might be worth talking to.

As I was lost in thought, she scooped up a bunch of fish to show me.

"Look! Fish fresh!"

"Yeah. They look really good."

She blinked in surprise then smiled blissfully.

"We go home now?"

"Yeah, let's."

Here goes nothing—my first step forwards.

I had no idea what would happen next, but I was interested enough to find out. If I liked what I saw of her, then maybe I'd consider running then.

With that, we headed back to her nest, side by side.

"Seiichi?"

"Yeah?"

"We go home, make babies. Me never make babies. Be gentle."

"Uh..."

Oh, forget it! I've gotta get the hell outta here!

Chapter 14: Risking It All

Man, time can really fly if you're not careful ... and it's scary what you can get used to.

A full week had passed since I'd started living with Saria, and although there was still no way I'd ever call her by her name, I was getting used to her. I was even starting to think that I was okay with her being a gorilla.

Ew! Really, me?! No way gorillas are okay! I mean she's literally not human!

Even though she was a gorilla, she was better at housework and the like than most human women I'd met. Honestly, I was surprised. Her fur was surprisingly soft, too, and her tail was just about the fluffiest thing I'd ever touched in my life.

I guess one of the reasons I was so harsh in insulting her might've been that I never had the chance to criticize anyone else before. Back on Earth, I was called fat, creepy, ugly, dirty, smelly—pretty much everything I could think of. It was probably ... no, definitely worse than just being called a gorilla.

The point was I still had every intention of running away, but I really enjoyed having such nice food.

"Seiichi, here."

"Thanks."

I sat down for breakfast with her.

Oof, we're like newlyweds now. This is sick. I should be questioning my sanity right about now.

I started to hum lightly as I dug into my meal. It was just as delicious as always.

If only she wasn't a gorilla, she'd be the perfect wife.

"Really? Seiichi so nice."

“Stop reading my mind already.”

Really, how’s she doing that? Creepy.

I felt equal parts contented and freshly repulsed by her—no, by *it*, that dumb monkey.

“Oh!” Her face suddenly lit up. “Today search day.”

“Hm? Search day?”

“Yes. Me go with Clever Monkeys, find Fruits of Evolution.”

“You what?”

Fruits of Evolution? Really?!

“Seiichi? You know Fruits of Evolution?”

“Uh...”

I didn’t know how I should respond to that.

Maybe I should just play dumb and see what she knows about them? Yeah, I’ll do that.

“Never heard of them.”

She nodded. “Okay. Me tell you. Fruit of Evolution amazing. Make you best of species. Get reborn better.”

So those “evolutions” made me one of the best humans there are? What does that mean though? Am I now the strongest human alive, or the smartest? Or maybe the coolest?

I didn’t know how I compared to other humans, though, and I was still level one either way. Maybe I was better at learning things now, but it didn’t feel like anything else had changed. I felt just as dumb as ever.

Besides, my Charisma stat is still blank! I even used Wash on myself ... sigh.

Speaking of looks, I was currently wearing the clothes that a certain gorilla made for me. They were as clean and comfy as they looked, and she even washed them whenever they got dirty. She even made some underwear for me out of a different material, one that was even nicer on the skin. She used a vine

from a so-called Bounce Tree to make a full elastic waistband and everything. The only problem was that she really wanted to keep my old, caustic-smelling clothes, so I had to use the Fire spell I learned from that *Everyday Magic* book to dispose of them.

Anyhow! The important thing was the evolution I went through and how I'd changed.

How'd I even change though? I felt the exact same as before! Oh, but I guess evolving was crazy painful in and of itself. Yay!

The gorilla continued.

"Me never tell you. Me first read book, not understand. Me find Fruit of Evolution. Eat Fruit. Then go back to nest. Could read book. Learned words."

Wait, so it had that big of an effect on her? I mean, learning how to talk is a pretty big step forward. Maybe it has to do with her level.

If she was at all like me, then she should've been over level 700 before she ate her first fruit—and now she was at nine out of ten evolutions. Scary.

"Me look different. Become stronger. Get—"

"Sorry, is there any chance you could stop speaking so weirdly?"

Just listening to her talk like that was irritating, but I couldn't pin down why exactly.

Right, it's because she's a gorilla!

No, not that.

"Sorry. Me no have mouth for talking. Grunts, not words. Can't speak normal. Me want talk more, but..."

"No, that's okay."

What would we even talk about? Seriously.

"Oh. Me remember about fruit. Eat eleven, die. Body too stressed."

"What?!"

Seriously?! They can kill you?! Man, I'm glad I never found any more then.

That did mean that I couldn't eat any more, though, which was a bit of a letdown.

Those things really are amazing, though, huh?

"Me ate ten. Me collect another ten, want give to strong male, be husband. Clever Monkeys find ten. But someone steal."

I, uh ... I don't like where this is going.

"Me find ten more. Give to Seiichi. Then me find thief, kill."

"I'M SO SORRY!" I hit the floor and started grovelling. "I really didn't mean anything bad by it, honest, but I stole them! I was so hungry I ate them all!"

Screw my pride! Anything to stay alive! That's the law of the jungle!

I nervously turned to look up at her. Her expression hadn't changed a bit.

"Oh. Seiichi eat? Okay. Me forgive."

"Great!"

"Now marry me. No buts."

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Okay, fine, I saw that one coming! I mean, I did eat her future husband's fruit and everything! I guess I'm officially screwed, then ... unless I get the hell out of here, fast.

All I had to do was slip out while that ape brain was out hunting for more fruits. Finally, I could escape from this living hell!

I guess I'll miss her food, but it's not worth it!

"Seiichi?" Her words whipped me back to reality. There was a strange look on her face. "You hate me?"

"Huh?"

There was none of that irritating banter in her voice, and she seemed genuinely nervous.

I hesitated, but before I could reply, she continued.

"Me love Seiichi."

I didn't say anything.

How many times has she said that already?

"But ... Seiichi hate me?"

I could feel the sadness in her voice.

What the hell's with this difficulty spike? What am I supposed to say?!

If she was being so sincere with me, though, then I owed her an honest reply.

"I don't hate you, okay? I like you."

That was honestly how I felt, but I liked her as a gorilla, nothing more.

I guess liking her "as a gorilla" is pretty weird, huh...

She was good at anything and everything housework-related, and she was really sincere and devoted to me too. That much was great, but she was a gorilla. An *ape*.

Why'd she have to be a gorilla?! If only she was a human!

I wouldn't even care how she looked—I was ugly enough that I couldn't get picky about stuff like that anyways. She wasn't even my same species though. I could put up with her no matter how ugly she was, if only she was human. That might sound harsh, but obviously, I wanted to marry someone pretty if I could. So what?

Ah, such is the plight of man.

I let out an introspective sigh.

"Okay." The gorilla nodded. "We marry now?"

"Can I take back what I just said?"

Man, she's annoying. Where the hell'd she learn that?

"Seiichi so shy. Cute."

"Seriously, go screw yourself."

I wish I could just punch her, but I know how that would end.

"Fine. Me go find fruits now."

“Sure. Hope it goes well.”

It took everything I could to keep myself from smirking. If I let anything show on my face, she might get suspicious.

I wonder why she wants more fruits now though?

“Me hunt dinner, too.”

“Huh?”

Wait ... if she's going to hunt food, that'll mean killing a monster, right? Doesn't that mean she'll evolve again?

“Hey, ape. Have you been hunting all our food up until now?”

“No. Clever Monkeys give food. We eat.”

I wonder how those monkeys aren't clever enough to realize they're being used.

“But if you've eaten a fruit, you evolve if you kill a monster, right?”

She shook her head.

“No. Kill weaker monster, no change.”

“Oh...”

Makes sense. I've been hunting nothing but monsters stronger than me, after all.

“Me no see stronger monsters. Long ago, many leave, join Demon King's Army. Me no like war. Hide.”

So this is where the Demon King comes in, huh?

The “long ago” she was referring to was probably only about a hundred years ago, so there really hadn't been a lot of time since then.

“Me know one stronger monster. Me avoid, no fight. Safe.”

“Avoid?”

That sounded more than a little worrying, but she didn't elaborate.

“Me have question for Seiichi. Important.”

“What?”

“You human. Why here?”

Fair point. I can't imagine this place gets many human visitors.

“It's kind of a long story ... wait! I totally forgot about the Soul Nectar!”

So much happened that I totally forgot, but I was trying to get the ingredients for that!

The gorilla cocked her head to the side.

“You want make? Why?”

“It's pretty amazing for humans.”

Bringing back the dead was pretty God tier.

“If I'm gonna make it, though, I'll need a Heat Rock, and of course some Revivification Grass.”

“Me have those.”

“That's nice ... wait, what?”

“Me have them.”

“Seriously?!”

She nodded then turned to root around in some nearby greenery for a moment before turning back to face me.

“Here. This Heat Rock. This Revivification Grass, seeds.”

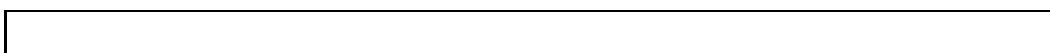
“Seeds?”

She handed me a bright red rock, a bundle of vibrant white-and-green grass, and some normal-looking seeds.

“Me no know how to grow seeds. Me no need Soul Nectar. Not work on me. Me give you.”

“Really?!”

I wasted no time in using Analysis on what she'd given me.



ITEM DETAILS
<p>HEAT ROCK:</p> <p>A special ore that produces heat. Striking it lightly causes it to constantly emit heat to 248 degrees Fahrenheit. If left alone for long enough, it will cool down naturally and can be reused. It contains a component necessary for bringing back the dead. Putting it in water will vastly improve the water’s medicinal qualities.</p>
<p>REVIVIFICATION GRASS:</p> <p>Grass that can call souls back from the Underworld. It has no supernatural effects, however, unless combined with Heat Rock-treated water.</p>
<p>REVIVIFICATION GRASS SEEDS:</p> <p>Used to grow Revivification Grass. However, it must be planted in Heat Rock-infused soil and watered with Heat Rock-treated water.</p>

Whoa ... so it really can bring back the dead, and this Heat Rock seems handy besides.

The ape said she was giving them to me even. No way was I going to refuse.

“Alright ... thanks.”

“Exchange. You marry me.”

“You can have them back now.”

“Me joking.”

She wasn’t, was she?! What if she were serious?! Man, I can’t let my guard down at all!

She turned her back to me, heading to the entrance to her nest.

“Okay. Me know answer now. Me go hunt.”

“Alright! See you later!”

I beamed and waved.

Finally, I'm free, and that dumb monkey doesn't suspect a thing! Bwahaha, I'm outta here, and with the Soul Nectar ingredients I need to boot!

"O-okay, me go now." She looked back at me from the entranceway, blushing, before leaving.

Ew! Why'd she have to blush like that?! Why?! If only she were human!

I continued to watch her as she headed into the undergrowth.

She's going ... going...

I'd head straight for that black spot on the map. That should be safe.

Aaaand ... she's gone!

"Now escaping!"

I bolted out of the nest in the opposite direction.

Hahaha, I won! I lasted a whole week!

I had tried to escape so many times, even though I wound up going almost everywhere with her. I almost gave up, and I was almost starting to enjoy living with her ... almost, that is.

But now I'm free!

"Hahaha! Victory! Woohoo! Sweet, sweet freedom!"

I didn't snap, did I? I don't remember the last time I felt so many emotions at once.

As I was skipping through the forest, though, I suddenly felt a pair of eyes on me.

I whipped around to find...

"Seiichi! Wait!"

"NOOOOO! GO AWAAAAAY!"

Holy shit, how can she run that fast?! Wasn't she supposed to be gone?! And why is she doing a full athlete's sprint?! God, that's horrifying! She should just get back to her fruit-hunting already!

"Stop! That way bad!"

“I don’t care! I’m free and I’m never letting you catch me again!”

I’m so close! No way I’m turning back now! I mean how would I explain this to her?

I started firing off rapid-succession Flashes, desperate to put as much distance between us as possible.



The distance between us started rapidly widening.

Haha! Thanks, Skills!

Finally, when the gorilla was totally behind me, I came across a clearing with a cave smack-dab in the middle of it.

“What the hell is that?”

I ran right up to it. Based on my mental map of the forest, I was in the blackened-out area.

“Man, this place feels spooky.”

I was getting goosebumps just from being close to it.

“Well, I guess there’s nowhere else for me to hide, so...”

It wasn’t exactly the most inconspicuous place to hide, but there weren’t any trees anywhere near the cave.

“In I go, I guess.”

Not only did I want a hiding place, but the cave seemed weird enough that I was just plain curious. Besides, there was a chance that there’d be branching paths or something that could help me out.

I ran full speed into the cave. Back on Earth, I wouldn’t have been able to run that fast, period, but I didn’t feel the slightest bit tired even after so much exercise. In fact, I hadn’t felt tired in a long time, but I didn’t know if that was thanks to evolving or because people in this world just had a lot more stamina or something.

As I ran through the cave, though, I started getting a little nervous.

“Crap, it’s just one big, long corridor. Nowhere to hide down here.”

It was really well lit too. Torches were set up at regular intervals along the walls, and the walls themselves had a ton of nice decorations.

“Uh, where am I, really?”

What if this is somebody’s house?

If I turned back now, that gorilla would catch me for sure.

I-I guess I should keep going.

I picked up speed a little. The corridor continued without even a single monster in sight. After a while, though, something came into view.

“What’s this?”

It was an ornate double door made of a heavy-looking pitch-black metal. Crimson gems were embedded in it. I’d never seen a door that felt actively threatening before.

“What the...?”

I took a few uneasy steps back.

“Uh...”

I came all this way, so I guess I may as well take a look inside.

I steeled my resolve and pushed the door open. The inside was pitch black, but as soon as I stepped inside, all the torches lit at once. They couldn’t dispel the heavy gloom in the room, however. Something about the air was deeply unsettling.

“Uh...”

I was slowly scanning the room when I suddenly heard a voice.

“A human? How amusing. I’ve not seen your kind in ages.”

“Wha?!” I flinched in surprise.

Standing in the exact center of the room was a skeleton clad in a cloak as black as night.

“If you possess the power to reach my chamber, then I imagine you must be quite powerful, correct?”

“Uh, actually, I’m a noob.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

C’mon, what am I supposed to say?! A goddamn skeleton starts talking and I’m supposed to think that’s normal or something? How is it even talking without vocal cords?!

Just for good measure, though, I decided to use Analysis on the thing, indiscreetly of course.

>THE DARK NOBLEMAN, ZEANOS: Level 1

“What the what?”

Level One? So like my level?

I probably looked pretty floored, since the skeleton nodded at me understandingly.

“I see. So you used Analysis on me, did you?”

“What?!”

How did he know?!

“However,” he continued, “you cannot hope to gauge my true strength with such a paltry Skill. My strength is greater than you could ever perceive. Indeed, human, you’re being deceived.”

“You’re what?”

At that moment, though, his aura suddenly changed.

I thought he looked strong and everything. Now it all makes sense.

I could feel the power radiating off him now though. He was strong—mind-bogglingly strong. Stronger than that Kaiser Kong even. I had no way of telling for certain, of course, but my sixth sense was screaming all sorts of warnings at me.

Holy crap, this guy is trouble!

He seemed totally different from just a moment ago. I hurriedly used Analysis on him again, just in case.

>THE DARK NOBLEMAN, ZEANOS: Level 1,500

“Uh.”

There’s an extra zero in there, right? Like, is that one thousand five hundred the “five hundred over one thousand” one?

.....

SHIT, I'M SCREWED!

The interest rapidly drained from Zeanos's features, and he gave me a cold, disinterested look.

"How dull. And to think I was so looking forward to my first human challenger..."

In the blink of an eye, he vanished.

"What?!"

Where'd he go?!

I used my Detection Skill, but I couldn't pick up anything. My eyes darted around the room. Then he suddenly appeared in front of me, as if he'd been hiding behind a mirage or something.

"Huh?"

There was a pitch-black rapier in his hand that looked downright terrifying.

"Farewell, weakling."

With that, he flicked his arm forward in a snapping thrust, aimed right for the left side of my chest.

The blade never reached me, however.

"S-Seiichi? You okay?"

His blade pierced not me but Saria.

She took a wide swing at Zeanos.

"Hmph." He pulled his sword out of her breast then effortlessly backstepped out of the way. Bright-red blood spurted out of Saria's chest.

Wait ... what? Why?

"Me ... make it ... in time..."

Saria's voice was so soft and gentle. Then, with the same softness, she slumped to the cavern floor.

"SARIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Chapter 15: A Miracle of Love

“Sariaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I dropped to the ground beside her and propped her up in my arms.

“Saria ... Saria!”

She didn’t open her eyes.

“Why? Why’d you do it?!”

I desperately tried to hold down the emotions threatening to flood out of me.

Finally, she opened her eyes to look at me.

“Seiichi ... finally say name...”

“Saria! Hang on; I’ll get you a potion!”

I reached to pull an Ultimate Healing Potion out of my Item Box, but she put her hand on mine to stop me.

“Me only alive by Skill. Potion only work on living. No good.”

“What?”

“Me dead.”

I was too overwhelmed by surprise and despair to respond.

“Kaiser Kong have Unique Skill—Imperial Majesty. Me talking thanks to that.”

“Imperial Majesty...”

“Yes. Me can move while dead. Only little while.”

“What?”

Wait, so that means Saria’s really going to...

I suddenly remembered the Soul Nectar.

“That’s right, the Soul Nectar! Hang on, I’ll make it and then—”

“No. Soul Nectar no work on monsters.”

I'd totally forgotten. To them, it only had the same effect as an Ultimate Healing Potion. That's why the Clever Monkeys never bothered to gather the ingredients for it.

I was suddenly hit by a feeling I couldn't describe.

“Why the hell'd you save me then?! Why'd you throw your life away like that?! Sure, I said I liked you, but not that much! You're not even a human! I don't even think of you as a girl! I treated you like shit too! Don't you remember all those times I insulted you?! I even tried to run away from you! So why? Why'd you do it?!”

Tears started spilling down my face.

I never treated her decently, did I? Not even once. Why? Why?

I gripped her shoulder more tightly. She gave my hand a squeeze.

“Me love you. Me need other reason?”

W-why? What did I do to deserve this?

“Seiichi say mean things. But eat food, act nice.”

“I-I just ... I didn't want to waste food, so...”

“You say me annoying. But talk to me. Sometimes do things for me. No ignore me. Act normal... Together, fun. Relaxing.”

I didn't know what to say.

“Seiichi always overreact, complain, insult. But not like Clever Monkeys. Treat me like person. Me ... me love you.”



The longer she talked the more miserable I felt.

Saria's a monkey? No, I'm the stupid shit-thrower here. How could I have treated her like that?

Tears poured down my face like a broken dam. Even then, she just smiled at me.

"Me love your smile. You not like self now. Me soon no more. Me want see smile one last time. Smile?"

How, Saria?

Her words lit a fire in me, though, driving out the gloom in my heart.

Man, I didn't give her a single thing she deserved. I'm just the worst.

My parents always told me that I was always positive, that I never gave up. That was my only strength really—and here I nearly proved them wrong.

I wiped my face with my shirt. My eyes were still brimming with tears, but I managed to smile somehow.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm a noisy pain in the ass, but I'm me."

"Yeah!" She nodded.

From across the room, however, I heard a muttering voice.

"Love between a gorilla and a human?"

Oh. I had forgotten about him.

"How utterly inane. Love between humans is twisted and ugly enough as it is, yet you would claim to love a mere primate?"

"So what if she's a gorilla?!"

I picked Saria up in a princess carry, carried her to the edge of the room, and gently set her down. Then I turned to glare daggers at him.

"Your name's Zeanos or whatever, right? Why didn't you attack us?"

"Simple—I was interested in your so-called 'love.' What I witnessed, however, was none better than a petty comedy, penned by a luckless fool. I can scarcely believe you feel a thing for her, yet her devotion to you is blind. What could

that be if not a comedy of the lowest calibre? Come, I grow weary of this farce. Let us draw your final curtain.”

“Oh, really?”

I pulled out my weapons—the Wise Simian’s Club in one hand and the Nixie-Cryst Shortsword in the other.

“This show’s far from over though!”

“What?”

I fired off a few Flashes in rapid succession, zipping behind him and taking a big swing at him from behind. He nimbly dodged my blow by leaning out of the way.

“A surprise attack? Truly a coward’s tactic.”

“So what, asshat?!”

Wait, didn’t he try to get me with a surprise attack too? I guess I’m supposed to forget that.

I dashed towards him again with another Flash.

“Enough games!”

He unleashed a thrust at me. I managed to block the blow at the last second with my Wise Simian’s Club, but the force was enough to totally shatter it.

No, not my Club! I liked that one! And wait, he’s fast enough to hit me mid-Flash?!

“Why do you continue to fight, human? Do you not realize the difference in strength between us?”

“Bwahahahaha!” I laughed. “As if a mere skeleton could understand!”

He stopped and just stared at me.

Oof... and that was my best impression of him too. That hurts.

As I grappled with my psychic damage, realization dawned on his skeletal features.

“Ah, I see now. It seems I was mistaken. You do care for that gorilla, do you not? And here I thought your relationship was naught but a cheap comedy. Ha! No, that is a comic masterpiece!” He let out an overly dramatic laugh.

I wanted to atone for how I treated Saria, and I needed to tell her how I really felt. If I was going to do either, I'd have to beat him before Saria's Imperial Majesty ran out.

“Yeah, I love her! So what?!” I used Flash again, swinging my shortsword right at him.

He blocked the blade with his rapier, unable to dodge in time. I must've caught him off-guard.

“Fool!”

He parried and leaped back, taking a stance that looked downright impenetrable to a novice like me.

“Yeah, I know I'm a fool! I'm an idiot, an asshole, a jerk, all of that! I couldn't get over the fact that she was a gorilla, I was so dumb! And because of that, she ... she... N-no, I'll cry and stuff later! Right now, I've gotta beat the shit out of you and prove to Saria that I'm worthy of her! That's it! I won't stop until you're dead ... err, more dead.”

Y'know what, screw this baggage! I know what I want now! And if Saria likes me best when I'm being a big, noisy pain, then I don't need all this negativity! I'll be the biggest pain ever!

“Seiichi...” I could hear Saria mutter behind me. She sounded genuinely happy.

Zeanos stared at me for a moment before bursting into laughter again.

“Hahahahaha! To think, your love for that creature is real!”

“That's what I've been trying to tell you! C'mon, don't make me repeat it!”

He seemed a little creeped out actually.

Don't make me cry, man.



“Enough. If that is true, then I have some pleasant news for you.”

“Huh?”

Good news? Is it about my Charisma?! Okay, maybe not. Actually, if it was, I wouldn't know how to react.

“Should you defeat me, you'll be able to save her life.”

“What?” My eyes flew open. “You're kidding!”

“I don't tell poor jokes, human.” He chuckled. “Should you slay me here, then you and she both will evolve. Indeed, you have quite the luck, having eaten Fruits of Evolution as you have, though defeating me is a nigh-impossible feat.”

“Wait—did you use Analysis on us?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. Now, what will you do?”

Those fruits really are the gifts that keep on giving, huh? Good thing she still has one evolution to go too. I don't think I've ever felt this grateful.

“C'mon, don't bother asking. I'm gonna beat you!”

The lights in Zeanos's eye sockets took on a strange gleam. He seemed to blur and fade into the air itself, just like when I first came into the room.

“Well, then ... show me the strength of your resolve, human!”

He suddenly appeared in front of me again and unleashed another thrust, aimed straight for my heart. This time, though, I knew it was coming. Using everything I had, I managed to bring the Nixie-Cryst Shortsword up to block it at the last second.

“Oh? Impressive.”

“Eat THIS!”

I swung my shortsword right at him, and he dodged it smoothly.

“To think you would block my strike. You are indeed full of surprises. Never a dull moment with you, is there?”

“You're the last person I wanna hear that from!”

I started firing off every Skill I could think of in succession. Cutter Kick, Mighty Claw, Flash, Cutter Kick, Mighty Claw, Flash...

He dodged every one with ease, however.

Alright, if Skills won't work, then let's try Magic!

I rooted through the spell list in my head and picked one with the same Mana cost as the one I'd used in my fight with Saria. I stuck out my hand towards him.

"Ocean Impact!"

A super-compressed ball of water flew out of my hand like a shot from a cannon.

"Oh? Ultimate-level Water Magic ... how amusing! But I'll have you know that, in life, I mastered both the sword and Dark Magic!"

He chuckled and extended his hand towards my spell.

"Magic Hole!"

A black sphere appeared in his hand. It let out an eerie wail as it spun, as if it were a tiny vortex. Just looking at it got me spooked. As soon as my Ocean Impact hit it, my spell was completely absorbed, and after a moment, the black hole disappeared.

"I must admit I wasn't anticipating you to have mastered magic of any sort. Not that it matters as no magic can affect me!"

Seriously?! Did he just jump right past cheat mode and go right into God mode?! That's gotta be bugged! Somebody's gotta nerf that!

"Dammit!"

He's too strong. I don't stand a chance!

"What, giving up so soon? Is that the extent of your love for that gorilla?"

He lunged forward, blade extended. I reflexively jumped back and his rapier only ended up, grazing me.

"Impressive. Since I've become a monster, few have managed to dodge my attacks so well."

“Wait ... so you were a human before?!”

That was outta the blue! I guess I should've expected it, since those bones had to come from somewhere.

No matter who he was or used to be, though, I was in deep trouble if none of my attacks could connect. I probably had only a little time left before Saria's Skill ran out.

The biggest problem was that I hadn't really mastered any of the Skills I got from the Clever Monkeys or the Acrowolf. According to the book that God gave me, Skills were typically something you earned through hard work and dedication. They weren't something you could just take, like I'd been doing.

This isn't even my power. It doesn't really belong to me.

I shook my head clear. If it wasn't my power, then I only had to make it my own, there and then. If I could do that, then...

“I can keep evolving!”

I ran straight at Zeanos, this time without using Flash. If I kept using it to close the distance between us like before, then he'd just read my moves and keep dodging me. No, there was a better way to put it to use. I fleshed out the details of my plan in my head as I ran.

I guess I really did evolve, huh? Even just running like this, I'm so much faster than I ever was before. I went from Stats of one or lower to where I am now, after all. And besides, who the hell challenges a level one thousand five hundred boss at level one? I mean, maybe it's normal in this world, but still it feels weird.

Zeanos gave me a bored look.

“I see you've lost your mind, human. Do you really think you can overcome me without using any speed Skills?”

He simply stood there, waiting, having evidently decided I wasn't worth dodging. He probably had a counter in mind, just as I'd hoped.

Just a little more ... one more step...!

Finally, the moment I'd been waiting for arrived.

“What a pity, human. And here I had such high hopes for your so-called love!”

He unleashed a thrust so swift that I could barely see it. With all the momentum I’d built up, I had no real way to dodge to either side.

Instead, I used Flash—and zipped *backwards*.

“What?!”

His blade bit empty air, and before he could regain his balance, I used Flash again.

“Take THIS!”

It was, again, slightly different from the times I’d used it in the past. Before, I’d just used the speed boost to evade—but this time, I had my shortsword extended, and Flash was going to drive it home in a sonic-speed stab!

>You acquired Secret Technique: Gale Thrust

Secret Technique?! That sounds so cool!

I quickly recomposed myself though. Zeanos came first.

That one thrust encompassed everything I had, the best and greatest attack I had at my disposal. I flew right past his rapier, deep past his guard, aiming right for his heart.

And then...

The Nixie-Cryst Shortsword buried itself deep in Zeanos’s chest.

A long moment of silence passed.

I kept my blade deep in his chest. Despite there only being bone there, the strike had felt as visceral and fatal as though he still had flesh and blood. I didn’t let my guard down though. Not until I knew he was dead.

We spent what felt like an eternity within arm’s reach, neither of us daring to speak first.

Then, with a clang, the rapier fell from his hand.

“Hehehe ... HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA! I’ve lost! And what a perfect loss at that!”

“Huh?!”

His body started fading into motes of light and disappearing, just like the other monsters I’d defeated.

I ... I won?

I held back the wave of emotion that rose inside me, however, as Zeanos opened his mouth again.

“It seems I had grown drunk on my own strength. Had I fought you as an equal, I imagine the outcome would have differed.” He shook his head and continued in a voice far softer and kinder than I’d thought possible from him. “No, I lost, fair and square, to the love you and that noble gorilla share, simple as that.”

Um ... what do I say to that?

I didn’t know how to process that.

I mean who is this guy, really?

“I ended my life despising humanity with every fibre of my being—but the true object of my hatred was the rotten, twisted love that wrought my miserable life.”

“Uh, okay.”

“But now I have finally witnessed true love—your love.”

I was looking at him as though he were an alien, but he kept monologuing.

“Marie ... I’m coming for you, my love...”

With that, he finally disappeared completely. Where he stood, there were two rapiers sticking out of the ground—the pitch-black one he’d used and a second snow-white one.

I still couldn’t make sense of most of the things he’d said, but he seemed happy enough in the end, so that was a win in my book. Besides, I’m sure there were answers to all my questions in his book, *Zeanos’s Knowledge*.

After I was absolutely sure Zeanos was gone, I ran back to Saria.

“Saria!”

The second I saw her, though, I felt sick.

“Saria ... y-you’re...”

Just like Zeanos, she was slowly starting to fade into motes of light. She gave me a weak smile.

“Seiichi ... thank you...”

“S-Saria...”

“Seiichi very cool...”

“You’re kidding ... not now...”

I actually beat Zeanos, so why is this happening? Why is she disappearing?!

“No ... no! You can’t go!” I shook my head in disbelief.

“Seiichi, no make that face. Look cool. Smile. Okay?”

“But...”

I could feel tears coming to my eyes again, and despair started welling up within me.

She rested her hand on my cheek.

“Me ... glad met you.”

“.....”

“Time together good.”

“.....”

“Me ... glad me love you.” She smiled.

I didn’t know what to say.

I-I can’t. This can’t be possible. I can’t just let her die!

Fate was cruel, far too cruel.

Even though my brain had frozen up, she continued softly.

“Seiichi? Me have one regret...”

“What?”

“Me ... wanted marry you.”

For the first time, tears welled up in her eyes.

Why does reality have to be this cruel? This isn't fair. Where did we go wrong? What were we supposed to do?

If gods really had no power in this world—if there really were no miracles—then all that lay in store for us was the cold, bitter truth. But in the face of such despair, I couldn't help but pray ... pray for a miracle.

That was all I could do for her now—but I knew that just sitting around and wishing wouldn't solve anything. There was no guarantee that a miracle would just fall into our laps. I knew just how low the chances of a miracle happening were. If I didn't do everything I could to save Saria, to cause a miracle with my own hands, then I knew I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

She wanted to marry me, even though she had to know how scummy I was by now. She'd be better off with someone else, for her own sake. That was her dying wish, though, so I wasn't about to tell her no now. It was one of the few things I could do.

And so—I kissed her.

It was my first, just to be clear. I'd never even dated before, after all, but it was the least I could do. I simply pressed my lips against hers, softly, lovingly.



Then, after a moment that felt like an eternity, it was over. I gently laid her down on the ground.

Tears spilled unburdened down her cheeks.

“Th-thank you...”

At that moment, her body burst into light. It wasn’t like the wispy effect that happened when a monster died—no, she was shining like a lighthouse. I’d never seen anything like it.

It was bright ... really bright. Too bright.

“My eyes—I CAN’T SEE!!”

I covered my face with my hands, my eyes in total agony.

Now I know how a certain colonel felt on a certain sky castle!

After a full minute of bleary blinking, I could finally see again. The light was gone by that time.

“Wh-what the hell was that?”

I looked down at where Saria was lying.

“Uh.”

I’m ... confused.

Saria was gone, and in her place, there was a buck-naked young woman.

Um ... who the what? Why? Where are her clothes? No, where’s Saria? Huh?

My mind had never been more boggled. I felt like I was on the verge of short-circuiting.

Err ... don’t I have Confusion Immunity?

“Wait, who cares about that?!”

Seriously, who is this?!

Even though she had no clothes, all her private parts were either covered by her hair or conveniently-positioned shadows. I could smell a higher power at work here.

Can somebody explain what's happening here?!

Just as my eyes started to spin, the mystery girl opened her eyes and sat up.

Our eyes met.

She stared.

“U-uh...”

I really hope she doesn't blame me for this! I'm innocent, I swear! Crap, this is more nerve-wracking than fighting Zeanos!

I carefully looked her over. Her hair was a bright, fiery red and it hung low down to her waist. She had matching thick eyelashes that framed ruby-red eyes. Her nose was small and straight, and her lips were a dainty cherry pink. All her features were so pretty and perfectly coordinated that she'd give any of the anime girls I'd seen back on Earth a run for their money. To put it bluntly, she was super cute. Like holy *crap*. She was maybe about my age but so much cuter than the idols at my school. Even her figure was ... g-good. Yeah, good. I noticed that all her private bits were still mysteriously covered. Not that I was looking. Not at all.

I'm not a pervert, really! I mean, c'mon, what am I supposed to do at a time like this?! Err, wait, I guess I should be doing something useful, huh...

After a moment of silence, though, our eyes met.

“U-uh...”

I tried to break the silence, but then I noticed she was muttering something.

“...chi...”

“Huh?”

I still couldn't make out her words though.

“....ichi.... SEIICHI!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Wh-what?!”

She suddenly leapt at me and wrapped her arms tightly around me.

I repeat: Wh-what?!

My brain felt thoroughly mushed. She looked right at me, tears forming in her eyes.

“Look...look, Seiichi! I did it! I can talk now, just like you! I can stay with you! I...I can tell you I love you again!”

“Wait, WHAT?!”

What’d she do exactly?! And seriously, who is she?!

I tried frantically to get my facts straight. She seemed to notice my confusion, though, and her expression changed to sorrow.

“Seiichi? Don’t you recognize me?”

“Recognize you?! I’ve never even met you!”

No, wait. Something about her is familiar, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.

I tried to puzzle what, exactly, I found so familiar about her. Just then, though, she looked at me with upturned eyes, and after a second she seemed to make up her mind about something.

“I love you, Seiichi! Lots and lots! So please marry me!”

I could practically hear things click into place in my brain. Everything made sense now.

“I-is that you, Saria?”

She beamed at me, tears still brimming at the corners of her eyes.

“Yep!”

For a long moment, I couldn’t say anything. It was a miracle—a genuine miracle in this godless world. A miracle wrought by the thing that had saved my life time and time again since coming to this world—the Fruits of Evolution. Even in this cold, ruthless forest, it gave us hope.

I’ll never forget what happened here.

I looked back at Saria. I did a double-take. And then I screamed.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Saria's human now?! Wait, she evolved into a human or something?! She's not even a gorilla anymore?! How?!

I frantically looked behind her and realized she still had her Kaiser Kong tail.

Dammit, she has a fluffy tail?! How am I supposed to not touch the fluffy tail?! And c'mon I've spent all these years as a total virgin! What the hell am I supposed to think now?! Okay, deep breath... Never mind, I'm okay.

I suddenly realized something was amiss. I took a minute to process my current situation. She was hugging me really tightly, and I could feel two super-soft somethings pressed against my chest.

Oh, I get it. Makes sense. I can't believe they're not marshmallows!

.....

I seriously better achieve inner peace and give up on all worldly desires within the next five seconds. I mean this sweet smell is driving me crazy. Going a second round with Zeanos would be easier than this. Seriously.

To put it simply, my brain did its best impression of the Big Bang.

Boom.

Chapter 16: The Dark Nobleman's Past

To make a long story short, I used my iron will to keep my urges in check ... somehow. It really was like my brain went through a second Big Bang though. I'd never had a girlfriend—no, forget that. I'd barely held a decent conversation with most girls. Getting pounced on by the cute new Saria was way too high a hurdle.

I guess that's a virgin's ... err, a loser's fate.

The last thing I wanted, though, was to take advantage of Saria. I didn't want to just go with the flow and risk hurting her. Besides, I'd been rejecting her time and time again while she looked like a gorilla, so suddenly changing my tune when she looked prettier would be a pretty shitty move.

Even if it is a very tempting one.

Anyhow, as soon as I'd processed Saria's transformation and then her hug, I realized that she would need something to wear sooner or later. I had a spare shirt in my Item Box, so I gave her that for the time being. In other words, she was naked except for one of my white button-up shirts.

I-I'm not some degenerate pervert though! That was the only thing I had that'd fit her! Man, I sound so unconvincing!

Besides, it would've been far weirder for me to be carrying around women's clothing. I mean there's no reason why I should need any, right? I was still concerned about her not having any underwear though. She couldn't wear pants until she had underwear after all.

As I thought it over, I noticed that Saria was holding her sleeves up to her nose and inhaling deeply.

"Ah, it smells just like you!"

"W-wait, I still reek?"

“No, not at all! It’s a really good smell! It’s relaxing, like you’re giving me a big, big hug!”

“Uh ... great.”

Holy crap, that’s embarrassing. And does her smile have to be that cute?!

That was the first time in my life anyone had complimented my smell though.

Has my B.O. changed or something?

I took a whiff of my armpit, but I couldn’t smell a thing, or at least nothing different. Just to be sure, though, I used Stench Virtuoso to cut my smell out completely.

After I finished obsessing over my own smell, I shot her a curious look.

“So, uh ... you really evolved, huh?”

“You think so?”

“I mean, c’mon, you look totally human.” I smiled awkwardly. “Did you change species or something?”

“Really? I don’t think I changed a bit.”

“C’mon, you look nothing like you did before. You sure act the same, but that’s it.”

“No, I look the same.”

Did she evolve into an airhead or something? Like how does she not realize what she looks like now? I seriously didn’t recognize her at first.

Saria puffed out her cheeks poutily at me.

“I’m the same, honest!”

“No, you’re not—”

“Fine! I’ll show you!”

At that moment, she burst into light again.

“My eyes—I CAN’T SEE!!”

Colonel Moosca revisited!

I covered my face in my hands and staggered around dramatically.

I mean holy crap! My eyes are literally dying! Seriously, if this happens one more time, I'll go blind!

"Ugh ... m-my eyes..."

When my eyes were finally back to normal, I looked back at Saria.

"See? Me tell you."

Me speechless. Saria gorilla.

What the how?! How'd she go back to her gorilla form?!

"You can change how you look?!"

"Yes. Me also change part by part."

Why would she need to though?!

Something about her now was even more surprising than that. That would be her attire.

"Who'd want to see a gorilla in nothing but a button-up?!"

She'd been making the shirt burst in her human form, but this was a different kind of bursting. Her muscles were so huge the shirt looked about ready to come apart at the seams.

I prefer the way she was bursting out of the shirt before ... I can't look! Seriously, who could get off on this?!

"Seiichi happy?" She blushed. "Me happy, embarrassed."

"How're you more shy as a gorilla?!"

She seemed perfectly happy to let it all hang out as a human, but for whatever reason, she was trying to stretch the shirt to cover her important bits now.

She was buck-naked for the past week! Where'd this embarrassment come from?! I can't even...!

I got on my hands and knees to take a deep breath or two, and I could see the ground turn white from her light. When it'd gone away, I looked up to find her

back in her cute human form.

“See? What’d I tell you?”

“Yeah...”

Part of me was honestly glad for her new form. I was positive I never needed to see her transform while wearing that shirt again though. It was too much for my poor little brain to handle.

“It’s great that you can transform and all, but why would you need to?”

She cocked her head to the side for a moment as she thought. “I think I feel a little weaker like this. I don’t have the same oomph I do in my normal form.”

So basically, her Cutie Saria is her everyday mode, and Gorilla Saria is her combat mode. Makes sense. Gotta keep that gorilla form then just not in that shirt. Please.

Having figured out Saria’s mysteries, I decided to go through Zeanos’s drops next. There was a whole mountain of them, after all, and they wouldn’t go through themselves.

“There’s so much of it though. I can’t imagine what’s in here.”

I just know there’s going to be some more balance-breaking stuff in there. I just hope it isn’t too hard to use.

I started with the Skill Cards.

SKILL CARD
DISGUISE: Use to acquire the Skill Disguise.

SKILL CARD
FADE OUT: Use to acquire the Skill Fade Out.

--

SKILL CARD
SECOND SIGHT: Use to acquire the Skill Second Sight.

MAGIC CARD
DARK ELEMENT (ULTIMATE): Use to gain proficiency in Dark Magic.

STYLE CARD
ZEFORD DUELLING STYLE (FOUNDER): Use to gain proficiency in the Zeford Duelling Style.

SECRET TECHNIQUE CARD
PIERCING LIGHT: Use to acquire the Secret Technique Piercing Light.

SECRET TECHNIQUE CARD
FLOWING MIST: Use to acquire the Secret Technique Flowing Mist.

“Whoa...”

I was at a loss for words.

What’s a “Style Card”? A Secret Technique Card is straightforward enough though. And he did mention having mastered Dark Magic, so that Magic Card isn’t a surprise. He also mentioned that he used Analysis on Saria and me, but I don’t see a card for that ... probably because I already have Analysis, I guess.

As I was thinking, Saria walked up and peered at the cards in my hands.

“What’s that, Seiichi?”

“They’re cards that let me learn new Skills.”

The cards turned into motes of light and flew into me and she mulled over my words.

>You acquired Skill: Disguise. You acquired Skill: Fade-Out. You acquired Skill: Second Sight. You can now use Dark Magic. You acquired Zeford Duelling Style: Founder proficiency. You acquired Secret Technique: Piercing Light. You acquired Secret Technique: Flowing Mist.

After I heard the voice confirm everything, I looked at my new Skills.

SKILL DETAILS
<p>DISGUISE:</p> <p>Masks your Status and limits your strength so as to deceive your opponent. Active by default but can be turned off at will.</p>
<p>FADE OUT:</p> <p>Allows you to blend perfectly into your surroundings. Effective even against searching Skills such as Detection. However, you cannot deal damage until you deactivate this Skill.</p>
<p>SECOND SIGHT:</p> <p>Allows you to see when an opponent uses a Skill. Passive.</p>
<p>DARK MAGIC (ULTIMATE):</p> <p>You have mastery of Dark Magic. You can use any Dark Magic.</p>
<p>ZEFFORD DUELLING STYLE (FOUNDER):</p> <p>You can use any technique in the Zeford Duelling Style.</p>
<p>PIERCING LIGHT:</p> <p>Pierces an opponent in wherever place you specify with flawless accuracy.</p>

FLOWING MIST:

Analyzes your opponent's movements, allowing you to dodge any attack and counter with lethal force.
Cannot be used if you are caught flat-footed by an opponent's actions.

“Yeah, no way I can use any of this.”

I mean seriously? SERIOUSLY?! The Skills seem easy enough, but I’m the founder of what now? I thought that Zeford whatever was just some offense Skill, but it’s a whole school of swordplay?!

I didn’t know what to do with all the knowledge I now had on Dark Magic either—and, similarly, I now had every technique from the Zeford Duelling Style in my head. A bunch of the Dark Magic sounded pretty unnerving, to the point that I almost didn’t want to try it out at all.

How am I supposed to use any of this? I get the feeling it’ll be the Skills using me, not the other way around.

In that fight with Zeanos, I learned just how important it is to be smart with how you use Skills. I just had to take my time with these new ones and I’d figure them out sooner or later ... hopefully.

Saria seemed more excited about it than I did actually.

“Wow! Did that light just go *inside* you?!”

“Yeah. That’s how I learn new Skills.”

“That’s so cool! So now you’re even cooler than before?”

“A-am I?”

I’d never been attractive before by any measure, let alone “cool.” Seeing her beam at me was just making me more flustered about it.

“Anyhow! What’s next?”

The next thing I picked up was a book with the words *The Tale of the Dark Nobleman*, Zeanos on the cover.

“Tale?! What?!”

At that moment, I noticed the subtitle.

This is a true story.

“It’s not a tale then!” I shouted.

The book had a far more ominous feel to it than any of the other books, though, and I was dying of curiosity.

“I wonder what’s in it.”

Saria peeked at it over my shoulder.

“Let’s see...”

The Dark Nobleman, Zeanos, was known as Duke Zeanos Zeford in life, nearly 1,500 years ago now. At the time, he was the head of one of the world’s few great noble houses, House Zeford. In the Harmarl Empire, his power and influence were rivalled only by the emperor himself. He was widely renowned for his fair leadership and for the improvements he made to the lives of the common people in his domain. He was also the founder of the prestigious Zeford Duelling Style, and when the Harmarl Empire summoned its hero to vanquish the Demon King, he was made personally responsible for training them. His love for his country was well known, as was his relationship with his beloved wife, Elizabeth.

“Oh!” Saria said from behind me. She certainly seemed impressed. So she could read then.

If he taught the hero how to fight, though, he must’ve been crazy strong. And if he used to be a duke, then that Dark Nobleman bit makes sense.

I kept reading.

However, the emperor at the time, Erushtat III, feared that Zeanos might challenge his authority after the hero slew the Demon King. In rapid succession, he framed the hero for a grave crime and spread debasing rumors throughout the realm. When the people’s outrage had reached its peak, he had the hero publicly executed. Zeanos himself came under fire then, as the hero’s mentor. The emperor had long feared Zeanos’ power and was eager for a chance to kill the duke.

That took a dark turn.

Zeanos pleaded his innocence before Erushtat III, but his claims were dismissed. On that day, however, there was a second betrayal awaiting him—that of his own wife.

“Wait, seriously?! I thought they got along really well!”

I hurriedly turned the page.

In truth, Elizabeth had only married Zeanos for his family’s large coffers. In other words, their marriage was born out of politics and not founded on any semblance of love. She made every effort to deceive him and the commoners, but as soon as his standing became uncertain, she fled without a second thought.

“C’mon, Elizabeth! Really?!”

I guess I can’t blame her for valuing her own life, but it sure sounds bad hearing it like this.

Zeanos had of course known his marriage with her was political in nature, but he loved her with all his heart, nonetheless. Having lost both his beloved wife and his country overnight, he lost sight of the meaning of love, and instead his heart was filled with despair.

“That’s so sad,” Saria mumbled.

I turned around to find her in tears. I gave her a sad smile and tousled her hair, and she grabbed on to me from behind.

Smoosh.

I struggled to refocus on the book.

The only support Zeanos had was from his maid, Marie. Marie had been orphaned by war at a young age, and when she was on the brink of starvation, Zeanos saved her and took her into his household. She was grateful to him for not only saving her life but granting her work as well. The gratitude she felt towards him, however, turned to love as she served him. And yet, they were master and maid. Between the rigid caste system and Zeanos’s marriage to Elizabeth, Marie’s love for Zeanos

seemed doomed from the outset. There was no law prohibiting a nobleman from having multiple wives, but Zeanos had eyes only for Elizabeth. And so Marie stifled her feelings and continued to support her master from the shadows.

“Whoa...”

“Oh.”

Neither of us knew what to say.

Following the betrayal of his wife and country, he lost all faith in his fellow man. When soldiers from the palace were dispatched to capture him, and there was only a matter of time before his arrest, Marie took him by the hand and the two fled the Empire together.

Hell yeah, they're eloping!

I couldn't not be happy for them.

Marie was determined to get Zeanos to safety, despite the generous bounties that were placed on his head. Zeanos could not bring himself to trust her at first—yet every time she risked her life for his, he could feel himself increasingly drawn to her. His heart had finally begun to reopen.

I wordlessly turned the page.

Finally, good news reached their ears. Erushtat III had perished from illness. His successor, Erushtat IV, had posters sent to all corners of the empire, apologizing for his father's crimes against Zeanos and promising to welcome him with an open heart, should he return to the palace. Marie had restored his faith in humanity, and an invitation from his beloved country was too appealing to ignore. He set out for the palace with a spring in his step.

“Yes!”

“I'm so happy for him!”

Saria and I both let out sighs of relief.

However, Zeanos was not prepared for the cruel truth that awaited him there.

“Uh-oh.”

If I could have taken back that sigh of relief, I would.

The posters were nothing more than a trap to lure Zeanos out and kill him. The Harmarl Empire had used his patriotism against him.

“Those Harmarl assholes!”

“That’s so mean.” Saria started tearing up again.

Erushtat IV abandoned any pretense of capturing him and ordered him killed on the spot. Zeanos’s weapon had been taken from him at the gate, however, and he had no means of resisting. Had they tried to kill him years before, when he was in the depths of despair, they would have succeeded—but Zeanos had someone to fight for now. He resisted the soldiers with his bare hands, fighting them one by one.

“Man, Zeanos is cool.”

“Yeah, that’s amazing!”

There was a limit to what he could accomplish unarmed, however. Just as what would be the killing blow fell on him, a lone figure stepped in to take the blow—once his maid, then his lover, and finally his shield, Marie.

“NOOOOOO! MARIIIIIIIIE!!” Saria and I cried out in unison.

She blocked their swords, spears, and arrows with her body, and not one of them reached Zeanos. He could only watch in horror as she told him she loved him one last time then drew her last breath with a smile. In that moment, Zeanos’s heart broke beyond repair. He slew every guard in the room with greater speed and ferocity than they had ever thought possible. Not even he knew where his energy had come from.

Saria and I sniffled as we turned the page.

He scooped up his beloved Marie in his arms and fled to the depths of a forest to live out his last days. The legends of the Soul Nectar that could be made from the Revivification Grass had led him there, but Marie’s body was too broken and battered for it to work, and regular medicine

could not heal the wounds of the dead. Light Magic had the potential to repair her body to the point where revival was possible, but Zeanos had no talent with it. He did have potential with Dark Magic, however, and he had heard of a forbidden ritual that could call someone back from the grave. He poured his soul into his research until finally he mastered Dark Magic.

“Oh ... so that’s why he was a master of Dark Magic.”

Long years of research had taken their toll on his body and heart to the point where even performing the ritual should have been impossible. His fanatical devotion to Marie would not be sated so easily, however, and he continued his work even after death, as a monster. When the time finally came to bring his beloved Marie back from the grave, however, he failed. Too much time had passed since her death. Not even the ritual could bring her back.

Saria and I were too engrossed in the tale to say so much as a word to each other.

Zeanos wept from his tearless eyes and cried from his voiceless throat for many moons. Since that day, he has lived out his days in silence, deep in the depths of the Forest of Endless Heartbreak with the body of his beloved Marie.

That was the end of the *Tale of the Dark Nobleman, Zeanos*. The next page had the words *Zeanos’s Life* printed on it.

For a long time, neither of us said anything.

“Is everyone in this world that mean?”

“That was so sad, Seiichi!”

We started bawling.

Zeanos had gone through so much. I never would’ve guessed that just from the way he was acting.

Saria was crying with her face pressed into my back. I gave her hair a loving tousle before I started on the next section.

To make a long story short, he knew a *lot* of stuff. There was plenty on the countries and political affairs of 1,500 years ago, not to mention on old monsters that were probably mostly extinct now. The most interesting information was what he learned from fighting them and what he knew about the hero.

The stuff about fighting monsters included how to fight them safely as well as particularly dangerous abilities they possessed and countless other bits and pieces of information. Given how inexperienced I was with fighting in general, it was like a full treasure trove.

The trivia about the hero was interesting too. Apparently, whenever the Demon King was revived, there wasn't just one hero summoned, but every country out there summoned their own. That probably meant that my schoolmates weren't the only ones summoned. There was no telling who else might be around. Not only that, but every summoned hero got a "holy sword of legend," whatever that meant. Apparently, only one of those holy swords could finish the Demon King off.

That was also part of the reason why Zeanos taught the hero instead of going to kill the Demon King himself. Also, given how strong Zeanos was, and how war with a neighboring country could break out at any point, the emperor decided that Zeanos should just stay at home.

As soon as I finished reading it, the book turned into light and flew into my chest.

“Well that’s enough gloomy stuff!”

I wasn’t actually feeling that energetic, but it was better than moping around.

“Let’s see, what’s next?”

The next things I picked up were the little spheres holding Zeanos’s Stats. I used Analysis on each of them.

ZEANOS			
MANA: 60,000	ATTACK: 50,000	DEFENSE: 20,000	AGILITY: 70,000

MAGIC ATTACK:	MAGIC DEFENSE:	LUCK:	CHARISMA:
60,000	60,000	100	50,000

“Wait, how many zeroes is that?!”

How are all his Stats so high?! Except for Luck! I guess that Stats like that would be pretty normal at level one thousand five hundred, though, and I got the feeling his Luck was pretty low just from reading how his life turned out. But wait, how is his Charisma so high as a skeleton?! That’s depressing. But I’m not giving in!

The spheres turned into light and got sucked into me. I ignored the voice as I checked out the other drops. All that was left was the treasure chest and the two rapiers. I decided to open the chest first.

“What’s this?”

The first thing I pulled out was a black, choker-style necklace. It looked kind of like plastic and kind of like metal, but it felt like nothing I’d ever touched before in my life. There was a pretty little blue gemstone embedded in the middle of it. I wasted no time in using Analysis on it.

>ATERPRINCEPTITE CHOKER: Mythic equipment. A choker made from prized aterprinceptite. Can automatically reflect any magic cast at the wearer back at the caster. The power of magic that can be reflected is based on the wearer’s level. The lapiz lazuhel stone maximizes any healing magic used on the wearer. The choker changes size to fit the wearer.

“Yeah, this is broken.”

I mean Mythic tier?! That’s even rarer than my shortsword! Man, Zeanos is scary.

I wasted no time in putting the choker on. It fit perfectly—small wonder, considering it could change size.

“Alright, what else is there?”

The next thing to come out of the chest was also a necklace. It had a shining silver chain, and a pink, heart-shaped stone hung from it.

Heart-shaped, huh. Maybe I should just give this one to Saria?

I decided to use Analysis on it, just to be sure.

>NECKLACE OF ENDLESS LOVE: Phantasm-tier equipment. A unique necklace that can only be obtained from Zeanos under specific circumstances. The pink stone is a Legendary Loveheart, also known as a heart crystal, which is always found in a heart shape in nature. The chain is crafted out of a mix of Empath Silver, a metal said to exist only in old legends, and Copy Silver. The properties of the two metals together allow the necklace to replicate to fit the number of individuals that are of one heart and mind with the original wearer. Any wearers of the necklace can communicate with each other via telepathy at any time, regardless of the distance between them. The Loveheart multiplies all Stats of the necklace's wearers by the total number of wearers, but only when another wearer of the necklace is within line of sight.

"OH."

I honestly didn't know how to respond.

So Phantasm tier does exist! But doesn't that effect mean that two people means 2x Stats, three people means 3x, and so on? I knew it, it's a harem item! It has to be! Well, as long as I have it, that'll be one less harem-having himbo out there in the world. Eat that, would-be harem asshole!

As I grappled with the necklace's effects, Saria peeked over my shoulder at it.

"Wow, that's a really cute necklace!"

"Yeah, uh ... it is."

Maybe Saria should be the one to hold on to this after all.

Just as I was about to put it on her, though, the necklace started glowing with a soft pink light.

"W-whoa! The hell's going on?!"

"Wow!"

When the light finally dispersed, I found two identical necklaces in my hands.

“Uh, what?”

Wait, two? Is this thing cursed or something?! Man, that’s spooky.

Er ... wait. Never mind.

I wasn’t expecting it to really just split like that though. If the description was accurate, then I must be the original wearer, and Saria’s of the same heart and mind as me.

Man, it’s like proof we’re in love. That’s a nice feeling. W-w-well, all’s well that ends well, right? No point dwelling on that, right? Right?

I shook my head clear of my embarrassment and turned to face Saria.

“So, Saria, do you want one of these necklaces?”

“Can I really have one?!”

“Sure. And look...” I put one of them on to show her. “See? I have a matching one now.”

She blinked at me in surprise for a moment, and then her entire face went flush. She started fidgeting as she looked up at me with her big, beautiful eyes.

“Um ... okay. I’ll take one.”

Watching her react like that was like getting a sugar rush through my eyes. I could feel myself turning red as I held it out to her. She didn’t reach out to take it though.

“Nope. I want you to put it on me. Can you?”

“U-uh...”

“Please?”

Man, I’m gonna die of diabetic shock. This is too much.

I shakily reached around her and fastened the clasp behind her.

“L-like this?”

“Yep! Thanks!”

I honestly didn’t know how to reply to that.

I think I know what “lovestruck” means now.

Getting attention like this from a girl—especially a girl as cute as her—was too much for my poor brain to process.

Even if she was ... err, is a gorilla.

I took one last look into the treasure chest, but all that was left was a bag of money. Inside, I found five platinum pieces, 47 gold pieces, and 76 silver pieces. At this rate, if I ever did make it out of this forest, I’d never have to work another day in my life. I decided to chuck the money into my Item Box anyways. It couldn’t hurt to have it.

With that, almost all of Zeanos’s drops were dealt with. There were only two things left.

“Two big things,” I whispered as I looked at the pitch-black rapier and its snow-white twin.

Zeanos had used the black one in the fight against me, but the white one only appeared after he vanished. I wasn’t going to get anywhere just sitting around, though, so I decided to pick up the black rapier and use Analysis on it.

>THE RAPIER OF FESTERING HATRED: Phantasm weapon. Zeanos’s endless contempt for the world given form. Inflicts a random rebuff on the opponent with every attack. Furthermore, the target’s Mana and Stamina are drained with each cut, restoring the user’s own Mana and Stamina. This effect cannot heal wounds. The number of Mana/Stamina drained is dependent on the wielder’s level.

“Oof ... I think I have my fill of cheats, thanks.”

Even with a stupidly powerful sword like this, I literally didn’t have the experience to use it. Besides, I’d never had any power before, and I’d never had to fight anything. At this rate, I might get the wrong idea that this strength was somehow mine. All the Skills in the world couldn’t do me any good without any actual experience, after all. Any sort of confidence I gained now would just betray me down the road.

I’ll need a decent weapon if I want to survive though. Man, I’d better work on this. I get the feeling I’m gonna be grappling with this for a long time.

“And wait, where’s the sheath?”

At that, the black Rapier of Festering Hatred coated itself in black light, and when the light dispersed, it was neatly sheathed.

“Whoa... Anything goes in this world, huh?”

I sure wasn’t about to start complaining though. I stuck it through my belt.

“And now for the white sword.”

I picked it up and used Analysis on it.

>THE RAPIER OF BURGEONING LOVE: Phantasm weapon. A weapon that can only be obtained from Zeanos under specific circumstances. If the wielder touches anyone they have designated as an ally, they can gift the ally with their Stamina or Mana. The wielder gains super-speed regeneration that can heal most damage or wounds in a single night. The effects of enchantment-type magic are also greatly amplified. All these effects are dependant on the wielder’s level.

“I said no more cheats!”

Seriously, was Zeanos some sort of cheat farmer?! I mean, c’mon, this works way too well with black sword! I’ll be unstoppable!

I’d never felt more relieved to be level one. If I had a level like Zeanos’s, I’d be downright inhuman ... though maybe I was alone in thinking all this absurd strength was a bad thing. I wished I at least had some idea of the average adventurer’s strength. If everyone was this broken, then I’d at least feel a little better.

“This one doesn’t have a sheath either.”

I’d barely finished my sentence before the white Rapier of Burgeoning Love enveloped itself in warm light, leaving behind an ornate sheath.

Yep, not surprised.

Going over all that loot was honestly exhausting, and I had zero confidence in my ability to master any of it.

I’d forgotten the most important thing though.

>Vast number of experience points confirmed. Final Evolution pending, confirmed. Special Evolution requirements fulfilled. Level difference between evolver and target monster exceeding one thousand, confirmed. Monster defeated for final evolution being a dungeon boss, confirmed. Final Evolution, Special Evolution, and Bonus Evolution requirements, fulfilled. All Stats will be increased by fifty thousand plus twenty thousand plus twenty thousand plus ten thousand. Now proceeding to: Final Evolve, Special Evolve, Bonus Evolve.

The voice spoke a lot longer than usual.

“Oh, crap.”

I didn't have the time left to say anything else.

Chapter 17: The Final Evolution

I found myself in a situation unlike anything I'd ever imagined.

"Seiichi! Don't die, Seiichi!"

Saria was leaning over me and crying, but I was watching both her and my body from above. It took me a long moment to process what the hell was going on, but I finally arrived at the answer.

"My soul got booted out of my body?!"

Oh man, this is bad! Am I a ghost now?!

I took a deep breath and stopped to get my facts straight.

I remembered that as soon as I heard that ominous announcement in my head, I blacked out. My guess was that it was just too painful for my brain to process. I was curious as to why that one specifically was too much for me to handle, but that didn't matter now. Basically, when I came to, I was translucent and floating around.

I guess that means I'm a ghost now.

"Wait, this is no time to be calm! Doesn't this mean I'm dying?!"

My body was the weirdest part of it all. Unless I was seriously mistaken, it was making sounds like a construction site, what with all the banging and clanging and high-pitched whirring. None of them sounded like healthy body sounds, but more than that, I looked fluid. Just the sight of that slimy human-ish blob wearing clothes made me feel ill. I really wanted to know how I was doing, but I couldn't even make out what part of me was what anymore.

Wait, I'm actually handling this pretty well, aren't I? I'm barely freaking out.

As I watched, though, Saria suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, I know just what to do at a time like this!"

You do?! How often do you see someone totally jellified like that?! I know if I met anyone who looked like me right now, I'd be running in the opposite direction.

Saria nodded to herself. "Yep, this calls for chest compressions and CPR!"

HOLD IT! I mean chest compressions on a slime-person?! And how can she even tell where my mouth is?! To begin with, how does she know anything about first aid?!

"Okay, no time like the present! Let's get you better, Seiichi!"

How could that get me better?! Just look at me, I seriously don't think I even have bones right now, and who knows what my organs are doing right now! Really, what's happening to me?!

As I watched powerlessly, Saria put her hands over my chest(?) and starting pushing.

"One! Two! One! Two!"

Her arms were perfectly extended, and her timing was perfect. I was so gooey at that point, though, that I honestly couldn't tell what she was doing chest compressions on—but if she was actually over my heart, then she was doing great. The only thing I was worried about was that my body was now sloshing around like a waterbed. I barely looked human anymore.

After about thirty compressions, she stopped and leaned in toward where my head used to be. Then she froze.

"Um, Seiichi? Where's your face?"

How should I know?! And shouldn't you have checked that first?!

I was honestly pretty happy that she was trying to save my life, but what she was doing seemed downright pointless. I mean my soul wasn't even in there anymore, not that I had any way of telling her that, but still.

A lightbulb turned on over her head, and I got a horrible sinking feeling.

"I know! I'm just not using enough force!"

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

Stop! Stop, Saria! C'mon, if you can't even do CPR on me, how is brute force going to solve anything?!

"Alright, here we go!"

She burst into light again, and after a moment, she emerged in her Gorilla—her gorilla Saria form, still wearing my white button-up.

"Seiichi, wait. Me save you."

H-hold on just a moment. Do you really need to do a full-body transformation? Can't you just do your arms? Please? My eyes are burning!

That was far from the worst part of it though. She clasped her hands together in front of her then raised them far above her head...

"Hup!"

...bringing them down with earth-shattering force on my body.

"NOOOOOO! MY BODYYYYYY!!"

I splattered across the room, bursting like an overripe tomato.

"Huh?"

Don't "huh" me! Where am I supposed to go now?!

As I watched, though, my body chunks started moving again.

"Wait, what?"

All my scattered gooey bits starting writhing around, all moving back together into a squirming, sluglike mass.

Uh, I really hope I'm seeing things. Maybe I don't need a body after all. I mean, whatever I'd become after this, it wouldn't be human. Actually, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't even be alive. That's not cool.

Just as I was trying to process what had just happened, my body started giving off a blinding light.

Goria covered her eyes with her hands. "My eyes! Me can't see."

How does she know that reference?! Err ... I guess I said it a few times. Does she have to say it like she's reading off a script though?!

As I watched her, I could feel my body pulling me back.

“Wait, you want me to live as *that*?! Like hell I will!”

I don't want to spend my life as a meatball! That's not even remotely human! I guess it's not in chunks and it's wearing clothes again, but ... ew. I'll pass.

I tried to resist the pull, but I was powerless to stop it. When I finally found my soul back in my body, though, it felt oddly relaxing, almost homey. I still didn't look at all human, and even though I didn't have eyes or ears or anything, I could still see and hear perfectly fine. I'd never been more afraid of myself in my life.

As I came to grips with the feel of my new body, however, it started billowing and squirming, slowly reforming itself. I could feel it making hands, legs, a proper torso, a head, everything I'd come to expect from my body. Even my face started forming, and I could feel all my hair grow in at once. It was a very weird feeling. I'd never felt so much at once before.

“S-Seiichi...?”

My eyes weren't done making themselves yet, but I could already tell Saria wasn't a gorilla anymore.

After a long moment, I blinked.

I looked down at myself. I was dressed just like I was before and I had all my limbs. My body was *tight* though, like I had more lean muscle than I'd ever thought possible back on Earth, and it felt like I'd grown even taller. I felt myself, finding my nose and mouth in the right place. My eyelashes seemed longer than before and I had no sign of stubble or anything anywhere. My hair was thicker than it'd probably ever been. I let out a sigh of relief. I'd been worried that it was thinning before.

As I looked myself over, Saria walked up to me. At once glance, she turned beet red again.

As long as I don't have to see that face in her gorilla form, that's A-OK. I'm really surprised she was fine with that whole evolution. I was downright repulsed, and we're talking about my own body here. She even tried to help me...

She was too good for me, honestly, even though she was a gorilla before. Err, was a gorilla still.

I decided to check my Status right off the bat. I was dying to know what had changed from before.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI			
RACE: Human (Human)			
SEX: Male (Male)			
JOB: Nameless Horror (Magic Swordsman)			
AGE: 17 (17)		LEVEL: 1 (2)	
MANA: 116,024 (11)	ATTACK: 118,075 (11)	DEFENSE: 113,252 (11)	AGILITY: 120,252 (12)
MAGIC ATTACK: 115,563 (11)	MAGIC DEFENSE: 116,665 (11)	LUCK: 109,030 (10)	CHARISMA: My Heart's Gonna Burst (10)
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality Shirt• Quality Pants• Quality Undershirt• Quality Underwear• Wise Simian's Chain• Wise Simian Club• Nixie-Cryst Shortsword• Bracelet of the Night• Aterprinceptite Choker• Necklace of Endless Love• Rapier of Festering Hatred• Rapier of Burgeoning Love			
UNIQUE SKILLS:			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instant Memorization• Perfect Recollection• Instant Learning• Instant Regeneration• Perfect Loot• Mind’s Eye
SKILLS—OFFENSE: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cutter Kick• Twin-Fang Strike• Mighty Claw
SKILLS—IMMUNITIES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paralysis Immunity• Sleep Immunity• Confusion Immunity• Charm Immunity• Petrification Immunity• Bind Immunity• Poison Immunity• Fatigue Immunity
SKILLS—MOVEMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flash
SKILLS—SPECIAL: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater Analysis• Ultra Compounding• Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting• Detection• Disguise• Blend-In• Second Sight
MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Daily Magic• Water Magic (Ultimate)• Dark Magic (Ultimate)
SECRET TECHNIQUES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gale Thrust• Piercing Light• Flowing Mist

STYLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Zeford Duelling Style (Founder)
TITLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stench Virtuoso• Man with a Gorilla Wife• Pinnacle of Existence• Unbounded One• Master of Men
CURRENCY: 1,000,000,000G

“Crap, now I’m more confused.”

My Stats were so high, I honestly had no idea what they meant anymore.

Isn’t this too big an increase?! This is insane! And how am I back to being just a human after all that?!

Something had to be off. I used Analysis on it.

>HUMAN: A word with perplexingly intricate connotations. After evolving so far past humanity, only to return to it, one cannot assume to be merely human.

“Man, that’s deep!”

I evolved past humanity? I don’t think I like the sound of that. And besides, I’m pretty sure I went and surpassed natural life, let alone humanity! C’mon, I don’t need my Status asking this kind of philosophical shit now!

Thinking about it now wouldn’t do me any good though. I’d just have to be content that I was technically human again.

But if my species is human, then how come my job is “Nameless Horror”? How can I be a human and a horror at the same time? Besides, “horror” seems a little harsh—I’m just trying to scrape by. Sheesh.

How are my Stats so much higher than Zeanos’s though?! These really are Nameless Horror-tier Stats, dammit! And my Charisma is still borked! What, is this a thousand percent love or something? Am I a singing prince-sama now or

something?! C'mon, at least give me an Charisma I can be happy about, dammit!

What's up with all these Unique Skills? I recognize Perfect Loot, but what's up with the rest of them?!

I used Analysis on them one by one.

INSTANT MEMORIZATION: Allows you to memorize anything in the blink of an eye.
PERFECT RECOLLECTION: You never forget anything you've committed to memory.
INSTANT LEARNING: Allows you to learn things you are shown or taught in the blink of an eye.
INSTANT REGENERATION: Allows you to recover from some injuries in the blink of an eye. Lost blood cannot be regenerated.
MIND'S EYE: Greatly increases your kinetic vision, making any attack against you seem to be in slow motion. Allows you to see that which cannot normally be seen.

“Shit! It's cheats on parade here!”

What even am I now?! I guess I didn't evolve out of my humanity once for nothing! And wait, between Instant Memorization and Perfect Recollection, I can remember anything perfectly just by seeing it once? Man, I wish I had those back on Earth...

Mind's Eye is flat-out inhuman, honestly. I mean, slo-mo vision? That's nuts. And what exactly am I supposed to be seeing that can't “normally be seen”? Ghosts?!

That was enough of the Unique Skills though.

It's nice to see my Skills are all nicely categorized now. And look, I've got new sections for my Magic and Secret Techniques. Nifty. Yep, no surprises here.

I looked down at my Titles.

"OH, C'MON! YOU'VE GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!!"

I used Analysis on the new Titles, one by one.

>MAN WITH A GORILLA WIFE: Amazing, in multiple ways. With this Title, you should be able to overcome most of life's hardships, probably.

"But what does it DO, dammit?!"

C'mon, this is just baseless optimism! Or is it because having a gorilla for a wife is that big a deal? I bet most things would seem easy compared to that, sure! Thanks for nothing, you worthless Title! You don't even do anything!

I looked at the next Title.

>PINNACLE OF EXISTENCE: You are the pinnacle of existence.

"What does that even mean?!"

C'mon, there are half-assed descriptions and then there's this! What does it do?! Am I supposed to Google it or something?! Does it have a website or some shit?! I don't even have a computer, let alone the internet, dammit!

>UNBOUNDED ONE: You know no bounds. Your growth has no upper limit.

"I have no boundaries?! Gee, thanks!"

So I'll just keep getting stronger forever then? Just what am I supposed to be if I get any stronger than this? The Demon King? God?!

>MASTER OF MEN: Your baby-making powers ranked up. You're a god in the sheets. Enjoy ;)

"C'mon, dirty jokes now?!"

Seriously?! I mean, sure, I bet I'm better-endowed than most guys right now, but when and where am I supposed to use this Title exactly?! Never?! Man, I wish I could give whoever's in charge of this stupid world a piece of my mind!

I felt like I'd about had my fill of hot takes on my Status, but there was one thing that still bothered me.

"Just what're all these numbers in parentheses?!"

I have a second Job, and all these numbers in brackets are so low. What're they supposed to mean? Isn't there some sort of instruction manual?!

I started panting heavily. I was totally out of breath from all that internal screaming.

"Seiichi? Are you okay?" Saria's face was filled with concern.

I was honestly surprised she wasn't spooked by all my screaming and flailing.

"Yeah ... yeah. I'm fine, thanks." I smiled at her.

Her cheeks reddened, and she turned away.

Wait... There's nothing wrong with my face, is there? Is it so bad that she turned red trying to stifle her laughter? Or am I so handsome she's blushing?! Which one?!

I put my hands to my face, but I didn't feel anything off.

Man, I've never wanted a mirror so badly. Oh, well, it's not like waiting will kill me.

There was something more important than that now.

"So, Saria? What do you want to do now?"

"Huh?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"I'm thinking of leaving this forest, maybe for good."

I'd spent way too much time alone. I had started to miss the feeling of being around people ... not that they ever let me get that close, but still.

As I stuffed the sad memories out of my head, Saria beamed at me.

"Wherever you go, I'll follow. Your home is my home... No, you're my home, Seiichi!"

Man, she really is too good for me. Who cares if she's a gorilla?

"Thanks."

I had a warm, fuzzy feeling in my heart.

At that moment, however, a fanfare started blaring through the cavern.

“What was that?”

“Not a clue!”

We both got ready to fight, just in case. Saria turned back into button-up-form Gorias, of course.

I guess I'll have to put up with it this once ... just this once!

We both sharpened our senses, scanning the chamber for any potential dangers. At that moment, though, we heard a voice.

“Ah, wonderful! Simply splendid!”

Saria and I whipped our heads in the direction of the voice, and then our jaws dropped in unison.

“Huh...?”

“What the...?”

“Oh, my apologies. I seem to have startled you both. Rest assured, I mean you no harm.”

The figure strode towards us with short yet elegant strides. Neither of us knew how to respond, though, since the newcomer was just too strange.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Edward Lusenstein Balhed Heybatos. Feel free to call me Sheep-san. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The speaker was an anthropomorphic sheep, clad in a tuxedo and a silk hat.



Chapter 18: Sheep-san

“A sheep...?”

“Sheep ... san?”

We exchanged confused glances. Saria was already back in her human form.

Where’d that thing even come from?

“Yes, Sheep-san, that would be me. I’ve come to reward you for being the first ones to clear this dungeon.”

Huh. I’m still not following.

“So, uh ... what, exactly, do you want?”

It dramatically raised its stubby little arms, which made about as much sense as everything else so far.

“Let’s see, I suppose I should properly introduce myself first.”

“Didn’t you do that already?”

“Not completely, no. You see, I manage and maintain the labyrinths scattered throughout this world.”

“Yeah, you mentioned something about that before. Did you make this place then?”

“No.”

“You didn’t?!”

Crap, I still don’t get it. I’ll try not to yell again, little guy.

“You see, the conditions for dungeon formation are quite specific. Sometimes, they form around a significant repository of Mana. At other times, they are born from lingering regrets, and at other times, they form naturally around a particularly strong resident. One does not simply ‘make’ a dungeon, you see. I simply maintain these dungeons, as per the will of the world.”

I can't keep up with this guy. What's he on about now?

The sheep sighed. "I suppose I can't expect you to understand so quickly."

"No. No, you can't. Right, Saria?"

"Huh? I understand."

"How?!"

So I'm the only one who couldn't make any sense of that?! Don't tell me I've lost my mind and I just don't know it yet?!

"Let me simplify things for you a tad," Sheep-san said. "I prevent monsters inside the dungeon from wandering outside. In fact, as we talk, there are doubtlessly other versions of 'me' working in other dungeons."

"Wait, there's more than one of you?!"

"Of course. In addition to maintaining the dungeons, I often also peer out into the world."

"Really? Why's that?"

"I get awfully bored, you see."

"If you're bored, then work!"

"Oh, come now. I'm working right now, aren't I?"

Just what the hell is this thing?! I mean, I guess it is working though. It's supposed to congratulate us, right?

"Wait ... didn't you come a little late though? We beat Zeanos some time ago now. What were you doing all this time?"

"I was laughing my woolly behind off at your evolution."

"Why, you creepy little pervert!"

"Oh, come now. No need to praise me so."

He scratched the back of his head bashfully. I had to try very hard not to kick him across the room.

"I can't go approving of violence now. I may have a plethora of administrative powers, but I'm quite useless in a fight."

“Stop reading my mind!”

This creep plays dirty! I guess it's partly my fault for being so simple-minded though.

“Administration is terrifyingly dull work, by the way. Why, nobody has the strength or resolve to properly clear a dungeon these days. All I need to do is redirect monsters that might try to leave. There's hardly anything to do, honestly.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that? So nobody actually clears dungeons here?”

I'd had the impression that adventurers would be clearing these things every chance they got.

“There are certainly adventurers that brave the dungeons' depths, yes.”

“I said stop reading my mind!”

“Oh, but it's so much fun! In fact, I peek in on the lives of humans every chance I get. There's nothing more comical than a candid view of a human bearing it all as they go about their daily life.”

“I don't care! And stop doing that, you little scumwad!”

“I am no scumwad, sir! I'm a gentlesheep!”

Man, I'm glad there aren't any sheep like this asshole on Earth! Like hell he's a gentle anything!

Saria giggled. “You're so funny, Sheep-san!”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort.”

“Stop acting all humble, dammit!”

Saria was smiling though, and that meant that I could let Sheep-san's dirty jokes slide. No, I had to.

Saria's so cute when she smiles. Man, she just warms my heart. There's no wound that smile can't heal!

Sheep-san cleared his throat. “Well then. As I was saying before a certain *someone* derailed the conversation...”

"A certain *who*?! Don't think you can just push the blame onto me!"

He was the one who suddenly started talking about his voyeurism!

"As I mentioned before, there are indeed adventurers that enter dungeons."

"Yeah."

"Among them, a fair number clear said dungeon."

"Huh? Didn't you just say—?"

"Come now, let me finish. Do you have no manners, boy? I suppose I should expect as much from a horror—"

"What are you, a real sheep or a devil in sheep's clothing?! Don't bring up that whole horror thing! I have a complex!"

"Oh, my apologies. I didn't mean for you to hear that."

"JUST GO AWAY!"

He totally knows about my Status, doesn't he?! He's just trying to bug me. Don't make me cry!

"I have no interest in a man's tears."

"Creep! Filth! Monster! I hate you! You're inhuman! Go die!"

"Hahaha! I'm afraid I am inhuman, quite literally. I am a sheep, after all."

This faultfinding little creep sheep! How's he even reading my mind?! And how'd he find out about my Job?

"It seems you've sidetracked us again, sir." Sheep-san shot me a sidelong glance.

I didn't reply.

I'm done with this game, lambchop.

"Damn."

"What? Did you just swear at me?!" A moment later, I realized. "Dammit!"

How'd he bait me into quipping again?! There goes all my iron resolve! And wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, grass-breath!

“All jokes aside... While there are a fair number of adventurers who have cleared dungeons, they have only done so in the sense of reaching the final area and defeating the boss there, nothing more.”

“Um ... is there anything else to do?”

“No, nothing at all. That’s exactly what clearing a dungeon entails.”

What the hell’s this thing trying to say then?

“You see, I only appear once a dungeon has been cleared in the *true* sense of the word.”

“The true, huh?”

Saria looked just as confused as me. Sheep-san tut-tutted before continuing.

“Have you already forgotten what I mentioned about lingering regrets?”

“No.”

“You see, when an individual—often a human—perishes in a place with strong emotional ties to the world remaining, a dungeon is formed. Therefore, to clear a dungeon normally is to defeat the boss at its depths, as you know. But what the two of you did was what I might refer to as a True Clear.”

“Uh ... okay?”

I still don’t get it. No, that’s not true. I guess I just don’t know how to feel about this.

“Well, the specifics aren’t important. A True Clear isn’t something that can be achieved through normal means. Besides, only dungeons that have been formed by such lingering regrets can be True Cleared at all. Dungeons formed through excessive Mana buildup, or that have formed around a powerful being, can only be cleared in the conventional sense. However, should you wish to True Clear a dungeon again in the future, I have a word of advice for you.”

“Advice?”

“Yes. You see, in most cases, dungeons formed from regrets have their creator as their boss, in monster form.”

“Okay, so like Zeanos was human before but then became a monster.”

“You could put it that way, yes. Therefore, putting said boss’s last regrets to rest is perhaps the best way of True Clearing a dungeon. However—and I must stress this—it is not a feat that one can accomplish on purpose. You see?”

Huh. That book God gave me didn’t have anything about this stuff in it. Not that there was anything more than just the basics, I guess.

“Well, then, you might be wondering what the two of you did to prompt a visit from me.”

I’d almost forgotten our original question.

“You see, as you have True Cleared the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, I have come to bestow your clear rewards upon you.”

“Clear rewards?”

“Of course. Normally, you would simply pick up the boss’s drops and leave, yes? Maybe loot a chest or two? Well, for a True Clear, you warrant a visit from me as well as a special reward.”

“Huh. So could we come back later and get another clear reward?”

“I’m afraid not. You see, as you have True Cleared it, this dungeon will cease to exist.”

“Cease to what?!”

“You heard me. A True Clear is achieved by dispelling the regrets that formed it, after all. I cannot guarantee that all dungeons can be True Cleared in the exact same manner, of course, but in this case, you have eliminated this dungeon’s very reason for existing. Therefore, it will simply disappear.”

“Whoa ... okay.”

“Therefore, you can only receive clear rewards from a dungeon once. You will also receive proper bragging rights, of course. Go on. I mean it—brag if you need to. I’ll permit it.”

“Why would we need your permission in the first place?!”

“Because I’m a sheep, obviously.”

“Dammit, you’re not making any sense!”

“Let’s see...” he said, totally ignoring me. “I’m supposed to give you a special reward, but I’m afraid I haven’t properly determined what I’ll give you. I never imagined anyone would actually do it.”

“Really?”

“Well, there are a few fixed rewards, so I’ll start by giving you those.”

“So what are they?”

“That would be a Fruit of Evolution Growing Kit and a Ten Days’ Travel Kit.”

“A what?!”

You mean we can grow Fruits of Evolution?!

“Of course.”

“Seriously, get out of my head!”

“Don’t worry; I’ll make sure to include plenty of seeds and an explanatory pamphlet. The travel kit is so that you can make it to the closest town from here.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

There was one thing that was still bothering me, however.

“If the dungeon’s going to disappear, what’ll happen to the forest and all the Clever Monkeys and the like that live here? If you’re not here to keep them inside, will they start attacking towns and stuff?”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that. The land and forest will remain as-is. Only the overarching systems that make it a dungeon will be affected. Besides, there aren’t any settlements close enough to here to be affected.”

“Wait... So if there aren’t any settlements, what’re we supposed to do after this?!”

Like there aren’t even any tiny villages close to here?!

I rooted through Zeanos’s memories, and I realized Sheep-san was right. It’d take a week of walking to get to the nearest town ... or at least to where the nearest town was 1,500 years ago.

“Weren’t you paying attention? That’s what the travel kit is for. You’ll have food, water, and of course a tent. That should be plenty for a short trip.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“Oh, no need to thank me. I figured you might need it as you’ll be force-teleported out of the dungeon as soon as you’ve received your rewards.”

“Gee, thanks!”

Whose side is this little creep on anyway?!

Sheep-san cleared his throat. “At any rate, you each have one reward remaining. Clear rewards always come in threes, you see. The cultivation and travel kits are a gift to you both, so let’s see... My last gifts to you will be individual ones.” He took a moment to size us up. “How about I give Saria-ojousama some proper clothing?”

He waved his little hand and a huge pile of clothes and underwear appeared before our eyes.

“Given your unique circumstances, I’ve enchanted them so that they’ll fit you regardless of the form you’re in. I figured that this would be the best reward for you now, all things considered.”

I gave him a thumbs-up. “Thanks, Sheep-san!”

Sorry I said all that about you. You’re a considerate little guy after all. Now we won’t have to deal with the guards first thing when we get to town! That size-changing ability’s a life-saver too.

“Allow me to grant you some privacy to change,” he said with a short clap of his little hands. A curtain unfurled itself between Saria and me. “Please let me know as soon as you’ve finished.”

“Thanks, Sheep-san!” she said from behind it.

Sheep-san turned to me and nudged the pile of clothing forwards. “Now then, if you could kindly store the rest of her clothing for the time being.”

I guess I’m the only one of us with an Item Box, but won’t I get in trouble if anyone catches me with so much women’s clothing? I guess it’s only a crime if I get caught, huh? Here’s hoping I have the guts to take this.

“I’m afraid crimes are crimes whether or not you’re caught, Seiichi-sama.”

“I was kidding. Honest.”

Don’t try this at home, kids. By that, I mean don’t do anything I do, ever.

“Now, that only leaves the matter of your reward. Therein lies the problem.”

“Is it really that hard?”

“Oh, yes. I was planning to give you a love potion or an elixir of popularity or something of that ilk, but it seems you’ll no longer need it.”

“Ew! Like I’d want anything like that! If you insisted, though, I guess I could accept it.”

“You won’t need it now, trust me.”

“Oh.”

I didn’t know if that meant I was so ugly now it wouldn’t help or if I was so handsome I didn’t have to rely on anything like that. I’d lost tons of weight and I was taller, but I was dying to know what state my face was in now.

But c’mon, who wouldn’t want an elixir of popularity? I wanna have my shot in the limelight!

“I would give you a weapon, but looking at your cheat-filled arsenal, I doubt you’d find it very useful.”

That’s true. Very true. How does he know about cheats though?

“Ah!” A thought suddenly hit him. “How does some armor sound?”

“Armor?”

“Yes. Like a black robe befitting a wizard or perhaps a warrior’s full-face helmet?”

“Come to think of it, I don’t have any armor or defensive accessories yet, do I?”

“Precisely. In fact, I think I know the perfect piece for you.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“A ski mask.”

“How about no?!”

What, does he think I'm going to be robbing banks or something?!

“What, you don't fancy the idea?”

“Like hell I would! Just imagine trying to get into town wearing that! I'd get arrested in a heartbeat!”

“Oh, I can imagine it. I'm rather looking forward to watching that.”

“Just drop dead already!”

I take back every good thing I ever said about him! This creep's downright evil!

“How about a motorcycle helmet then?”

“What do you think I am, some kind of headless rider? Or what, do you want me to go around fighting giant monsters with a color-coordinated team?!”

Okay, maybe those guys don't technically wear motorcycle helmets, but still.

“Neither in fact. I simply thought it'd be amusing to watch you bumble around in a motorcycle helmet. Oops, I wasn't supposed to say that. Forget that.”

“C'mon, at least keep your own secrets! And wait, you know what I mean by headless rider?!”

“Of course I do.”

That's scary. How?

“And seriously, why're you only suggesting stuff that covers my face?! You're not actually thinking about what's best for me, are you?!”

“Oh, but I am. Trust me; you'd best cover your face from here on out.”

“Wait, why?”

“Because of your Disguise Skill, your Charisma appears to be a mere ten. Any Stat of ten is, to be quite frank, shit-tier.”

Oh, so the numbers and stuff in brackets in my Status is what people see through my Disguise? And maybe he doesn't have to be that frank.

“How do you know so much about my Status anyways?”

“I am a sheep, after all.”

I'm not even going to grace that with a response.

“Anyhow,” he continued, “as long as you have Disguise activated, only myself and individuals you trust from the bottom of your heart can see your true Status. In other words, almost everyone is condemned to see your Charisma of 10.”

Wait ... if 10 is awful, then I must've been literally the worst before with ones across the board!

“As such, I would recommend you cover your face so as to avoid unnecessary trouble.”

“Shouldn't I just turn off my Disguise instead?”

Assuming my current looks aren't lower than 10 of course. Man, I wish I could see myself.

“How naïve, Seiichi-sama.”

“Huh?”

“Should you remove your Disguise, then the world at large will bear witness to your true power. You realize what that would entail, don't you?”

“Uh ... no.”

“To put it bluntly, entire countries would go to war over you. Society at large would see you as an inhuman monster. In all likelihood, you'd live out your life in obscurity without ever really connecting with another human before dying in some ditch, cold and alone.”

“That would suck, yeah.”

Saria's accepted me for who I am, which is great, but I've got no idea what Shouta or the others would think of the new me. They'd probably be terrified of me. That's not a great feeling.

“To be quite honest, though, the biggest reason for the face equipment would be my own amusement.”

“How am I supposed to trust anything you say?!”

C'mon, at least read the mood! I was getting all serious there!

"I really do think it would be wise to cover up a little though."

"Sure, but no ski masks, and no motorcycle helmets either. I'd just look like some weirdo."

"Oh, come now. I know you're a weirdo, deep down."

"Just shut up!"

Man, this stupid sheep twists everything I say!

"If you insist, though, I suppose I can provide an alternative for you. How does a motorcycle helmet sound?"

"How's that an alternative?! C'mon, explain yourself!"

"Ah, but this won't be just any motorcycle helmet. I'll be adding all manner of special qualities to it."

"Ooh, like what?"

"It'll be sturdy enough to be stomped on or bitten by a dragon without a scratch."

"No way that's helmet-level defense! That does sound pretty good though."

"It'll have temperature regulation qualities, such that the inside of it will be comfortably room temperature even in the burning depths of hell."

"Wait, just my head?! If I have to go someplace like that, I'd rather have that kinda effect for my whole body!"

"And lastly, the mouth part will open so that you can eat when you need to."

"Man, that last one's lame! Why would I even need that?!"

"Alright then, it's decided. I hope you enjoy your new helmet."

"LISTEN TO ME!!"

How's it decided?! Who said that?!

Without skipping a beat, though, the sheep produced a black helmet out of thin air.

“Here you go.”

“I don’t want it!”

“Oh, come now, no need to be polite. I’d personally rather die than wear it.”

“Just scrap the stupid thing then!”

As I said that, however, Sheep-san threw it into the air and clapped. Before I knew what was happening, it suddenly jammed itself onto my head.

“What the hell?!”

“There. Pulled the wool over your eyes, did I? Never underestimate a sheep’s abilities, my friend.”

“What are sheep anyways?!”

I tried to pull the helmet off, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Um. I can’t take it off.”

“Of course not. That’s one of its features.”

“TAKE IT OFF ME!!”

“Hahaha! When I have time.”

*C’mon, I know that means you’ll never do it! You’ll “do it tomorrow,” huh?!
Yeah, right!*



“Oh, come now. You’ll be able to take it off freely as soon as you leave, so long as you’re with people you trust completely. That also means, however, that you’ll never be able to remove it around strangers.”

“What is this, some kind of smart helmet?!”

How does it even tell who I trust?!

“Wait, so I can take it off around Saria, right?”

“Naturally.”

“Cool! I just have to take it off and never put it back on as soon as I’m outta here!”

Man, I’m so smart!

“Be my guest. Just be aware that it’ll re-equip itself on you as soon as anyone else comes near, and there’s no avoiding it.”

“Dammit, just how powerful is that stupid thing?! It’s cursed, isn’t it?! Shit!!”

“It’s important that you humans learn when to give up, Horror-san.”

“So which am I, a horror or a human?! Stop confusing me!”

“At any rate, I’m sure you’ll be able to remove the helmet naturally after a while. Or who knows, brute force might just work.”

Yeah, no. If a dragon can’t crack this thing, there’s no way I’ll be able to.

Just when it felt like the sheep had worked my HP down to zero, Saria poked her head through the curtain.

“Why, if it isn’t Saria-ojousama! Finished changing already?”

“Yep, all done!”

“Excellent. On to the next step then.”

Sheep-san clapped his hands and the curtain separating Saria and me disappeared. She was dressed in a snow-white one piece.

“Um, Seiichi? How do I look?”

“Y-you look, uh ... good.”

I didn't know what to say. I'd never seen anyone so beautiful before in my life. Her red hair especially looked so nice against her dress.

"Ehe! I'm glad you think so!"

She's just too damn cute. Why can't I stop gushing over her?

"Yes, why can't you?" Sheep-san shot me a sidelong look. "You sicken me."

"Would it kill you to be a little nicer?!"

What a merciless little monster. I don't even care that he's reading my mind; I'm just done with this. I want a nap.

"Alright then. Now that you have your gifts, it's high time you teleported out of here."

"Yeah. Not like we have any choice of course."

"I'm glad you agree. Let's get you on your way then."

"At least try to listen to me!"

"I'll hear your complaints out next time, should we meet again," he said as he got the spell ready.

"Didn't you just give us a whole speech about how hard it is to Perfect Clear a dungeon?! Besides, I never want to see your woolly little ass ever again!"

"Oh, don't worry; I know you love me deep down."

"That's it; I'm seriously gonna slug you!"

"Oops, and there goes the teleportation!"

"Hold it!"

Before I could reach the little asshole, my body was covered in light, and I started fading away bit by bit.

"Don't forget this! I'll get you next time, you bastard!" I shouted as I faded away.

"Bye-bye, Sheep-san!" Saria said with a wave.

"Yes, farewell."

And with that, Saria and I were finally out of the Forest of Endless Heartbreak.

Maybe that parting line was a little too tropey, but I don't care.

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“And so they’ve left,” I muttered to myself as I watched Seiichi-sama and Saria-ojousama teleport away. “He’ll get me ‘next time,’ will he?”

I smiled to myself at the thought of his last words.

“So you’re planning on meeting me again, are you, Seiichi-sama?”

And after all the foul things he said about me too.

I’d been so starved for a decent conversation partner for so long that I hardly cared.

“Hehe, I’m afraid I’m no freak though. If anything, I would be a ba-a-astard.”

Ah, how I love such trivial exchanges. There’s no better use of time than going off on tangents.

“I suppose that’s the end of this dungeon though. I wonder how long it’ll be until the next is formed.”

And when it has...

“I trust you’ll come find me again, Seiichi-sama.”

With a spring in my step and a light in my heart, I left the chamber for the last time.

Epilogue

“Please, wait here.”

The day we were all summoned to the new world, I, Takamaiya Shouta, was being led through a series of corridors with my schoolmates. Our summoners had waited until we had calmed down somewhat to approach us. They were wearing robes and wielding staffs, the kind that I’d only ever seen in manga before. It was as if they were showing off that they could use magic.

Representatives of our school met with representatives of our summoners, but before long, they led all our teachers off somewhere. Now it was only us students and the denizens of this new world.

“Where d’you think they’re taking us? This sure is a fancy waiting room,” Kenji whispered as he looked around us.

“I assume they are taking us to our leader,” Kannazuki-senpai replied matter-of-factly. She was the only one who seemed totally unfazed by this latest turn of events.

Her assumption was a fair one, since there was a massive set of ornate wooden doors at the far end of the room. It felt like the exact type of place someone important would be. The corridors on the way there had also been quite opulent, decorated with all manner of fancy vases and oil paintings. There were even antique chandeliers, but as I doubted there was electricity in this world, they were likely lit with magic.

Kannazuki-senpai’s cool voice interrupted my thoughts. “I couldn’t care less who we’re about to meet, but I am rather concerned about where they’ve taken our teachers.”

Um ... maybe we should care about who’s past that door?

Considering Kannazuki-senpai’s pedigree, though, she was probably used to meeting bigwigs.

After a short while, the man who had guided us up until now addressed us once more.

“Thank you for waiting. His Majesty will see you now. Please, be on your best behavior.”

The massive doors swung open and I could feel a current of unease run through the students. Kannazuki-senpai was probably the only one of us who was calm.

“Right this way.”

The man led us into the room. Inside, we saw a throne room, the likes of which we’d only ever heard about in stories. At the far end of the room was an overdecorated throne and the middle-aged man sitting in it was flanked by people clad in noble clothing. Behind them we could see a number of men clad in bulky silver plate mail.

The guy on the throne is probably the king, and those nobles are likely his ministers... The guys in back would be his guards.

The kids around me turned pale, except for Kannazuki-senpai of course.

Wow, she’s got guts. How can she maintain her cool so easily at a time like this?

Our robed guide led us to the king’s feet, and he turned around to face us.

“Take a knee and bow your heads! You are in the presence of royalty!”

Confusion and irritation ran throughout the crowd. Some of us were genuinely puzzled. Others were genuinely pissed. I was, of course, the latter.

Sure, some of us might just need time to process this. But seriously? They ripped us right out of our home world, and then they want us to bow to them? What the hell do I owe any of them? Who do they think they are?

I cast an irritated look at the so-called king. He had ash-grey hair and blue eyes. He clearly wasn’t Japanese. It didn’t matter what he looked like though—he was the one responsible for our summoning, and from the look on his face, I could tell he thought he was superior to us. The whole situation rubbed me the wrong way.

One of the ministers raised his voice in irritation. “You heard him! You are before His Majesty! Now bow!”

Is that any way to talk to your heroes?!

A quick glance around told me I wasn’t the only one who was irritated.

At that moment, Kannazuki-senpai stepped forward, as if to represent us all.

“My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty. I regret to inform you that we are quite unused to meeting a man of your caliber. I pray you can forgive us.”

My eyes flew open in shock.

She turned back to us, speaking in a low voice. “We had best obey them for now. We possess no connections in this world. It would be best to avoid provoking them unnecessarily. Swallow your pride and bow, all of you.”

Some people hesitated, but it wasn’t long before we were all down on one knee.

What the hell?

I kept my head low enough to appear as though I was bowing, but my eyes were fixed on the king in a glare.

The king snorted and stood with a great air of pomp.

“We welcome you, heroes who have come so far from your home world to save our kingdom from disaster. We suppose that we owe you our thanks for your sacrifice. There, you have it. Feel free to cry tears of joy, we won’t stop you.”

What a windbag. We’re not here because we want to be, asshole. Why the hell would I thank you?

The king continued his speech. “We hate wasting words, so we will be brief. We have but one order for you—slay the foul Demon King that threatens the peace and tranquility of this world. Fortunately, the Demon King is still weak following his resurrection. It should take a full four years for him to regain his former power. His presence has nonetheless stirred demons and monsters alike into action. Therein lies your work.”

Why is he assuming we'll do anything for him? Who said this old creep could tell us what to do? And besides, why'd he summon us when he still has four years left? Why doesn't he use that time to solve his own goddamn problems?

I cast a look at Kannazuki-senpai. She was cool and collected—more so than I'd ever seen her, and we'd known each other since we were little kids. Her eyes were filled with utter disdain. If looks could kill, the king would've died a dozen times over. Even I could feel a chill run down my back, and not the happy, masochistic kind.

At that moment, a few of the students in the crowd stood up.

"Shut the fuck up, old man!" the first girl shouted. "Like hell we're gonna let you call all the shots!"

The second girl rolled her eyes. "Seriously, what's your problem?"

"Yeah, what she said!" called out the third. "Your stupid little world can eat shit! I mean I can't even get Wi-Fi here!"

The second girl raised an eyebrow. "Wait ... that's your problem?"

"I mean Airi's got a point," the fourth girl said. "But c'mon, they totally don't even have makeup here! I bet they don't even know how to have a good time."

The second girl sighed. "But you don't even wear makeup, Rumi."

"Course not. I don't need it. But I need stuff for my skin, okay? And what about manicures?"

They were a famous group of girls at our school, but not exactly in the positive sense.

The first was Nojima Yuuka. She was half-English and her uniform had been modified to the point where I almost couldn't recognize it. She also wore a long coat, the kind those biker gang members wore. She even wore a bandage wrap around her chest, as though she'd come right out of some old manga. If I remembered correctly, she was the leader of some famous lady biker gang, which was why most people didn't dare get too close to her.

The second was Shimizu Noa. She'd dyed the ends of her short hair blue, and she was every bit as pretty as Yuuka was. Her uniform wasn't as modified as

Yuuka's, but she wore it as though it were a few sizes too big for her, and she had on earrings as though they weren't against the dress code at all. Apparently, she was a famous fashion model, which made sense considering her lithe figure. I was in the same class as Noa back when I was a freshman, but all I remembered about her was that she spent most of her time glued to her phone and that she often played hooky with Yuuka. Thinking back, they spent a lot of time together.

The third one was Seto Airi. She had sort of a gal aura around her, and despite not wearing makeup, she was about as pretty as the other two. She overdid her accessories a little, but she was fun enough to talk to. Even though Yuuka and Noa gave off all sorts of lone wolf vibes, she hung out with them like it was the most natural thing in the world. She was a bit of an oddball but in a good way.

The last girl was Amakawa Rumi. Unlike Airi, she had the classic gal style down pat. Her hair was brown and wavy, but just like Noa said, she wasn't wearing any makeup. She came off looking pretty, nonetheless. I was honestly impressed. Unlike Noa or Airi, I could tell from her uniform that she cared about fashion.

Wait ... this could be bad. If they don't shut up right now, they could get us all killed. I just hope they need to wait for the stars to align or something to summon heroes...

As an aside, all the guys around them were still trembling with fear. Not that I was one to talk, of course.

Man, they've got guts.

I felt a little glad, knowing I wasn't the only person upset about getting summoned.

The thin-haired minister who'd told us to shut up a minute before stepped forwards in irritation.

"Know your place! How dare you address His Majesty so crudely?!"

"Stuff it, baldie!" Yuuka shouted back. "I ain't talkin' to you!"

"Baldie?! I-I'm not bald yet, honest..." His shoulders drooped, giving us a good view of just how thin his hair really was.

Oof—that was rough, guy. I almost feel sorry for you.

The king sat back in his throne, snorting as he reclined.

“We’ll allow their complaints. Speak, heroes, before we change our mind.”

Yuuka stepped up. “Alright, I’m gonna speak then! Send us back to our goddamn world right now!”

“Seriously...” Noa grumbled. “First some weird voice is telling us what to do and now we’re supposed to kill some Demon King? Get real.”

Rumi shrugged. “I don’t get what’s going on, but like, it sounds like a pain. You can totes count me out.”

“A Demon King sounds totally Dragon Adventure-y, though!” Airi chimed in.

“Uh, Airi?” Noa said, eyebrow raised. “How about you stop talking?”

Yep, nothing but serious conversation here.

I felt a bit more relaxed, though, as I took a moment to scan the room. Kenji and everyone else were still trying to keep up with all that was going on, and Kannazuki-senpai was as composed as always. Airi might’ve outed herself as the biggest airhead in school, but at least some of the tension was gone now.

The king seemed unfazed though. “Protest as you may, you have no means of refusing us. Behold the mark on the back of your hands and weep.”

We all did as he said, but all I saw was the back of my hands, which hadn’t changed—and I knew them quite well.

What’re we looking for?

“As you can see,” the king continued, “you all have Crests of Subordination emblazoned there. Now you have no choice but to serve us as our loyal pawns. You have no means of resisting, peasants! How does it feel to be helpless?! Bwahahahaha!”

Um ... what crest? There’s nothing on my hand.

I took a look around at the others just in case, but their hands were crest-free too.

Yuuka's eyebrows furrowed in irritation. "Hey, geezer! What're you blabbin' about? I don't see any crest!"

"No crest." Noa nodded.

"Nothing here either," Rumi agreed.

Airi seemed genuinely upset. "Aww ... and here I thought I'd get to have a cool tattoo for free! Why'd you lie to me?!"

It seemed like everyone was totally crest-free. Every pair of eyes in the room rested on the king.

His eyes went wide. "Shit. You're kidding, right?" All his pride was gone now. His eyes darted around the crowd, never blinking once.

I think we just heard his "normal" voice. What a chump.

He turned in panic to an old man in a long robe who stood nearby.

"Hey, where're their crests? I said I wanted them with crests! This is bad, right? I'm gonna get wrecked, aren't I? I got like super full of myself there. You planned for this, right? Right?!"

The king started shitting bricks. The robed geezer smiled so refreshingly that even I felt relaxed.

"Inconceivable!"

"NOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Wow, he just pushed it right back! What a poor, baby king.

"C-c'mon, you've gotta help me, Gramp-emon!"

What is the geezer, some kinda robot cat? How do they even know that reference? But honestly, that stupid king deserves all he's got coming to him.

The entire room watched the king's panic unfold, too stunned to make a move. Even Kannazuki-senpai shot him a mixed look of loathing and pity.

C'mon, the guy's dead already. Show him some mercy!

The geezer sighed. "I suppose I don't have much choice, Your Majesty. Fortunately, I have just the thing for this situation."

Don't actually play along with him, gramps.

"Dadadada-dada! Hostages!"

Don't say that like it's a good thing! Man, that's almost worse than saying your own sound effects! And are you or are you not just ripping off Toraemon at this point?! How do you even know that anime?!

The geezer whispered something in a nearby guard's ear. The guard ran off somewhere then came back a moment later with a crystal ball.

"If you would stand against His Majesty," he shouted, "then your companions' lives are forfeit!"

He held out the crystal ball and, just like an old projector, it created a screen in midair. On the screen, we could see our teachers locked up in dark little cells.

My eyes flew open in surprise. "What?!"

Kannazuki-senpai only glared.

"These are your friends, aren't they? It would be a great pity should misfortune befall them! Follow His Majesty's orders to the letter and they will be spared!" When nobody spoke up to contradict him, the geezer smiled and continued. "I shan't blame you, if their lives truly mean nothing to you, but you wouldn't want to surrender your only means of returning home, would you? Only we possess the means of doing so! Listen well and no lives will be lost—oh, and don't even consider running to anyone else for help! Only we, your summoners, can un-summon you!"

"What?!"

In other words, if we ever want to make it home, we'll have to be their pawns. That's one hell of a trump card.

Even if we made it home, though, there was no guarantee we'd be welcomed back. If that voice was to be believed, then nobody back home even remembered us now—assuming, of course, that self-proclaimed God was telling the truth. Either way, we wouldn't be going home anytime soon.

Dammit. These jerks know how to hit where it hurts.

While everyone else was moping, though, Kannazuki stepped forward.

“In other words, you wish us to obey you if we wish to return home?”

“That’s it, yes.” The robed geezer nodded.

She shot him a dark look. “You’re filth, all of you.”

“What, you aren’t upset, are you? I don’t have the slightest idea what you could be thinking.”

The robed freak actually seemed to be enjoying this, and I wasn’t the only one getting pissed. Yuuka looked about ready to knock his teeth out, and Noa was only barely managing to hold her back.

The old man grinned. “You may all be rather weak now, but with the proper upbringing, your strength will be unrivalled. Why fear one measly, powerless little Demon King?”

Yeah, but we haven’t fought a day in our lives. Japan’s just about the safest place on Earth and you want us to go slay someone? We haven’t killed anything bigger or meaner than a bug before.

His words seemed to take hold with a few people though. Murmurs echoed around me.

“He’s got a point, y’know.”

“We’re heroes, right? Since when do heroes lose?”

“Maybe we can do this.”

“We’ve gotta beat the Demon King if we wanna go home, right?”

The crowd seemed to be turning more in the geezer’s favor with every passing moment.

Really though? Sure, it sounds like “Dragon Adventure,” like Airi said, but there’s no guarantee this world will play out the same way.

Kenji gave me a confused look. “Is it just me or are people actually listening to him?”

“Well, there’s a chance he’s telling the truth,” I said with a shrug. “If they won’t send us back either way, we might as well go do what they want. Besides, I doubt we’ll have any problems with our strength.”

“Wow ... you really think it’s that easy?”

I snorted. “As if.”

We’re nothing but tools to them. Even if we finish their little errand for them, they don’t have a single good reason to keep their side of the bargain. If we don’t go along with them now, though, we might not live until morning.

Kannazuki-senpai’s brow was furrowed in consternation. She had probably arrived at the same conclusion that I had.

The king climbed back on his throne and cleared his throat dramatically, as if nothing unexpected had ever happened.

“Hmph. We see little point in continuing this conversation. You *will* slay the Demon King for us, on your names as heroes. Until then, we permit you to use the palace’s facilities. You may thank us now. Starting tomorrow, you will begin training for your journey. Now go. You are dismissed.”

He stood up again.

“Y-Your Majesty!” Kannazuki-senpai called out. “We still have more to say!”

At that moment, however, the guards that had been waiting in the back advanced, lowering their spears at us in one uniform action. Kannazuki-senpai froze. The king strode out of the room through a back door without so much as a glance behind him.

The robed geezer smirked. “You’d best give it up, heroes. The guards will show you to your rooms, and I’d advise you to rest well tonight. I’m looking forward to seeing you tomorrow for training!”

He also left, followed closely behind by the ministers. We were left alone in the throne room with the guards.

“You heard your orders, men,” said one of the guards in the back. His arms were folded in front of him, his eyes closed. I couldn’t make out any emotion in his deep voice, but he was clearly no rank-and-file soldier. “Show them to their rooms. Don’t rough them up now.”

We all stood up, and the guards started leading us away. Kannazuki-senpai still had a concerned look on her face. Kenji and I exchanged uneasy looks. Most

of the rest of the students seemed totally at ease, however, and began chattering with anticipation as they imagined what their rooms would be like. Not one of them gave a second thought to what slaying the Demon King might actually entail.

Well, we have four years, and as we get stronger, our options will increase in turn. I'm sure we'll figure this out in time.

I couldn't fully convince myself, however—nor could I shake the harrowing feeling that my fears would pale in comparison to the cruel reality that lay in wait for us.

To be continued in *The Fruit of Evolution, Volume 2*

Back Matter

Miku My hobbies include going to karaoke and reading. I'm also starting university next year. Flawed as it may be, I sincerely hope you enjoy my work. (October 2014)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (October 2014)



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