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The FRUIT of EVOLUTION

Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

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illustrator

4

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

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Before I knew it,
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Seichi
Human

"What in
the what?"

"Damn, he's
a real hero."

"He's like one of
those fairy-tale
princes!"



Lulune
Donkey

Altria
Grem
Adventurer

"Hm? Who are
these young
women?"

"You can
call me Saria!
I'm Seichi's
wife!"

"I'm Altria Grem.
I'm, uh...Seichi's
girlfriend...I guess."

"My name is Lulune.
I serve Master as
his knight and
underling alike."

Saria
Kaiser Kong

Louise
Palse
Knight



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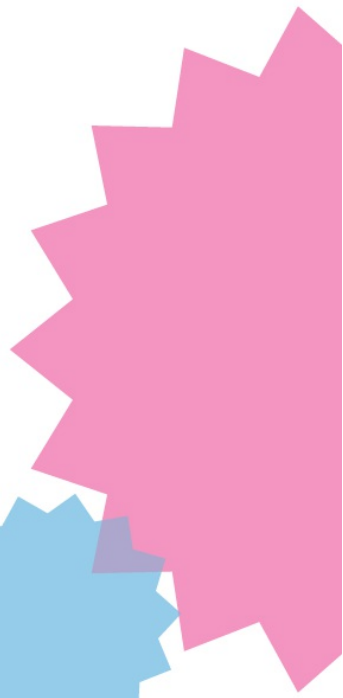
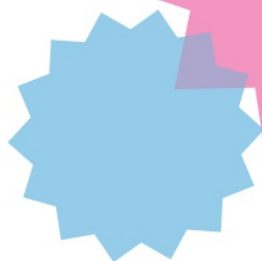
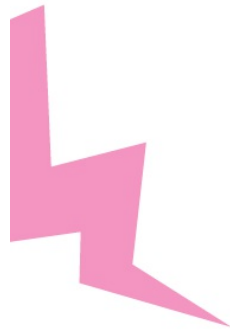


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THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 4

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅



Chapter 1: Kingblade Vs Hellsmoke

Some time prior, in the Kaizell Empire's capital of Walzard, a tense standoff was taking place within the mighty Zesal Castle. In its very depths, in the Emperor-King's own bedroom, Sheldt vol Kaizell and his robed aide Helio Lorban were glaring coldly at the empire's strongest knight, Zakiya Gilford. Before the former's frigid glares, Zakiya could only stare in horror.

"What is the meaning of this, Your Majesty?" he asked in a low voice. He could not keep his building rage out of his voice, but Sheldt didn't even notice.

"The meaning of what?" he replied coyly.

That was the last straw. "What did you do with the Heroes?!" Zakiya roared.

Sheldt only snorted at the knight. "Oh, you mean our slaves. We've shipped them all off to Barbadoll Magic Academy, where we're sure they're fighting monsters while we speak. Knowing those peace-poisoned numbskulls, We're sure a few of them may have perished already."

"Why would you do that?! It's far too early to send them into battle! As you said yourself, their former world was a peaceful one. Surely, they're not prepared to fight to the death!"

Helio sneered. "Ah, Zakiya, always with the excuses! You want to keep them cooped up where you think it's safe forever, don't you?!"

Zakiya turned from Sheldt to glare at the elderly man. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Of course there is! They're pawns of our glorious Empire, and you would waste their powers so easily?"

"You're despicable, Helio."

"We can't have fools like you in the palace. The Heroes are nothing more than tools of war, weapons of death and destruction to bring to bear on those foul

demonkin! What use are they to us weak? Why, His Gloriousness would dispose of them anyways!"

"What if they don't listen?" Zakiya asked, attempting to suppress his anger in favor of reason. "Make them stronger, and you'll be giving them more tools to betray you."

Helio cackled. "What, is that what you're worried about? We gave them all Armbands of Subordination as parting gifts before they left. If they try to harm the Empire, they'll be in too much pain to move—we could even kill them on a whim! They couldn't stand against us if they tried!"

"You what?!"

"They have that troubling Analysis Skill, of course, so it wasn't quite that simple. They'd never put on the Armbands if they knew what it was, after all. That's where I came in. You know what they used to call me, don't you?"

"No... you didn't!"

It was clear what Helio was referring to. The wicked old man grinned.

"They used to call me the Dreameater! I'm a master of magic and the sole wielder of Illusion Magic! Deceiving such a simple Skill was child's play."

The Heroes had no idea that the bands they put on could kill them, —and thanks to Helio, it was impossible for them to find out.

"You're pure evil," Zakiya seethed.

He was unable to say anything else, however—at that moment, an arrow flew in through the window, aimed at Sheldt. It was too sudden for the Emperor-King to react, let alone Helio. Only Zakiya was able to step in at the nick of time, utilizing his superhuman reflexes to smack the projectile out of the air with the flat of his blade. He whipped about to face the window, only to find a thin line of white smoke drifting in through the window.

"What was that?!" Sheldt finally exclaimed in shock.

"It was likely the work of an assassin," Zakiya replied flatly as he readied his blade again.

"A-Assassins?!" The king's eyes widened with fear as he dived behind Zakiya's back. "What are you waiting for?! Protect Us!"

Zakiya rolled his eyes, though he made sure Sheldt couldn't see it. He used Wind Magic to let his voice carry to his subordinates throughout the castle.

"This is an emergency. An unknown assailant has attempted to murder His Majesty. I was able to cut down the arrow, preventing him from coming to harm, but the assassin is still at large. I need extra guards in His Majesty's room and around the castle perimeter *now*."

As soon as he finished giving orders, Sheldt threw himself at Zakiya's back again. "What are you standing around for, you incompetent oaf?! Bring Us the assassin, now!"

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, I don't think it would be wise to leave your—"

"Silence! Silence! We command you! Whoever tried to kill Us must pay! We demand you bring him to us this instant! We want him *alive*! Now go, now!"

Zakiya hesitated for a moment before finally nodding. "As you will. Helio, His Majesty is in your care."

Helio only sneered. "Quit wasting time and go!"

The knight silently turned around, then bounded out of the window faster than the eye could follow. It was a fifth-floor window, making it a fall that any normal person would be hard-pressed to survive in one piece. Zakiya, however, had no issues landing and bolting in the direction the arrow had come from at breakneck speed. He took to bounding across rooftops to avoid pedestrians wherever possible.

Left alone in the palace, Helio turned to Sheldt with a grave expression.

"I never even dreamed someone would try to take your life, Your Majesty."

"What are those lazy asses of guards doing?!" Sheldt snorted. "Are all of Zakiya's men as worthless as he is?! Who would even try to..." He froze, his face shifting from indignation to horror. "This is a foul demonkin plot, isn't it?! Those hell-born bastards!"

Helio only shook his head. "Not so fast, Your Brilliance. We've no proof of that."

Sheldt raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Have you heard the rumors about Windberg?"

"What rumors?"

"Well, they say Windberg's king is a fan of those horrible demonkin, and I wouldn't put it past him to ally with them. I wouldn't put it past him to use his new 'friends' to try and remove you from your throne."

Sheldt turned red with rage. "That pathetic excuse of a king again? How dare he try to make allies with those worthless cattle! They're always the only country foolish enough to refuse our attempts to unify the land! Well, We refuse to give in to them. It's all *their* fault that infuriating girl of an empress in the Varcia Empire and the Eastlands continue to defy us!"

"You can't blame them, Your Benevolence," Helio cooed. "They're idiots, every last one of them. They don't understand the natural superiority of real, pureblooded humans. These days, even those flea-ridden beastkin think they're people."

"Exactly! How can they not realize that we humans are destined for greatness? Why, they're *worse* than cattle! Oh, how We dream of putting each and every one of them to death!"

"Unfortunately, Your Righteousness, that would be difficult. The Kingdom of Windberg is not only far removed from us, but both Mountain and Ocean are also shielding them. Not only that, but we mustn't also dismiss the threats posed by the Knight of the Sword and her Swordsaint Valkyries, let alone the Black Paladin. We would need a great deal of determination to break through them."

Sheldt seemed to calm himself somewhat at Helio's words. "We suppose their military is indeed threatening for such a puny country. They should consider themselves lucky to have such great men, what with the paltry resources their realm holds. In the end, of course, they could never hope to oppose Us. We shall put them to the torch as soon as we have purged the demonkin."

Helio sighed dramatically. "Oh, if only they would sit by and do nothing to interfere."

"They'll try to resist in their own feeble way, no doubt—but that is why We will slaughter the demonkin now before they can bolster their strength with Windberg's fools. In fact, when the time comes, why don't We crush Varcia as well? We would greatly enjoy watching their empress squirm."

"What of the Eastlands?" Helio prompted.

"Leave the easterners to their own devices. As much as We loathe their disobedience, they have no land worth taking. They're still embroiled in their petty civil wars, no less, so We are content to let those barbarians wipe themselves out. Fighting such warlike people would in no way be in Our favor, and they clearly have no designs for the rest of the world. Should they try to leave their islands, of course, We will murder them all. We have heard much of their women's beauty—that would make a decent enough prize." His lips curled into a poisonous smirk. "More importantly, We have already engineered a plan to cripple Windberg—and at no cost of our men, no less."

The sage raised a brow. "Meaning, Your Supremacy?"

"Oh, nothing much. We simply get the feeling their king will suffer the same fate We nearly did."

His eyes widened in shock. "You mean—"

Sheldt let out a deeply self-satisfied cackle before continuing.

"We have sent none other than the Twilight Assassin."

※ ※ ※

Zakiya pushed his every sense to its limit as he searched for the assassin. Of course, he already had a good idea of where the killer was headed—the source of the smoke he had seen from the window.

Thus, two things were going through his mind as he ran through the town.

The first was about Zakiya himself. He had begun to lose sight of his worth in the Emperor-King's service. He was useless at politics and at using his head.

That much was clear from all his years of service under even Sheldt's predecessor, Alph dia Kaizell. When Alph was king, it was easy to trust him and keep fighting as directed, a trust founded in the belief that Alph's ideals aligned with his own.

Under Sheldt, however, Zakiya was filled with doubt. He couldn't understand Emperor-King's designs at all. Kaizell had more than enough to support its people comfortably, but they were always attempting to conquer other nations. Sheldt even attempted to wipe out the demonkin, all the while claiming it was for the good of the people.

Alph, on the other hand, never dreamed of expanding his borders. He was a sworn peacemaker who never once attacked his neighbors, though he was merciless should they try to invade Kaizell. He even willingly risked his own men to protect his foreign allies.

Would Sheldt ever do that? Zakiya wondered as he leaped from rooftop to rooftop.

He was the Knight Commander, sure, and he had sworn to serve the Empire, not any given Emperor-King—and yet he believed his strength should be for the people. No matter how hard he thought, he always arrived at that conclusion, but he could never choose that path for himself. Sensing that he was starting to get lost in his head, he put that matter aside, even though he knew he would eventually have to decide one way or the other.

He bit his lip and turned his attention to the other problem—the assassin's identity. Whoever it was, they clearly were strong enough to not be dissuaded by Zakiya's presence. Of those few killers, however, only a few were talented enough snipers to make such a shot. They were strong enough that he'd heard of them despite not having anything to do with the criminal underworld itself. One of the biggest reasons was that most assassins preferred to be in the same room as their prey, making the snipers much more unusual.

With the sight of the white smoke, though, the culprit was all but assured. The assassin was none other than the Hellsmoke himself.

Not only was the assassin as hard to get ahold of as his name suggested, but his calling card was also a thin line of white smoke that would rise from

somewhere in the same town as his mark. Zakiya believed that there was some deeper meaning to the smoke, however, especially since it had maintained a steady stream into the sky since he first spotted it.

"Could it be a trap?" he wondered aloud.

There was too little smoke for the average passerby to spot it, after all. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword as he made for the source. That was the issue—the Hellsmoke was virtually impossible to track normally. But he had clearly marked his location to Zakiya.

If this isn't a trap, he must've made a mistake.

The latter was unthinkable, and Zakiya readily discarded the possibility. Everyone makes mistakes, but for an assassin to mess up so badly would ensure not only their death but their client's. Even the slightest misstep could spell disaster. He couldn't possibly forget something as simple as the smoke.

But who is this for? Is he trying to bait me out?

He thought of several possible explanations, but none stood out as he finally arrived at the source. It seemed to be the roof of a building that towered over the houses clustered about it. It belonged to a wealthy merchant, no doubt.

It doesn't matter if this is a trap. I'll cut through it all the same.

He wasn't great at thinking but was confident enough in his strength that it didn't matter. With a powerful bound, he rocketed to the rooftop.

Standing in the middle of the roof was a man with a cigar in his mouth.

"Finally," he sighed in a gravelly voice as soon as he spotted Zakiya. "Took you long enough."

I knew it. He was waiting for me.

He studied his opponent carefully. The man was wearing a ragged, dirty black robe with an average-looking hemp shirt and trousers underneath. His only unusual clothing was a wine-red gauntlet he wore on his right hand. His greasy, dark green hair was slicked back, and he had the golden eyes of a predator. His face was dotted with stubble, not to mention dirt. Despite his poor appearance, however, he exuded danger in such a way it was hard to look straight at him.

"Are you Hellsmoke?" Zakiya asked, careful to keep his distance from the stranger.

The dirty man grinned, the cigar still clamped in his teeth. "That's a helluva way to ask. Here I thought you'd be at my throat for shootin' your king, but look at you! Cool as a cucumber."

"Enough. Just answer me."

Despite Zakiya's glare, he seemed unfazed.

"Damn, you're givin' me chills! No need to glare like that. Yeah, I'm the great an' powerful Hellsmoke. Happy?"

Something about Hellsmoke's tone rubbed Zakiya the wrong way, but he wasn't about to be provoked so easily.

"Why didn't you extinguish your smoke? If you had, I never would've found you."

"You tellin' me to quit smokin'? That's just cruel, man. Lemme be me."

Zakiya narrowed his eyes. "Stop fooling around and answer me."

In an instant, Hellsmoke's expression grew sharp as a knife. "Simple as anythin'. I want you outta my way, Kingblade."

"You what?"

"You're the strongest knight 'round here, I gotta admit," the assassin continued. "That puts you right in my way. How am I supposed to kill that assbat with you cock-blockin' me?"

Hellsmoke's every word dripped with poison. Zakiya had experienced his share of battle, but even he hesitated to look the assassin in the eye now. Hellsmoke, however, didn't even seem to notice.

"You know, right? The country's gone to shit, but you don't even know, do ya? You never leave that fat cat's side. You ever taken a good look at the people of this place? People're starvin' in the streets. Nobody's safe anymore, an' you wouldn't believe the kind of racism that goes on."

Zakiya didn't answer.

"Don't take my word for it, though—take a look. I got just one thing I gotta make clear first. I'm not tryin' to kill ol' Emperor-King Dingusbreath for money or anythin'. No, I'm doin' it 'cause I hate his guts."

"You tried to kill His Majesty for such a paltry reason?"

"Paltry? Like hell. Sure, maybe it ain't shit to you, but it's the damn world to me. Think of it as revenge for my buds."

"Revenge? How so?"

He hadn't been expecting such a response.

"I knew it. You think I'm lame, huh?" Hellsmoke smiled thinly as if in pain. "Folks've done worse for less, y'know."

Again, Zakiya didn't reply.

"But you listen here. I can't even tell ya just how many are dyin' in this country."

"What...?!"

It was an unexpectedly disheartening blow, but Hellsmoke just puffed on his cigar and looked out over the rooftops.

"We were good buds, y'know. She wasn't filth like me, either. She ran a little flower shop, and they'd always water those plants with a smile. Hell, I can barely remember 'em not smiling."

"..."

"That's before that ass on the throne murdered 'er, 'course."

"..."

"First, it was all those taxes, and then one dumbass war after another. Hell, people couldn't afford to eat anymore. The men were shipped off to die, an' the women were left to scrape by on nothin'."

"..."

"But that ain't the worst of it." Hellsmoke paused before continuing in a cold voice. "My bud was a demonkin. That's all it took to get 'er killed."

"What?!"

He shot a sidelong glance at Zakiya before continuing. "She didn't do nothin' wrong. We were just chattin' in the flower shop when a buncha Imperial soldiers kicked down the door an' stabbed 'er."

"..."

"I was barely an assassin worth anythin' back then. I was fuckin' *pathetic*. I could only watch my bud die in front of me."

"..."

"She was beggin' me to run the whole time. Even as she lay there dyin', she *smiled* an' said she was fine! She... She said it was *fine*!" He let out an irritated sigh, a new edge appearing in his voice. "The fuck's wrong with being a demonkin?! What'd she ever do to anyone?! All she ever did was water flowers an' smile!"

"..."

"But that ain't even the worst of it. Y'know what the pig that stabbed her said? 'A demonkin has no business running a flower shop. What's a cow like that gonna do? At least I had fun gutting her!' Then that fucker *laughed*."

"..."

"What's so wrong with bein' a demonkin? For that matter, what's so good 'bout killin' people? Call it protectin' the country or whatever; it's nothin' more than glorified murder. An' just compare that to raisin' plants. That's *givin'* life, not takin' it. There's nothin' cooler than that."

"..."

"That's why I'll never forgive the cowards who killed 'er, or the country they served. I'll crush 'em all to dust, along with the lame-ass ideas it's all built on. That's the whole reason I got as strong as I am. That's..." He stopped, then turned to glare at Zakiya again. "You're strong. Hella strong. I can't take on no army, either. That's why I wanted to get you outta the way first, but don't get me wrong, you're just a boulder in the road. If I can't snipe past ya, I've gotta

deal with you somehow—unless, 'course, you're decent enough to turn the other way."

There wasn't so much as a hint of hesitation in Hellsmoke's voice. After a long moment, Zakiya finally opened his mouth.

"No matter what your reasons are, I can't overlook any threat to the Empire."

"So that's it, huh? That's a damn shame. Here I thought you were a person, not a puppet dancin' on someone else's strings."

All at once, the blood rushed to Zakiya's head. He drew his sword, letting the five gems embedded in the sword's hilt shine with their unnatural light.

"I am *not* a puppet," he asserted.

"Damn, that's scary! So is that the famous Gemblade Fiftia I've heard so much about?"

"It is. Surrender now—a sniper like you has no means of beating me head-on."

Hellsmoke shrugged flippantly. "Yeah, you got me there. Think of it this way, though—you really think I'd call ya way out here for you to hand me my ass just like that?"

"What are you—"

Zakiya was unable to finish his sentence. A chill ran down his spine, and all his instincts screamed at him to duck. A split-second after he did so, something ran through the air with horrifying speed right where his neck had been.

"Seriously, you *dodged* that? Man, you don't play fair!"

Zakiya barely registered Hellsmoke's surprise, however. The assassin hadn't moved a muscle. But that shot could have easily taken Zakiya's life, and he had no idea how that was possible.

Is there another sniper in waiting? But no, I don't sense anyone else nearby.

Hellsmoke cackled. "You should see the look on your face! You got no idea what just happened, huh?"

"..."

"Sorry, but I ain't the type to spill my secrets before I kill. You better get ready for the next one!"

At that moment, another chill ran down Zakiya's spine. He twisted out of the way as something razor-sharp flitted past his face, leaving a stinging cut across his cheek.

"You're a *beast*, Kingblade! I thought that'd end ya for sure. This next one will be the end of you, though."

Hellsmoke snapped his fingers on his right hand, and Zakiya was instantly struck speechless. Hundreds—no, thousands of arrows appeared in the air around him, each of them poised to strike a fatal wound.

"Consider this your partin' gift," the assassin said with a sneer. "See you in hell!"

With that, every arrow launched itself at Zakiya at once.

"Gah!"

Any lesser man would've been turned into swiss cheese, but Zakiya was different. He raised Gemblade Fiftia above his head before bringing it down with a mighty slash.

"Heavencrusher!"

The sheer energy encompassed in the knight's blade unleashed a powerful storm around him. The arrows were easily enveloped in the vortex and shattered into nothingness.

"Sh-Shit," Hellsmoke swore, his forehead glistening with sweat. "I knew you were a monster, but this is inhuman, man!"

Zakiya wordlessly relaxed his guard as he sized up his opponent. Finally, he raised an eyebrow.

"It that all you've got?"

Finally, Hellsmoke seemed to realize his overwhelming disadvantage. Even if he tried to run, Zakiya would chase him down easily enough.

"Whelp, that's that," the assassin sighed.

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm done. You win. I gotta admit, I underestimated you."

"You'll come with me peacefully, then?"

Hellsmoke cackled. "You're kiddin', right? I never said I wasn't gonna run away."

"What?!"

Zakiya could only watch as the smoke quickly spread to envelop the assassin.

"Later, Kingblade! Next time we meet, I wanna see the real you—not some puppet, and not the Kingblade, either. I wanna fight *you*! Here's hopin'!"

"Wait!" Zakiya cried, but it was too late. He rushed forward into the smoke, only to find nothing there. He had nearly caught his mark, but the sting of failure was nothing compared to the assassin's parting words.

"A puppet," he muttered through gritted teeth, unable to do anything but clench his fists in futility.

※ ※ ※

After his encounter with Hellsmoke, Zakiya Gilford strode through Zesal Castle with a grim look on his face.

"..."

Opposite him in the hallway was a band of men in opulent armor. His brow furrowed. The head of their group was a man with dirty blonde hair and blood-red eyes. He was looking about disdainfully, as always, making his foul temperament even more apparent. As soon as he laid eyes on Zakiya, he sneered mockingly.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't our own pride and joy, Zakiya-kun! How goes it in the limelight, my friend?"

Zakiya didn't reply, instead trying to stride right past the knight, but his followers quickly barred the way.

"You're so cold!" the man chided. "And here I thought we were friends."

Zakiya sighed. "What?"

The man—Aureus Fencer—was the leader of the Empire's First Regiment. He was also the first to kick Zakiya whenever he was down.

"Oh, it's nothing much," Aureus drawled with feigned disinterest. "But I did hear a rather interesting rumor. Hellsmoke tried to kill His Majesty, didn't he?"

"..."

"Where is that assassin, by the way? You didn't actually let that filth escape, did you? My, how the once-great Kingsblade has fallen!"

Aureus' cronies smirked. Zakiya tried once again to push past them, but the captain draped his arm over Zakiya's shoulders before he could escape.

"That's what your hubris gets you," Aureus hissed in his ear. "Your entire Second Regiment is a pitiful band of peasants, barely fit for weakening the enemy before we *real* soldiers take the field. You're nothing but a pawn."

Zakiya said nothing, his face remaining mask-like.

"But I'm sick of having to wipe your sorry ass all the time. Just try not to piss His Majesty off too much. What would we do without our strongest knight? I'd hate to have my boys pick up all the slack!"

When he realized his words weren't getting through to Zakiya, however, Aureus scoffed and roughly shoved him away.

"Stuck-up ass! C'mon, men, we've got better things to do."

"Yessir!"

With that, Aureus and his men beat a hasty retreat.

As soon as Zakiya was alone, he let out the breath he was holding and slumped against the wall.

"What am I supposed to protect, anyway?" he muttered weakly.

There was no reply except for the echoing of Hellsmoke's words in his head.

"Maybe he was right. Taking pleasure in slaughter is absolute madness. Nurturing a new life is far more difficult."

All he could do was fight, but in doing so, he'd saved countless lives. He had assumed that he could only save some lives by taking others and had no other choice. He was beginning to doubt his very purpose in life now.

"A pawn, eh?"

Aureus was right—he was nothing more than a mindless tool, and the very thought consumed him.

※ ※ ※

I, Shouta Takamiya, had been spending my days at the Barbodel Magic Academy, honing my skills for the day we'd be sent to kill the Demon King. A few of the students had gone behind Zakiya-san and the rest of our backs to break a deal with that old-robed man—Helio, or something like that—to get us enrolled here. We'd been not only furthering our magic studies, but also getting more sword training. I didn't really care either way, but tons of my classmates were thrilled about the change and were having the time of their lives. Zakiya-san's endless drills must've really been eating at their nerves.

At the moment, though, I was chatting with my long-time friends Kenji Araki and Karen Kannazuki-senpai about our futures at the school.

"Do you think we can keep going like this?" I asked Kannazuki-senpai.

Just one glance at her expression made her opinion clear. She clearly didn't think so.

"At this rate, we'll be utterly isolated," she declared.

The other students at the Academy seemed to be pushing us away more and more, no doubt, because of how quickly we heroes were picking up strength.

Kannazuki-senpai sighed. "Honestly, whose brilliant idea was this in the first place?"

"I think we all know who," Kenji scoffed. "It's gotta be that Aoyama guy—y'know, the prick in Seiichi's class."

She nodded thoughtfully. "They no doubt played a part in it, but there's another who deserves the brunt of the blame. It has to be—"

"Oh?" came a man's voice from behind us. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

I turned to find a group of three men watching us.

"Masaya Kisaragi," Kannazuki-senpai spat. Just that was enough to show me that she was really to blame.

Those three are the reason we're here.

"There's no need to glare at me," Masaya said flatly. "You could really stand to smile more. Nobody likes to see a woman so upset."

He was a twelfth-grader like Kannazuki-senpai, as well as the leader of a world-famous idol group. He had silky brown hair and a baby face, making him popular with girls all over the place. And his athleticism had made him the former soccer team captain back on Earth. He'd famously quit soccer and made Aoyama captain instead because he thought it wasted too much time to bother.

"So? What are we talking about?" he smiled amicably. "You don't mind if I join in, do you?"

"We do," Kannazuki-senpai return bluntly.

"Damn, that's harsh!" crowed one of Masaya's companions, Tsuyoshi Ooyama. "Gotta say, though, I love teaching you independent types some manners!"

Tsuyoshi had a perpetual shit-eating grin, and he dyed his hair red in a low mohawk. He had tanned skin and liked showing off his lean muscles, proof that he was once in the same boxing club as Kenji before he blew it off. He was a Masaya's idol group member, and his wild charms somehow made him popular with the ladies.

Behind them, a man who looked like a male prostitute tut-tutted. "Don't go scaring the little kitten, Tsuyoshi. Look, she's terrified of you."

His name was Rento Tougou, and he was probably the only person who rivalled Kannazuki-senpai's acid tongue. He had long blonde hair that had clearly been permed half to death. He certainly looked as handsome as the

other two. But I'd heard no end of unsavory rumors about how he was with women—though, to be fair, the other two were infamous in that regard, too.

Masaya didn't seem to even notice Kannazuki-senpai's ice-cold glare. "You can relax around us, you know. It was just an innocent question. Besides, you wouldn't want to turn us away and risk another *incident*, would you?"

Nojima and her delinquent friends were the subjects of the girls' bad rumors more often than not. But these guys were the most troublesome around, no questions asked—and that included Seiichi's classmate, Aoyama, too. Nojima hadn't caused any problems since coming to this world, though, and I had every reason to believe she and her friends were genuinely good people. Kisaragi-senpai's threat, though, was enough to make even Kannazuki-senpai have second thoughts for a moment before glaring at them again.

"I'll be blunt, then. We were talking about the reason we've been so isolated here."

"Oh, is *that* all?" Kisaragi-senpai rolled his eyes. "It's because of us, obviously. You're talking like that's a bad thing. That old guy... Helio, right? He said we had to do one thing aside from putting on those bracelets, so we're just following orders."

"Orders?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? We need to find our true strength as Heroes."

"Yes, he did, but..."

I remember that, too.

Unlike putting on the armbands, though, it wasn't as important—not that I understood the first thing about the armbands.

"Did you know that people in this world—not just the other students here—can only use like two elements of magic, tops? But we've all got *four*. That's just proof we're better than the others. We can do anything they assign us in class without breaking a sweat."

Rento nodded. "Exactly. You've done combat drills with them, too, so you should know how pathetic they are. They're way *too* easy, in fact. The Demon King's bound to be a pushover."

"Really makes you believe what Helio-san said about those beastkin and other demihumans, huh?" Tsuyoshi cackled. "They're inferior to us humans—and those demonkin trash can only cower in the Demon King's shadow. They're even worse!"

"You're still going way too far!" Kenji protested.

To be honest, I'd noticed our classmates started to look down on the inhabitants of this world more, too. The crazy strength we had only cemented us as 'superior' to everyone else. I hadn't witnessed Kisaragi-senpai or his cronies do anything bad personally. But I'd had to step in and stop Aoyama and his friends from pounding weaker students time and time again. Apparently, a few people even started following some of the weaker girl students. But luckily, nothing bad had come of that yet.

Kisaragi-senpai and the others only seemed irritated by Kenji's protests, though.

"We're *heroes*, Kenji," Kisaragi-senpai asserted. "We're always right by definition. We're fighting to make the whole world safe."

Rento-senpai shook his head. "Don't get too cocky, Kenji, or we might have to punish you."

Tsuyoshi chuckled. "You think you're some saint, huh? That's so lame!"

"What did you say to me?!" Kenji looked ready to start punching.

"Enough," Kannazuki-senpai interjected coolly, putting herself between them and us. "Kenji, Shouta, we're leaving."

"But they—s"

"I said enough."

That was enough to cool Kenji's head, and he backed down willingly. As we turned to leave, though, I could still hear Kisaragi-senpai continue to mock us.

"It's survival of the fittest, isn't it? Even back on Earth, the strong have always preyed on and exploited the weak. It's practically our right to have our way with weaklings, right? How stupid do you have to be to not get that?"

Kannazuki-senpai pointedly ignored them as she led us away into the dormitories.

Chapter 2: The Karasti Art Show

After I, Seiichi Hiiragi, had successfully saved Landze-san's life, I'd had a busy month of helping Louise and the others with their Skill training.

I'd also done plenty of shopping and the like with Saria and Al in that time, and we took on the odd gathering and Slime-hunting quests to pass the time. I hadn't told either of them about what happened in the palace—I'd promised not to, after all. All I said was that I was giving them a hand with their Skills and Magic. Al had seemed pretty wary of the idea, and Saria seemed conflicted, but I still had no clue why.

Lulune, on the other hand, was perfectly content to wander from food stall to food stall, enjoying all the foodie pleasures of her human form. I had enough money that I wasn't concerned about our budget, but she easily had twice the appetite I did. I wasn't a light eater by any means, but I tried to pace myself as best I could... emphasis on the 'tried.' I was the Unbounded One, after all.

Long story short, we'd had a good month, but today's work was a little special. To be specific, it was the start of the long-awaited Karasti Art Show, and I had to see how Clay and May were holding up. Saria, Al, and Lulune were also interested in the show, so we ended up going as a foursome.

"Art, huh," Al muttered, arms crossed. "Can't say I know the first thing 'bout that."

"I don't really get art, either" Saria chimed in. "Do you know a lot about art, Seiichi?"

"No, not really. I bet Lulune doesn't know much about it, either."

She shot me a confused look. "Of course, I know about art, Master."

"You what?!"

How can a donkey know more about fine art than me? How?!

"By art, you, of course, mean gourmet food, don't you?"

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank god you're clueless, too."

We continued to exchange small talk as we made for the site of the show, the same square I'd first met May in. Today, however, all the countless small art stalls were gone, replaced by a single giant stage and an equally-large crowd gathered in front of it.

"Whoa... There's gotta be a ton of artists mixed in this crowd."

"Hey, Seiichi," Al prodded me. "How're you gonna find May in all this?"

"Uh. Good point."

We exchanged troubled looks.

This sure is a massive crowd... I wonder if that's the only reason there are so many weirdos out and about?

Just at a glance, I could spot a number of clowns and other street performers, but there was no way they had enough space to run their acts in this crowd. I also spotted some people wearing the oddest clothes I'd ever seen, as well as people carrying around off-beat carvings. It was like an actual freak show.

"I guess that's artists for you," I muttered. "They're all real attention whores."

As I watched the crowd bustle with just as much fervor as they had for the Capital Derby, a voice similar to the Derby's announcer rang out.

"Thank you all for waiting!" came a young man's voice. "The Karasti Art Show is about to begin!"

"YEEAAAAAAHHH!!" the crowd roared in reply.

"Wow!" Saria shouted over the din. "Everyone's so excited!"

"Yeah! I never thought it'd be this hype!" I echoed.

Even Al and Lulune seemed baffled by the enthusiasm of the crowd.

"Allow me to introduce this year's judge!" the announcer continued. "He's a visionary and genius of the art world who has pioneered many new styles. It's Leon Berger-sama!"

A ripple of surprise ran through the crowd.

"You're kidding! Saint Paint himself?!"

"His abstract stuff is seriously bleeding-edge, but he's also the guy who revolutionized perspective and shading techniques, right?"

"I heard his work advanced the art world by a hundred years."

The more I heard, the more impressed I got. Sure, shading and perspective were common on Earth, but he'd probably invented them in this world. He had to be hot stuff.

But where have I heard the name Berger before?

Before I could put my finger on it, though, the same kind of mana projection they'd used for the Capital Derby appeared in the air, showing an old man with an amicable smile. He was likely Leon, and though he was getting on in years, I could tell he was pretty handsome in his youth.

"I look forward to seeing what you bright young talents have created," he said with a gentle smile.

"YEEEEEEAAAAHHHH!!!"

The crowd was somehow even more excited now.

I guess that's just how big he is in the art world.

"Thank you for your opening remarks," the announcer continued. "Without further ado, let's get right into judging. Could entrant #1 please take the stage?"

With that, the art show was formally underway. Unfortunately, there were way too many people for us to get near the stage and get a proper look at the art, so we had to make do with the projection. That wasn't exactly surprising, given the crowd, but it was a bit of a bummer.

We watched as painting after painting appeared on the projection. Some were startlingly lifelike, others were just as confusing as Clay's art, and there was, of course, everything imaginable between the extremes. Leon-san tenderly went over everyone, laying out the strengths and shortcomings of each piece. The way he always emphasized the good parts left every entrant deeply moved by his words.

"And now," continued the announcer, "we're down to our last two entrants! Could our second-last artist please take the stage?"

With that, Clay strode proudly onstage.

Oh, right! That's where I heard that name before! Berger is Clay's last name!

The crowd around me seemed equally surprised.

"That's Saint Paint's grandson."

"No wonder he looks so cocky."

"I wonder what kind of painting he's got?"

All eyes were on the stage. I didn't get his work in general. But I figured something about it was probably different from the other entrants. As the projection changed back to the stage and Clay's covered creation, one thing about it was readily apparent—it was nearly twisting his height.

"Wh-Whoa," Al blinked in disbelief. "None of the others were that huge, right?"

I wasn't that surprised, though. It seemed about fitting, given his equally huge ego.

The announcer cleared his throat. "Well then, Clay Berger-san, what's the name of your piece?"

Clay theatrically threw back the tarp, revealing his painting. "Behold, my latest creation—I call it 'Art'!"

Right in the middle of the giant white canvas was a single, solid red sun.

I gasped. "Wait, Clay painted something I can *understand*?!"

Up on stage, he narrowed his eyes and muttered. "Why do I get the feeling I'm being mocked?"

That did little to add to my shock, though. I was expecting something more like his drawing of a triangle with that long and nonsensical name. His painting was clearly a sun, though.

Al nodded in approval. "Damn, Seiichi, your friend's got skills."

"Yeah!" Saria enthused. "It's a big, pretty sun!"

Lulune squinted up at it. "All I can see is a big, juicy apple."

Uh... I think you're alone in that.

It reminded me of the Japanese flag, oddly enough—a large, white area with a single red dot. I was probably the only person who saw it like that, though.

"Please introduce your piece," the announcer said.

"Very well. I've packed all my feelings about art into this single piece! My passion for painting burns stronger than anything, like the flickering blaze of a matchstick!"

Only a match?! And wait, does that mean he painted a match, not the sun?! He's even got the solar flares in there!

"Unlike my other works," he continued, "I've abstained from including so much as a single unnecessary element. The canvas itself is my body, and the flame in the center is my passion. That's all that matters!"

"Oh." There was a hint of disappointment in the announcer's voice. "It looks like the sun to me."

"Of course not! It's a match, obviously!"

"Er... Okay."

I guess I should've expected this from him.

He was nothing if not consistent, which was oddly comforting.

With that, though, Leon-san got right into the judging. He studied the canvas for a long moment before finally opening his mouth.

"It looks like a match to me, too."

You, too?!

He'd been giving very reasonable remarks until now, and I wasn't expecting their shared blood to rear its head now. In the ensuing silence, I could hear the crowd murmuring around me.

"That's a good one."

"Yeah... It really makes you think."

"You can really see Saint Paint in his work."

"I never would've thought that was a match."

What're you all getting so conflicted about? Don't tell me I'm the crazy one here! Damn, artists are something else.

As I shivered, Leon-san's soft voice continued over the mana speakers.

"You always had a talent for unabashed honesty in your art, Clay. They might have been difficult for your peers to understand, but each and every one of them is full of your feelings. I'm especially impressed with your insistence that this is a match, not the sun as it appears to be. It's because that flame of passion could be snuffed out at any moment, isn't it?"

Clay nodded. "I knew you'd understand. My life isn't as large as the sun, either—but my passion burns strongly enough to put the real thing to shame. This is my art."

Damn, that's deep... How did those two get deep?! Though I guess Clay deserved the credit as the artist.

After hearing Leon-san's explanation, I thought I understood what Clay was trying to convey.

I guess that's something a normal guy like me could never understand. Does that mean his painting of a triangle really was a portrait of a girl at twilight dreaming of a youth watching the sunset? I think I'm even more lost than before.

Leon-san chuckled. "I believe I understand your convictions now, Clay. My recommendation is that you hone your skills further so that your message may reach even more people. Consider that your homework."

"Of course, grandfather!"

With that, Clay's turn onstage was over.

There's only one person who could be left, then.

"It's time for the final contestant!" the commentator announced. "May Cherry-san, please take the stage!"

It's finally May's turn.

With that, she walked onstage. She was clearly scared out of her wits—she was walking like a robot, too nervous to remember how to walk normally. A couple of stagehands followed her to the stage, carrying a covered canvas the same massive size as Clay's.

"She okay?" Al poked me worriedly. "She looks ready to wet herself."

"Well, uh... There's not much we can do about it."

It was too late for me to do anything. This was her moment, and she had to see it through. All I could do was watch and hope she'd do okay.

"Please introduce your piece, May-san," came the announcer's voice.

She went stiff as a board, her dog tail sticking straight out behind her. "O-O-Okay!"

Man, I can't watch.

Fortunately, after a few deep breaths, she seemed a bit more calm.

"Th-This is my art!" she announced, yanking off the tarp.

The sight of the painting below stole my breath away.

"What?!"

The painting looked a lot like Jean-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. But with a few serious changes—namely, Lulune replaced the horse, and Napoleon himself was replaced by me.

Chapter 3: Hero

No doubt about it, the painting was of me riding Lulune in Napoleon's famous pose.

What in the world?

Worse yet, she'd painted me *without my hood*, of all things, putting my black hair and eyes on display. Given the utter lack of people who looked like that in the Capital and Lulune's extreme likeness, I couldn't imagine it as anyone else.

I didn't take my hood off by accident during the race, did I? Am I really that much of a dumbass?

Thinking back on it, though, it was all I could do to hold on and keep from getting bucked clean off Lulune's back. My hood didn't even occur to me, and I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it if it had.

All my hard work in keeping my identity secret down the drain just like that...

Black hair and the like were honestly fine, though. That wasn't the real issue. The true problem came all around me in the chorus of mutters from the crowd.

"Damn, he's a real hero."

"He's like one of those fairy-tale princes!"

"H-Hey, man, no need to blush like that."

"He's real hot stuff!"

The issue was that May had painted me as being god-level handsome. I was genuinely starting to get shivers from the crowd's reaction. Even I had to admit he was drawn with a king of coolness that no living human could actually have.

Wait... that is me, right? What the hell happened?! Sure, I got thinner, but that's insane! Why'd she have to draw me as being so stupidly hot?! She must've used a different model after all!

The more I thought, the more I was convinced it couldn't be me after all. There was no way she'd chose me, of all people, as a model. The donkey, the totally-fictional Japanese-looking guy, was riding had to resemble Lulune as a pure coincidence.

Why would a guy that cool ride a donkey, though? That's crazy talk.

"Please introduce your work to us, May-san," the announcer encouraged her.

"Well, um... I drew this portrait of the man who gave me the courage to enter the Karasti Art Show in the first place. He was the same amazing guy who entered last month's Capital Derby on a donkey and left with first prize. I still can't get the sight of his amazing victory out of my head."

Dammit, it IS me!

I fell weakly to my knees.

That cinches it; she has to be talking about me! I'm the only person who could fit the bill! Nobody who's actually that handsome would be caught dead on a donkey! But come to think of it, they say that the real Napoleon rode a donkey into battle, so wouldn't I actually fit the hero bill here? No, forget that. I just can't do this.

Unfortunately, May wasn't done yet.

"And what do you call this painting, May-san?"

"U-Um, I call it Hero!"

Oh, god, I'm actually going to die of shame now. Why'd she name it that, of all things?! Man, I'm feeling so guilty that I'm not even a real hero! Sorry, I'm a failure, everybody!

I pulled my hood low over my face to hide my tears.

"You look so cool, Seiichi!" came Saria's cheerful voice.

"Yeah," Al agreed. "You look, uh... Real good."

Go get glasses, why don't you?! You've seen what I really look like. You should know that painting's basically propaganda!

"You look as wonderful as I'd expect, Master!" came Lulune's prideful voice. "Anyone would fall in love with such a magnificent hero!"

"H-How's that a comment?!" I bashfully snapped back.

She's only making this more humiliating... What kind of embarrassment play is this?

All that aside, though, it was an admittedly great painting. Nobody knew about Napoleon in this world, so choosing that heroic pose had to have been a genuine stroke of brilliance. It was only marred in my eyes by the piles of crushed wolves around Lulune's hooves, but that was probably a personal qualm.

Even Leon-san seemed impressed as he looked at the painting over.

"Spectacular," he muttered.

Please, just end this already.

Leon-san wasn't finished, though. "The composition, the poses, the landscape—I've no words for it but perfect. It's clear that you're overflowing with talent."

May blushed. "Oh, I-I wouldn't say—"

"However, I must say that some of your color choices detract from the composition as a whole and draw the eye in an unfortunate way. That, however, you will no doubt master with practice. I hope you continue crafting such masterpieces in the future, Mei-san."

"U-Um, of course!" She was smiling ear to ear.

The announcer cleared his throat. "With that, the judging process is now over. Please allow Leon-sama enough time to decide which work will receive first place. Results will be announced half an hour from now."

With that, the crowd began to thin as everyone started to relax. Clay and May had done all they could. Now, we only had to wait.

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In the end, May received first place, while Clay was the runner-up. May ended up crying with happiness, and even Clay seemed content, losing to her art.

I guess Clay's not a bad guy after all. I'm glad his beauty isn't just skin-deep.

After the awards had been given out, I met up with the two of them by the stage while Saria and the others returned to the inn. I skirted around the crowds, and fortunately, they also seemed to be looking for me.

"Well, if it isn't Seiichi!" Clay exclaimed.

"Seiichi-san!" May waved at me.

"You were both great up there. Your paintings were super good."

May blushed a little at my compliment, and Clay puffed out his chest with pride.

"Of course, it was good!" he boasted. "It was *my* art."

"Confident as always, huh? I thought you'd be more torn up about getting runner-up."

Clay's expression turned a tad more grave. "Oh, I'm naturally upset, but May's piece truly deserved first place. I'm content with ranking immediately behind her."

"Huh." I nodded thoughtfully. "I guess if you're fine with it, that's enough. The only thing I really learned from this whole show was that I'm not an artist at all. I just don't get it."

It might as well be Greek.

Sure, I could tell the paintings were pretty. And I could get the emotions the artist was trying to convey most of the time, but I felt like an outsider looking in on a whole new world of complexity.

Clay shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Seiichi."

"Wrong? How?"

"Be it art or music, there are many things that one doesn't need to survive. It's only natural to be confused by those who chase such uncertainties."

"Uh... Okay."

"But nothing we create has even the slightest meaning without people like you to take it in. Art cannot exist without patrons to enjoy it; as such, even the most brilliant of works is worthless if it is not understood."

"Okay..."

"My painting was, in that sense, worthless. I never realized it before Grandfather's words. I had taken up the brush in the first place to be praised by him, but frankly, nobody else had appreciated my work. I only sold paintings because I shared my grandfather's blood, nothing more. My artwork was worthless on its own merit."

He seemed almost lonely, but brightened up a tad as he continued.

"But that's exactly why I won't stop honing my craft, and I'll continue to take pride in my work. My art's first patron is and always will be me. If I lose my connection with my art, nobody could ever see its worth."

"Damn, Clay..."

I was genuinely impressed by his fierce dedication. He was stronger than I thought, and he definitely had a talent for the arts.

May, evidently coming to the same conclusion, nodded. "You're amazing, Clay-san."

"I suppose I am." He cleared his throat and straightened his posture before continuing in a much prouder voice. "It's high time I take my leave, then! Now that I know how to improve my work, I must immediately put brush to canvas! To you, dear friends, I bid farewell!"

With that, he strode into the crowd and out of sight.

He never runs out of energy, does he?

Now that we were alone, May turned back to face me.

"So, um... Seiichi-san? Thank you so much for all your help!"

"No, I didn't do anything, honest."

"That's not true! It's thanks to you that I had the courage to enter the Art Show in the first place—not to mention that you inspired me to finish my

work."

I thought back to her painting, my spirits sinking again. "Great. I'm glad I could help. Seriously, though, I'm glad it turned out okay. Seeing you quiver like that onstage was nerve-wracking."

"Oh... u-um... This is embarrassing..." She dropped her gaze, her dog ears falling flat against her head, just like a puppy might. Finally, though, she raised her head and smiled just like Clay had. "Seiichi-san, I've decided to go to the City of Art, Amuria, to sturdy painting more."

"Amuria?" I repeated dumbly.

"Yes! It's a bustling city full of amazing artists like Leon-sama. He actually invited me to go there and hone my skills."

"Wow, that's great!"

I guess she was basically scouted. Clay did mention that the Karasti Art Show's one of the biggest shows around, though, so I'm not too surprised.

"That does mean I'll be saying goodbye to Terbelle soon," she continued with a note of sadness.

"Yeah, I guess... Goodbyes are always sad."

She nodded, then hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth again. "I really can't thank you enough, Seiichi-san. If you hadn't bought my painting back then and gone out of your way to give me courage, I never would've done any of this. I, um..."

"What're you saying? It was all your own skills. I bought your painting because it was good, the same as how you won the competition. It'd be okay to feel proud of yourself."

May's expression brightened. "In that case, after I finish my studies and come back from Amuria, I want my first painting to be of you."

"Wait, me?"

This isn't the setup for some lame joke, is it?

"I insist! I want to paint you again!"

"I can't say I get why you'd want to do that, but, uh, thanks. I'll look forward to it."

"Please do!"

With that, she beamed at me and bid me farewell.

At the time, however, I didn't know that Clay would become known as the Abstract Master. And May would become the Hero of the Brush—not to mention that May's *Hero* painting would become world-famous with time.

Chapter 4: Katsudon

Alone in the darkness, a man peered into his crystal ball.

"Heh-heh-heh! How goes the plan?"

"No issues on my end," came an old man's voice from the ball. "More importantly, I should ask how you're faring."

In an instant, the man's face flushed red with rage. "It's horrible, absolutely awful! That bitch just *had* to go interfering, and now I've got to make all sorts of adjustments to our schedule!"

"Ah, yes. She's looking for an alliance with the Kingdom of Windberg, is she?"

"Exactly! At this rate, my ambitions will be forever beyond my reach!"

"*Our* ambitions," the old man corrected. "We're every bit as invested in this plan as you are."

"Er..." The rage quickly drained from the man's face. "Of course. My apologies."

"No matter," said the elder nonchalantly. "More importantly, are you prepared for the next phase yet?"

"Heh-heh-heh! Of course! Despite the setbacks, I've no intention of putting aside our goals—even if we'll have to break our share of eggs along the way."

"Good. It seems we were right to gather so many monsters throughout the realm."

"More importantly, I trust you have the potion ready?"

The elder let out a throaty chuckle. "Oh, I have it, all right. It's my best work yet."

"Finally! Finally, with the Advancement Elixir, we'll be able to raise anything's level to the maximum instantly!"

"Rest assured, it'll work brilliantly. So, do you think our monsters will be sufficient to test it on?"

The man thought for a moment before grinning wickedly.

"No, not yet. It's too early for that. We'll wait until the moment is right to put that girl out of her misery."

The elder nodded hesitantly. "Against the Demon King's own daughter? Are you sure?"

"Oh, come now. The Demon King is far too small and insignificant for us to bother with his politics. Such weaklings deserve only death—assuming, of course, we can't glean any further use from them!" He let out a cackling laugh.

"If you insist," replied the elder. "In that case, I'll get right to work."

"Yes, let's!"

All in the name of the Wicked One.

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"Yes, just like that," Florio-san encouraged me. "Keep going."

"Mrrgh..."

The day after the Karasti Art Show, I'd returned to the palace for more magic lessons.

Funny that a random in a robe like me can just waltz in here like I own the place. Scratch that; should I be coming here so often in the first place? Might that cause problems?

"Seiichi-kun! You're getting distracted again, aren't you? Your spell is faltering."

"O-Oh, sorry."

I was in the middle of practicing my magic control. My current task was to use a simple, low-level Water spell—Water Ball—to create a basket ball-sized sphere of water and keep it steady. The first time I tried it, I accidentally made it

big enough to flood all of Terbelle. Now, though, I could keep it an okay size as long as I didn't get distracted.

That first try was a doozy, though. I mean, threatening to damage the whole city with a low-level spell? That's not low-level at all!

Fortunately, I was quick to follow it up with a Magic Hole spell to cancel it out and prevent any trouble aside from the odd rumors going through the streets. It would've been nice if Evolution activated to give me an easy way to handle my powers, but nope. It was dead silent.

I wonder if this is what people mean when they say electric cars are quiet? Er... nevermind. That doesn't even make sense.

Either way, my most annoying and overpowered Skill wasn't doing a thing now, of all times, making me think it had to be giving me a hard time on purpose. If I had to guess, it was because Evolution could only make me stronger, not weaker.

According to Florio-san, though, I'd get a new Skill called Magic Limit if I kept practicing. It didn't look like there'd be any easy shortcuts for me this time around.

"All right, that's enough," Florio-san finally said. "You can let it go now."

"Agh, FINALLY!"

I released my spell on the spot and collapsed. My practice also made me better at stopping my magic when I wanted to. I wasn't physically tired at all, but the practice was very mentally tiring. Normally, that'd be the end of the day's training, but today was different.

"Seiichi! Look at me!"

I turned to find Saria floating a ball of fire in the air. Past her, I could see Al puppeting a giant bird she'd made out of ice. Lulune was watching both of them with great interest. In other words, I'd brought them along for a magic lesson.



"Wow, you're crazy good!"

"Look, I can do this, too!"

Her smile deepened into a grin as her forearms and legs burst into flame.

"Ta-da! Isn't this cool?"

Florio-san shook his head in amazement. "Honestly, I'm impressed that they're both so capable."

Apparently, neither Saria nor Al had ever touched magic before. But my Instruction Skill gave them both great magical abilities on the spot.

Instruction is totally nuts...

I didn't know before I used it, but with it, I could draw out someone's hidden potential in a heartbeat. That meant that they had to have the capacity to learn a Skill or magic for me to draw it out. As proof, Saria could use Fire magic, and Al could use Ice, but since they had no proficiency with other elements, that was all Instruction could do. Also, anything I had to tell them about their Magic or new Skills just naturally popped into my head in easy-to-explain terms.

"Your Skills really are amazing, Seiichi-kun," Florio-san said with a shake of his head as he levitated a clump of mud and toyed with its shape. "I've been known as the Winter Wizard for some time now, but I never even dreamed I had proficiency with Earth Magic as well."

I hadn't just been learning from Florio-san and Louisse-san, of course—I'd taught them both everything they could learn. I'd pored over every book in the palace library to expand my knowledge, and I'd reached the point where I could easily explain a fair number of spells and Skills alike. As a result, I'd uncovered Florio-san's hidden Earth proficiency, just like I had for Saria and Al.

"I think I know how to further my studies," he continued. "Of course, you've also taught me a great deal about my shortcomings with Ice magic, not to mention new avenues for use. Honestly, I feel rather ashamed of myself."

"Hahaha... Uh, sorry."

According to the palace books and what Florio told me, a spell's power was determined almost entirely by the caster's abilities. Not only that, but when I

stole magic from the Acro Wolves, Sandmen, and the like, the mana consumption that popped into my head was the *minimum* power of those Spells. I could pour as much mana into them as I liked, with no upper limit, and the magic got stronger the more mana that went into them. My problem, then, was that I didn't know how to control the flow of my mana, and I kept accidentally pumping them full of as much firepower as possible. My magic practice was really just to get a grasp of how to properly limit my mana.

Of course, my Magic Attack Stat was still stupidly high, which meant that I'd still be doing serious damage even on the minimum setting. As long as I kept control of my Spells, though, I could freely adjust their power at will—as long as I didn't put in too much mana and lose control, of course.

I finally got to my feet, noticing that Al and Lulune were walking over to me.

"Damn, Magic's tough," Al muttered.

"You did really well," I replied.

"Y-Yeah." She made a chunk of ice to cool herself off and pointedly looked away from me. "I tried to make that bird and sparred with it a bit, but it was a real handful. I still can't believe I made it."

"Oh, yeah, I see what you mean about Magic being 'tough.' Making and moving a giant bird like that must've really taken its toll, huh?"

She started blushing harder. "S-Stuff it already."

"Dammit, I was being sarcastic!"

I'm kinda jealous, honestly!

All my strength was from those Fruits of Evolution, after all. Before I ate them, I was just a normal guy—no, I was *worse* than normal. I was as low as they came.

Just the thought is depressing, dammit.

"An ice-bird," Lulune mused. "I wonder how it would taste?"

"You never change, do you?!"

After all, the bird was made out of pure ice, and eating all of that would give anyone a stomachache.

Wait... Scratch that; I can't imagine Lulune ever having tummy troubles!

Lulune was the undisputed master of anything and everything food-related. Apparently, the black-pelted wolf she'd kicked the living crap out of during the Capital Derby was an A-Rank monster, even.

As an aside, I learned from the Guild that an A-Rank monster was totally different from an A-Rank adventurer. The general rule of thumb was that a monster needed five adventurers of the same letter rank to be taken down. For instance, defeating a C-Rank monster typically required a party of five C-Rank adventurers. Alternatively, a single B-Rank adventurer could take on a C-Rank monster single-handed. Each letter rank was, therefore, many times stronger than the last.

The exception was when it got to B-Rank monsters and above, which broke the pattern and were way stronger. Even a party of five B-Rank adventurers might get their asses handed to them by a B-Rank monster.

In other words, Lulune stomped a monster that even five people as strong as Al would struggle against. By that same token, though, Louisse-san was truly terrifying. She'd taken on the Bahamut single-handedly when it was supposed to be way tougher than the wolf Lulune beat. She was the kingdom's strongest knight for a reason, and some said she was as strong as the best S-Rank adventurers out there.

I guess that means I'm the toughest of all of us since I fought Louisse-san without her even grazing me. Not that there's anything wrong with that!

That realization put a damper on my spirits, but the sight of someone heading out of the palace towards us in the training grounds snapped me out of my funk. It was none other than Louisse-san herself.

"Hello, Teacher," she greeted me. "Is your training done for today?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we just finished."

"Good... hm? Who are these young women?" she asked flatly.

Come to think of it, I'd only introduced them to Florio-san at the start of our training. This was the first time they'd met. Just as I turned around to introduce Saria, though, she cut me off.

"Wow!" Saria exclaimed. "She's super pretty!"

"Uh... Yeah, she is," I replied. "This is the Captain of the Swordsaint Valkyries and the renowned Knight of the Sword, Louise-san."

"Master, I believe she resembles Florio-san."

"Huh?" Saria looked from Louise-san to Florio-san and back. "Wow, Lulune's right! Are you siblings?!"

So, I'm not the only one who can see the family resemblance.

Louise-san was admittedly very beautiful, but since Saria, Al, and Lulune were every bit as pretty, I hadn't reacted that openly. I must've finally started getting used to them.

Or maybe the shock of having a sparring match thrown at me made it so I didn't notice her good looks as much?

Besides, looking pretty was great and everything, but I still preferred inner beauty in the end. Given how I looked before, I was hardly in any position to call out others' looks, good or bad.

Saria and the others probably deserve someone better than me, huh...

I decided not to look a gift horse—or rather, donkey, gorilla, and human—in the mouth.

"You can call me Saria! I'm Seiichi's wife!"

"I-I'm Altria Grem. I'm, uh... Seiichi's girlfriend... I guess."

"My name is Lulune. I serve Master as his knight and underling alike."

"Can't you introduce yourself more normally?!" I shouted.

Geez, I never expected this to be such a hassle! I mean, I guess I'm Saria's husband and Al's boyfriend, but underling?! That's going too far.

Both Florio-san and Louise-san were completely slack-jawed. I paled as I tried to find some sort of excuse, but they both recovered before I could say

anything.

Florio-san nodded. "I suppose I should've expected you to surpass me in your personal life as well."

"I'm proud to have someone like you as my mentor, Teacher."

"It's not *that* great!"

I suddenly felt like asking everyone's opinion of me since it was clear the siblings were a little too proud of me.

"That reminds me," Louisse-san continued, "I have a favor to ask of you."

"Hm?" I looked at her blankly.

She leaned in to whisper in my ear. "It concerns the assassin who attempted to take His Majesty's life. She has a Collar of Subordination about her neck, which we are unable to safely remove. We wish to enlist your aid."

I furrowed my brow. "A Collar of Subordination?"

I remembered reading about those. Just like its name suggested, it was used to bind someone to your will. It wasn't an Anathema, though—those were uncontrollable. No, a Collar was a Magic Item, and not only did it force the wearer to obey the master's commands, but it also prevented the wearer from fighting back. The wearer was unable to remove the Collar, of course. And if anyone but the master tried to take it off for them, the wearer would take massive damage, even dying in some cases. As an aside, there was a weaker variant—Armbands of Subordination—that were more limited in the number of orders that could be given but had all the other nasty effects.

"Rona is presently interrogating the assassin with the aid of a barrier that suppresses the Collar, but it won't be effective for much longer. Not only that, the barrier stymies the commands given by the master, not the other restrictions, meaning we're unable to remove it."

"So even that barrier's at its limit?"

"Exactly. Collars of Subordination are incredibly powerful magic items, meaning that even the strongest of barriers have only limited effect on it."

"All right, I think I understand. I'll see what I can do."

Over the past month, I'd totally gotten over my hesitation to use my monstrous powers if it meant I was helping someone. I'd even felt more comfortable with my strength, thanks to the siblings' training. I wouldn't hesitate to save that little girl.

"Thank you, Teacher. I have one more thing to inform you of."

"Okay. What is it?"

"I would request that you finish the matter with the Collar first. Allow me to show you to the interrogation room."

With that, I moved to follow Lousse-san back into the palace.

"Huh? Where're you going?" Saria called out from behind us.

"Oh, uh... I've got something important to do."

Al narrowed her eyes. "Alone? With Lousse-san?"

"Don't worry, we won't be alone or anything."

"Why would you leave me behind, Master? Have you grown tired of me already?!"

"Seriously, Lulune, stop phrasing everything so weirdly!"

I didn't know what I was even allowed to tell them, though. If I told them I needed to go to the interrogation room, they'd probably ask why, and then the attempt on Landze-san's life would be out. As I fumbled for an excuse, though, Lousse-san and Florio-san exchanged a few hushed words before turning back to me.

"Teacher," Lousse-san said, "there's no need to keep secrets from them if they're with you."

"Wait, really? I'd understand if you want to keep it a secret still."

"There's no issue with it on the condition that they swear to secrecy."

Fortunately, Saria and the others were quick to decide.

"Of course! I can keep a secret!"

"Y-Yeah, I'm good with secret stuff."

"I've no interest in your conspiracies, so I can agree to that."

Louisse-san nodded gratefully. "Thank you, all of you. In that case, I shall explain the circumstances on the way. Please follow me."

With that, the four of us were led to Rona's interrogation room, where the assassin awaited us.

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"Damn," Al cursed. "I never thought an assassin would attack the king..."

Louisse explained last month's events on the way to the interrogation room, and that was Al's first reaction.

"But you saved him, right, Seiichi?" Saria cut in. "That's so cool!"

"Uh... Thanks."

Saria didn't seem that worried, though, and Lulune showed no sign she cared at all.

Does she just not care about anything except food?

I didn't know if I was more disappointed or jealous of her attitude, to be honest.

Louisse stopped in front of one of the doors in the hall. "This is the interrogation room. This entrance, however, only leads to the observation area. The door to the questioning area proper is further inside."

In other words, it was like one of those rooms in cop dramas where people could watch the interrogation on the other side of the one-way glass, with all the recording devices, cameras, and everything. The only difference was that there was a mana projector and camera instead of glass, like at the Capital Derby.

Louisse looked up at the projection. "It seems she's resumed the interrogation."

Sure enough, the screen showed Rona-san and the black cat beastkin girl sitting opposite each other. Rona-san was wearing the same armor she always

did, but the girl was wearing simple black clothes, the kind a ninja might wear.

"How about you spill the beans already?" Rona-san drawled in a low voice. "No point making this any harder than it had to be, right?"

The girl didn't reply.

"Cat got your tongue, eh? Well, we've got damning evidence against you!" She slammed her fist into the table, then narrowed her eyes. "Wanna grab a katsudon?"

C'mon, she's just going through all the cop show tropes!

It was all I could do to not start shouting.

How does Rona-san even know all this Earth cop show stuff? She's gotta just be making it up on the fly.

Rona-san left the camera's view momentarily, returning soon after with a rice bowl in hand. She placed it on the table and sat back down.

"This sure looks good!" she exclaimed before chowing down.

"Why're *you* eating it?!" I exclaimed.

I mean, that's just cruel!

The girl could do nothing but sit and watch Rona-san eat. It was clear she was dying for a bite.

"This is great!" Rona-san chuckled between bites. "Too bad you still won't let the cat outta the bag! If you did, I could get you one of these."

"..."

"Just look at all this pearly-white rice! Doesn't it look great? And that smell... Wowza!"

"..."

"Oh, and check out this onsen egg! It's perfectly jiggly and goes great with the cutlet's crunch!"

Unable to stand it any longer, I threw the door to the interrogation room open. "You're the devil!" I shouted at her.

That's outright torture!

Rona-san was shocked to see me, but Louise didn't scold me. Instead, she calmly followed me into the room.

"Rona," she said.

"What's up, Louise-sama? Why's Seiichi-san—"

"No dinner for you tonight," Louise cut her off coldly.

"Why?!"

"Even if you're interrogating the girl, you can't forget basic etiquette. What possessed you to try such a method in the first place?"

"Well, I knew she was hungry, so I thought if I offered to trade her some good food for what she knows, she'd open right up."

"She's only a little girl. Have you no shame?"

Back in the observation room, Lulune shuddered. "What vile torture..."

"It's not *that* bad," I retorted.

Seriously, how food-obsessed can you get?!

Florio-san was watching the scene unfold with a bitter smile, while Saria and Al seemed shocked.

"Florio-san?" I asked. "Is there any chance we can get another katsudon in here?"

"Hm? I'd imagine so."

He called a servant and said something to him, and a few minutes later, they brought me a katsudon. I carried it over to the girl.

"Sorry she was so mean to you," I apologized. "See, I got you the same thing she has, so help yourself, okay?"

"..."

"How am I the bad guy?!" Rona-san shouted at me.

Louise shot her a cold look. "I'm not done talking to you."

"Fine, fine, I admit it! It's all my fault!"

The girl looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears.

I smiled a little. "Don't worry, I won't do anything bad to you. Help yourself."

She hesitated for a moment but started eating readily enough. She was probably hungry enough that anything would've been welcome, but this only felt fair after seeing Rona-san eat. That probably only made her hungrier for katsudon.

With that, she continued to blissfully munch away at the katsudon.

Chapter 5: Siblings

After the girl finished her meal, it was time for me to do what I'd come there for in the first place—removing her Collar of Subordination. It wouldn't be easy since trying to remove it by force was incredibly painful, which was one of the many reasons the item was illegal in many countries. The Kaizell Empire, however, clearly didn't agree with the ban.

Legalities aside, though, I had to focus on getting the Collar off her. I crouched down so I could meet her gaze.

"I'm going to try and remove your Collar," I said as gently as I could.

Her eyes widened in surprise, then she shook her head. "No. There's no way you can."

"Don't worry; I get how crazy it sounds. Only the person who put it on you can take it off, right?"

"Yeah..."

"But don't worry! Your big bro's got this!"

I smiled as confidently as I could in an attempt to reassure her. They say that too much power can destroy you, and I sure had power in spades, but I wasn't about to let my fears stop me from doing all I could to save her. If it meant saving her life, I was actually proud of my new powers.

I reached out and touched the metal band around her neck. My first custom spell, Get Better, probably wouldn't have any effect. Get Better could only turn Curses into Enchantments. Since the Collar of Subordination wasn't technically cursed, I had nothing to reverse. No existing spell affected it, either—only the person who put the Collar on her could remove it normally. That meant I'd need to make another new spell to free her.

No way I'm screwing up again and giving it a lame name, though!

For starters, though, I just had to imagine the effect breaking—and there I stopped.

Wait. I'm just as bad at that visualizing stuff as when I made Get Better.

It was far too early to give up, though. Just thinking up a bunch of similar words had to get me the effect I wanted.

Uh... Slavery? Subordination? Damn, I'm still drawing a blank!

There was only one thing that came to my feeble mind when it came to freeing people from slavery, though.

"Abraham Lincoln?" I muttered.

The entire room went dead silent.

Shit! Again?!

Everyone in the room was staring at me confusedly. None of them knew what an Abraham was, much less how to Lincoln it. I wished I could run away on the spot.

I really need to stop saying everything I think! Can't I get a shot or something that'll shut up my stupid mumbling?!

At that moment, though, my fingertips began to glow, and the motes of light quickly enveloped her whole Collar. Then, it exploded, sending chunks of shrapnel flying.

"What the shit?!" I swore, ducking away with lightning speed.

As an aside, the Auto-Defense Skill I'd gained fighting Louisse was still handy, but I'd gotten enough practice with it to control it a little. Hopefully, it wouldn't get the better of me too much now.

Fortunately, the girl was unharmed, and I was the only one close enough to be in danger of the metal shards.

Oh, why me?

The girl didn't even react for a long moment. Then, she slowly brought her hands up to her neck.

"What...?!"

"See?" I boasted. "I did it!"

It was really sloppy, sure, but I did it! Who cares about the details?

At that moment, the familiar mechanical voice rang out in my head.

>Skill: Magic Creation has been activated. You have successfully created Unbinding Magic, Abraham Lincoln.

I care about the details, that's who. How did I end up giving it another screwed-up name after how careful I was to do better this time?! I mean, that's a person's name, not a spell name! I don't care what I said!

As my discomfort settled in, the explanatory display popped up before me.

>UNBINDING MAGIC - ABRAHAM LINCOLN: You instantly release the target from any and all forms of bondage of physical impediments.

Damn, that's actually really good!

Forget working on Collars; it seemed to apply to any debilitating magic.

That's the former president of the freest country on Earth for you. Says who? Says me.

"Teacher?" Louise asked from behind me. "Did you succeed?"

"Uh, probably."

I checked her with my Clairvoyance Skill, and sure enough, the little Status: Subordinated blurb was nowhere to be seen.

"Y-You mean..." The girl felt around her neck again, brow furrowing. "I'm really...?"

"Hm? You okay?"

At that moment, she broke out crying.

"Wh-Whoa! You okay?!"

"Hah!" Rona-san called and pointed. "Seiichi-san made a girl cry!"

Louise shot her a dark look. "Not another word from you."

I had virtually no experience with crying girls, so I was thoroughly lost as to what I was supposed to do. Fortunately, Saria stepped up and gave her a hug.

"Don't worry, it's okay! You're just too happy to be free, huh?"

"Sniff... Yeah..."

Al reassuringly stroked her hair. "Yeah, I bet. I dunno what kind of shitbag put that thing on you, but it must've been rough. No wonder you're glad to have it gone."

"I don't understand, but congratulations!" Lulune said between hearty mouthfuls of her own katsudon.

"When did you even get that?!"

After a while, the girl finally stopped crying.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"Of course!" Saria smiled as she wiped her tears away.

"My name's Origa Karmelia."

"Origachan, huh? It's great to meet you! I'm Saria."

Wow, they're getting along great already.

"Saria-oneechan?" she said, cocking her head to the side.

"Oneechan? Me? Hehe... The kids at the orphanage call me that, too, but it's still kinda weird to be called that!"

Whoa, oneechan-level already?!

Saria's natural motherly instincts had me floored again, but Origachan wasn't done with that.

"What's your name?" she asked Al.

"Me? Uh, I'm Altria."

"Altria-oneechan?"

"U-Uh..." Al quickly averted her gaze. "Wh-What do I do now, Seiichi?! It feels like my whole damn chest's on fire!"

"I think that's called 'happiness.'"

I didn't know what Al was getting flustered about, but it felt a little late for stuff like that.

Lulune sidled up to Origa-chan next, puffing out her chest with pride. "Little girl! My name is Lulune, and I am Master's knight and underling alike!"

Origachan gave her a confused look. "Hungry?"

"Why?!" Lulune's expression turned to despair. "Why are those two 'oneechan,' but I'm merely 'Hungry'?!"

"What's wrong? It suits you," I joked. "I didn't know you even cared about stuff like that."

Origachan had already left Saria's arms and moved on to her next target—Louisse.

"Oneechan?"

"Hm? What?"

"... Your name?"

"Come to think of it, we've never been properly acquainted. I am Louisse. It's a pleasure to meet you, Origa."

"... Yeah, Louisse-oneechan."

Louisse's eyes suddenly flew open as though she'd been struck by lightning.

"Oneechan," she muttered dazedly. "I've only ever had an older brother, but that sounds rather... pleasant."

Flavio-san chuckled. "You're the youngest, after all."

Apparently, Louisse had been wanting a little sister for quite a while.

As I smiled at their back-and-forth, Origa-chan tugged on my robe.



"... Name?"

"Me? I'm Seiichi. Nice to meet you, Origa-chan."

"Yeah... Seiichi-oniichan." She chuckled.

What's this weird feeling I'm getting?

Shouta's little sister, Miyu, always called me oniichan, but hearing that from Origa-chan was a whole different feeling.

I guess Al wasn't overreacting after all.

As I came to terms with the overflowingly warm sensation, Rona excitedly skipped up to Origa-chan.

"Hey there! My name's Rona! Can you say Ro-na?"

She immediately hid behind my back. "Meanie."

"Whaaaaat?!"

"... You're mean."

Unsurprisingly, Rona-san had left an absolutely awful impression on her.

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After we'd all finished introducing each other, Origa-chan's interrogation started anew. However, she completely refused to say anything to Rona-san, so Louise had to lead the discussion. Even Saria, Al, Lulune, and I ended up joining in.

I know they said Rona-san was great at interrogating people, but I'm seriously starting to doubt that.

"Well then, Origa," Louise began. "Could you explain why you attacked His Majesty?"

"I didn't want to attack him, but my body wouldn't listen..."

Louise's brow furrowed. "Just as I'd feared."

None of us thought that Origa-chan attacked Landze-san willingly, of course, but hearing it from her mouth made it feel much more real. The Collar of Subordination had no doubt forced her into that role, little more than a puppet at her master's whim.

My expression soured a little, and noticing that, Origa-chan shot me a sad look. "I'm sorry, Seiichi-oniichan... One of my orders was to kill all the witnesses..."

"No, I should be apologizing to you."

She blinked at me in surprise. "Huh?"

"I tried to go easy on you, but that flick to the forehead seemed to hit you pretty hard. I hope it didn't hurt too much."

She shook her head no. "I'm fine. I'm used to pain."

Something about the look in her eyes while she said that seemed so helpless and alone. Nobody could think of anything to say until Origa-chan broke the silence again.

"I'm a cat beastkin, right? But more than that, I'm a jinx."

"..."

"Black cat beastkin are bad luck. They can only mean trouble. Mom hit me a lot and kept telling me how she wished I'd never been born."

"..."

"I wanted her to look at me, though. I wanted her to pet me. I wanted her to smile at me more and tell me I was a good girl! She never did, though. I got sold to the Kaizell Empire as a slave."

"..."

I struggled to keep up with her, as everything she said felt like another punch in the gut. All I could do was sit and listen powerlessly. I couldn't imagine how much it'd hurt to get abused by her own mother. My family used to get along well enough, and I thought that was normal, but it turns out I was just lucky. I was honestly pretty blessed to have such nice parents.

"I got bought soon," she continued. "My masters were a team of assassins that served the Emperor-King. There, they... they taught me to kill people."

"..."

Who'd teach a little girl to murder people? Like, seriously?

"I was too young to do any work making men happy, but they made me kill tons of people in exchange. That was all I lived for." She looked down at her hands. "Even if I was following orders, I'm filthy."

So she even sees herself as an instrument of murder, then?

Unfortunately, it sounded all too likely. Her birth family kept driving home how worthless she was, but she could be 'useful' as long as she kept murdering people. Before I knew it, I'd left my seat and was hugging her frail little body close to my chest.

"That's not true. You're not filthy. If you were really that bad, you wouldn't be crying."

The proof of her innocence was right there on her face. They clearly weren't the happy kind of tears she was shedding before—if they were, that'd be just fine. But nobody wanted to see her looking so sad.

"If you wanna be pet, I'll pet you all I want," I said, reassuringly stroking her back. "Whenever you need to smile, I'll be there to cheer you up. And look..."

I pulled down my hood, showing her my own black hair.

She gasped. "Oh."

"See? I've got black hair, just like you. Even my eyes are black. Hell, we might even pass as siblings... not that we look that much alike."

"Siblings?"

I nodded. "That's right. So what do you want to do now?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't have any home to return to."

"Why don't you make a new home with us, then?"

"Huh?" She looked up at me in surprise but dropped her gaze and shook her head just as quickly. "No... if I'm with you, the Kaizell Empire will come for you."

They hate traitors."

"Is that so? I'll just have to protect her, then."

She looked up again in surprise, and this time I looked her straight in the eyes to prove I was serious.

To be honest, though, I felt sick. The Kaizell Empire was the country that summoned Shouta and the others. They could be in trouble if the Empire was so willing to use Collars of Subordination and other filthy tricks like that. I hoped they were okay—they'd supposedly started going to some school lately. However, if the Empire had done something to them, there'd be hell to pay. I wouldn't hesitate to live up to my status as a monstrosity and put the Empire in its place.

For now, though, I could only keep Origa-chan out of their clutches.

"Are you sure?" she asked hesitantly.

"Positive."

"Will you pet me again?"

"Of course, as often as you'd like. I'll pet you until all your fur falls out if you want!"

"Can you... smile at me?"

"Obviously. Just be aware that my life can be a little hectic. Oh, and the smiling thing goes both ways. I wanna see you happy more."

"O-Okay... Okay!"

Once again, she started crying, but I could tell at a glance that these were happy tears again. *She can cry to her heart's content*, I thought as I hugged her tight again. As I patted her back, I looked over at Louise.

"You don't mind if I take her off your hands, do you?"

Technically, she had still tried to murder the king, not to mention all the secrets she probably knew about the Kaizell Empire. They probably wouldn't want to let her go so easily.

Louise, though, just nodded. "Of course, Teacher."

"Wait, really?! Damn! Don't you think you're playing it a little too fast and loose?!"

"I was planning on placing her in your care in the first place."

"You were?"

"Both His Majesty and I were planning on taking her into protective custody. Especially with the Empire after her, the safest place for her would be by your side."

"Safest? Uh... you realize you're talking about me versus a whole country?"

"Yes. You're my mentor, after all."

"Why did I even ask?!" At this rate, it felt like I could get away with murder. I sighed. "You know what, fine. I guess that means you're with me, Origa-chan."

"Yep! Thanks, Seiichi-oniichan!"

"Yay!" Saria glomped onto the both of us. "Now there's even more of us!"

Origa-chan gave her a curious look. "Us...?"

"It ain't just him and Saria," Al cut in. "I'm with 'em, too."

"I, myself, am Master's personal knight! We'll be seeing far more of each other henceforth."

"Altria-oneechan and Hungry, too?"

Lulune stomped in frustration. "Hey! Stop calling me that!"

"I think it fits," I offered.

"You too, Master?!" She drooped like a wilting flower. "Of course... Of course, I'm nothing more than a hungry lout. I see how it is."

"C'mon, you don't have to take it that badly," I said. "To be honest, I kind of like watching you eat. You always seem to enjoy yourself when you're eating."

"Y-You truly think so, Master?"

"Yeah. It always lifts my spirits."

"Very well!" she announced, puffing out her chest once more. "I solemnly swear I'll get even better at eating!"

"Uh, not like that."

She never changes... but I guess that's not a bad thing. I don't understand how you can get 'better' at eating, though.

The doom and gloom permeating the room was gone now—except for one person.

"Don't forget about me!" Rona-san pleaded.

Origa-chan's expression immediately soured. "I hate you."

"Noooooooooooo!"

Origa-chan really hates her, huh?

As I thought that, however, I caught her smiling a little bit. Maybe she didn't hate Rona-san that much after all.

"Never underestimate a food grudge," Origa-chan said simply.

"Uh..."

Scratch that; the hate is real. Rest in peace, Rona-san.

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"By the way, Louise, didn't you have something you wanted to tell me?"

We'd just finished our meeting in the interrogation room when I remembered what Louise had told me.

"Ah, right," she replied. "I was hoping you would be willing to serve as His Majesty's bodyguard while I'm away."

"Wait... Me? Protect Lanze-san? Where are you even going?"

"You see, there's another who matches my power—the Black Paladin. They typically roam the kingdom, dealing with any issues on our frontiers. They recently reported that there's unusual monster activity at our borders, however, and their patrol squad lacks the ability to deal with them on their own."

"Oh, I get it. That's where you come in."

"Exactly. The Black Paladin is regarded as a true defensive master, but there's a limit to what one can do on their own. I will lead the Swordsaint Valkyries to his side to cover that which they cannot."

"I think I get it... why me, though? Don't you have enough soldiers around the palace to keep him safe?"

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, none of them could hold a candle to your strength. Besides, I have no intention of asking you to always stay at his side."

"You don't?"

That was a bit of a shock, honestly. I didn't know how I'd be expected to guard him if I wasn't always at his side.

"All I ask is that you remain in Terbelle for the entirety of my absence. Just knowing you're present and available should the need arise would be sufficient."

"That's some confidence you've got in me... I'm just a low-ranking adventurer."

"No adventurer of *any* rank would be capable of besting me in combat."

"Uh, right. Sorry."

Is it just me, or do I have the least confidence in me of anyone in the city? It seems like everyone thinks I can do anything.

"Well, okay," I shrugged. "I can do that, but are you sure just being in the same city is enough?"

"That will be plenty. Thank you very much for your cooperation."

"Nah, no problem. So, when'll you get back?"

"I don't anticipate being gone for long, but I will probably take at least a week traveling to and from the region in question."

"Okay. So, considering the time needed to defeat the monsters and wrap things off, I guess you'll be back in a month?"

"Once again, I greatly appreciate your cooperation."

"Really, it's no big deal. Take care out there."

"I shall." She gave me the faintest of smiles before leaving to prepare, leaving the palace with her Valkyries not long afterwards.

I got the feeling as I watched her leave that it wouldn't be as cut-and-dry as that, though. Sure enough, my fears were confirmed a week after she left.

Chapter 6: Disturbance

One full week had passed since Louisse left Terbelle. Things had been pretty quiet in the Capital. I had been visiting the palace daily to practice my magic, and Saria and the others kept busy with requests at the guild. Even Origa-chan was helping Saria with her work.

As far as my studies were concerned, I had finally had a breakthrough.

"There...!"

"Impressive!" Flavio-san remarked as he studied my Water Ball.

I had finally reached the point where I could keep the spell at basketball size without even focusing on it.

"I can hardly find any wavering in your spell at all. I believe you should finally have the Restraint Skill now."

I got the same feeling.

Finally, I can cast spells without ludicrous collateral damage!

I broke down in tears of joy as I thought back on my past month of hard work.

Great job, me!

As the strange voice rang out in my head, I was filled with satisfaction for once.

>You have acquired Skill: ENDLESS HELL.

The hell?!

I took a deep breath. I must've misheard something. I thought back on what I'd heard.

>You have acquired Skill: ENDLESS HELL.

"Hah!!" I shouted, smashing my face into the ground.

Flavio-san jumped. "A-Are you all right, Seiichi-kun?!"

"Oh, I'm fine, perfectly fine. I just didn't hear that little voice in my head saying I got Restraint, so I was asking my brain what the actual fuck was wrong with it. I'm perfectly okay. Never been better."

"Um... So you're not okay, then."

Seriously, I can't take this anymore! Where'd Restraint go?! Why'd I get an evil-sounding Skill like that instead?!

I took a deep breath.

No, it's okay. I can control my magic now, so it's probably a totally normal Skill with a wicked-sounding name. I can't judge a book by its cover, right?

Clinging to that faint hope, I checked the Skill.

>ENDLESS HELL: You can subject a target to infinite suffering. While this Skill is active, no attack you make against the target will kill them. Instead, you will subject them to such intense pain that they will beg for the sweet release of death. You can also limit the power of your attacks and spells as usual. Requires conscious activation.

How is it worse than it sounds?! Like, that's just horrific! That's literally the worst skill a monstrosity like me could possibly get, and the whole Restraint bit is just a little blurb at the end, anyways! How can I never get stronger the way I want to?

Even though it was pretty gruesome, I was glad to be able to hold back if I wanted. If it was a different Skill altogether, I might've never recovered.

As I was thinking about the new Skill, I spotted a pair I'd never seen at the palace.

"Huh? Gustle?"

"Hm?" The muscular mountain of a man turned at the sound of my voice, grinning when he spotted me. "Oh, if it isn't Seiichi-kun!"

"Oh, my, you're right!" Eris-san exclaimed.

They were none other than the beefy guild master and the guild receptionist.



Eris-san was always dressed in her work uniform, while Gustle was clad in his signature tiny speedo. Honestly, he'd be showing off just as much if he was buck-naked.

Wait, he came to the palace dressed like that, and nobody stopped him? What are the guards doing?!

"What brings you to a place like this?" Gustle asked.

"I won the Capital Derby, so Florio-san and Louisse have been training me as a reward."

He gave me a slightly confused smile. "You, uh, sure like to keep busy, don't you?"

"More importantly, what're you two doing here?"

"We've come to escort this gentleman to His Majesty for an audience," Eris-san replied.

"Gentlewho?"

As I wondered, an elderly man came out from behind Gustle.

"Ohoho! I don't believe we've met, young sir."

"Uh... No, we definitely haven't."

I would've recognized him if we had. He looked like a wizard from an old fantasy book. He had bushy silver eyebrows, long white hair, and an equally impressive beard. He was even wearing a snow-white robe, and despite his posture being great for his age, he was still dwarfed by the length of the staff he leaned on, which was almost as tall as I was. He gave off a very friendly feeling overall.

"I am Barnabus Aebrit. Please, call me Barney."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Seiichi."

Beside me, Florio-san gawked at the old man in awe.

"I never thought I'd meet the Great Sage in the flesh!" he gasped.

"Huh? You mean you know Barney-san?"

"Of course, I do! Barnabus-sama is said to have mastered every spell known to man. He's the greatest magic user in the world!"

"U-Uh, okay..."

I didn't know how to react to his sudden enthusiasm. However, Barney-san was a seriously big deal if what he said was true.

"Ohoho!" the old sage chuckled. "No need to praise me so, Winter Wizard."

"Y-You know who I am?!"

"Of course, I do. Landze-san often tells me of your spectacular talents."

Florio-san couldn't even reply—he just burst into tears.

It's like seeing a die-hard fan meet his favorite idol for the first time.

I had to admit, it was fun seeing a new side of him.

"Besides, I'll have you know I'm far from a master of all magics," Barney-san continued. "I've been alive a great many years even by elven measure, but I've yet more to learn than I could possibly imagine."

"Huh? You're an elf?"

"I am," he said, turning his head so I could see his ears. "Look how long and pointy my ears are."

Sure enough, they were just as pointy as I'd expected.

My first elf of this world, huh? He sounds like quite the celebrity to boot.

As I stared at his ears, though, I heard the sound of footsteps coming from the palace proper.

"Hey, Seiichi. How's your training going?"

"Landze-san!"

"Hey... Wait, is that Gustle? What're you all doin' here?"

It was none other than the king himself, and he seemed just as confused about the guild master's presence as I was.

Barney-san smiled up at him. "How've you been, Landze?"

"Wha... Barnabus-sensei?!" Landze immediately straightened his posture in surprise. "L-Long time no see, sensei! You seem to be doing well!"

The sage chuckled. "No need to be so tense. You're a king now, and I'm nothing more than an old fogey."

"N-No, I insist!"

Just who is Barney-san? Maybe I should be calling him Barney-sama? Damn, and I was getting all friendly with him, too...

It was hard to shake my growing unease.

"Uh... Landze-san? Can I ask how you know Barney-san?"

"Huh? He's my former teacher, just like it sounds."

That makes a lot of sense.

Gustle nodded. "Barnabus-sama here is the principal of the Barbodel Magic Academy to boot."

"Barbodel?!"

That was a name I didn't expect to hear. That was supposedly the school Shouta and the other heroes were studying at.

Landze-san paid me no mind as he turned back to his teacher. "What brings you all the way out here? I don't believe we had anything to discuss."

Barney-san stroked his beard. "I've something important to tell you."

"Something important?"

"It's about your children."

"My kids?!"

Landze-san's expression suddenly turned serious.

Come to think of it, didn't Claudia-san mention something about the first and second princes?

"I trust you've heard the Academy had some rather unusual new students?"

Landze-san nodded. "The Heroes, right?"

"Precisely. As a result, some rather troubling issues have come to light."

"What kind of troubling?"

"Well—"

Just before Barney-san could speak, a soldier burst into the training grounds, panting heavily.

"Y-Your Majesty! It's an emergency?"

Landze-san shot him a puzzled look. "What's the matter? Why are you so out of breath?"

"Monsters... there's a massive herd of monsters headed right for Terbelle!"

In a heartbeat, everyone paled.

Didn't Lousse go to stop the monsters, though?

"How?" Landze-san muttered confusedly. "I thought the monsters were only getting riled up near the border. Besides, Lousse and the Black Paladin should both be out there."

Apparently, Landze-san and I were thinking the same thing.

"We just received a communication from Captain Lousse," the guard continued. "She reported heightened monster activity all along the border, and the Black Paladin-sama communicated much the same?"

"The hell? I've never heard of so many monsters getting riled up at once..."

"Landze!" Barney-san admonished. "The reason can wait for later. We need a plan of action first, don't you agree?"

"R-Right, Sensei." He turned back to the guard. "Got any idea how many of them there are?"

"Our scouts report roughly five thousand of them, Your Majesty."

"Five *thousand*?! That's ridiculous."

"Unfortunately, that was only the number they were able to confirm. It was too dangerous to get close to the herd, so there may well be more than that."

Landze-san cursed under his breath. "How many squads are ready to go?"

"I'm afraid we only have Terbelle's garrison at our disposal. The rest of our military is too far afield to respond in time."

"Great... Fine, tell you what. Take all guards in the castle, and get the scouts back here now. Go!"

"Y-Yes, my liege!"

"Florio!"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"As soon as the scouts get back, figure out where exactly the monsters are and get mana cameras on them. Put only a skeleton crew on the cameras, and have everyone else on the front lines with the guards."

"As you will."

With that, Florio hurried off into the palace. Gustle stroked his chin worriedly as the hustle slowly spread.

"I imagine you'll need the guild's help on this."

"Sorry, but it seems so. Can I rely on you?"

"We're not soldiers—but then again, there's no reason for us to not put down a rabble of monsters." He turned to Eris-san. "Get to the guild and put out a formal hunting request."

"Of course."

"Thanks," Landze-san said with a slight sigh of relief. "Tell them I've got the reward gold covered."

Gustle chuckled. "That'll sure put a spring in their step! I guess I may as well join in this time."

"Likewise, I shall assist."

I looked at Gustle and Eris-san in surprise. "Wait, you can fight?!"

I'd seen Eris-san with a whip before. But I thought she only did that in a dominatrix way, not as a genuine attack... though it made sense Gustle would finally put his muscles to work for once.

"Don't you peg these bad boys as display-only, Seiichi-kun!" he said, flexing. "You're gonna see the real meaning of firepower—not to mention there's no better place to show off my body."

"You only meant that last bit, didn't you?"

They're not really just for show, are they?

"I was quite the perky adventurer myself before becoming receptionist; I'll have you know."

"I can't really imagine that..."

And wait, 'perky'? That's a weird way of putting it.

While I was pondering that over, though, Gustle and Eris-san left to return to the guild. I was left alone with Barney-san and Landze-san.

"Ohoho!" old mage chuckled. "Perhaps I should lend a hand as well?"

"Y-You'll fight with us, Sensei?!"

"How could I not, with my precious pupil in such dire straits?"

"Thank you so much!" Landze-san bowed deeply. "I'd be a fool to turn down any transcendent's aid, much less yours. I'm truly lucky you're here."

"Transcendent?" I echoed dumbly.

Landze-san turned to me. "Didn't you know? Transcendents are the lucky few that break the limits of what normal folks are capable of. Louise, for instance, is at the human level cap of 500, but some lucky folks manage to break past that limit and get even stronger."

"Ah, you mean the prodigy," Barney-san said knowingly. "I'd imagine she'll be a Transcendent herself, given enough time."

Wow, that sounds crazy. I'm... I'm not gonna wind up being a Transcendent, am I? No, I'll be fine. I'm only level 15, after all!

I decided to gloss over the fact that I could beat a level 500. It didn't bother me in the slightest at all.

"So what're you gonna do, Seiichi?" Landze asked me.

"Huh?"

"You heard Gustle. Sure, this is an emergency, but nobody's gonna force you to do anything. You can accept the quest if you're interested or ignore it if you're not."

"Of course, I'll fight. I love this place."

Landze-san's eyes widened at the frankness of my reply, but a moment later, he chuckled. "That so? You'd better help protect it, then!"

"Yes, sir!"

With that, I resolved to take on the massive herd of monsters threatening the town.

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A short while earlier, the portly man sniggered at his crystal ball from within the depths of his dark chamber.

"Heh-heh-heh! There, I've done it! The Wicked One is one step closer to His revival!"

"I was the one who prepared it all," retorted the elderly voice from within the orb. "Who do you think got close enough to Terbelle's Mountain to ready the teleportation magic?"

"Of course, I'm grateful for your contribution but don't forget those were *my* monsters. Let's chalk it up to a team effort, shall we?"

"Hmph."

"At any rate, no number of monsters would be sufficient to move the Mountain Terbelle clings to so desperately. Only a proper army could do that. It's a monster itself, after all."

"I feel it didn't goo poorly," the elderly man added, "despite being unable to near Ocean."

"Unsurprisingly. A teleportation circle needs solid land to activate, after all. Luckily, the city doesn't have any users of Dimensional Magic, meaning it was a

simple matter of luring the Knight of the Sword and the Black Paladin away. That only makes it that much easier to level the city, and every death will only foster the Wicked One's profane strength."

"I've heard the Winter Wizard and Ironhide are still in the city, though."

"Bah! You think a few capable men can stand against an entire army? They'll be especially nourishing fodder, nothing more."

"I suppose so. Should we succeed, we'll only hasten His resurrection."

"*Should* we succeed? We can't fail! You waited until the city garrisons were at their emptiest."

"You're right—I can't imagine they'd survive."

"Heh-heh-heh!" the man in the darkness cackled. "All for the Wicked One!"

He believed thoroughly his alliance would succeed and reaffirmed his faith in his dark god with their secret code phrase.

What he didn't know, however, was that there was a monstrosity in Terbelle capable of surpassing any god—

Chapter 7: Open War

"**W**hat in the world?" I, Louisse Palse, muttered as I took in the sight before me.

"Wow! There sure are a lot of 'em, huh?" Rona echoed.

"Yeah," Claudia agreed. "They're crammed in like sardines."

I had led the Swordsaint Valkyries out to near the Kingdom of Windberg's border to answer the Black Paladin's summons, observing the situation from a grassy hill. Beneath us, the plains were so dense with monsters it was virtually impossible to see the ground. Worse yet, we had just received word of a similar horde on Terbelle's doorstep.

When we first received the message, I was tempted to return to the Capital immediately. But there was enough reason to assuage my fears. The king's magic teacher Barnabus-sama was present, not to mention the problematic-yet-powerful adventurers that populated the guild. Best of all, however, was knowing that Teacher was there. I felt truly lucky.

"Hmph. They're swarming like maggots," came a voice from behind me.

"Maggots, indeed," I agreed.

The voice was artificially generated with magic and was near-perfectly androgynous. Its owner was a tower of sheer black steel, standing nearly six-and-a-half feet tall in their heavy armor. The sword slung across their back was easily taller than I was. It was none other than the Black Paladin themselves. Nobody knew their name, age, or even their gender. I suspected the Paladin was a man only because of their incredible height.

"Are the other monsters already dealt with?" I asked.

"Naturally. My black flames burnt them so utterly that even reincarnation is beyond them."

"..."

That didn't make much sense to me, if I was honest, but I assumed that the monsters were all dealt with. It was the only thing that explained their presence on the hill.

"Louisse," the Paladin said curiously. "Are you truly content with leaving His Majesty's side? The capital is likewise beset with these foul wretches. Your absence may be what dooms them to chaos and ruin."

"I'm not worried," I asserted. "Not only is Barnabus-sama there, but I also received word that the guild is lending their aid."

"I see. Verily, a Transcendent's aid is invaluable."

"But that's not all."

"Oh?"

"My own teacher is there, too."

"You have a teacher?!" Their voice was rife with surprise. "I hadn't the faintest idea. I had convinced myself your awesome power was the product of a hell of your own design."

I shook my head. "It was until recently. He's incredibly strong."

"Is he, now?" The Paladin crossed their massive arms, deep in thought.

As we chatted, Claudia approached us. "Louisse-sama, we'd best get moving. The nearby villages may be threatened at this rate."

"You're right. Let's go." With that, I drew the slender blade at my hip.

"A stunning blade as always," the Paladin muttered as they looked at it.

My sword, the Water God's Rapier, was a Mythic-tier sword that allowed even someone with no magic proficiency like me to use Water Magic of the highest caliber—or rather, the sword could use magic on my behalf. Alternatively, I could channel mana directly into the blade to coat it in potent mana-dense water.

I began pouring mana into the sword.

"That's hardly the mana of one inept with magic," the Black Paladin mused.

"Why don't you prepare for battle?" I suggested, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Regrettably, there were so many of the wretches before your arrival that I've used the wealth of my power. I cannot hope to produce the same effect as before, but I would gladly shield you and your companions with my black flames. I suppose you have the need for such trifling protection, though."

I shook my head. "That will be plenty. Well then, let us go."

With that, I sprinted at the throng of monsters.

"Such speed! One would think she were flying, not running—but I had best join her regardless."

After hearing that voice, the entire hill burst into a sea of black fire. Our entire force, myself included, was enveloped in the blaze, but to us, it was hardly warm to the touch.

"Listen, foul wretches!" the Paladin bellowed. "Can you not hear Death scraping at your door?"

With that, they crashed into the first ranks of monsters with the force of a meteor.

Claudia's voice came from behind me and said, "Valkyries, charge!" I could hear all of our soldiers charging down the hill toward the monsters.

"I'll finish this quickly and hasten to Teacher's side," I muttered to myself.

I still had much to learn, after all.

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I, Seiichi Hiiragi, was standing ready with Saria, the girls, and the other adventurers just outside Terbelle's gates.

"Damn, there's a ton of people here," I gasped.

Landze-san had just finished his announcement to the people of the Capital, informing everyone of the throng of monsters at our doorstep. Nobody seemed to so much as bat an eyelash, however, even as they began to evacuate to the

palace. Their response was almost too smooth in the face of what might be imminent death. I remembered asking the innkeeper Fina-san's family about it before coming out to fight.

"Our guards are the best there are," she'd said matter-of-factly. "Besides, all we can do is evacuate quickly and quietly to the palace, right?"

"That's right!" her daughter Mary added. "The more we rush, the more work we make for the guards. We've got the guild's headquarters here, too, so there's no need to get too worked up about it. If the guards fail, we'll all be dead either way."

The father, Lyle-san, chuckled as he tousled Mary's hair. "Mary's making it sound pretty do-or-die, but she's not wrong. Besides, you'll help defeat the monsters, won't you? Don't get in over your head. If you think you don't stand a chance, then run."

Oddly enough, he felt even more motherly than Fina-san did.

"A monster invasion, huh?" I muttered idly. "I can't really imagine that."

Al turned to look at me. "I've been an adventurer for quite some time now, and I ain't used to fightin' thousands at once. They said five thousand *minimum*, right? That ain't like anything I ever heard, let alone saw for myself."

"Huh. I guess it's rare, then."

"You better hope so. I mean, sure, you've got herd monsters, but they cap out at about a dozen. There ain't any monsters that nest in the thousands. 'Sides, this's supposed to be a mixed group. It's more than unheard of; it's downright weird."

"You don't say?"

Saria clenched her fists excitedly. "Don't worry, Seiichi! We've got this!"

"Yeah, we do!" I echoed.

Her smile deepened, and she began warming up by punching the air in front of her.

She's really gonna fight bare-handed? I don't think I've ever seen her fight in human form, actually.

With that, I looked at Lulune and realized something was definitely off about her. It sent a bit of a chill down my spine.



"Hey, uh, Lulune? You okay?"

"Master... I've made a horrible realization."

"What? What's wrong?!"

"If those foul beasts reach the Capital..."

"Then what?"

"Terbelle is still full to the brim with all manner of delectable cuisines I haven't tried yet. If the monsters get in, they'll eat everything, and no food will be left for me!"

"Food again, huh."

That's easily a Top 10 Regrets moment for me. Why do I bother asking if I know it's just going to be something about food?

Her eyes gleamed dangerously. "I would gladly kick God Himself to death for a bite of fine food."

"The scary thing is, I don't doubt you're serious."

Deicide probably wasn't even the worst thing she'd do for a bite to eat, and I could easily imagine her pulling it off.

But she is just a donkey... right?

I couldn't get that image out of my head, but a tugging at the hem of my robe made me look down. There, I found Origa-chan.

"Hm? What's up?" I asked her.

She was also participating in the battle—she insisted she helped us, actually.

"Seiichi-oniichan. I'll try really hard."

"You will? Great. Just be careful, okay? I'm glad you want to help, but I'd be really sad if you got hurt."

"... Mm." She looked up at me with her big, kitten-like eyes. "If I do well, will you pet me?"

"O-Of course! Leave the petting to me!"

I didn't exactly know how to respond to that, but at least she smiled at me a little.

"Hahaha!" boomed Gustle's massive voice. "Ready to rumble, Seiichi-kun?"

He'd apparently finished mustering the adventurers and had specially come over to greet us. Of course, he was wearing his usual speedo, making it look like he was heading to the pool, not into war.

"Are you sure you're gonna fight?" I asked. "You *are* the Guildmaster and all."

"But of course! What, you think I should kick back and relax while the battle for the Capital rages?!"

"Uh-huh. Really?"

"No. This is the *perfect* chance to show off my steaming-hot muscles!"

"That's what I thought!"

When I thought about it, though, it made sense for the guild master to fight right alongside his guild. The whole showing-off bit was probably a joke... I hoped.

He flexed. "No matter how desperate you're feeling, though, remember that we're in this together! We all want the city we know and love to make it out of this mess okay. That's why we'll stand against this threat together!"

"Wow, Gustle, I—"

"And when the dust has settled, we'll propel ourselves to even greater heights of perversion!"

"Why, though?!"

"You heard the king himself is footing the bill, didn't you? Besides, we'll be regular saviors of the country. Even the guards will respect us too much to arrest us!"

"Damn, you're almost worse than the monsters!"

"Hahahaha! Let loose, everyone! This is our JUSTICE!!!"

"H-Hey, stop running away!"

With that, however, he skipped off without so much as glancing back at me.

After the monsters are gone, we'll have to track down the guildmembers and stop them.

After that, we all chatted idly while we waited for the monsters to arrive.

Finally, a voice rang out over the mana cameras' speaker system.

"The monsters have been spotted!"

I could hear the crowd around us mutter with excitement.

"A-And, um," the voice continued hesitantly, "th-the monsters' average rank is, uh, A-Rank."

Suddenly, everything went dead silent. No wonder they were struck speechless—one A-Rank monster would take at least five people as strong as Al, and aside from her, there weren't even any B-Rank adventurers. Everyone but Al was C-Rank or below.

No wonder they're worried.

At that moment, though, the silence was broken.

"FUCK YEEEEEEEEEEAAAHH!"

"HOO-RAH! LET'S CRACK SOME SKULLS!!"

"They better not think they can stomp our homes and get away with it!"

"I'll break 'em all... Lemme break 'em all apart!!"

That's odd. Very odd. This isn't what a city on the brink of annihilation should sound like.

As I gaped at them, however, Barney-san hobbled up beside me.

"Ohoho! I'd expect nothing less of the Capital's own adventurers. Not even A-Rank monsters can strike fear into their hearts!"

"Uh, Barney-san? Can you please tell me what the hell is going on here?"

He gave me a confused look. "I'm not sure I understand your question... Oh, look! Gustle's chosen to take the initiative."

"He what?"

I whipped around to look out the gate, where I saw Gustle, Eris-san, and a few other familiar faces standing imposingly in front of the city walls. The monstrous horde was now close enough to see with the naked eye.

Barney-san squinted up at the sky. "Well, I'll be! There really are more than five thousand of them."

I followed his gaze to find the mana cameras' projection there, just like during the Capital Derby.

"Ah, how incredible! There's even several S-Rankers in there!"

Oddly enough, he didn't seem bothered in the least.

"Uh... How can you be so calm about that?"

It had to have something to do with his being a Transcendant—but then again, I was plenty monstrously strong in my own right.

"Just look at Gustle and the others." He gestured at them with his staff. "They'll answer all your questions soon enough."

"Huh?"

Still confused, I looked out at the guild master.

He flexed proudly. "Think you shrimps can lay a finger on my muscles, eh?"

With that, he leapt bafflingly high into the air before smashing into the horde from above like a meteor.

"What?!"

I was struck speechless as dozens of monster bodies were sent flying into the air. Then, he began laying into the fiends, his muscles rippling all the while. "Hahahahaha! Bash them, biceps! Trounce them, triceps! Hammer them, hamstrings! Having such an audience is only firing up my muscles more!"

The monsters weren't dumb enough to just roll over and let him whale on them. Even though they were from all different species, they were startlingly coordinated as they attempted to overwhelm him from his blind spots, digging into him with their fangs and claws.

"Hahaha! Weaklings!" he roared, shaking them off easily and crushing their skulls with his bare hands. Not only that, none of them seemed to be able to break his skin, let alone deal any decent damage. "My muscles will never bend to such pathetic affronts!"

"Gustle Clout," Barney-san mused. "Now, he may be nothing more than the guild master who oversees Guild HQ, but his raw offensive and defensive might earned him the lauded title of S-Rank Adventurer. That fearsome fighting style of his earned him the name of Ironhide—and believe it or not, he even wore clothes back then. More importantly, you should take a look at the projection."

I did as he said, and I saw Eris in her full bondage gear with a bullwhip. She let out a high, cackling laugh. "Kneel, vermin! Kneel before me!" She cracked her whip against the closest rank of monsters. After an impossibly loud *BOOM*, she sent a generous handful of monsters flying. "Oh, *yes!* Scream for me! Scream for your mommy!" Eris unleashed a flurry of strikes, and with every air-rending crack, monsters were sent wailing through the air. "You're all so *boring!* I wouldn't mind being on the receiving end of a few powerful blows, you know!" Something about her expression—especially the conspicuous flush on her cheeks—suggested she was enjoying the fight in more ways than one.

"Eris Maclaine," Barney-san introduced me. "Before becoming a receptionist, she was also an S-Rank Adventurer lauded as the Princess of Perversion. It seems her skills are as sharp as ever."

"U-Uh..."

I gawked at them, unable to pick my jaw up off the ground.

I mean... Holy crap. I don't even know what to say.

Worse, Barney-san wasn't even done. "Take a look at those two, now."

The projection changed again, this time focusing on the lolicon-exhibitionist combo.

Wait... Don't tell me.

"What miserable wretches!" the exhibitionist crowed.

"Indeed, Slan-shi. Why, they would positively terrify the little girls of the Capital."

"Nor would they behold me in my natural splendor, what with this rabble."

"Tragic, truly tragic indeed. If we were to exterminate these fools, however..."

"Precisely—they're the only obstacles to our happiness."

With that, they turned to face the monstrous horde in perfect sync.

"You must all perish!" they cried.

The lolicon grabbed his sword in both hands, then began cutting into the horde with such speed and power that even a peasant would be flummoxed by his skill. It was like he was dancing with his blade as even the highest-ranking monsters were sliced to ribbons.

"If the young girls of this city are too afraid to sleep, I'll hold each and every one of you responsible!"

"It's time I got serious!" the exhibitionist cried, whipping off all his clothes and casting aside his gear as he dived into the ocean of bodies.

"Flame Body!"

With that, he began glowing like a miniature sun. And all the monsters closest to him were almost instantly reduced to ash.

"More! Look at me! I'M NAKED!!"

He began switching from fire to electricity to even ice and pure light, ravaging the mob as he ran through them nude.

Barney-san nodded solemnly. "The Loli-Loving Legend, Walter Berat, and the Nude Number One, Slan Algard. They make a terribly effective pair between Walter's brilliant swordplay and Slan's revolutionary magic. If strength was the only factor, they'd both be incredibly high-ranking adventurers—but as the higher ranks demand a certain degree of professionalism, they've stalled completely at C-Rank."

Nope, I'm done. I can't take any more of this.

I could only sit and listen, slack-jawed, as Barney-san went over each guild member in detail. Despite their low ranks, most of them seemed to have S-Rank-worthy power.

"So?" he finished with a smirk. "Do you understand why we've no reason to hurry?"

I had only one thing to say to that.

"Seriously, who the hell are those freaks?!"

A perverted guild was a strong guild, it seemed.

Chapter 8: War's End

Thanks to the adventurers' rampage, monsters were dropping like flies. They weren't the only ones joining the fray, though. The full garrison of guards was also on the front lines.

"You smelly beasts better get back to whatever hole you crawled outta!"

"Finally, I can burn off the stress of having to chase down those perverts over and over again!"

"Shut up and die, you stinky monsters!"

Thanks for everything, guys—both here and in keeping those guild perverts in check.

I spotted a familiar face among the chaos—Claude, the guard who often manned the city gates.

"Take this!" he shouted, cutting down every monster that got too close to him. "You monsters are *nothing* compared to the freaks we arrest on the daily!"

"No, *we're* nothing!" the nearest guild pervs shouted back.

"It's not a contest, dammit!"

Something about seeing Claude and the adventurers yell back and forth was oddly relaxing, though.

"Claude-kun, was it?" Barney-san mused beside me. "I must say, Windberg has quite the capable guards."

"I don't think they can afford to slack off," I muttered.

As much as I hated to admit it, the guild's plethora of powerful perverts went a long way toward toughening up the city guard.

Just then, I heard a thundering bang. I turned to find the guy who was always screaming about breaking stuff going on an absolute rampage.

"YEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!! Let the good times fuckin' ROLL! Gimme more shit to break... Gimme more monsters to mash! I'm gonna trash everything!!"

He had orange cornrows, and his red eyes seemed to absolutely burn with ecstatic rage. The front of his shirt was totally open to reveal his muscled chest, over which he wore a black jacket. He had a massive hammer in his hands that was taller than he was, and he swung around with horrifying ease to mash every monster that came within reach.

"What's the matter, you fools?! Come an' get it! I'll turn ya all to mincemeat!" He brought his hammer down on the ground, creating a sixty-foot crater in the ground. "Stop bein' so boring! If ya won't come to me, then I'll come an' wreck you!"

He ran at the monstrous horde and took a mighty swing at them.

KER-BOOOOOOOOOOMM!!!

Nearly a hundred monsters were utterly vaporized on impact. He laughed maniacally as their blood crashed into him like a wave. "HAHAHAHAHAHA!! DAMN, this is the most decent fun a guy can have!"

How is any part of this decent?! Like, damn, I could easily mistake him for the villain here.

"That's the Bloody Crusher, Grand Lorzen," Barney-san added. "He's got the power of an S-Ranker beyond any doubt, but he has no interest in anything but destroying everything. Between his utter disinterest in quests and the collateral damage he leaves in his wake, he's a D-Rank adventurer—with a hefty debt to boot."

Holy shit...

I shook my head dazedly. Guild HQ was honestly too OP for its own good.

"Hmm." Barney-san scratched his chin. "Look over there, Seiichi-kun. Do you see that large party fighting monsters?"

I followed his crooked finger and paled as soon as I saw the party in question.

"Guh?!"

It was none other than the gang of men that tried to take my virginity when I first arrived in town.

"They're the C-Rank party, the Buddy Lovers," Barney-san said. "That man at their head is their leader, Homon Gayzer."

God, that's an awful name! Not only that but that party name... it's almost too damn perfect!

"Their most notable trait is that with every quest they complete, their members only grow. Rumor has it they have a number of powerful nobles on their side, as well as members nearly the world over. Quite the surprise, isn't it?"

Surprise?! That's horrifying! I'd rather deal with a zombie apocalypse than them! And wait, aren't the guys who tried to hit on Saria with them? I guess they fell prey to them, too.

As I watched, Homon let out a rallying cry.

"The city's still full of boys who haven't awakened to our love! Purge the monsters and protect our lads!"

"Yeahhh!!"

Protecting people's good, but that motivation!

I watched in disturbed fascination as they cleaved through wave after wave of monsters with oddly suggestive thrusts.

Nope, I can't anymore.

As I looked around for something, anything else to focus on, I spotted a familiar face in the crowd.

"Wait, Noard-san?!"

He was the café owner who'd given me some much-needed advice when I was struggling with Al's feelings. He was still dressed in his bartending clothes, even.

"What's he doing here?!"

"Hm?" Barney-san followed my gaze. "Ah, Noard. No need to worry about him."

Barney-san seemed incredibly calm, despite a massive lion-like monster heading right for the barkeep.

"Why, I believe that's an S-Rank Beast King," he remarked unaffectedly.

"S-Rank?!"

It seemed a lot bigger than the other monsters, and it had an unusually large mouth full of way too many swordlike teeth. It lunged at him with a mighty roar, moving at genuinely horrifying speed.

"My apologies—your life is mine."

Noard-san elegantly dodged the attack with a half-step back, then swung one of the two pitch-black sickles in his hands to slash at just about where the jugular would be on a human. An unsettling amount of blood sprayed out of the Beast King's neck as it stumbled back a few steps, then softly thudded to the ground.

"Rest in peace," Noard-san muttered.

Holy shit, he's strong—and way too cool for his own good! Who is he, really?!

Barney-san chuckled as my jaw hit the ground again. "I can't imagine this would pose any challenge to him. He's none other than Death, the legendary assassin himself."

Somebody help me. I can't keep up. My brain doesn't run this fast.

Just as I was starting to regain my grasp on reality, though, I caught sight of Saria.

"Yahh!"

She was lying into monsters with only her arms reverted to her gorilla form. The guards around her were so baffled that they almost stopped fighting to watch her.

Honestly? I'm not surprised. I mean, a cute girl like her with gigantic, hairy, majorly ripped arms? It's a bit of an odd sight.

"You're not bad, missy!" one of the adventurers called out to her.

"C'mon, guys! We can't let her show us up now!"

"Kh!" Gustle shot her a jealous look. "Those beautiful muscles... I never expected such excellence out of Saria-kun. I'll have to believe in the strength of my own hot bod!"

Uh, okay. Apparently, that's all good. Just try not to antagonize poor Gustle too much.

I knew that Saria could only use her full power in her gorilla form, but it was good to know that partial transformations did the same thing for her.

She seemed to notice I was watching her, so she turned and waved to me enthusiastically.

Damn, she's way too cute... even with her arms like that.

"Take THIS!"

Al was likewise hacking her way through wave after wave of monsters, and although she clearly didn't have Grand's power, her giant axe had plenty of raw power in its own right. As I watched, however, they slowly began to surround and overwhelm her.

"Al?!"

I started to rush to her aid, but she held out her hand to stop me.

"I got this!"

The beasts surrounding her all tried to lay into her with their fangs, claws, or even stinger-clad tails, but she dodged them one by one with perfectly controlled movements. Then, the second one of the monsters plunged its tail into the ground; she leapt into the air and unleashed a spell where she'd been standing moments before.

"Ice Prison!"

Her Ultimate-tier magic released a flurry of freezing air from her palm, freezing the entire pack in one fell swoop. Then, she raised her axe and unleashed a Skill at them.

"Meteoric Crush!"

The force of her blow easily shattered her frozen foes, leaving behind a massive crater where she landed.

"See?" she smirked at me, shouldering her great axe.



Something about the fearlessness of her smile made me blush a little. She likewise seemed to get a little flustered at my reaction, hurriedly turning to ravage another wave of monsters.

I swear, I love those two way too much.

A familiar donkey's voice reached my ears as I let out a contented sigh.

"Master and I have yet to eat much of the Capital's delicacies. To that end, I'll have you all perish!"

Lulune didn't seem phased by the mob of monsters headed for her—in fact, she had her arms crossed imperiously as she waited for them to get closer. When they were nearly right on top of her, she raised one of her long legs into the air in a karate-like fashion and brought her hell down on the closest monster's head.

KER-BLOOOOOOMM!!!

Her attack instantly shattered every bone in the monster's body. And the sonic boom she'd generated on impact sent out a shockwave powerful enough to rip all the monsters near her to ribbons. She snorted proudly.

"If you truly wish to challenge me, bring a god!"

Uh... She's just a donkey, right?

I racked my brains for some sort of explanation for her power, but all I could remember was her saying very clearly that she was a donkey. No donkey could create sonic booms like that with her kicks, let alone act so cockily. I quickly decided to give up on thinking entirely. It seemed like thinking only brought me pain lately.

With that, I averted my gaze to Origa-chan, who was slashing her way through monsters with her daggers.

"..."

Like Noard-san, she composedly dodged every monster in her way as she efficiently nailed monster after monster in their vitals. Even though she specialized in more properly assassin-like work, she was clearly putting her high

level to use in wiping out every monster that got near her. She was working for those post-battle head pats, no doubt about it.

After taking stock of all the adventurer's work, I let out a small sigh.

"They don't even need me, do they?" I muttered.

They're doing pretty damn great on their own, after all.

Barney-san seemed to overhear me, and his gaze hardened a little as he watched the front lines. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

I followed his gaze to watch the monsters swarming forwards like a living wave.

"What horrifying numbers," he muttered. "Not only that, I believe there are significantly more S-Rank monsters than there were."

"Wait... So you're saying this latest wave is mostly S-Rankers?"

He nodded grimly. "Nearly all of them, it seems."

Oh, damn. How'd it get to be this way?

Nobody had the luxury of time to think it over, but it was clearly weird. Why were they all attacking now? Why did such a weird mixed horde even form in the first place? The more I thought about it, the more unnatural it all seemed.

What if someone's controlling them? I mean, they've got teleportation magic and everything to put the monsters so close to the Capital, so that wouldn't be a stretch.

Ladze-san had mentioned he wanted to leave in peace with the demonkin. It was entirely possible there was a country or two out there who'd see Windberg as problematic, then—maybe even problematic to try and wipe them off the map.

In the end, though, I didn't know the first thing about politics or the like, and I had no way of proving anything I thought up. Still, if a human was pulling the strings, they'd be a bigger and more crucial threat than any of the monsters.

"Well, then." Barney-san flexed his fingers about his staff. "It's high time I carried my own weight."

He stuck out his oversized walking stick, and as I watched, he generated a number of spheres in a ring in front of him in all different colors—red, blue, green, orange, yellow, teal, white, and black. The orbs slowly combined, forming a single bloated orb that shone with a sickly light. With a wave of his staff and a vehement grin, it began to rise into the sky.

"Go on, now, and wreak the havoc you were made to—Chaos Reign."

With those words, the orb multiplied at a horrific rate, then fell down on the monster army like a hailstorm. I watched in awe as every orb that so much grazed a monster utterly erased it from existence.

"My, there's a lot of them," Barney-san remarked with a sigh. "Let's try this, then. Chaos Tornado."

He made a gesture as though throwing a ball, and with that, the orbs stopped in the air, then began to circle each other. It was like watching one of those long-exposition photos of the night sky, with each and every star forming a streak through the sky about a single point. The gaps between them quickly closed as they picked up speed until they formed a single, unified cyclone. The magic tornado then began tearing across the battlefield, obliterating huge swaths of foes as it went.

"Ohoho!" Barney-san chuckled. "I won't be letting the young'uns get the better of me, now."

Okay, that's pretty horrifying. Is he even stronger than me? I guess Transcendants really are something else. Maybe I'm not that overpowered after all.

I'd about had my fill of just sitting and watching, though. I was ready to join the fray, and judging by how strong everyone else was, it seemed like I was clear to let loose a little. Given the sheer number of monsters, I'd probably be more useful making a new wide-area spell to kill huge numbers of monsters at once instead of just hitting them one at a time with my swords.

Alright, let's see. I need something that'll hit huge numbers of monsters but that won't hurt any of the people out there. It'll probably be best to hit from above somehow—that'd definitely work better than running a laser or

something along the ground. I'll probably need to put Endless Hell to work, too, if I don't want to utterly obliterate the whole area.

The first thing that came to mind was some sort of divine thunder from above. I could easily imagine that turning into some kind of edge lord-tier spell with an equally cringe-worthy name. But I wasn't too worried on that front. *Anything* would be better than the downright idiotic names I gave my first two spells.

With that, I stuck my hand into the air and said the first spell name that came to mind.

"JUDGEMENT!!"

...

It was almost painfully clear that nothing had happened.

Wait, what? Why won't my magic activate now?

My face went bright red, and I curled up in a fetal position.

Holy fuck, this is so humiliating! Why did those lame-name Spells work without a hitch, but nothing happened at all this time?! I feel like such an embarrassment... but that's nothing new, I guess.

Fortunately, nobody even seemed to notice I was freaking out—but that somehow made me even more depressed.

Then, all of a sudden, the clear sky clouded over as angry black clouds appeared out of nowhere. Not only that, but the air felt absolutely frigid now. I looked up at the sky just in time to see massive pillars of light begin to rain down on the battlefield. The light completely avoided the humans on the battlefield, striking down only the monsters with horrifying power. Not only that, I'd totally forgotten about Endless Hell, meaning that the monsters couldn't even die—though, of course, they were hit so seriously that they'd be goners soon enough, anyways. A concerto of agonizing screams reached my ears.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!!"

Their howls caused the very air to quiver—I'd somehow hit every last one of them. The guards and adventurers alike could only stare dumbfoundedly at the hellscape before them. A fair number of them looked back at me in confusion.

Okay, so I guess I overdid it after all, but the important thing is that this whole mess is finally ov—

"GWAAAAAAAGH?!"

Huh?

That didn't sound like monster screams. I looked out again to see Gustle and the adventurers were now getting hit by the lights.

Again: huh?

I stopped casting just in case, and the light stopped falling.

Why're Gustle and the others getting hit?

I resumed the casting just in case.

"GWOOOOOOOGH!!"

One more time, all together now: huh?

Again, the adventurers were getting fried—the monsters were all dead and gone, but they were definitely still taking hits from my spell.

It was then that I finally heard the mechanical announcement in my head.

>Skill: Magic Creation has been activated. Seiichi Magic: Judgement has been created.

What the hell is 'Seiichi Magic'?!

That wasn't the problem here, so I quickly checked my new spell's effect.

>SEIICHI MAGIC, Judgement: A Spell that causes divine light of retribution to fall on anyone the user believes to be a threat.

Suddenly, it clicked.

"Oh, I get it! I think Gustle and the others are a threat to society, so they're getting hit!"

"Stop chatting and stop the damn spell already!" everyone shouted at me.

I obediently cut off the casting. The assorted perverts of the guild were all left scorched and charred, their hair standing on end.

"That was quite the final blow! Hahahahaha!!" Gustle grinned at me, his teeth seeming extra-white against his burned face. He gave me a hearty thumbs-up.

Damn. He's way too tough.

Eris-san was lying on the ground, her face utterly melted in ecstasy as she twitched feebly. "Oh, yes! It's been a while since I've been so thoroughly ravaged!"

Uh... Okay. I guess she really is a masochist, too.

"I must admit, I've never had the clothes scorched off me like that!" Slan said as he looked down at his fully-exposed manhood.

Walter nodded. "Indeed, I feel as though the little girls of Terbelle may love me all the more now."

"HEY!!" Grand howled. "Where'd all those squishy ass-clumps go?!"

Homon smiled warmly at his followers. "Good work, boys! I'll make sure to reward each and every one of you all night long!"

"YEAHH!!"

Oddly enough, neither of them seemed to have even noticed my spell.

Seriously, there's gotta be something wrong with these guys.

As everyone picked themselves up, though, I realized that there really wasn't so much as a single monster left standing. It was such a sudden and thorough ending, even, that it was downright anticlimactic. It felt like we should've struggled and despaired far more than we did—but it was fitting enough of an ending for that ridiculous farce of a battle.

Well, no point complaining. Everyone made it out okay.

—Human casualties, zero. Monster casualties, innumerable.

※ ※ ※

The man chuckled into his crystal ball in the darkness of his chambers.

"Heh-heh-heh! I imagine those pathetic humans in Terbelle are all dead by now!" He couldn't help but raise his voice a little. "HEH-HEH-HEH!! Suffer, you fools! Despair! All for the Wicked—"

Before he could finish his sentence, a bolt of light fell on him from above.

"NGYAAAAARGH?!"

The light faded just as suddenly as it came, leaving the portly man done medium-well. He feebly splayed out on the floor.

"Wh-What in the Wicked One's name...?"

He only had a moment to relax, however, before a second column of light smacked him.

"GYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEGH!!"

By the time the second frying was over, he was left overdone.

"Heh-heh... heh..."

Then, still clueless about what had just happened to him, he lost consciousness.

Of course, Seiichi was none the wiser to the man's plight.

Chapter 9: A Sudden Request

As soon as I was sure every last monster was dead, I let out a sigh of relief. However, I didn't have much time to relax.

>Level up.

"Crap."

I instantly tensed up again.

H-Hold up. That isn't right. Sure, I brought them to the brink of death, but it's not like I killed them directly or anything—and if I killed them, I should be getting their drops and those little Stat orbs, right?

Just then, one of the adventurers pointed at the mountain of monster corpses. "Look! The bodies are glowing!"

Sure enough, the pile was glowing almost blindingly bright—and when the light had finally subsided, there was an ocean of drop items left. That alone was fine. Well, it wasn't, but I could live with it. The horrifying part was that a multitude of glowing spheres floated out of the ocean of loot like a whole sea of stars, and they were all headed for me.

You know what? Screw it. Nothing I can do about this shitshow now.

I clamped my eyes shut as the river of lights flowed into my body, with them, an absolute flood of information about the monsters I'd just slaughtered. Between my Instant Memorization and Perfect Recollection Skills, I had no problem processing everything. If only it all ended there.

>Level up. Level up. Level up.

Enough! Seriously, I just wanna be a normal human!

At that moment, though, the voice changed.

>Leve

... Wait, why'd it cut off like that?

>Leve... Your level has increased.

Huh?! Why the sudden change all of a sudden?!

Fortunately, that was the end of the level-ups, and the mysterious voice moved onto my Skills.

>You have received a high volume of Skills. Similar Skills have been combined into new ones.

That's neat, sure, but not what I wanna hear!

>You have learned Claw Mastery. You have learned Fist Mastery. You have learned Kick Mastery. You have learned Bladed Mastery. You have learned Perfect Resilience. You have learned Mobility Mastery. Your Mastery Skills have been combined. You have learned Combat Mastery.

Uh-oh. That doesn't sound balanced at all.

I opened up my Status, but for some reason, all of my attack-related Skills were totally gone, and in their place was only Combat Mastery. That was probably the combination of all the various Skills I'd been picking up.

Wait, so what does Combat Mastery do, then?

Taking a deep breath, I checked its effect.

>COMBAT MASTERY: In combat, any and all of your actions become a custom Skill of your choosing. However, effects such as instant-death attacks and invulnerability cannot be produced. Passive.

Okay, that's flat-out cheating.

Basically, that meant that I could pull off any kind of crazy movement I could think of. If I wanted my sword to make a slash of pure energy that split into ten homing slashes, it just happened. The little caveat at the end was totally worthless to me, too.

No instakill attacks? No invulnerability? Guess what? I get that on my stupid-high Stats already.

I let out a heavy sigh.

Seriously, this is too much! I literally can't imagine a Skill more OP than this!

I had finally gotten a grasp on my abilities through sparring with Louise. But now, it was clear my strength was beyond even my comprehension. At this point, I could only laugh at my stupid cheater Status. Haha, I suck.

Unfortunately, though, I was curious enough about the exact state of my Status that I had to look.

HIIRAGI SEIICHI	
RACE: Human(Human)	
SEX: Male(Male)	
JOB: Enigma(Magic Swordsman).	
AGE: 17(17)	LEVEL: 20(20)
MANA: Too terrifying to display(200)	ATTACK: Too terrifying to display(200)
DEFENSE: Too terrifying to display(200)	AGILITY: Too terrifying to display(200)
M-ATTACK: Too terrifying to display(200)	M-DEFENSE: Too terrifying to display(200)
LUCK: Too terrifying to display(200)	APPEARANCE: Just guess(20)
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality Shirt• Quality Pants• Quality Undershirt	

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality Underwear• Wise Simian’s Chain• Nixie-Cryst Shortsword• Bracelet of the Night• Aterprinceptite Choker• Necklace of Endless Love• Rapier of Festering Hatred• Rapier of Burgeoning Love
<p>UNIQUE SKILLS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instant Memorization• Perfect Recollection• Instant Learning• Instant Regeneration• Perfect Loot• Arrange• Clairvoyance• Perseverance• Open Heart
<p>SKILLS—OFFENSE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Combat Mastery
<p>SKILLS—DEFENSE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perfect Resilience
<p>SKILLS—MOVEMENT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flash
<p>SKILLS—SPECIAL:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater Analysis• Ultra Compounding• Ultimate-Tier Tool Crafting• Strength Disguise.• Blend-In• Second Sight• Absorption• Compression• Universal Language Comprehension• Armor-Piercer• Pressure• Auto-Defense

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instruction• Endless Hell
MANA: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Voiceless Casting• Compound Casting• Multicasting
ELEMENTAL—MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Daily Magic• Water Magic (Ultimate)• Dark Magic (Ultimate)• Earth Magic(Ultimate)• Dimensional Magic(Ultimate)• Fire Magic(Ultimate)• Null Magic(Ultimate)• Air Magic(Ultimate)• Thunder Magic(Ultimate)• Ice Magic(Ultimate)• Light Magic(Ultimate)
UNIQUE MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Purgatory• Reversal• Unbinding• Seiichi.
SPECIAL MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Magic Creation• Glyph Magic: Ultimate.• Circle Magic: Ultimate.
SECRET TECHNIQUES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gale Thrust• Piercing Light• Flowing Mist• Blossoming Blades• Sword And Soul
COMBAT STYLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Zeford Duelling Style (Founder)
TITLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stench Virtuoso

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Man with a Gorilla Wife• Pinnacle of Existence• Unbounded One• Master of Men• Dragon Hunter• Godslayer• Meister of Magicks• Flash Murderer• Monsterkind's Nightmare• The World-Crusher
CURRENCY: 583,361,470,560G

Great, now even my Status is afraid of me! Like, seriously, why?! What does this world even want from me?! But somehow, my Appearance is actually halfway-decent this time.

The real mystery, though, was my Race changing back to human, despite my powers never being more monstrous. Once again, I used Analysis on the Race entry.

>HUMAN: A being that manages perfection despite its multitude of flaws. Their actions can elevate them beyond the benevolence of the greatest god or render them viler than the cruelest Demon King. Their flaws are the very factor that ensures their endless evolution.

That's even worst than just being a vanilla monstrosity! Like, what's a human supposed to be, anyway?! I can't keep up with this philosophical shit!

I took very ragged breaths in an attempt to calm myself down. That was when I noticed two new entries in the Unique Skills area.

Okay, I'm good now... and I guess Clairvoyance is a Unique Skill, too.

Perseverance and Open Heart seemed like pretty stereotypically human-y Skills, which meant they didn't sound stupidly overpowered. They seemed like half-decent ones to have, actually.

SKILL DETAILS

PERSEVERANCE: A Skill unlocked by humans upon levelling up. When taking physical or mental damage, your Attack is multiplied by the number of seconds you've been subject to said pain. If not used immediately, your Attack multiplier is automatically carried over into your next combat. Passive.
OPEN HEART: A Skill unlocked by humans upon levelling up. Your experiences only continue to broaden your horizons, automatically increasing all your Stats over time. Passive.

Those are easily the most busted Skills I have! So, I can't trust human-y things now, is that it?! I mean, seriously, Perseverance can snowball my Attack to stupidly high levels way too easily. And Open Heart's just stupid. That means my Stats are increasing right now, right?!

Now sure, getting Skills like that might be why to celebrate under normal circumstances. I had tons of people and things to fight for, so more strength definitely couldn't hurt. This just felt like overkill. Nobody needed to be so obscenely strong. At this rate, even if I was just trying to protect someone, I might accidentally wipe the attacker off the map—no, forget that, I could obliterate whole *countries* if I wasn't careful, maybe even the whole world. Power was nice and all, but that was downright overkill.

Also, I noticed that Auto-Defense and Endless Hell weren't classified as offensive Skills and were slotted in under the special category. Not only that but my various scattered Immunity Skills had also been combined into the singular Perfect Resilience. That was a small comfort.

Nonetheless, I managed to stay on my feet as I looked at my new Titles.

TITLE DETAILS
FLASH MURDERER: A Title awarded to those who kill a vast number of monsters in an instant. Your Agility and Attack are

greatly increased during combat.
MONSTERKIND'S NIGHTMARE: A Title awarded to one who demonstrates themselves as monsters' worst nightmare. During combats with monsters, all your Stats are greatly increased, and the opposing monsters' Stats are halved.
THE WORLD-CRUSHER: A Title for one who struck fear into everyone the world over.

That was the last straw. I finally fell to my knees.

Saria ran over to me. "Seiichi? Are you okay?!"

"Haha... hahaha..." I laughed weakly. "I'm not so sure I'm a human anymore."

She gave me a puzzled look. "Of course, you're a human."

Her certainty was just enough to pull me back from the brink. Before I knew what I was doing, I hugged her tightly.

Thank God she still thinks so.

Now that I was feeling better, I had a few things to say to my Stats.

'Flash Murderer'? That's just gruesome! And how the hell is Monsterkind's Nightmare even a title, much less one I can pick up so willy-nilly?! And c'mon, how does The World-Crusher sound so lofty when it doesn't even change my Stats?!

One thing was clear: I'd somehow surpassed humanity while staying human.

But wait a minute. If someone really did send all these monsters here, doesn't that make my levelling up his fault? After all, I wouldn't have gotten so many levels without the monsters.

If there was a mastermind behind everything, they deserved a full-force punch to the face. All my recent mental strife was their fault, and I could practically feel Perseverance and Open Heart popping off. I smiled darkly at the thought of giving that faceless foe what they deserved.

As I imagined that, one of the guards came forward in front of our group.

"Listen well! His Majesty has formally declared the monster threat to be vanquished! Please head to the castle immediately so that you may receive your rewards. There is only one exception—Seiichi-kun, the man who vaporized the enemy force!"

"M-Me?!"

Of course, they know it was me... but then again, I wasn't exactly trying to hide it with a spell that flashy.

Then again, I'd been attracting my fair share of attention since beating Louise, so there was no point trying to keep my power a secret now.

"It pains me greatly, but His Majesty would like to use the drops of the monsters you have defeated to reward the adventurers and guardsmen alike. We won't ask that you relinquish your bounty freely, of course—you'll have first pick of the exceptionally powerful items, and we'll prepare a separate reward for you to suit whatever you please. Do you accept?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I knew it... You don't want to part from your—what?!"

"I don't mind you taking the loot. Honestly, I'm pretty content with how things turned out as-is."

More OP equipment was honestly the last thing I needed.

He shot me a confused look, which was quickly replaced by a happy smile. "I'm not sure I understand, but regardless, thank you for your generosity."

With that, he left to tell the guards and adventurers the good news.

I'm just glad nobody got hurt. I guess I have the abnormally-strong perverts to thank for that, though.

"Seiichi!"

"Master!"

"... Found you."

Al, Lulune, and Origa-chan finally found me shortly after. I was about to say something when Al suddenly cut me off.

"The hell was that spell you used?! I mean, *damn*, I knew you were strong! Your Status is probably a buncha lies, right?"

"Uh... Let's just call that my little manly secret..."

"You can't pull the 'girl's secret' card that easily! I want answers!"

"What?!"

"Don't tell me you actually thought that coy act would work!"

Honestly, though, I didn't mind if she saw my Status—or if Saria did, either. I knew they wouldn't get scared of me and would keep on treating me like they always had. That wasn't the problem, though. If I told them everything, that would naturally lead to my being summoned as a Hero and how I got isolated from the others. To be fair, though, it was also a *lot* to go over, so it just seemed easier to avoid that whole conversation.

As I kept trying to avoid Al's questions, Lulune stopped me with a pained expression.

"Master..."

"Whoa, are you okay? Did a monster get you?!"

She seemed fine when I watched her, but there must've been too many of them. I hurriedly started looking her over for injuries. That only made her cheeks flush bright pink, though.

"E-Er... I'm unharmed, so I-I would appreciate it if you wouldn't look me over so closely..."

"Oh! Right. Sorry."

I must've been too worried to keep my head on straight. I took a breath before asking her more calmly this time.

"So? Are you okay?"

"Well—"

Her stomach cut her off with a mighty growl. She bashfully averted her gaze as we all turned to stare at her. Her cheeks turned a shade redder before she finally shot me a pleading look.

"... I'm hungry," she finally said.

The tension left my shoulders all at once.

Oh, is that it? How's that any different from always?

I couldn't help but smile a little with relief.

"M-Master!" she protested. "Please don't laugh! I'm aware that I'm a filthy beast who can't get her mind off food, but it's still plenty embarrassing!"

"Wait, even you think you're obsessive?!"

That was honestly the biggest surprise here. I'd thought she took pride in her endless appetite. She genuinely seemed dispirited by my smile, so I sobered up a little more.

"Sorry. How about we go out together sometime and have something really good?"

She perked up a little. "Really? Just the two of us?"

"Uh... That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but sure, why not?"

"What?!" Al's eyes widened. "M-Me too, then! I wanna go out to dinner with you, too!"

"Really...?"

"Me too, me too!" Saria chimed in.

Lulune seemed insistent on going out with me alone, though, so I had to slot Al and Saria in for dinners on the next two days.

Wait... Don't tell me these are dates?

I'd never really had a girlfriend or anything before, so going on dates with not one but two incredibly beautiful ladies was a really big ask. We'd gone shopping and eaten out before, but I never thought of it as dates, so I could pull it off without any embarrassment or dumb slip-ups on my part. Just the thought of it was making me blush.

I felt a tugging at my robe. "Seiichi-oniichan?"

"Hm? What's up, Origa-chan? Do you want to go out to dinner with me, too?"

"... Yeah."

"Oh. Okay."

That wouldn't be as nerve-racking, at least—she felt more like a little sister to me than anything. The only challenge would be making sure she enjoyed herself.

"... I wanna say something else."

"Huh?" I cocked my head to the side. I wasn't expecting that.

"You promised... Pet me?"

My heart quickened when I saw how pleadingly she was looking up at me. If that lolicon at the guild—Walter, or whatever—saw her, there'd surely be a scene. I just gave her the promised pets.

"You did really well, but you don't need to try so hard. I'd be really broken up if you got yourself hurt."

She blushed bashfully and began to fidget a little. "Okay... thank you."

While all that was going on, the guards and adventurers alike were making their way to the palace. We followed them, making small chats as we went.

When we were partway there, however, Barney-san stopped me. He had an unusually serious expression.

"Uh... Everything okay?" I asked.

He didn't reply; instead, he came closer until he was right under my nose.

Okay, I think I'm starting to panic.

Then, he clapped his hands on my shoulders and stared right into my eyes. I reflexively tensed up, but he wasn't upset—in fact, he seemed elated.

"Seiichi-kun! Please, come to my Academy to teach!"

"I... huh?"

That was the closest thing to a response that I could muster.

Chapter 10: The Gears Mesh

"**H**ahh..."

I, Louisse Palse, aimed a massive slash at the elephant-like Dawnhorn as it moved to impale me on its namesake horns. It was cleanly split in half and hit the earth with a tremorous thud.

"I suppose that's the last of them," I sighed as I looked about.

I was surrounded by a generous mountain of monster corpses. The Dawnhorn was evidently the last monster, and with its death, the monsters' advance was utterly halted.



"That would put an end to that, then," came the androgynous rumbling voice of the Black Paladin at my side.

"Indeed. Was there any damage to the nearby settlements?"

"Rest assured, no harm has come to the villagers. Likewise, there exists not a single casualty amongst our ranks."

"Good... I'm glad to hear that."

"I must admit, though, your sword arm is as impressive as always. Of the five thousand-odd invaders to cross our border, you vanquished a third of them with ease."

"You think so?"

It didn't quite seem real. The only thing I could say for certain was that Teacher's lessons had a palpable effect on me. The increase in my effectiveness in short bursts was appreciated. But the more noticeable change was how I handled wars of attrition more easily. I'd gotten used to cutting out unnecessary motions from my attacks and was even evading more efficiently. It was a matter of achieving the maximum possible effect using the minimum possible energy. If I had tried to take on such a horde before my training, I would've likely worn myself well before the battle's end.

I suppose I have grown stronger, then.

"As long as there were no fatalities, I'm content," I replied simply. "I'll be taking the Swordsaint Valkyries back to the Capital, then."

"Already? Can you not wait a spell? We've our share of cleanup to—"

"I don't want to leave Teacher waiting."

"Were you always so cold?! I mean... there's an awful lot of work for my Abyss Schwartzen to handle, not least of which is collecting our foes' scattered bounties..."

"Ladies, take thirty minutes to rest before we return to the Capital."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Listen to me!"

I ignored the Paladin, however, and took a seat on a nearby rock. I'd received word the Capital was also under attack. But I trusted that Teacher would have little issue vanquishing the attackers.

Then, I heard a voice in my head that had left me ever since I reached level 500,

>You have levelled up.

With that, I was officially a Transcendant, just like Barnabus-sama. I would have once taken such news with shock, but now I was Teacher's pupil now. It came as no surprise.

I composedly stood up, neglecting to tell any of my companions as I walked away.

I can't wait to tell Teacher upon my return.

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I, Karen Kannazuki, had been continuing my magic lectures and monster-fighting practicums without difficulty. Not even a week had passed since our enrolment in Barbodel Magic Academy. Although we had fought and slain our first monsters, we remained wholly unchanged. Not all of us possessed ironclad resolve—in fact, there were more weak-willed students than not—but not one of us was conflicted about having taken lives. If anything, there was a general mood of elation in light of our first combat-fueled level-ups.

It was only a guess, but I thought that something about our summoning to the Kaizell Empire had cleared such inhibitions from our consciences. Our time at the Academy had only strengthened that theory.

As an aside, our Status was also quite unique. Mine, for example, was as follows.

KAREN KANNAZUKI
RACE: Human

SEX: Female	
JOB: Magic Swordswoman	
AGE: 18	LEVEL: 20
MANA: 1000	ATTACK: 500
DEFENSE: 500	AGILITY: 500
M-ATTACK: 500	M-DEFENSE: 500
LUCK: 500	APPEARANCE: Indeterminate
EQUIPMENT: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality Shirt• Quality Skirt• Quality Blazer• Quality Underwear• Quality Black Tights• Quality Leather Belt• Armband• Holy Sword(On Standby)	
SKILLS: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis• Double-Jump.	
ELEMENTAL MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fire Magic(Intermediate)• Water Magic(Intermediate)• Air Magic(Advanced)• Light Magic(Advanced).	
UNIQUE MAGIC: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Holy Magic: Ultimate	
SECRET TECHNIQUES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• New Moon Slash.	

COMBAT STYLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kannazuki One-Sword Style: Initiate
TITLES: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hero• Wealthy Heiress• Guide.
MONEY: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 23,800G

As a Hero, I received comparatively higher Stat increases per level, and all of us could use at least three elements of magic aside from our Holy Magic. In short, we subverted the world's existing magic norms. It was no wonder we were, by and large, targets of scorn throughout the Academy.

"Still, I can't get used to these looks," I muttered discontentedly.

"Yeah."

Shouta Takamiya, my underclassman from the kendo club on Earth, nodded in agreement.

We were simply walking down the corridor yet surrounded by all manner of vexed glares and terrified sidelong glances. Not one of them looked upon us favorably.

Soon, however, a group of three male students appeared in the hallway ahead of us. The boy at their head approached us readily and greeted us.

Roberto Illoas Windberg.

Shouta was quite handsome in his own right, but Robert's handsome profile easily put him to shame. His manners were likewise impeccable—I had met my share of Japan's elites, and even I was somewhat starstruck by his mannerisms.

"Good day to you, Heroes. I hope you've been doing... er. I suppose you don't look that well."

His voice was devoid of sarcasm. He was simply telling us what he saw.

"Hey, aniki! Why're we hangin' around here instead of getting to class? We've got Dorger-sensei's class next, right?"

Roberto shot his brother a discontented look. "You could stand to be a tad more polite, Gionis."

"Pfft, as if. I'm a real dumbass. No way I could speak fancy like you."

"But as a prince, you have an obligation to—"

"Eww, no thanks! You're gonna be king anyways, so you can just handle all that diplomacy shit. I just wanna hit stuff with my sword. You'll be the king, and I'll be the general or whatever! See? Everyone's happy!"

"Again, that's not the issue."

Shouta and I exchanged flat glances as the brothers argued. The shorter, blonder man at his side was his brother, Gionis Galdein Windberg. Unlike Roberto's composed nature and perfectly groomed hair, Gionis couldn't even wear his uniform properly, and it looked like he'd cut his hair with a rusty knife.

Finally, the last member of their trio spoke up. "Roberto-niisama, Gionis-niisama, could you perhaps leave it at that?"

Both the brothers instantly froze.

The last of their group was a young woman whose blonde hair reached her waist. Her sky-blue eyes possessed an unmatched, regal sort of strength. Her facial features were beautifully proportioned without feeling artificial. She was the youngest of the trio, Latis Dea Windberg.

All eyes were on the purple arcs of electricity dancing between her fingers.

"You wouldn't want to trouble your little sister, would you?" she smiled sweetly.

"O-Of course not!" Roberto quickly composed himself. "I'm sorry, Gionis. I went a little far."

"N-Nah, same here. I'll try to watch my mouth."

It was almost unbelievable how quickly the pair apologized to each other, and I found myself feeling somewhat lost.

Latis then turned to us and curtsayed apologetically.

"I'm so sorry for my brothers' foolish antics."

"Foolish?" Roberto puffed himself up a little. "Isn't that going a tad far, Latis?"

"Yeah! Like hell, I'm the only one with a bad attitude!" Gionis echoed.

"And what, may I ask, is the problem?" She glanced back at them, but it was clear that neither wished to challenge her further. "Anyhow, noble Heroes, we have classes to attend. Until we meet again."

"H-Hold up! Uh, anyhow, Heroes, see ya later!"

"That Latis... Nonetheless, Heroes, this is farewell for now."

Gionis and Roberto then hurried to follow their little sister to their next classes.

"They're rather unique," I mused.

Shouta nodded. "Yeah. I don't think anyone else here has treated us that normally."

The Windberg trio was something of an anomaly. They had to have heard of the misdemeanors of the other Heroes, but they clearly weren't prejudiced against us.

"They're nobility, aren't they? I seem to recall something about them and the Kingdom of Windberg."

"Yeah, we covered that in geography," he added. "It's a fair distance from the Kaizell Empire we came from, and they supposedly haven't had a war in a hundred years... I think."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes, that's right. The country that will one day have them as rulers. It seems like a veritable paradise in comparison to the Empire."

The air between us grew a tad heavier, and we were silent for a while.

Shouta suddenly broke the peace. "Hey, is that Seto over there?"

"Hm?"

I followed his gaze to find one of the girls who'd spoken up during our first meeting with Kaizell's king.

She's... Airi Seto, was it?

Seto was peering about, evidently searching for something. I wasted no time in approaching her.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, you're the student council president! And Shoucchi, too? What're you two doing together?"

Shouta scratched his head. "We just noticed you were looking for something."

"Where are Nojima and your friends?" I pressed. "I haven't even seen them as of late."

She chuckled. "Oh, Yuuka and the girls? Everyone keeps getting the wrong idea about them, but they're pretty calm and composed at heart. Sure, they got in trouble a few times and wound up fighting their way out back on Earth, but they always showed up to class and everything."

She was likely referring to Nojima still-Yuuka Nojima. She was one of the more standout female delinquents. If memory served, she was the leader of a local ladies' gang. According to her, though, she wasn't a true troublemaker, and it would thus be unsurprising that they hadn't been causing problems.

"Very well." I nodded understandingly. "So? What are you looking for?"

"Right! Have either of you seen Sei-chan anywhere?"

"Sei-chan?"

Shouta and I exchanged puzzled looks.

"Yep! Actually, I've been looking for him ever since we came here..."

"Er. Is it a person or an object?"

"Of course, he's a person!" She giggled. "What're you talking about?"

That's my line.

I cleared my throat. "So? Was this Sei-chan summoned to this world alongside us?"

"Well, he goes to our school, so I kinda thought so."

"Could you tell us his full name, then?"

"Of course! His name is, uh... What was it again, Pres?"

"How should I know?"

"What about you, Shoucchi?"

"The hell are you asking me?! You're the only one who'd know!"

"Huh... And here I was sure you'd know."

Shouta sighed. "How'd you come to *that* conclusion?"

I rubbed my chin in thought. "You said you've been searching for this 'Sei-chan' ever since we came here?"

"Yep! We've got a ton of people at our school, right? So I was sure I'd just missed him somewhere."

She certainly had a point. There were enough of us that finding one particular person, even if we were all gathered in one place, would be a herculean feat. Such meetings were rare, which would only add to the difficulty. Even so, we'd been in this world for half a year. I'd have thought she would've found him by now.

"Why are you searching for this 'Sei-chan'?"

She blushed slightly. "Well, he doesn't have many friends, so I was thinking he'd be feeling pretty lonely. Besides, he saved me once, so I've gotta return the favor!"

For some reason, I suddenly felt as though we were great rivals of sorts.

"Well, don't worry!" Seto chuckled. "I'm gonna keep looking for him. If either of you sees him, let him know Airin's looking for him!"

"A-Airin?"

"Okay, bye-bye now!"

With that, she left to continue her hunt.

"She's awfully energetic," I remarked as we watched her leave.

"Y-Yeah," Shouta echoed unconvincingly.

I turned to face him. His brow was furrowed in thought.

"She's not looking for *him*, is she?" he muttered.

"..."

Evidently, he had an idea of who the mysterious Sei-chan was. We headed off to class from there, with Shouta still lost in thought.

Little did I know that I would be reunited with *him* soon enough.

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"Uh..."

"What do you say?!"

I, Seiichi Hiiragi, was still being stared down by Barney-san. I still didn't know how to react to his invitation to teach at Barbodel Magic Academy.

"So, uh, why me?"

That was my biggest question. After all, he was the Great Sage, so I didn't know why he'd need me for anything.

He only looked at me blankly. Apparently, that was a stupid question.

"What are you saying, Seiichi-kun? You created that spell that wiped out the monsters, didn't you? A spell that powerful, that secret—and *home-crafted*, no less—easily surpasses anything an old coot like me can produce. Who wouldn't beg to learn their secrets?"

Well, damn.

Apparently, I'd transcended a Transcendant.

Does that mean I'm a Trans Transcendant? No, that probably means something else.

"I'm really flattered—"

"You'll accept my offer, then?!"

"Hold up! I can't just decide so easily!"

"What's the matter? If it's money you're after, I can surely satisfy you."

I honestly couldn't care less about money, but I had a pressing reason I couldn't leave Terbelle yet.

"For one, I promised Louisse that I'd keep watch here until she got back. I won't be able to set foot outside for at least a week."

He stroked his beard. "Hmm... I see now. I'd imagine her faith in your strength permitted her to join the Black Paladin so freely."

That was the biggest reason. Honestly, the pervs at the Guild were strong enough to handle any problems on their own, but a promise was a promise. There was no way I could leave until then.

"I really don't want to leave Saria and the others," I added.

That was my biggest reason. Becoming a teacher at Barbodel would probably mean leaving them behind. I was really worried about Shouta and the others, but that wasn't any reason to abandon Saria.

I'm the one getting invited, after all, so I doubt I can take anyone with me.

"Oh, is that all? In that case, Saria-kun or whoever can be your students. Not only that, your adventurer girlfriend is clearly skilled enough to teach combat at the Academy. The young lady kicking monsters about can be a student or a teacher, her choice. We're always on the lookout for new talent, both as students and faculty, so feel free to bring as many people as you'd like."

Saria and the others all stared at him wide-eyed. There was still one loose end, though.

"What about her?" I asked, nudging Origa-chan forward.

"Hmm... She's a tad young to be a student. Come to think of it, isn't she the girl who attempted to assassinate Landze?"

"Uh... Yes?"

"That would mean she's talented enough to evade even Louise's attention... Very well, she can accompany you as an assistant. What do you say?"

"Well, if you're really sure, I don't see anything wrong with it, but..."

I glanced back at the others.

"Sounds good to me!" Saria grinned. "School sounds like a ton of fun!"

Al nodded. "Yeah, sounds fine. 'Sides, I'm, uh, fine as long as you're there."

"As your knight, I shall follow wherever you lead!"

Even Origa-chan nodded. "I wanna be with Seiichi-oniichan and everyone."

Barney-san clapped his hands with a smile. "It's decided, then! So, you'll be setting out as soon as Louise returns?"

"Yeah, fine by me."

I was glad that we were all able to go in the end. Fortunately, Barney-san had some business of his own with Landze-san, so he wasn't ready to leave Terbelle yet, either. Of course, I had my fair share of preparation to do in the meantime. I'd have to ask Louise to put our lessons on hold until I got back, and aside from that, I had many people to thank.

With that, Barney-san nodded and grinned. "Well, I'd best receive my bounty from the palace." He then hobbled off down the street.

It looks like I'll be meeting up with Shouta and the others again soon, but not how I expected we would.

The Kaizell Empire was clearly up to no good, after all, so I had to make sure all my former schoolmates were safe and sound. Not only that, I was genuinely interested in what school was like in this world, even if I'd be seeing it from a teacher's perspective. The only thing I knew for certain was that it'd be much more fulfilling this time, especially with Saria and the others at my side.

With that, we headed to the palace to receive our rewards.

Chapter 11: Lulune and the Speed-Eating Competition

It was the morning after I'd received my reward from the palace. Louisse still hadn't returned, so I would fulfill my promise to Lulune by taking her out to grab some food.

As an aside, my reward was a goodie bag of extra-rare drops. The guard who'd handed me my loot was outright stunned by what I was getting. The garrison, adventurers, and even Landze-san clearly suspected that I was to thank for the sheer wealth of the bounty. And Landze-san, fortunately, played it all off as good luck. I didn't know if that was the right call for him to make as king, but it sure made my life easier, so I wasn't complaining.

The items I received were as follows.

ITEM DETAILS
THOUSAND-HANDED BRACERS: Mythic-tier equipment. Whenever you attack, your attacks are doubled, and your regular attacks gain the Light element.
GARUDA BOOTS: Mythic-tier equipment. You can walk freely in midair. In combat, you can envelop your legs in the wind to move at high speeds or unleash more powerful kicks.
THE WATER GOD'S CANTEEN: Mythic-tier equipment. The flask contains an unlimited supply of water. One sip is enough to cure any status conditions and restores the drinker to health.

Great. I guess I killed another god.

All three of the items were pretty busted. The Bracers, for instance, would turn a hundred slashes from a mighty monstrosity into two hundred slashes, and the Light element certainly didn't hurt, either.

Just to be clear, I'm not the monstrosity in that example.

According to all the new information in my head, the Bracers were probably a drop from a Thousand Golem. At least, I assumed so—nothing else had literally a thousand arms.

The Garuda Boots were an obvious upgrade to the Azure Boots I was wearing, with similar air-walking effects. The speed boost was just the icing on the cake. I had no idea what monster dropped them. However, there was everything from Sky Dragons to Heavenly Lions, and any of them seemed like strong candidates for flying shoes.

The Water God's Canteen, on the other hand, managed to be pretty broken without even being equipment. Any free pass to heal status conditions was great, even if I didn't need it, and the 'restore to health' bit made it sound like it could cure anything from the common cold to cancer. You couldn't put a price tag on that. Again, I didn't have a good idea of what dropped it, since there were Water Serpents, Aqua Lords, and other water-y monsters. All I knew was that it probably belonged to a god, and I stomped it without even looking at it.

I'd gotten quite a bit more equipment, not to mention parts of most of the monsters I'd taken out, but there were far too many to name them all.

The important thing was, this was my day with Lulune, and we'd decided to check out different street stalls. We even planned to skip breakfast so we could visit every last food vendor and had gotten up at the crack of dawn to arrive in the park when the stalls first opened. Saria, Al, and Origa-chan were all either kicking around the inn or taking requests at the guild.

At any rate, I couldn't leave Lulune waiting, so I quickly got dressed and left the room.

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After waiting for a little while outside the inn, Lulune arrived.

"Ah, Master! My apologies! Did I make you wait long?"

"Nah, not at all. More importantly, we've got a full day of eating ahead of us, right? I'm pretty hungry after skipping breakfast."

"I-Is that so?! Then let us get underway!"

She smiled before hurrying off down the street. I sped up a little to grab her hand and stop her. Sure, I was hungry, but I wanted to relax as much as we could.

"Slow down! The food's not going anywhere. How about we take our time?"

"Ah... Of course, Master. B-But, well..."

"What's up?"

She blushed. "Y-Your hand is..."

"Oh!" I quickly let go of her. "Sorry!"

However, just as I released it, she grabbed my hand in turn.

"Lulune?"

I gave her a curious look, and she pointedly turned away from me.

"I-I'll permit it for today, so... may I continue to hold your hand?"

"Uh."

Who is she, and what did she do with Lulune?

She was totally different from the noble glutton I knew her to be and was acting unusually self-conscious. I'd never seen her so meek and uncertain, and I had no idea how to respond to her question.

"Master?" she asked hesitantly.

"Uh, s-sure, we can hold hands. I'm pretty new to this stuff myself, but if it makes you happy, hold it all you like!"

Gee, Casanova, what a smooth reply.

That was about the best I could do, though. Lulune didn't seem to mind—if anything, she only blushed harder. Her smile was so sweet, in fact, that I had to quickly turn away to avoid outing myself.

"Well, we better get going! Can't block the front of the inn forever, right? We've got some street vendors to hit up."

"Right!"

Finally, we started walking. A casual stroll would be pretty fun in and of itself, but we headed straight for the city square. We'd find the most food stalls there. After that, I was hoping to take her to Noard-san's café. His cake and tea were to die for, after all.

"Master, Master!" Lulune suddenly pointed. "Look!"

"Hm?"

We weren't even halfway towards the square, but a sign outside a restaurant had evidently caught her eye.

'Binge-Eating Contest'?"

Evidently, the restaurant was having some kind of promotion. The place's name was the Bloated Gut, so it certainly tracked.

I know we were planning on eating at the square, but this could be fun.

According to the sign, the winner got all their food for free along with the prize.

"Wanna try it, Lulune?"

"Well... Are you sure, Master?"

"Course. I can just eat later, so if you wanna enter, I'll be there to cheer you on."

"In that case..."

She hesitated for only a moment before nodding. We stepped up to the door and let the waitress know Lulune wanted to enter.

"Um... Are you sure?" the waitress asked us. "The competition here is rather fierce, as famous binge-eaters from all over the world are here. We have no bracket for women, so she'll have to compete with the men."

Famous binge-eaters from all over the world? Gotta admit that sounds intense.

Lulune didn't even bat an eye.

"No matter! I'll beat them all!"

There's the Lulune, I know.

Since she could tell Lulune meant business, the waitress was kind enough to register Lulune as a pro.

Inside, we found the restaurant was laid out like any other. There was a generous handful of round tables with chairs clustered around them, along with a full bar area and even a terrace. Lulune headed right up to the rest of the contestants, so I took a seat by the bar to watch her.

The smell of cigarette smoke hit my nose, and I turned to find a man in a tattered black robe sitting there.

"Sorry, bud," he grinned. "It's a shitty habit, but I can't seem to shake it."

His hood was pulled low enough that I couldn't see his whole face, but I could see the messy beard he was growing, and the cigarette clamped in his teeth. Between that and his deep voice, I could tell he was a man.

I didn't know they even had cigarettes in this world.

"I don't mind."

"Ya don't? That's real swell." He turned to the nearest waiter. "Hey, can I get an ale?" The man then turned back to me. "What can I get ya?"

"Huh?"

"Just a token of my thanks. Wanna drink?"

"N-No, it's no problem, really!"

"C'mon, bud, lemme do you a solid. So? What's your pleasure?"

"Um... I guess I'll take some juice."

The dirty man smirked as he turned back to the waiter. "Bring a glass of your best juice for my bud here!"

"You got it."

Ale's a kind of beer, right? I remember seeing on TV that ale doesn't use hops in the fermentation stage.

Soon enough, the waiter brought the man a flagon of ale and placed a glass of orange juice in front of me. He took a hearty swig of his booze.

"Damn, that hits the spot!"

I took a sip of the juice. "Yeah, this is really good."

It wasn't made from oranges like the color would suggest. But I could tell it was undiluted and unsweetened, and the fruit had a full flavor profile.

After taking another swig, the smoker turned back to me.

"Gotta admit, bud, this's a nice country. Don'tcha think?"

"Uh, yeah, I agree. I'm not from here, of course, but it's pretty good."

"I knew you got taste. See, my work means I gotta move around a ton, but even the villages here are managed great by the state. That might not sound pretty, but trust me, that's a compliment. They care about the people, an' the knights are keepin' the peace even in the boonies. If there's trouble, the top brass're quick to respond. They even got some welfare shit, so there ain't many poor folks. It's like a real dream."

"Huh... I didn't know that."

"The king here's good shit, bud. In most places, you're up to your eyes in racism, and you can't even take a breath... By the way, you an adventurer?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"You'll probably wind up leavin' here eventually, then, so here's a bit of advice. Forget everythin' you learned about work here. In a place like this, you wind up takin' advantage of the peace, which can really bite ya in the ass."

That made sense. Then again, Terbelle also had an especially perverted guild—at least, I hope they were the exception to the rule. I didn't want to think about what it'd be like if Guild HQ was the norm.

"Thank you for the advice," I said.

"Don't mention it. Sorry, mind I ask your name, bud?"

"It's Seiichi."

"Seiichi, huh? Nice name. You an Eastlander? I'm... well, call me Slowe. Meetin' here was prolyl fate, so I bet we'll run into each other again down the line." He turned back to the waiter. "I'm leavin' the cash on the table!"

With that, Slowe-san let out a hefty puff of cigarette smoke and strolled out.

"He sure was weird," I muttered as I watched him leave.

I didn't have much time to relax, though, as the competition looked like it was finally ready to kick into gear.

"It's finally the time you've all been waiting for!" came the announcer's voice. "It's now time for The Bloated Gut's famous binge-eating competition! Let's move right along and introduce our contestants. First off, we've got the biggest binger in Terbelle! Give it up for Hun Gree!"

"Yaaaahhh!" roared a muscular man in a tank top. He wasn't quite Gustle's size, but he was close. "I'm the biggest eater in the whole damn town! I'm the Eating Master!"

Uh... Eating Master? That sounds kinda lame—and I'm not even going to start on that name.

"Next up, we have a contestant from the Kaizell Empire! Here's the Snacking Tsar himself, Chewar!"

"I am indeed the true Eating Master!" bellowed a middle-aged man in a goatee wearing a military uniform.

Okay, his name's literally 'chewer.'

"Continuing our streak of foreign contestants, we have the biggest gourmet in the whole Varcia Empire! It's Eatsa Lott!"

A middle-aged man with rapidly greying hair nodded in recognition, his gargantuan belly jiggling with pride. "I dare any of you to outdo my stomach!"

The names are officially getting stupider. Good to know.

More importantly, though, I'd never heard of the Varcia Empire before. Of course, I knew about the Kaizell Empire, but it only made sense there'd be other

countries, too—especially given what Slowe-san had said.

"Last but not least, we have this competition's dark horse, Lulune!"

"Enough chat," Lulune retorted. "Where's the food?"

She didn't seem at all bothered by the trio of gigantic men sharing her table as she started looking around for the waiter.

"All right," the announcer continued, "let's get right into the rules! Your mission is to eat the dishes we've prepared for you all in order, and whoever lasts the most courses will be our winner! Our winner will have their lunch bill covered and be awarded the Bloated Gut's signature Great Parfait! But watch out—whoever doesn't win will be slapped with double the usual bill!"

So the stuff on the sign-out front's true, then. But wait, why's the prize for a binge-eating competition more food? That just seems kinda cruel. Forget prizes; that's torture. Also, the whole double-bill thing makes this feel like a scam.

The announcer didn't even pause to take a breath, though.

"All right, time for our first dish! It's none other than a Dorse steak!"

Dorse again?! And wait, wouldn't that kind of be like cannibalism for Lulune?! Er, I guess donkeys and horses are different enough that it's okay, right? Please tell me they are.

As I had a slight panic attack, massive steaks were laid out in front of the four contestants.

"All right, everyone, on your marks! Get set! EAAAAAAT!!!"

With that, all four of them dug into the meat, and Lulune had as much gusto as any of them.

So Lulune's an eager cannibal. Good to know.



As the contestants chipped away at their steaks, one of them—Hun Gree—began eating more and more slowly before finally collapsing completely with a belch.

"Ugh... I can't eat another bite..."

With that, he was officially out of the running.

Hey, it's still the first course! It's a big steak, sure, but can't you at least finish that?!

Hun Gree even had nearly half of the steak left on his plate. I honestly had no idea what he was even doing at the competition.

"It looks like we have our first loser, folks!" the announcer called. "As such, contestant Hun Gree gets double the bill, plus a penalty fine for leaving half his food untouched!"

With that, he handed Hun Gree a slip of paper.

Wait, they didn't mention penalty fees in the rules explanation. This really is just a big scam, isn't it?

Worse, as soon as Hun Gree saw the figure on the paper, he made a face like Munk's *The Scream*. I was almost curious about how badly they were gouging the poor guy.

"It seems as though our remaining three contestants have finished their first course! Let's move along to the next dish, shall we?"

With that, Lulune and the other two began ploughing through course after course.

Hun Gree really wasn't anything special, was he?

As the second and third courses came and went, a second contestant began to struggle and slow down before collapsing to the table.

"I-I can't... I can't take another bite...!"

"There you have it, folks! Chewar's the second warrior to fall in battle! Here's your bill."

Chewar accepted the bill with a trembling hand as he clutched his aching gut. However, one look at the price caused his jaw to drop in a voiceless scream.

Seriously, how much is it?

"At last, we're down to our last two food fighters! Who would've thought Lulune would last so long?!"

To be fair, nobody would expect a girl like her to hold her food so well. Even having seen her appetite at work, I had no idea how she managed to eat all she did.

"Since we're down to our last contestants, this next course will be the last! Be warned—we've prepared a seriously heavy-hitting dish for the final round! Behold!"

The announcer pulled back a curtain to reveal two roasted birds, each nearly 16 feet tall.

"Our last dish of the competition is a whole grilled Flabby Bird! The king of the birds for the ultimate climax!"

It was almost startling how differently the two contestants reacted.

Eatsa Lott paled. "I never imagined they'd have such a heavy hitter in the wings!"

Lulune was already drooling all over the table. "That looks great!"

She dug right into her bird while Eatsa took a much slower pace in an attempt to finish it all. The victor was all but decided from the round's start, though.

"Ngrk..." Eatsa clasped both hands over his mouth as his eyes rolled back into his head, and he flopped wetly out of his chair and onto the ground.

"Outstanding! Eatsa Lott is down! That means that against all odds, our winner is the only woman in the competition, Lulune!"

"YEAAAH!!!" came the roar of the crowd. The restaurant had somehow filled with spectators while I was distracted by Lulune's eating.

"I won?" She drooped slightly. "There's no more food, then?"

Wait, is she still not full? How can she eat that much? Does she have a monster in her gut or something? I sure hope not!

Nonetheless, the restaurant was filled with applause for their new Eating Master as Eatsa Lott slowly heaved himself off the ground.

"Heh... Heheh... I never thought I'd lose to anyone, much less such a charming little girl."

Lulune shook her head. "My fork moves for a love of food alone. The dinner table is the great equalizer; man or woman, it matters not."

"Men and women equal, huh?" He thought for a moment. "I must ask you something. What does eating mean to you?"

Lulune didn't even hesitate. "Food is the unification of life and death. History itself."

"What?"

"In eating, one consumes another to sustain their own life. Only with both sides in balance can food exist. Not only that but the innovations and culture of our ancestors are captured in their purest form through cooking. Without such innovations, we would be left unable to distinguish poison from poultry and disasters from delicacies. In the divine eat we call eating, paltry matters like man or woman, race or religion, or even human or god become moot. In fact, I believe food to be the one domain that the gods are incapable of setting foot in."

That's... deep. Too deep. I had no idea she thought about food that much.

Eatsa Lott nodded, smiling as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "I see now... It seems I'm still only a child compared to you. When I left my motherland to join this competition, I never imagined meeting a saint like yourself. It was the wisest thing I've ever done."

The spectators, deeply moved by their back-and-forth, showered the pair in applause. Then, a waiter sidled up beside Eatsa and slipped the bill into his hand. The portly man took one look at it before replicating *The Scream* himself.

What the actual fuck was this?

That was all I could think of as I shook my head in sheer amazement.

Chapter 12: A Date with Lulune in the Square

Not long after leaving the binge-eating competition, Lulune and I headed towards the square again.

"That parfait was absolutely delicious, wasn't it?"

"Uh, yeah."

Lulune had shared her winner's Great Parfait with me. That alone was fine, but she *insisted* on spoon-feeding me. She seemed confused by my hesitation, though, so she probably didn't even realize how embarrassing it was. The worst part was that she then proceeded to eat the parfait herself with the very spoon she fed me with.

I can't be the only one who sees that as an indirect kiss, right? Though I guess only kids care about that stuff. What am I, ten years old?

There was one question that was still chewing at me, though.

"You sure you can still eat, Lulune? You had a *lot* at that competition."

She gave me a baffled look. "Why would that make me unable to eat more?"

"I dunno, because you might be full?!" I honestly didn't know what she expected to hear. "I'm starting to think your stomach leads straight to an alternate dimension."

"Please, Master, don't be preposterous. My stomach doesn't lead anywhere. It's effectively a bottomless pit."

"That's worse!"

If her stomach was a black hole, that would at least sound cuter.

Wait, no, it wouldn't. They both sound pretty terrifying.

Before long, though, we arrived at the square where we'd find the street vendors.

"All right, we're here!"

"Oh, Master, look! They've got a giant chunk of meat on a stick—and look at that fresh juice vendor!"

I could tell at a glance that she was already enjoying herself.

She sure loves food.

"Feel free to order whatever you want. I've got more than enough money, so let's just enjoy a nice meal together."

"Really?! Let's buy out every vendor here, then!"

"Whatever you want *within reason!*"

There was no doubt in my mind that she was serious... but then again, I could easily afford to do exactly as she asked.

Money's basically a cheat in its own right!

"Anyhow, if there's nothing you wanna start with, why don't we just pick a side and work through them all?"

"Yes! By all means, let's!"

With that, I led a giddy Lulune to the closest stall at the edge of the square.

The vendor greeted us with a smile. "Welcome! We've got some great hamburgers!"

Lulune eagerly pointed to one of the burgers on display. "I want two of those, sir!"

"You got it! Two Dorse-burger, coming right up!"

"Dorsemeat again?!"

Just how versatile is that stuff?! If only they were a little smarter, they might actually make decent horses!

Nonetheless, we took our burgers from him and began eating as we strolled.

"I've never had Dorse before," I said with a dubious look at the meat. "Is it really that good?"

"Rest assured, Master, it was very good."

"Wait, did you finish yours already?!"

Maybe Lulune should go to a speed-eating competition next.

I took a bite of my burger. The patty was surprisingly juicy and harmonized well with the crunchy lettuce and signature sauce.

Is there anything a Dorse can't do? Aside from, y'know, not dying from sheer stupidity.

"Oh, Master!" Lulune eagerly pointed out another stall. "I want that next!"

"All right, sounds good."

She was pointing out a yakisoba stall.

"Line right up!" the vendor barked. "This is the only place in the city you can try special food brought here by the Heroes themselves!"

Huh. So yakisoba isn't native to this world?

We bought two helpings and ate them as we walked. The flavor wasn't as refined as in Japan, but it was tasty enough to leave me content with that taste of home. Lulune absolutely inhaled it.

After that, we continued our gourmet tour around the square. We tried everything from Takoyaki to kebabs and grilled chicken to popcorn. The flavors were all comparable with what I might find back on Earth, and it was all delicious.

Wait... I'm eating a lot, aren't I? I'm still not Lulune-level, but I really hope my stomach hasn't gone monstrosity-sized.

Finally, we arrived at the last stall in the square. They had a big sign with all the different kinds of crepes we could order out-front. There was an impressive line, though, so it ended up being some time before it was finally our turn to order. Unfortunately, they were nearly out of stock at that point—the stall only had a single crepe left. I just bought that, and then the two of us sat on a nearby bench.

"It's too bad they only had one left," I sighed.

"Er... Master? Are you quite sure about this?"

'Bout what?"

"I feel rather guilty, taking the crepe for myself."

"Nah, don't sweat it. I had plenty else to eat, and just watching you dig into it with gusto is enough for me."

For some reason, she blushed. "A-All right."

With that, she began chipping away at the dessert with small bites.

Seriously, though, what's going on with my giant stomach? I had tons to eat, but I'm not full yet. I don't remember feeling really hungry, either. This is proof I'm some sort of freak of nature, isn't it? What's next? I won't have to use the bathroom?! Damn, my body's changing in all kinds of ways, and I don't like it!

"M-Master?"

"Hm?"

I snapped out of my blue funk and turned to face Lulune. She was blushing tomato-red and holding her crepe out to me.

"W-Would you care for a bite?"

Okay, seriously, who the hell are you? You're not Lulune!

I froze up just like I had when she grabbed my hand. I honestly couldn't figure out what was going through her head. We just had an indirect kiss over the parfait, but *this* was embarrassing to her? Then again, maybe she just didn't think about it back then.

"N-Nah, don't worry about me! I'm fine!"

"You don't want to?" She looked a little deflated. "I wanted naught but to share this flavor with you."

"..."

I could understand what she was getting at, but I was already way too worked up about the whole thing. Besides, there's no way she'd want any kind of kiss with a guy like me, so a real man should just turn her down.

"... Thanks."

It's official; I'm not a real man.

She looked far too sad for me to turn her down, and I wasn't enough of a jerk to disappoint her further.

After one last moment of hesitation, I took the crepe from her and bit into it. It had a classic chocolate-banana filling. The main ingredients balanced well with the cream, and the resulting combination was pretty delicious. After I finished chewing, I handed the crepe back to her. She took a bite but suddenly froze and turned a shade redder. After that, she hurriedly scarfed down the rest of it.

God, that just makes this more embarrassing!

As soon as she finished, she covered her face in my hands.

"I-I never dreamed I might ever be this happy."

"You what?"

Finally, she looked me in the eye again. She looked calmer and more content than I'd ever seen her before.

"Without you, Master, I never would've found my human form. Nay, I never would've discovered the wonderful realm of human food as a whole. I would've lived a dull donkey's life."

I didn't know what to say.

"Once, Mother told me I may never find a he-donkey I truly loved and that I may well spend my life toiling away under human whips. However, she always wanted me to swear my life to a mighty knight as the legendary ass Lulunelion had. Thus, she named me Lulune after him. She always hoped, in her way, that I would find a soul mate worthy of my service."

"..."

"Ever since meeting you, Master, my life has been nothing but one wonderful surprise after the next. You've given me more firsts than I could've dreamed."

She looked me in the eyes. Her face was full of kindness and warmth, but there was another emotion there that I didn't immediately recognize.

"Master... You're my soul mate. Meeting you has made me the happiest donkey in the world. Thank you for finding me."

I'd never been thanked for something as weird as 'finding' someone before, but I could tell just how strongly she felt about it. I had something to say to that, though.

"Lulune. Did you just say you're happy?"

"Y-Yes."

"Well, you're wrong."

She blinked in surprise. "What?"

I blushed slightly, hesitating for only a moment before continuing. "Just you watch; I'll make you happy enough that this will seem like hell in comparison."

"?!"

"And not just me, either. Saria, Al—we're all going to make you so happy you won't even know what to do."

She said I was her soul mate, and I felt the same. It had to be fate that we met. I just happened to have the right Skill for us to talk, and there just so happened to be no other horses in that store for sale. I didn't know if my high Luck Stat had anything to do with it, but it was downright miraculous that we could meet at all. As they say, there are no coincidences, and I wasn't about to let Lulune fall by the wayside.

"We'll be together forever, got it?"

"O-Of course, Master!"

Just as she replied with that massive smile, though, the Necklace of Endless Love around my neck began to shine.

"Huh?"

"What on...?!"

When the light finally subsided, a second necklace in my hand was identical to the one around my neck.

Hold up. Sure, the Necklace splits so that there's a copy for me and everyone I share a heart and mind with, and it multiplies all the wearers' Stats by the number of people wearing it. But why'd it multiply now?

Of course, I liked Lulune—that was a total no-brainer. But I didn't *like* her. It wasn't the 'love' kind of like. Sure, the wording of the item was ambiguous that it didn't rule other kinds of love out, but it relied on Lulune's feelings, too. I knew she didn't hate me—or at least, I really hoped she didn't—but that shouldn't mean enough.

Damn, women are mysterious. Just when I thought I was used to dealing with them, Lulune pulled this on me!

Either way, the Necklace had split, so there was no point reading too far into it. I couldn't even imagine my current Stats getting a big, fat 3-times multiplier, but I could do nothing about that now.

I stopped beating around the bush and handed Lulune her copy of the Necklace.

"Um... Master? What's this? I seem to remember Saria-sama wearing the same necklace..."

"Jeez, where do I begin?"

Explaining the Necklace's effects was pretty embarrassing, especially since it made me seem like a womanizing jerkwad. I couldn't just explain, though, so I'd have to choke down my shame and tell her everything.

As soon as I finished, she began to panic.

"Y-You mean we feel the same about each other! No, impossible! I refuse to accept it! W-We'd hardly make a good match, and besides, I'm only your donkey!"

That was a pretty thorough rejection, even if she was blushing hard all the way through.

We honestly wouldn't make a good couple at all, but that was because of me, not her. I didn't care about her being a donkey, though—I was already married to a gorilla, after all.

If Lulune doesn't feel that way about me, then this dumb Necklace must be bugged after all. Or maybe it's fine as long as we care about each other? Er. No, wait, that's pretty much the same as before.

I couldn't just keep the extra Necklace, though, so I handed it over to her.

"I know you don't like me or anything, but still, you should take this. It's pretty handy and couldn't hurt to hold on to."

"N-No, Master, it's not as though..."

She clammed up pretty quickly, though I had no idea why. I pressed the item into her hands nonetheless.

"O-Oh..."

"Look, just assume this whole thing's an accident and treat it as a little gift."

She stared at it blankly for a moment before clutching it close to her chest.

We sat in awkward silence for a little while before getting up. I took her to Café Accogliente just as planned, and Noard-san served us some delicious tea. By the time we'd ordered the cakes, the awkward air between us was gone, and Lulune's attention was soundly on ordering second, thirds, and fourths. I even got to see Noard-san surprised for once by Lulune's appetite, marking an amusing end to our time out together.

Chapter 13: A Date with Altria at the Theater

The day after my date with Lulune, Al and I agreed to meet in front of the inn.

Wait, doesn't that kind of make me sound like a two-timing scumhole? I mean, I guess I'm literally dating several girls at once...

I still didn't get what Al and Saria saw in me. Al especially could probably find a million guys who were nicer and were actually attractive to boot. Even Saria... well, she was a gorilla, so that made a little more sense.

As I rapidly gnawed at my self-esteem with endless questions, I finally heard Al's voice from behind me.

"S-Sorry for makin' you wait."

"Nah, I just got—"

As soon as I turned around and saw her, I was struck, totally speechless. Her signature crop-top shirt and shorts were nowhere to be seen. Instead, she was wearing a white coat and a long skirt. She didn't look anything like her usual tomboyish self, but that gap only made her seem prettier now. I stared at her for a few good seconds, unable to say a thing.

Her brow furrowed. "Wh-What? You think I look weird or somethin'?!"

"No! I mean, I didn't say a thing! It really suits you. It's just, uh... you're so cute, I kinda forgot how to speak."

"Wh-Wha...?!"

She fervently blushed a few shades redder and dropped her gaze to the ground.

This is so embarrassing! Like, holy shit, how is it this bad?!

She was just that beautiful, and I felt I had to tell her that no matter what, but I wasn't expecting it to be so awkward. I couldn't believe that guys regularly had

to go through such a hellish trial whenever they wanted to compliment their girlfriends.

Like, damn, she's so hot she can't be human! I guess I'm not one to talk like that, though.

"Anyhow! Let's get going!" I suggested.

"Y-Yeah!"

Anything beat standing awkwardly in front of the inn forever, after all. We only took a few steps before she stopped again.

"Seiichi!"

"Yeah?"

"Can I... uh... hold your hand?"

"..."

She was red as a boiled octopus, and her hand was visibly trembling with effort as she held it out to me. I could practically feel my brain short-circuit, and in a daze, I reached out to hold her hand.

Instantly, her face lit up like a bulb. "Ha... Haha...!"

If just holding hands makes her this happy, we should really do it more often. Wait, if I cut my hand off and gave it to her, she could hold it forever! I'd probably regrow it, honestly.

In the end, though, I thought that might turn her off a bit, so I decided not to.

We finally started walking again. She'd originally asked me out so that we could go to dinner. But honestly, there were a number of things we could do together. Since I was still so new to the Capital and hadn't explored much, we decided that Al would take the lead and show me around town.

"Remember that entrance exam?" Al asked. "I think I showed you 'round a bit back then, too. Damn, that feels like forever ago."

"Yeah, it does."

Al had been assigned to oversee Saria's and my entrance exams. And she showed me a few places, like the Church of Belfeuille, where the orphanage

was.

"Back when we went to Adriana-san's place, I introduced you to the Upper Quarter, right?"

"I think I remember that."

"Well, I didn't break it down for you then, but we've got the Merchants' Quarter, the Entertainment Quarter, the Upper Quarter, and the Common Quarter. The Merchants' Quarter is where most of the shops and stuff are, and the Entertainment Quarter's full of places to have fun. The Upper Quarter's where most of the rich folk and nobles live, and it's right between the Merchants' and Entertainment quarters. The Common Quarter's where the common folk lives, obviously. Anyhow, we also got the city square and the palace in the center of the city, and they're kind of on their own."

"Huh."

I honestly had no idea about any of that.

I mean, I know I haven't lived here long in the grand scheme of things, but I seriously should've known about that! I mean, I should've at least clued into the different Quarters! Damn, I'm stupid!

"By the way," she added, "the guild and our inn're both in the Merchants' Quarter. You spend most of your time 'round there... and in the palace and square, 'course."

"Huh."

I honestly should've known that the Capital, of all places, was bigger than I thought. I had no idea how that'd never occurred to me before.

"Anyhow, I wanna take you out to the Entertainment Quarter today."

"Makes sense."

It sounded like a pretty ideal place for a date, and I was pretty curious as to what it was like.

With that, Al pulled me out of my thoughts as she quickened her pace.

"C'mon, stop standin' around! We've got places to go!"

"H-Hey! I'm coming already. No need to pull me!"

With that, we hurried ahead.

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"This's it, the Entertainment Quarter!"

"Whoa!"

This part of the city was different from anything I'd seen or felt before, giving it a very different feel from the Capital as I knew it.

"I bet you never heard of it, but they've got a famous theater here."

"Really?"

"Yep. And 'cause they're puttin' on a show today, I figured we could go take a look."

"But don't we need to buy tickets or whatever for that?"

She whipped out a pair of tickets as if she was waiting for just that.

"Good thing. One for each of us."

Oh, dear, she's so cool! I hope she'll be my boyfriend!

Jokes aside, though, she probably went out of her way to buy the tickets while Lulune and I were out yesterday.

I kinda suck as a boyfriend, huh.

No matter how OP I became, I still couldn't seem to be a decent person. The thought stung way more than I expected it to.

"Thanks," I said, covering my pain with a smile. "How about you show me the way there?"

"You got it!"

She's way more manly than I'll ever be, and I mean that in the best way possible.

I followed her through the Entertainment Quarter's colorful streets, trying to wrap my head around the eclectic layout all the while. After a while, when I'd finally gotten out of my self-deprecating slump, I started to enjoy myself.

"Whoa, what's that?!"

On one of the street corners, a clown was floating in midair and juggling seven-odd fireballs. Little by little, he combined the balls into steadily larger balls of fire. He chucked it into the air when there was just one of them. He made a show of blowing on it, causing it to explode in a burst of silent fireworks before fizzling away into nothing.

Al nodded at the clown. "You get street performers like that all the time here."

"Street performer, my ass! That was crazy!"

It was probably only possible with magic, but still, I had a hard time believing it was such a small-scale thing. The act felt way too refined.

I mean, there's no way I could ever—

>You acquired Skill: Street Performance.

...

"Hm? What's up, Seiichi? You're lookin' pretty gutted."

"Uh... Nothing..."

I shook my head and continued following Al. Soon enough, we came across another performer; this time, a woman who was singing on the corner. It was a light and playful tune that fit the Entertainment Quarter as a whole perfectly.

Al chuckled. "That's a seriously refreshin' song!"

Even I had to admit it was a ton of fun to just relax and listen—

>You acquired Skill: Sing.

Whelp, I'm sad again.

Trying to get my mind off it, I focused on the people playing all kinds of instruments behind her. It was honestly really refreshing, just the thing for my poor, weary heart.

But then, during a slight lull in the music...

>You acquired Skill: Music.

Hello, depression, my old friend. You've gotten worse since last we met.

I mean, seriously, what the actual hell is going on with me?! These people probably poured years of their life into their crafts, and then I just waltz along, and suddenly I can copy them? How is this fair to anyone?! I mean, I got three new Skills just by walking down the street! I'm so sorry, all of you!

I let out a heavy sigh as we kept walking.

Not long after, though, an older woman in startlingly little clothing approached me.

"Hey there, big boy. Wanna come play? I'll give you all kinds of *special* treatment."

"Huh? Wait, me?!"

"Of course. Who else is there to talk to?"

Oh, I get it. She's trying to take me somewhere with lots of other pretty ladies who're gonna try and milk every last penny out of me.

I'd never been called out like that, though, so I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice. She took that opportunity to glomp onto my arm.

"Don't be shy, now. Let's go have some fun."

"Uh, no, I, uh..."

Your boobs are touching my arm, lady! Is this why everyone says older women are different?! I'm too young for this—I mean, I'm literally underage!

Unfortunately, I had no way of keeping my cool under fire, given how I still wasn't used to women yet. I couldn't form a sentence or talk my way out of that mess.

Wh-What do it do?!

"Hey!" Al shouted. "He's my... m-my b-b-boyfriend! Get your fuckin' hands off him!"

She pressed her chest into my other side as if to assert her dominance.

S-Soft... So soft!

I could feel all my blood rush to my face. I was even redder than Lulune's boiled octopus impression from the other day. And I was far too shaken to even move a muscle.

Fortunately, the lady on my other side chuckled at her and backed off.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were with someone. Don't worry; I won't lay a finger on you."

With that, she left just as suddenly as she'd come.

...

"So... the Entertainment Quarter's that kinda place, huh?"

Al shook her head and sighed. "The hell're you sayin'?" She then glared up at me. "Just to be clear, you better not fall for any floozies like that, got it?! Not while I'm around!"

Damn. Just when I thought she couldn't get any cuter. How is it that literally everything she does only makes me fall for her harder?

"I'd never," I promised her. "I dunno if you'll believe me when I say this, but you and Saria are all I need."

Of course, I'm wimpy enough to not leave Saria out of this. Of course. I may have changed on the outside, but I haven't changed a bit on the inside?

>You acquired Skill: Seduction.

Great. Thanks for that.

In the end, just holding Al's hand wasn't enough anymore. We walked arm-in-arm as we headed for the theater.

Finally, we arrived at a large building that looked like a temple, giving off an oddly noble air. At the entrance, we found an usher, who took our tickets and waved us inside.

"Whoa..."

The sheer fanciness of the building left me speechless. The inside was bathed in a soft orange light, courtesy of a ludicrously expensive-looking chandelier on the ceiling. The roof itself was covered with countless frescos of humans and nature alike, which was undoubtedly the work of a famous painter. In the middle of the temple was a giant staircase flanked by marble pillars covered in gold and silver foil. All around us were important-looking lords and ladies who were chatting over cocktails.

Wow, do I feel out of place?

"Uh, Al? Are you sure we should be here? I mean, I am still wearing a cloak."

"Nah, don't sweat it. Sure, there are a ton of nobles here, but commoners come here all the time. 'Sides, it's not some upright, classy show, either. You'll be fine so long as you're not dressed like literal shit."

"I'm pretty sure I am! Like, do you see anyone else with a weird hood around here?! Nope, only me!"

"Just take it off if you're worried about it, but the nobles here ain't really uptight 'bout that kinda thing. 'Course, I guess you could pull down your hood if you *really* wanna..."

Wait, why doesn't she want me to take my hood off? Oh, well. If I don't have to worry about it, I guess that's good news for me.

"I guess I'm fine as-is," I finally said. "Getting changed is too much of a pain."

"Got it. C'mon, let's go grab a seat already!"

We climbed the massive staircase, then walked down an impressively long hallway to arrive at the second-story balcony seats. Even though I'd never gone to a real play before, the seats she picked gave me a great view of the stage. Unlike a movie theater back home, though, they weren't selling any refreshments.

"So, what's the play of the day?" I asked, finally realizing I didn't know.

"Hm? Lemme think... It's supposed to be called 'The Little Mermaid.' Apparently, the heroes brought it on over from their world."

C'mon, Heroes, really? Is that really necessary? I guess I don't really hold anything back myself, though.

If Earth stories like that were so popular in this world, though, that just went to show how well-written they were.

After that, Al and I chatted until it was time for the play to begin. All the lights in the hall went out as the stage was bathed in illumination.

What followed was easily the most moving thing I'd ever seen in my life. They used tons of real water in the show and even had a real mermaid play the titular Little Mermaid. All the actors and actresses were really attractive, and they had great acting skills to boot. They used magic to simulate waves on the stage, and during the scene when the prince's boat was hit by a storm, they used such powerful Wind Magic that they even made the boat float.

None of it could've been replicated back on Earth. It was a performance totally unique to this world. Sure, Earth probably had this world beat when it came to the technology of the stage itself and the like. But they could replicate just about everything perfectly. Science was totally dead in this world.

One of the most moving things about it, though, was the fact that it ended with a happy ending. Sure, Bizney's movie adaptation also had that, but this version was closer to the script while ending on a sweet note. After the ending, I was a crying mess.

"That was the best play ever!" I blubbered through my tears.

"Hah!" Al grinned. "Liked it that much, huh?"

She wasn't laughing in a cruel way or anything, and I was glad I felt secure enough to cry my eyes out around her.

Man, sometimes it's nice to pee from my eyes instead of down there! Uh, wait, I think that's officially the worst excuse in history.

Happy tears were better than sad tears, though. I just had to hope my body didn't 'evolve' on me so much that I shot lasers from my eyes instead of crying or something equally unhinged.

Seriously, though, that was top-notch. I've never seen anything like it!

>You have acquired Skill: Acting.

WWWWW

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

In an instant, I was filled with despair.

This has got to be on purpose! I mean, this is getting stupid! Does my body hate me? What did I ever do to deserve this?!

Honestly, it felt like I'd stolen my own rights from me. I decided to get my mind off it all as soon as possible.

"So, do they put on any other plays?" I asked Al.

"Sure. They've got Cinderella, Snow White..."

Seriously? Are those Heroes trying to make this place Earth 2 or something? I can just imagine them spreading anime and manga next.

"Those are all plays the Heroes brought, though," Al continued. "We've got a bunch of original stories, too. For instance, we've got *My Wife and Her Lover: A Tale of Maddening Passion*, not to mention stuff like *Horny Housewife's Big Adventure*."

Couldn't they have picked literally any other topic?! Those both sound like low-budget pornos! I'm almost curious about what they're like!

It sounded like adapting Earth stories was the right play. I shuddered to think what sorts of magic-powered special effects they use for something like *Horny Housewife*. At least this world kept me on my feet.

"How about we come see somethin' else next time?" Al suggested.

I enjoyed it so much that I didn't waste any time nodding yes. After that, we grabbed some lunch, then headed back to the inn happy.

Chapter 14: A Date with Saria and Origa at the Orphanage

"**S**eiichi! Let's go out with Origa-chan today?"

"Huh?" The morning after my date with Al, I was caught totally flat-footed by Saria's declaration. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"We can't just leave Origa-chan home alone. That'd be waaaaaay too sad! So, I was thinking, instead of going out just the two of us, we should take Origa-chan along!"

"Uh..."

She had a point. I hadn't stopped to consider Origa-chan's feelings in everything.

And here I promised to stay with her... See, more proof that I suck.

Of course, I'd been eating with her, but I hardly spent any time with her besides that. I was lucky that I had Saria—she always kept an eye out for those around her, and she wiped my ass on multiple occasions... figuratively, of course.

I'd never improve if I just kept on moping about it.

I forced myself to smile. "All right, sounds like a plan. The three of us'll go out together!"

"Yeah!"

I had plenty of time to dwell on my regrets later. What mattered now was making sure Origa-chan didn't get lonely. After that, I went straight to the little catgirl to invite her along, and the three of us left the inn together.

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Once we were all assembled, Saria led the way to the orphanage. It seemed like a good idea to me since I hadn't visited the orphans in forever, but more importantly, it'd give Origa-chan a chance to meet some kids her age.

"I like going out with Saria-oneechan," Origa-chan said as she squeezed Saria's hand tight.

"Really? I like being with you, too!"

Saria was always dressed the same, but Origa-chan was wearing a cute floral one-piece instead of her earlier ninja gear. Al had probably bought it for her, just like she'd picked out Lulune's clothes.



Origa-chan wasn't showing much emotion on her face, but I could tell from how she was acting that she was really enjoying herself. I couldn't help but smile at them.

"Seiichi-oniichan?" She looked up at me with her big, round eyes.

"Hm? What's up?"

"... Hand." She reached out towards me.

Even I could tell what she wanted, so I took her little hand in mine.

"Mm." She nodded, smiling faintly for the first time today. "I like it when everyone's together."

As we walked, a thought occurred to me.

What if we look like a family? I mean, I am engaged(?) to Saria, and Origa-chan's like our little sister now, so I guess we really are family. But with Origa-chan between us, I bet we look like her parents... even though I'm a cloak-wearing weirdo!

I seemed to be the only one feeling at all embarrassed about it, though.

Wait... If Saria and I really do get married, and if we have a kid, what'll they look like?

Suddenly, I was unable to think of anything else.

If he's a boy, I bet he'll have big arms and a broad chest like his mom. As for his face... Yeah, like Saria would be nice. I bet he'll have a cute little fang sticking out of his little mouth, and he'll be born with a little ook-EEK...

...

For some reason, I could only imagine our boy as a little gorilla.

H-Hold on! I bet it'll be a different story for our daughter! Yeah, she'll be super pretty, like Saria, for sure. Yeah, she'll have bulging pecs and shoulders as broad as a mountain. She'll have a little snaggletooth, too, and she'll pop out of Saria with an ook-ook... Uh...

...

Again, I could only imagine our kid as a gorilla.

How?! Why?! Is this really all my underactive imagination can do?! I mean, who's to say she can't have human children, even if she was a gorilla? Er... no, a monster! Wait, are humans and Kaiser Kong even compatible like that? Do I even have human DNA anymore? What'd our kid be then? Some kind of dark god? Cthulhu?

I didn't know if humans and monsters were compatible with each other in the first place. There were stories about half-orcs, half-goblins, and the like, but I hadn't run into any in this world. In the end, though, I was no geneticist, and I wouldn't be able to puzzle out an answer no matter how hard I tried.

"... Seiichi-oniichan? Are you okay?"

"Yes?"

"You look really tired..."

"I do?! Must be your imagination! Hahaha, haha..."

"...?"

I didn't want to worry her, so I decided to keep her well away from my questionable train of thought. I gave her the most reassuring smile I could muster.

Fortunately, we'd also arrived at the orphanage. I was about to head right inside when I spotted someone peering over the wall.

"Hahh... What beautiful, immature little bodies! Why, I can't get enough! Even the little boys are at that delightful age where they try to appear taller. How absolutely delightful... but I mustn't lay a finger on them! I love them with my eyes alone, for that is the way of the gentlem—"

"Hup!"

Before I could stop myself, I kicked the middle-aged creep in the head and sent him flying down the street.

"Gehlrggh?!"

"Seiichi?!" Saria called out from behind me, bringing me back to my senses.

"Oh, no... Don't tell me I finally killed someone?!"

"Hahahaha!" laughed the pervert as he struggled to peel himself off the cobblestone. "A real gentleman can handle a hundred such blows! Gebleh!"

I don't know what that's supposed to mean.

Nonetheless, he was alive, even if he was hacking up blood. I must've subconsciously activated Endless Hell just before laying into him.

Still, I kicked him in full force. That's some crazy durability.

I looked down at the offender—the Loli-Loving Legend himself, Walter Berat. Sure, he was one hell of an adventurer, but at the moment, he was nothing more than a creep of the worst kind.

Walter finally picked himself up and dusted himself off, somehow no worse for wear. He gave us a dandy smile. "Let's see... If I'm not mistaken, you're Seiichi-kun, and the charming miss there is Saria-ojousan? I believe we have yet to be formally introduced. I am Walter Berat. As you may know, Slan-shi and I are party mates."

"Right... Oh, sorry for kicking you out of the blue."

"Think nothing of it, my boy. You were right to stop me, just as I was right to bear witness to those darlings!"

"No, I think I'm the only right one here."

Nobody who got off watching little kids was 'right,' let alone humans. He didn't seem to even hear me, though, as he gave me another mature smile. It was then, however, that he finally noticed Origa-chan hiding behind my back. His eyes bugged out in shock.

"My word!"

"Uh, Walter-san? Your eyes are seriously scaring me."

"What an absolute ANGEL! Please, I beg of you, allow me to serve you! No, marry you! Rather, I would delight in becoming your slav—Gebwoggh?!"

I punched him full-power in the face, and he was sent back with such force that he was driven straight down into the street. He was completely

underground from the waist-up.

"You okay, Origa-chan?"

"H-He's scary." Tears brimmed up in her eyes as she clung to me more tightly.

I hugged her tight to me and reassuringly patted her head. "Don't worry, your big brother'll beat the living shit out of that freak as many times as it takes."

"No!" came Walter's shout from beneath us. "I'll never surrender, no matter how often I'm beaten down!"

Just then, I happened to spot one of the town guards walking by.

"Hey, guard? Can you arrest this guy?"

"Nooooooooon!!!"

The guard took one glance at Walter-san, nodded, and immediately moved in for the arrest. He was so quick and efficient with tying the dandy up that it was practically an art.

Walter-san struggled against his bonds. "No! Nooooooo! I can't leave now! There are so many little girls left for me to love!"

"Shut up, pervert."

He obediently drooped. "Okay."

The guard then walked Walter-san away as if he was walking a very dejected dog. I was a little surprised that the guard didn't even ask us any questions. But just like that exhibitionist, he was probably a repeat offender.

I finally turned back to Saria, who was blankly watching Walter-san get taken in.

"Saria? The creep's gone now, so we can go."

"Oh, right!"

We finally made it into the orphanage, where we found Clare-san playing with some children. As soon as the sister noticed Saria, her eyes widened with surprise, and she hurried over to us.

"Why, if it isn't Saria-chan! And Seiichi-san, it's been a while!"

"Hello!"

"Yeah, it's been a while. I hope you and the kids have been doing well."

"Oh, we have been, thank you!"

I'd only ever met her once, during the first stage of our guild entrance exam, so it really had been quite some time since we'd seen each other.

After a moment, Clare-san finally spotted Origa-chan. "And who's the lovely little lady you have there?"

"Uh, she's our sister... more or less. Anyway, she's our family."

"Hello," Origa-chan muttered, her face only poking out slightly from behind my back.

Wow, she really seems helpless. Way to stir up my paternal instincts.

When I turned back to Clare-san, I found that she was ardently facing the ground.

"Uh, Clare-san?"

She muttered something in reply, but I couldn't catch it.

"What was that?"

"She's an absolute ANGEL, just like Saria-chan!!"

"Whoa!"

I wasn't expecting Clare-san to start shouting out of the blue like that.

"Honestly, are you trying to cute me to death?! How does she manage to be so *adorable*?!"

"I know!" Saria echoed, glomping onto the little girl.

Origa-chan frowned. "Saria-oneechan... you're embarrassing me."

"Oh, what am I doing?!" Clare-san hastily patted her robes. "My camera! Where did I put my mana camera? I need to preserve this little darling forever!"

"Um... Clare-san? You're scaring me."

"Get out of the shot, Seiichi-kun!"

"Why?!"

Haha... That's me, the human obstacle. I've gone from fat and ugly to thin and ugly, nothing more.

I silently cried to myself while Clare-san took photo after photo of the Saria-Origa-chan pair.

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After Clare-san finally recovered from her frenzy, she apologized a hundred times before we could finally play with the kids as planned.

Don't worry; it's not like I got my feelings hurt or anything.

Origa-chan didn't know what to do around the kids at first, and she was more than a little confused, but the orphans were all good kids, so they were patient and made her feel welcome. Saria and I had joined in the fun at first, but now we were just sitting by the sidelines and watching them play.

"Origa-chan looks like she's having fun!" Saria giggled.

"Yeah."

I wasn't about to start overreacting like Clare-san, but Saria really was an angel.

I mean, I know she's a gorilla, but still.

Saria was an amazing person. She was like a surrogate mother or big sister for our group and was great with kids of all ages. Not only was she gracious and understanding, but also genuinely seemed to enjoy spending time with them. Clare-san got a truly bizarre number of nosebleeds as she watched Saria play with them, but it all panned out just fine. My Stats might be higher than hers, but she had me beat in every way that mattered. This recent episode with Origa-chan only hammered that home. I tended to get serious tunnel vision, so Saria was a serious life-saver. I really didn't deserve her.

"Saria?" I found myself saying.

"Hmm?"

"Thanks."

"Huh?"

"Thanks for loving a guy like me."

Her eyes widened at me.

"I love you, too."

"You're welcome!" Saria grinned, tears brimming in her eyes.

Sure, it might've come off as a bit of a weird conversation, but it was one that mattered a lot to both of us.

Unfortunately, the orphans were quick to notice her tears.

"Hey! Seiichi-oniichan made Saria-oneechan cry!"

"He's a bad man!"

"H-Hold on, it's not like that!"

I chased after them to try to clear up the misunderstanding, but that turned into a regular game of tag quickly enough.

Clare-san watched us fooling around with a soft smile.

"They're just like an old married couple," she whispered to herself as we ran.

Chapter 15: The Assassin Swears Revenge

Thuthuthud!

A flurry of arrows pounded the exact center of the bullseye. The man who fired them didn't have a bow, however—he was wearing a dirty black robe, a cigarette clamped in his teeth, and a strange wine-red gauntlet on one hand.

He let out a heavy sigh, releasing another cloud of smoke into the air. Instead of making his concentration waver, however, it only grew stronger.

"This ain't enough," the man cursed under his breath. "No way I can kill that jackass like this."

He extended his gauntlet towards the target once more, and as he filled his lungs with smoke, he could feel his mana reserves skyrocket. A translucent arrow formed at his fingertips. On his silent command, it multiplied into a hail of over a thousand bolts.

"Manashot Hellstorm."

With that, the magic arrows rocketed through the air towards the target, arcing about at impossible angles to pummel the target into dust.

He had two weapons at his disposal. The first was the gauntlet, which allowed him to create so many magic arrows at will—the Manashot Gauntlet. It could create bolts of pure mana and even manifest physical arrows, giving him potent means of attacking both physically and magically. He could also stop the arrow in midair, manipulate their trajectories at will, and make invisible arrows—the Gauntlet's powers were as potent as they were plentiful.

His second weapon was his signature cigarette, made from unthinkable rare Ambrosian Weed. It possessed all manner of different functions, from strengthening him physically to granting him access to elements of Magic he couldn't ordinarily use.

Even with those potent tools at his disposal, however, it wasn't enough to take down his mark—the strongest knight in the entire Kaizell Empire, Zakiya Gilford himself. The knight was even stronger than the man had thought, cutting down his every arrow. Even with more than a thousand arrows and magical enhancements on everyone, it wasn't enough. As long as Zaikya lived, though, he knew it would be impossible to get his revenge. His only option, then, was to surpass him.

"Just wait for me," he muttered. "I'll avenge you."

He would do anything to get justice for his fallen friend. His expression, however, was not one of rage but pure sorrow.

Chapter 16: The Cult of the Wicked One

"Teacher. I, Louisse Palse, have returned."

"Uh, Louisse? Did you really have to come all the way to the inn?"

"Of course. As my mentor, you deserve to know before even His Majesty."

"No, actually?"

Several days after my date with Saria, Louisse showed up during our breakfast as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The others were back in the room.

"I mean, how do I outrank a king in your mind? What even am I to you?"

"An absolute power. The single most important thing in my life."

"What the

what?!"

What is that supposed to make me, then? Her god?

"You're my mentor."

"How are you reading my mind?!"

I had no idea how everyone seemed to be pulling that off.

I sighed. "Welcome back anyways, I guess. I'm glad you're still in one piece."

"Thank you. I fought precisely as you instructed, and as a result, I was able to become a Transcendent, much like Barnabus-sama. I owe it all to your tutelage."

"Damn, that's one hell of a bomb to drop on a guy out of the blue!"

That meant that she'd passed the Level 500 cap. I got the feeling that I knew a lot of obscenely powerful people. But I was still the most utterly overpowered of them all.

"Regardless, thank you for remaining in Terbelle to deal with the monster incursion. I would not have been able to devote myself fully to my battle otherwise."

"Well, I'm glad I was at least kind of useful to you."

'Kind of'...? By the way, I received word that monsters attacked the Capital as well and that you single-handedly vanquished them all. A truly impressive feat."

"Wait, and you just believed a rumor like that?"

"Is it wrong?"

"Uh... no."

I hated to admit it, but it was the truth.

"At any rate," she said with a half-turn, "I had best report to His Majesty."

"You really should've done that first, but okay. I've got some business with Barney-san, so I'll go grab the others and meet you there."

"Understood. I shall see you later, then."

With that, Louisse left to report the king, and I went to grab Saria and the others.

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A lone man trod into the depths of a gloomy tunnel. Though there were candles mounted on the walls, they didn't shed enough light to illuminate his footing. He didn't even slow, however—he had walked that same path enough that every bump and crag was familiar to him.

Finally, he arrived in a cavern large enough to accommodate a decently-sized town square. In the very center was an ancient stone altar. Though the alien stonework and shifting shadows about the room would've struck fear in the heart of the bravest warrior, to the man, it felt like returning home.

"Hey, Kreiss!" came a voice from the ceiling. "What's with that gloomy frown?!"

The man, Kreiss, looked up. "Hm? Ah, Lester."

"Gyahahaha! Long time no see!"

The speaker finally revealed himself. He had unkempt red hair, and his reptilian eyes practically bulged out of his skull. He was dressed in a short black jacket and brown pants. His most noticeable trait, however, was his pronounced hunch and the way his oddly large tongue repeatedly flitted out to writhe about his lips. At some point, he'd descended to the cavern floor, though Kreiss had no idea how.

What a loathsome wretch.

Appearances aside, Lester was a fundamental part of their alliance, and Kreiss liked the man in his own twisted way.

Another voice rang out through the cavern. "Finally decided to show your face, have you, pig? Come to boast of your latest failure?"

Kreiss grunted unhappily. "Angreia."

He turned to face the speaker—a tall woman who, even in the darkness, held her black-and-white parasol aloft. She was wearing a gothic lace dress in similar colors, and the left half of her face was covered with a featureless white mask.

"Have you no shame?" she drawled. "After all your boasting that you couldn't possibly fail, even. So? How is utter humiliation treating you?"

Kreiss' face went bright red as he snorted in indignation, but everything she said was true.

"You're so half-baked!" she continued with a chuckle. "You can't foster true despair with such childish methods. You need to kill, butcher, maim, and set example after example, and *then* your victims will know true despair. Might I also add that it's far more entertaining to bloody your own hands instead of making monsters do your dirty work?"

"Gyahahahahaha! You're a real philosopher, Angreia! You wanna hear what I did to hasten the Wicked One's revival?"

Angreia raised her visible eyebrow. "Oh? Let's hear it."

"I swapped around the signs on the men's and women's bathrooms!"

"How petty!" Kreiss yelled. "Can't you have done anything more worthwhile?!"

Angreia only stroked her chin. "Ah, so men would unwittingly walk into the women's bathroom, allowing chaos to ensue. What evil genius, Lester!"

"Hm?! Get ahold of yourself, Angreia!"

"Don't yell at me!" Lester snapped back. "You know what they say, enough small deeds can reach the gods!"

"Nobody says that, you sacrilegious fool!"

They continued to bicker amicably for some time before the stone altar was suddenly engulfed with violet flames. All three of them snapped to attention, swallowing hard.

"Is my resurrection finally nigh, o Servants of mine?"

It was impossible to tell if the voice was male or female, young or old, and it carried a chilling sort of presence with it. Kreiss both trembled with pleasure and cursed his own ineptitude.

He groveled before the altar, rubbing his forehead into the grimy cavern floor. "My sincerest apologies! All the Servants are presently scattered about the world, gathering despair for your glorious resurrection!"

"No matter," came the voice from the flames. "I have the utmost faith you will see my will done. Besides, I require the power to slay the Gods Beyond The Sphere first. As much as I wish to return to my former glory, I cannot risk their interference. What a conundrum..."

"Indeed, O Wicked One."

"I cannot begin to count the ages since I was banished to this wretched land, and the Gods' divine blessing left for fear of my return. But finally, *finally*, I possess the means to revive! Those fools have no doubt forgotten my very existence in their hubris. All the more reason to reveal my true power to them and prove that there must be one supreme god!"

The flames rose into an inferno, and the Servants gasped in ecstasy at the sight.

"Now, my pawns—feed me more despair. More death. More misfortune! Spread chaos and mayhem! The Darkness shall become my flesh and blood and return me to my proper seat of power!"

"All in the name of the Wicked One!" the three Servants replied somberly.

Then, the flames flickered and disappeared. None of them were able to move for some time, however. The voice had brought them too much sheer bliss to even consider it. When finally they composed themselves, there was a fanatic new light in their eyes.

"Heh-heh-heh! I'd best create more despair right away!"

"Yeah, but that's just the same as always, right?"

"Hmm." Kreiss paused to think. "No, it's not enough. Killing is enough for ordinary despair, as Angreia says—but for *true* despair, we must kill hope before the world's very eyes."

Recognition lit up in Lester's globular eyes. "I get it! So, we'll lock everyone in the world inside their bathrooms!"

"Why are all of your ideas so utter juvenile?!"

"C'mon, that'd make *me* despair pretty hard. Just imagine if you had a serious stomachache, but no bathroom in the world would open up for you! That'd suck, right?"

"Well... yes, but..."

Angreia's thoughts, however, were already on the other Servants. There had to be someone that could amass despair easily.

"I've got it!"

Kreis gave her a baffled look. "Got what?"

"You failed last time because you attempted to do everything yourself. Even though you evidently had help, it clearly wasn't enough. No, we need to team up and do everything in pairs from start to finish so that we might accrue despair more easily."

"Hm... That makes sense, but what of it?"

"Do you remember where Demioros is?"

"Demioros?" A moment later, his expression changed from confusion to cruel glee. "Ah, yes!"

Angreia followed suit, smirking. "Exactly—not far from Barbodel Magic Academy."

"Heh-heh-heh! Nobles from all over the world have gathered in those halls! No matter how the Kaizell Empire would protest, it's undoubtedly the best magic academy in the world."

"Precisely. Just imagine what would happen if something terrible were to cut those young lives short. What would their parents, among them monarchs and nobles the world over, think about that?"

"Gyahahahaha! They'll be up in arms for sure! I bet it'll be a bloodbath!"

"And don't forget, bloodlust is as potent a fodder for the Wicked One as any. If we were to then kill the parents once they've all gathered—why, no despair could be greater!"

Angreia cackled as Lester and Kreiss exchanged wicked grins.

They were of the Cult of the Wicked One, and under the leadership of the Servants, they strove to revive their forgotten god by spreading evil from the shadows.

To be continued in The Fruit of Evolution Before I Knew It, My Life Have It

Made 5

Back Matter

Author: Miku My hobbies include going to karaoke and reading. I'm also starting university this year. Flawed as it may be, I sincerely hope you enjoy my work. (February 2016)

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I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (February 2016)



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