



Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

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MIKU
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illustrator

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The FRUIT of EVOLUTION


Hanashi
MEDIA

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"No, it's not that..."

"Accept her, Seichi!"

"Am I not good enough for you?"

Saria
Kaiser Kong

Seichi
Human

Altria
Grem
Adventurer



“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!
Don’t tell me...!”

“Sniffle...
Master...”



Contents:

Chapter 1: On Either Side

Chapter 2: Gathering Information

Chapter 3: The Books' Curse and a Bit of Peace

Chapter 4: The Calamity's Resolve and The Monstrosity's Hesitation

Chapter 5: Pickup

Chapter 6: Perfectly Normal Horses

Chapter 7: A Mule's Loyalty

Chapter 8: An Unexpected Development

Chapter 9: The Capital Derby

Chapter 10: Lulune the Speed Demon

Chapter 11: The Demon Army Meets

Chapter 12: Into Custody

Chapter 13: The Swordsaint Valkyries

Chapter 14: Conspiracy

Chapter 15: Curses and Conviction

Chapter 16: Reversal Magic

Chapter 17: Bathtime

Extra: Stirrings of Feelings

Back Matter



Contents

On Either Side.....	●
Gathering Information.....	●
The Books' Curse And A Bit of Peace.....	●
The Calamity's Resolve and The Monstrosity's Hesitation.....	●
Pickup.....	●
Perfectly Normal Horses.....	●
A Mule's Loyalty.....	●
An Unexpected Development.....	●
The Capital Derby.....	●
Lulune the Speed Demon.....	●
The Demon Army Meets.....	●
Into Custody.....	●
The Swordsaint Valkyries.....	●
Conspiracy.....	●
Curses and Conviction.....	●
Reversal Magic.....	●
Bathtime.....	●
Extra: Stirrings of Feelings.....	●



THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 3

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅


Hanashi
MEDIA



Chapter 1: On Either Side

"**K**eeep your arms up! If you give your enemy any opening at all, you're dead!"

I, Takamiya Shouta, was training at the castle's practice grounds. I was far from alone—nearly every student summoned from my school was going through the same basic sword drills.

"A hundred more reps!"

Our instructor was the knight commander himself, Zakia Gilford. Zakia-san was the one who was watching us with his arms crossed when his men threatened us during our first audience with the king. His silver armor was dull from wear and riddled with the scars of countless battles. Anybody could tell he was a cut above the average grunt. For today's training, he'd ordered us all to take up wooden practice swords and do 1,000 reps of simple swinging drills.

Our training was designed to prepare us for using our Holy Swords. Apparently, they were like hero-summoning bonuses, and only those summoned from another world could use a Holy Sword. As such, every one of us could summon our Holy Swords at will. The Swords' Holy Element was apparently extremely effective against the Demon King and his monstrous servants. All the training in the world didn't matter if we couldn't use it properly, so Zakia-san was teaching us how to do it.

"Five more reps!" he barked. "Four... Three... Two... One... Stop!"

On his mark, everyone lowered their weapons. We'd been at these drills for over half a year, but many of us still couldn't keep up with the training. Of course, Kannazuki-senpai and I were in the kendo club before, so we didn't have any troubles. And Kenji was athletic enough to tough it out.

As everyone caught their breath and massaged their aching muscles, Zakia-san stood in front to address us.

"That's enough training for today! At ease, all of you. Rest well for tomorrow."

With that simple goodbye, he turned to leave. He'd always been so blunt with us, but today one of my schoolmates stepped forward.

"Hold up!"

"... What?"

The speaker was our group's self-appointed leader, Aoyama.

"When're we gonna stop these lame-ass exercises and start fighting stuff?! Are we Heroes or aren't we?! Our Stats are barely going up from all this, and I haven't gotten even one level-up yet!"

"You need to get used to your weapons first," Zakia-san replied coolly.

"That's what you said last time! How about you let us kill some weak monsters and work our way up? *That's* how we should be training!"

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd.

"Y-Yeah, what Aoyama said!"

"Swingin' a stick isn't gonna make us stronger!"

"We're pretty strong as-is, so levelling up is totally the way to train!"

"Let us fight something already, Zakia-san!"

The discontent only seemed to grow. I shot a glance at Kannazuki-senpai, but she was simply watching our schoolmates with thinly-veiled disappointment. Leveling up would make us stronger a lot more quickly, but I got the feeling that was the wrong way to go about it.

After listening to the complaints for a minute, Zakia finally opened his mouth.

"I'm not changing my methods. Tomorrow will be more swinging drills and mock combat, end of the story."

With that, he turned and left. As soon as he passed out of sight, disappointment exploded around me.

"The hell's his problem?!"

"This shit sucks."

"What's the point? Like, seriously?"

"You think he's senile?"

Nobody pulled any punches as they muttered about him.

This is inefficient, sure, but I bet he has his reasons.

I had kendo experience, granted, but I'd never been on a battlefield before. I wasn't about to tell a professional soldier how to train us.

With that, I stood and listened in silence as my classmates continued to cuss the old veteran out.

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"Hahh..." I, Zakia Gilford, let out a heavy sigh as I looked up at the moon from my balcony. "They still don't get it, do they?"

"Who doesn't get what?" came a sudden voice behind me.

I wasn't surprised to hear him, however. I'd noticed his presence some time before.

"That you, Orphe?"

"Would you mind if I joined you, sir?"

"Suit yourself."

The man—Orphe Armond, one of my adjutants—gave me a soft smile. He had distinctive brown hair with a light tousle to it, and he was one of the strongest men in my command. He was also the man I trusted most of the whole lot.

"You were a tad harsh in training today, weren't you?" he asked conversationally.

"Something like that."

"Why is that?"

Of course, he could tell I had a reason. Figuring it wouldn't hurt to tell him, I shrugged.

"I don't want them to die."

He blinked in surprise, his expression changing for the first time. "What?"

"Those kids have nothing to do with our war. Nonetheless, His Majesty is hellbent on having them slay the Demon King for us."

"What are you—"

"Not only that but... just between you and me, I'm against this whole damned war."

"What?!" A mix of shock and terror overtook his features. "Zakia-san, if someone were to hear you say that..."

"Relax. It's only the two of us here."

With that, Orphe seemed to compose himself a little. "I imagine the Kingblade's own words wouldn't be held against him either way."

I scoffed. "You know I hate that name. I may be following His Majesty's orders now, but my allegiance lies with his father alone."

"King Alph was indeed a great leader."

King Alph Dia Kaizell not only saved my life but was also truly worthy of the throne. He was a gentle soul who cared deeply for his subjects and would lend aid to anyone in need, regardless of their race. However, the years were not kind to him, and his power waned as it became harder and harder for him to leave his bed. Finally, he was forced to pass his title to his son, the present king. Our country hadn't known peace since.

As the lines on my face deepened, Orphe continued, "His Majesty is a very... different man. Returning to the subject at hand, however, you mentioned you didn't want the Heroes to die. Why, then, won't you let them gain live combat experience?"

"Their former world sounds nothing like ours. It sounds so... peaceful. They don't even know which is the business end of a blade. They need to learn their fundamentals before I can let them fight."

"But still—"

"I know the Demon King could return any day now, and they're no doubt sick of all the drills I've forced on them. But think—they haven't even seen a real

sword before now, and they want to go toe-to-toe with bloodthirsty monsters? I don't care how impressive their Stats are. If they don't have the skill and knowledge to back them up, the battlefield will be their death. I know this isn't the best solution, but it's the only one I could think of."

Orphe didn't reply, so I continued.

"In the end, it may all be pointless, but I refuse to let even one of them die on my watch. If they were lucky enough to be born into such a strifeless world, I want nothing more for them than to live in peace. That's all."

With that, I left the balcony.

"Zakia-san..." Orphe muttered into the lonely night. "You're far too poor with your emotions..."

Chapter 2: Gathering Information

"Hahh..."

I, Hiiragi Seiichi, let out a heavy sigh as I munched on my breakfast at *The Tranquil Tree*. There was only one trouble on my mind.

As if on cue, Altria-san came out of her room, but she stopped in her tracks as soon as she spotted Saria and me.

"U-Urk!"

Hurriedly averting her gaze, she hurried right out of the inn.

Speak of the devil, I guess.

"She's totally avoiding me now..."

I couldn't blame her. After all, I'd proposed to her out of the blue. I'd feel awkward in her shoes. Not only was it sudden, but it was also *super* bold. I had tried to explain myself yesterday, but she had avoided me the whole time.

Being avoided sucks... but more than that, I thought I finally had another friend.

"What do I do now?" I wondered aloud.

Saria heard me, taking a moment to pause her own breakfast. "Don't worry, Seiichi! I know she doesn't hate you or anything."

That was a relief.

"Thanks, Saria. But what makes you say that?"

"Um... my animal instincts?"

"A-Animal what?!"

I thought her womanly instincts would be coming in clutch here! Though I guess she is a gorilla...

My animal
instincts?



While I was still reeling, the inn's poster girl Mary noticed us chatting and came over to our table.

"Hey, anything happened between you and Altria-san?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, c'mon. She's avoiding you, right? There's got to be a reason."

"Well, uh..."

She'd hit the nail on the head and I didn't know how to explain it. Unfortunately, that only seemed to egg her on.

"So, what happened? Let me guess, is it a guy-girl thing? Man, are you a ladykiller. You've already got one girlfriend. It's super weird, considering nobody can even see your face under that hood, and you don't exactly talk about yourself. So? C'mon, spill the beans!"

"Uh... I don't know?"

I guess tons of girls like hearing about romance and relationships, but I never thought they'd talk about me like that...

"I-I didn't really do much," I stuttered.

"Really? It sure doesn't seem like that," she pressed. "What happened? What's going on? C'mon, don't leave me waiting!"

I finally snapped. "Jeez, what's gotten into you?!"

Eventually, Mary's mother and the inn's proprietress, Fina-san, noticed that she was bothering us and intervened. Hence, Mary was forced to dejectedly get back to work.

"Seriously," I said with a sigh before turning to Saria. "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Huh? Plan?"

"Our harvest quest got cut short, but we still cleared the guild's entrance test, right?"

Gustle gave us our official guild cards after we returned from that creepy labyrinth yesterday, and he also explained the nitty-gritty of how the guild works. In other words, we were now members of what had to be the most pervert-filled organization in the Capital. Yay!

To put the Guild's operations simply, every adventurer was assigned a Rank from F to A, with S at the very top. Saria and I, of course, were still Rank F. We were authorized to take requests from our current Rank or the one above us, and we could register for as many as three quests at a time. To go up to Rank E, we needed to complete either 10 requests of our current Rank or 5 of the Rank above us. Also, we weren't under any pressure to fulfill a quota, and we were free to take on as many or as few jobs as we wanted.

I was relieved to hear that we were free to do as we pleased. After all, I had only joined the Guild to get information, and the last thing I wanted was to waste all my time running errands. I was tentatively planning on getting into info-gathering right away.

Saria, however, took a moment to think. "I wanna go back to the orphanage today."

"Oh, so you wanna take a quest right away?"

"Yep! Clare-san said I could go help out anytime, so even if they don't need any help today, I wanna drop by."

"Alright. Sounds like we'll be splitting up for today, then. Be careful out there, okay?"

"Okay!"

Contenting myself with her answer, I polished off my breakfast and headed out on the town.

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"Man, this place is so full of life..." I muttered to myself as I parted ways with Saria and left the inn.

I passed stall after stall of energetic merchants and even a few groups of housewives making small talk. What stuck out to me the most was how much everyone was smiling. It was a far cry from Earth, where school or work made almost everyone miserable.

I wonder if a country this well-off even has slums?

I hated to think of it, but as they say, where there's light, there's shadow. I didn't know enough about the country's political state to say anything.

"I guess that's an investigation for another day."

As I mumbled, I noticed that the street in front of me was full of hustle and bustle, but not in the way the markets had been.

"What's going on over there?"

Suddenly, I heard a woman's scream.

"Jeez, as soon as I think this place is pretty nice..."

I turned to face the source of the panic, but what I saw made me freeze in my tracks.

"After him!"

"Don't let him get away! Faster, men!"

A group of men clad in armor just like Claude, the guards were chasing a plump older man through the street. The man was, unfortunately, completely naked.

"Hahahahaha! You'll never catch me!" he boasted. "Behold, my wings of freedom!"

"We're beholding a lot more than that, dammit!"

I recognized the streaker from the Guild—he'd been talking to the lolicon when last I saw him. He seemed to be genuinely enjoying his run. However, the woman all screamed and covered their eyes as he passed, and the men all seemed thoroughly unimpressed.

"Not today, you creep!" shouted a guard.

"It'll be jail for you this time; I swear!" echoed a second.

"Oh, your words wound me so... but you'll never catch me! Now that the cruel shackles on my soul have been undone, I could run to the very end of the world!"

"You can run wherever you want, just put on some pants first!"

"I refuse!"

"Why?!"

"My entire body, my very soul, screams for the sweet release of the open air!"

"How can you make it sound like all that?!"

With that, the group sprinted right past me.

...

"Yep, just another peaceful day in the Capital," I muttered as I continued toward the Guild.

I've got better things to do than waste my voice shouting at perverts.

Fortunately, the rest of my trip to the guild was totally uneventful, and I could head right inside. For once, there wasn't any open indecency to be seen, and even Eris-san was clad in her official receptionist uniform when she stood behind the counter. Only Gustle was out of place as he practiced his bodybuilder poses nearby.

Seriously, when does he work? How'd he even become Guildmaster?

Brushing aside my questions for the moment, I walked right up to him.

"Good morning, Gustle."

"Oh, if it isn't Seiichi-kun! Aren't you tired after yesterday's ordeal?"

"No, not really."

I've got pretty monstrous Stats, after all.

"Glad to hear it!" he replied with a grin. "I don't see Saria-kun with you, though."

"She headed to the orphanage she helped out at during the test."

"Ah, of course. So, what brings you all this way alone?"

Since he was asking, I figured it was the perfect time to get right to business.

"You see, I'm looking for some information. I was hoping you might be able to lend me a hand with that."

"Information, eh?" He stroked his chin in thought.

I knew it. There's bound to be some things he won't tell me so easily.

After a moment's contemplation, he looked right at me with his game face.

"If you're looking to gain muscle fast, I've got everything from beginner to expert courses. What would you like?"

"That's not what I'm interested in at all!"

Seriously, just when I thought he was going to take me seriously... How many 'courses' does he have ready anyways?!

He gave me a baffled look. "How? Is there anything else worth knowing?"

"Yeah, there is! You're just too messed up to realize it! Why're you making me out to be the weirdo here?!"

When I started shouting, however, Eris-san put down her work and walked over to us.

"Precisely. Honestly, who would want to know about something so trivial? Perhaps you truly have muscles for brains after all?"

Gustle balked. "T-Trivial?!"

So, he's fine with being called a musclebrain, huh?

I was glad Eris-san was reasonable, at least. She was a whip-crazy pervert, but at least she took her work seriously, like a real professional.

After quickly apologizing for bothering her, I got right to the point. "So basically, Eris-san, there are a few things I really need to know..."

"Is that so? Rest assured, I have you covered."

"Really?!"

"Yes. In fact, I have all manner of courses on sadism and masochism prepared, from beginner to advanced. Which would you like?"

"Dammit, you too?!"

Oh, why'd I get my hopes up?!

Eris-san seemed baffled by my rejection. "I-Impossible... My courses are quite well-respected, I assure you!"

"Wait, so *I'm* the crazy one here? Me? I'm the weirdo?"

I was so frazzled I didn't know what else to say. She looked so deeply shocked I didn't know how to react.

Am I the only normal person left in the world?

Just as I began to despair, however, Gustle smiled.

"Well, enough of the jokes for now."

"Why do you even need to joke?!"

I wanted to punch him, but I held myself back. I was an adult, after all.

"You want information?" he continued. "Nothing much has happened lately, as far as I know."

"How about in the past six months, then? Anything big happened?"

"Six months? Let me think..."

I chose that deadline since that matched up with when I first arrived in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak. If the Heroes had made any big moves in that time, I wanted to know about it. Asking about the Heroes directly might have come off as a little strange, though, since that might lead to questions about why I wanted to know. I didn't even know if the Heroes were common knowledge, so I didn't want to take any risks on that front either.

"Hmm... The biggest thing would have to be the Kaizell Empire finishing their hero-summoning ritual."

Eris-san nodded. "Definitely."

"Whoa."

Bingo!

I wasn't expecting to get the answers I was looking for so easily, but I wasn't complaining.

"Hero-summoning?" I asked, pretending that I knew nothing about it at all.

"What, you haven't heard?" Gustle asked in surprise.

"Not really."

"Huh. And here I thought it was a pretty big deal... Anyways, the hero-summoning ritual is—"

"A special spell to summon legendary Heroes from another world," Eris-san interrupted. "The Kaizell Empire is no doubt preparing themselves for the Demon King's revival."

Gustle moaned sadly. "That was my line..."

I ignored him and turned to Eris-san. "What's a Demon King?"

"What? Don't tell me you've never heard of him?"

"Uh... I grew up in the boonies, so I don't know much common sense."

My guild card left my hometown blank, so I could lie as much as I had to about my roots. The only cost would be the weight on my conscience.

Fortunately, Eris-san seemed to buy it. "Is that so? At any rate, the Demon King is the lord and master of the demonkin."

"Lord of the demonkin, huh?"

"I would tell you more, but I'm sure you would receive a far more comprehensive picture from the library."

"Okay, makes sense."

A library, huh?

I wasn't much of a reader back on Earth, but I was curious as to how libraries worked in this world.

Demonkin, though... That reminds me of those guys I met back in the forest. Who were they again? Bel and some other guys? Didn't they say they were in

some kind of army?

As I thought, I realized something.

"Um, so the Heroes the Kaizell Empire summoned... they're preparing to fight the Demon King, right?"

"Of course."

"What's our country doing to get ready, then?"

If the Demon King was that big a deal, I'd assume things would be much less peaceful around town.

The Black Dragon God's memories sure didn't make the Demon King sound that evil, though.

Gustle, having somewhat recovered from his shock, answered me.

"Most countries are at least talking about conducting rituals of their own, I'm sure, but not here."

"Wait, really? Why not?"

"Because there's nothing to worry about. We've got two of the strongest knights in the world here. Sure, one is always at the king's side, but the other is a master of defense. Even if the Demon King's whole army hit the city, we wouldn't lose."

Whoa... That's nuts. I had no idea they had someone so strong here. I'd love to meet them one day.

"Of course," Gustle continued, "we've even got Rank S adventurers who are demonkin."

"Really?!"

That sounds pretty cool; not gonna lie.

I got the impression that everyone thought demonkin were evil, but that wasn't the case. Gustle seemed to guess what I was thinking and smiled gently.

"The Demon King's one thing, but demonkin are still people. We can't go hating people just because of their race."

From what I saw from the Black Dragon God's memories, I assumed that humans were more evil than demonkin. But Gustle didn't care about the racial difference in the first place. It made sense since the guild seemed to take in all types. He wouldn't make a good Guildmaster if he turned people away just on account of their race. Even if I'd never seen him work, that certainly seemed like a mastery quality.

"Besides," Gustle continued, "the king here is big on interracial relations, including with the demonkin. Of course, things got a little stalled when the Demon King started coming back. And they don't have a peace treaty or anything, but some demonkin already living here are getting along fine. I'd call that a good sign."

"Huh..."

I'd always assumed it was just human nature to fear anyone different from yourself. But just from looking at the guild, there were enough colorful characters that they couldn't care less about differences. They were a bunch of perverts, sure, but both Saria and I—let alone Altria-san—knew they were good people deep down. They wasted no time looking for us when we went missing, too.

Just as I was reminiscing, Gustle dropped another bomb.

"In terms of other developments, well... the Heroes have given us all sorts of fancy new technology."

"Wait, they what?"

"See, the Heroes come from this place called Earth, and the Kaizell Empire's been spreading this Earth-technology all over the place. There's been new clothes, food, entertainment, even weapons."

"Uh..."

Jeez, Heroes, cool it on the overtechnology! Not that I haven't been making waves of my own, I guess...

"I'm impressed this Kaizell Empire, or whatever, didn't try to hog all the tech for themselves," I remarked.

From the way they summoned the Heroes in the first place, I got the impression they'd be a lot more greedy.

Gustle chuckled. "Oh, they tried. The improvements they saw were just too big, though, and anyone could tell how much it'd mean to keep all that power in one place."

"Why didn't they do that, then?"

"It's all in the money. Not even the Empire could control that."

Money? That would mean...

"So, the merchants just... started selling off the technology?"

"You could say that."

Eris-san nodded. "Any merchant would prioritize turning a profit. The Empire's markets were already quite oversaturated, so it only made sense to start selling abroad."

"Okay... that makes sense."

Rather than trying to make money selling what every merchant probably had, they could make a killing by breaking into a new market altogether.

"I'd imagine the Heroes' technology is all over the place now," Eris-san said matter-of-factly. "From what I've heard, though, it came at quite the risk to the merchants themselves. They went against the Emperor-King's explicit orders, after all."

This Kaizell Empire, or whatever, sounds like a pretty rough place.

Of course, keeping a technological advantage would help them better protect their people, so maybe they weren't as greedy as they sounded. I didn't know enough to say either way.

Just then, Gustle seemed to remember something. "Oh, right. One more thing, Seiichi-kun."

"Yeah?"

"You don't have a horse yet, do you?"

"A horse?"

Horse... as in the animal, right?

It took me a moment to react but, of course, this world would still use animals for transportation.

Where's this coming from though?

"You'd better get a horse while you're still Rank F," Gustle advised. "You've probably got a lot of traveling ahead of you."

"Nah, I don't think I'll really need one."

I wasn't planning on doing any serious work for the Guild, not even any hunting quests to increase my Rank. I'd probably be staying around Terbelle for a while to boot.

Besides, I can run faster than any horse can... That's a horrifying thought actually.

"They all say that, but you've got real strength. I bet you'll get some escort quests coming your way."

I froze. "Wh-What did you say?"

How does he know I'm strong? I should be cloaking my Stats and everything...

"Altria-kun told me about your outing," he explained.

"She did? Wh-What did she say?"

"She told me that you're hiding your real power, though she didn't seem to know why. You beat a monster she didn't stand a chance against, didn't you? She said you couldn't have made it back alive otherwise."

"O-Oh."

"I'm not about to pry into your personal affairs, but plenty of nobles will take an interest in you. They'll probably invite you to be a retainer or guard them on a trip out of the city... any number of things. Word hasn't gotten out about you yet, but it's just a matter of time."

"I'm really nothing special, though..."

I didn't see any point in keeping secrets from Gustle, but I decided to err on the side of caution anyways. He didn't seem to care about how strong I really

was as he continued.

"Anyhow, if you end up taking any escort quests, you'll find yourself doing plenty of traveling. If you run into any bandits along the way, you might end up having to run. Honestly, a reliable horse is one of the best investments you can make."

"Makes sense. I really don't have anywhere to keep a horse, though."

"Hmm... You're staying at *The Tranquil Tree* with Altria-kun, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"If I remember correctly, they've got a stable in the back. They'll even care for it if you've got the money to spare."

Oh, nice.

I didn't need a horse right away, but as Gustle said, there was no telling when one might come in handy. Besides, if I ever had to travel with anyone and could keep pace with their horses on foot, that'd be really suspicious.

"I guess I'm buying a horse then."

"You don't need to anytime soon, of course. I only wanted to give you a tip for when you've got the money to spare."

"Oh, I've got plenty of money; no worries there."

"In that case, I've got just the thing for you."

With that, Gustle disappeared behind the reception counter, coming out a moment later with what looked like a flyer.

"Here's a map to a good stable in town. There are also a few blacksmiths and item shops that our adventurers frequent on here, and not just the newbies at that. It's got the library on it, too."

"Really? Thanks."

Sorry for assuming you never do your job.

"Anything else you need?" he asked.

"No, I think I'm fine for now. If I have any questions later, though, I'll make sure to ask you."

Both Eris-san and Gustle seemed satisfied with my answer.

"Excellent! Next time, I'll surely introduce you to some proper muscle-building techniques!"

"You're always welcome in my sadomasochism classes as well."

"Maybe next time... or never."

With that, I left the guild and went on my way.

Chapter 3: The Books' Curse and a Bit of Peace

"Oh, right... That dumb sheep gave me more Fruits of Evolution, didn't he?"

It had completely slipped my mind until I left the guild. I wasn't that surprised, though, what with meeting Altria-san and the whole mess with the Black Dragon God.

"The Fruits come before either the library or a horse."

I knew how amazing those things were better than anyone. Saria evolved, thanks to them as well, so she probably knew they could be useful. But they'd literally saved my life, time and time again. I wanted to handle them before even doing any digging into the Demon King. Fortunately, I already had a little business with the item shop, so I didn't have to go out of my way to get what I wanted. It was high time I put my potion-crafting skills to use.

"I'll need compounding tools, not to mention flasks."

I'm still shocked those Clever Monkeys could make everything from scratch.

I looked at my map. "Okay, item shop... Huh, it's pretty close. I guess that's my first stop, then."

With that, I started walking. Along the way, I saw the lolicon from the guild watching a little girl eating candy with a little too much interest, but I pretended not to see him.

Where're the guards when you need them, huh?

Looking around town, I noticed that quite a few people were wearing what looked like jeans. It looked so natural that I didn't even spare them a thought until Gustle mentioned it. The more I looked, the more Earth fashions I recognized.

Jeez, the Heroes sure are going overboard...

Before long, I arrived at the item shop.

"This is it, right?"

It looked like a perfectly ordinary store from the outside. When I opened the door, however, I saw the shelves were full of all sorts of strange things. As I gawked at them, a middle-aged woman came out of the back.

"Oh? A new customer, are you?"

"Uh, hi. Gustle told me about you."

"Haha, is that so? Feel free to look around."

She returned to the store's back rooms with a chuckle and a smile.

Wait, come back! What even is all this stuff?! I've never seen these things before in my life! She could've at least given me a quick tour...

"Oh, fine... Guess I'll have to explore on my own."

Everything seemed to have a name and a price tag, at least, so that would give me a start. If I needed to know anything else, I had Greater Analysis to help me out.

"But, uh... what's this?"

The first thing I picked up was a smooth white sphere listed at 100G.

"Not a bad price. What's it called?"

I checked the nametag.

Just A Ball.

"Hey! Lady!!"

Is it really just a ball? What use is this thing supposed to be?! Or wait, maybe that's just its name, and it has some special effect?

I used Analysis on it.

>JUST A BALL: Really, it's just a ball. Cats like playing with it, and if you throw it at a monster hard enough, it might run away... maybe.

"Dammit, it really is useless!"

What was I even expecting?!

I'd been so disappointed lately; I didn't know why I even bothered. Even Gustle and Eris-san were something else.

I tiredly put the ball back on the shelf before scanning for something else of interest.

"Oh, what does that vase do?"

The vase gave off a strange sort of aura, and it looked like the kind of thing you could do alchemy in. The price tag was a hefty 100,000G, so it had to be valuable. I skipped looking at the nametag and got right to Analysis.

>VASE OF HAPPINESS: A vase that looks like it might bring happiness to its owner. The shopkeeper will be especially happy if it actually sells.

"GUAAAAAARDS!!"

This is a scam! This whole place is full of junk! How is this place still in business? And hold on, Gustle actually recommended this place to me! Is this some sort of hazing thing again? Screw that!

I'd lost all faith in the store, but I decided to take another look around just in case, and I found a few things that looked like they might actually be useful. One thing that caught my eye was a bundle of Otherworldly Paper made with techniques the Heroes introduced. It wasn't as nice as real Earth paper, but it was a cut above parchment or anything, so it'd be way easier to use. It was priced at 500G per hundred sheets, and while I had no idea if it was worth it, the price seemed at least reasonable.

I also found an item made from a rock called a mageite that was labeled as a Mana Camera. It was probably based off my world's cameras.

So, this is what that pervert in the guild was using to take his candid photos, huh...

Plenty of things that were left looked interesting, but I could easily be stuck there browsing all day long, so I focused on tracking down what I was looking for. Fortunately, I had no problems finding what I wanted.

"Here they are. Let's see... a mortar and pestle, plus some flasks. Let's say ten of them."

I also grabbed a planter and a watering can so I could start growing Fruits, plus a burlap sack full of rich soil. Once I had everything together, I called the owner back out.

"Excuse me? I'd like to pay for this."

"Decided already, have you?"

"Yeah, more or less."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in anything else. For now, I decided to just get my things paid for and get underway. I paid 3,000G, but I had no idea what anything was worth to begin with.

It's not like I'm low on money, so I don't need to care about good deals or anything right now.

I left the store, returning to the busy city streets.

"Okay, what's next...?"

After a bit of thinking, I decided to buy the horse last. It seemed like a horse would just get in the way of my shopping if I bought it now.

"Right. Library it is, then."

If there were any books on the Demon King or the Hero, I wanted to see them. Having decided on my next destination, I pulled my map back out and let my feet carry me there.

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"Whoa... That's big."

That was my first impression upon arriving at the library. It was a massive building, not unlike what large museums looked like back on Earth. It even had stained glass windows and a bell tower, all of which made it stand out more from the surrounding cityscape.

"So, this is the Royal Library, huh?"

I bet a place this big has books on magic.

With that, I stepped inside to find that it was just as fancy on the inside. It was packed to the brim with towering bookcases. There didn't seem to be an entrance fee, but they didn't do any book rentals, either. It seemed to be for public display only. I noticed that each of the books seemed to have a charm that would teleport it back to the shelf if anyone tried to sneak it outside.

Man, magic is cool.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of a reception desk, so it looked like I'd have to find the books I wanted on my own. I struck out into the forest of shelves to try and track down the books I was looking for, but it was so mazelike that I nearly forgot why I was there. I was eventually able to track down a few interesting volumes, so I carried them off to one of the tables along the side to take a look. Oddly enough, there wasn't anyone else there, so I effectively had the whole building to myself.

"Alright, let's start with this one."

The first one I opened was titled *The Hero and The Demon King*, and its contents seemed just like that. It was a history book, but it was simple enough to be for kids, so I decided to take a look at it just in case. In the end, though, it disappointed me. It was clearly biased towards the humans, making the demonkin out to be horrible monsters.

If only I could find a more subjective book... something from a third party's viewpoint, maybe.

I kept looking through the other books I'd found, but I came up empty in the end. Every book I'd found painted the Demon King as a villain and the Hero as some sort of saint. Maybe that was the truth—but it didn't mesh with what I'd read from the Black Dragon God's past.

"Well, that was a bust," I said with a sigh.

I did find one other thing that was decidedly off, though. Every time the Hero slew the Demon King in the history books, it explicitly said that everyone lived happily ever after. Given what I read from *The Hero Abel's Journal*, however, I couldn't believe that was true. If I could trust that diary's contents, the Hero would be banished from his country and driven to suicide.

"To be fair, though, I didn't expect any country to come forward and admit they basically murdered the Hero after they were done with him. It's not a great look."

If any current Heroes heard that was what happened to their predecessors, there's no way they'd fight for anyone. Nobody wanted to be a pawn.

"I guess that's all I'm getting on the Demon King, though."

Deciding that I couldn't trust any information on the Heroes or the Demon King, I put away the books I'd gathered.

"Alright, what do I wanna look up next?"

The next book I grabbed was on Status. I chose to look at it since my only solid knowledge of Stats was based on what I knew from games or manga, and there was no telling if it'd hold up in this world. Apparently, everything was just as I thought it'd be except for Appearance. I'd assumed it was just a measure of how attractive someone looked and that much was right, but there was another aspect to it. It also measured how appealing someone was in other ways. Even if they looked ugly, they'd have a good Appearance Stat if they had some other quality that positively attracted people's attention. In other words, it measured a person's charisma as well.

Wait... If my Appearance was blank before, then that means I wasn't just ugly. I literally didn't attract people in any way, shape, or form.

It wasn't a great feeling, but I didn't stay down for long. After all, the next books on my list were about magic, and I couldn't wait to crack them open.

The first one on my list was titled *How to Cast Magic*. As I read, I discovered that it was about the nature of magic itself. Basically, magic was the act of using energy—mana—to affect the caster's surroundings. To use it, you just needed mana and the ability to envision things. An incantation made it easier to envision the effect you wanted, and top-class casters could use partial incantations or so-called 'voiceless incantations' to speed up and refine the process.

Hold on a second. I haven't been envisioning my spells at all.

If I had, I would've never dropped all that water on my head during my first battle with Saria. After all, I had no idea what that spell did at the time. The reason was probably that I picked up all my spells without practicing or anything, so just saying the incantation was enough.

That's, uh... a nifty side effect.

Just then, however, I heard the familiar mechanical voice in my head.

>You acquired Skill: Voiceless Incantation.

...

"... Well, shit."

This again? Really? I guess I am the Unbounded One, but this is getting crazy. This is supposed to be a top-class Skill, right?! I wonder if the lost-and-found has my limits yet...

However, I was pretty used to the crazy-powerful-Skills routine, so I didn't waste too much time moping.

After that, I looked through more specific books on each element, reading over every spell on their pages, from beginner to advanced magic and even master-level magic. Of course, they didn't have anything on my unique Purgatory Magic. Interestingly, there wasn't anything on Dimensional Magic either, which struck me as strange since Item Boxes were so common. As such, I only ended up reading through the basic elemental books—Fire, Water, Air, Earth, Thunder, Ice, Light, Dark, and Null. It turned out that I already knew all the spells in the Fire, Water, Earth, and Dark books, but there were detailed descriptions of each spell, so I finally knew what they did. By the time I finished, I had a perfect understanding of all my magic except for the Dimensional stuff.

"Nice! No more trying spells out in the middle of battle now."

Before, I only had the spell names and mana costs.

After that, I decided to at least skim through the other tomes. I wasn't able to use any of those elements yet, but I might pick them up later and it never hurt to know what a spell did in case someone tried to use magic against me. Fire and Water magic were mainly offensive spells. But Air, Earth, and Thunder

magic were a lot more balanced and leaned into more utility uses. They'd probably be that much easier to use, then. Null Magic had the most utility spells of all, though. It covered all sorts of strengthening effects, telekinesis, and other effects that weren't good for dealing damage but could be superpowerful in the right circumstances.

In the end, I finished reading through every tome from start to finish in much better time than I would've been able to do on Earth.

Is this an Evolution thing, too?

"Okay, that's it!" I said with a stretch as I put the last book down.

Just then, I heard the voice echo in my head once more.

>You acquired Magic: Null (Ultimate). You acquired Magic: Air (Ultimate). You acquired Magic: Thunder (Ultimate). You acquired Magic: Ice (Ultimate). You acquired Magic: Light (Ultimate). You acquired Title: Meister of Magicks.

>Ultimate proficiency in all base elemental magics confirmed. You acquired Skills: Compound Casting, Multicasting, Magic Creation, Glyph Magic (Ultimate), Circle Magic (Ultimate).

It took me a good moment to process what had just happened to me.

"..."

Why? Why am I crying blood? Why did just reading a bunch of books get me so many skills? Am I going to have to suffer through this every time I read a book from now on? What am I, cursed?

I felt too wasted to argue with it, though, and I decided to check the new Skills instead. I got a pretty good idea of each type of magic from the books, so I decided to skip right over those.

Skill Details
VOICELESS INCANTATION: You can cast magic without reciting an incantation.
MEISTER OF MAGICKS:

A title for those who have mastered all the basic elements. Your magic attack power is multiplied by 2.
COMPOUND CASTING: You can combine spells of the same or different elements to produce powerful new effects.
MULTICASTING: You can cast multiple spells simultaneously, regardless of the elemental tradition to which each belongs.
MAGIC CREATION: You can create unique new spells. After creating a spell, you can activate it via voiceless incantation. All new spells require a clear mental image of the intended effect and a name.
GLYPH MAGIC (ULTIMATE): You can embed magic into objects, such as weapons or accessories.
CIRCLE MAGIC (ULTIMATE): You can cast a spell via magic circle, greatly increasing its effects.

"Damn... I just can't keep up...!"

With that, it seemed like I had taken another step away from humanity.

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"Ugh..."

By the time I finally left the library, I felt totally drained.

What am I even supposed to be? A Hero? The Demon King? I bet I could pull off either if I felt like it, and it'd be about as easy as a trip to the convenience store. Haha, this is so nuts...

I trudged through the streets for some time before finally arriving at a bustling park.

"Wow, this place is busy. What's going on here?"

All sorts of booths were set up around a central fountain, which probably ran on some kind of magic. Some of the stalls were selling delicious-smelling street food, while others were laden with flashy art. No matter where I looked, everyone was either buying or selling something.

"Come to think of it, I still haven't had lunch yet."

I had no idea how much time had passed while I was in the library, but it was clearly sometime after noon now. I was honestly kind of startled that I'd managed to read so many books in so little time.

"I'd love to find someplace a little quieter to eat, though."

I still wasn't in a great mood, so I wanted to sit down someplace nice and quiet to grab a bite. As I passed through the busy square, however, one of the booths caught my eye.

It wasn't a proper stall like the others, and not a single customer was looking at its wares. In fact, it was little more than a blanket with a couple of paintings laid out on it. I didn't know or care about art, but the sight of that little shop made me stop for some reason. A single young girl was seated there, and she had doglike animal ears on her head. She was probably a year or two younger than I was, and she was pretty cute. However, she looked depressed.

She's probably the stall owner. Man, I wanna touch those ears...

When I stopped in front of her little store, she looked up, and the gloom disappeared from her face.

"Oh... H-Hello! Would you like to buy something?"

I kept half an eye on her while I looked down at her art.

"Whoa...!"

The paintings she had on display had me spellbound. From what I could tell, they weren't especially flashy and weren't done in an unusual style. They didn't have any special qualities to them at all, in fact, but each and every one of them had a mysterious appeal. One was of a bird drinking from a pond, one of a person smiling, another of a townscape at sunset, and another of the night sky.

They were all based on simple, everyday models but, for some reason, everyone was drawn to the fancy-pants paintings being sold on the other stalls.

Why, though? I can't even tell what those other paintings are supposed to be. Then again, everyone says Picasso and the like are really great and moving or whatever. But it's just random color to me. I don't get that stuff at all. I mean, Picasso's stuff looked pretty impressive from the textbooks and stuff, and I'm not an artist. But they never made me really feel anything.

"Did you paint these?" I asked her.

She blinked in surprise but composed herself a second later. "Yes!"

Wow... I couldn't paint anything half this good, and she's gotta be younger than me.

Her work had moved me, and since it was the first time I'd really felt anything about art since coming to that world, I figured it couldn't hurt to buy one. I decided on the one about the sunset since it spoke to me the most.

"How much is this one?" I pointed at it.

"U-Umm... It's 1,000G."

Whelp, I've got no idea how much that is. I don't even know how much art's supposed to cost back in Japan.

Either way, I decided to just buy it, no regrets.

"Great. I'll take it."

"R-Really? Thank you so much!"

She seemed beside herself with joy as she accepted my coins and set about wrapping up the painting for me.

I'll have to buy a frame later.

With that, she handed me the neatly-bundled painting. I accepted it and slid it right into my Item Box to ensure it didn't get banged up.

"Thanks."

"N-No, um, thank you!"

As I turned to leave, the girl stood up and bowed deeply.

Wow, she's happy. Are sales really that slow today? That's a real shame.

With that, I walked out of the square, searching for a place to grab a bite and relax.

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"How come I still can't find anything?"

I continued wandering through the streets, looking for someplace to sit down and relax as I ate. Unfortunately, all the restaurants I could see from the street were packed from the lunchtime rush, and none looked particularly relaxing. I went down some side streets, hoping to find something there, and the first place that came to mind was where I was assaulted not long after my first visit to the Guild. I didn't see many people back then, so I figured that I might be able to find somewhere that fit the bill.

It wasn't long before I came across a lonely-looking place.

"Café Accogliente, huh?"

What's an 'accogliente'? Some kind of snack? I wondered as I stepped inside.

The bell on the door let out a pleasant tinkling sound as I entered. The place was a little on the dark side, which set a casual, almost sleepy mood. Along one wall was a bar occupied by a middle-aged man with white hair in a bartender's apron.

The sign said it was a cafe, but is this a bar? I'm too young to be in a bar.

Just as I was starting to feel overwhelmed, the only customer in the whole place noticed me.

"Hey, you. How 'bout you come on in instead of standing in the doorway like that?"

"Oh, uh... Sure," I stammered in reply.

I walked over to the bar and caught my first glimpse of the customer's face.

"You're a fresh face," he said. "You an adventurer?"

He had blonde hair that messily stuck up this way and that, and he was dressed like any other guy on the street. He had to be in his forties, and his face had a sort of handsome ruggedness.



"Yeah... As of yesterday, actually."

"That so? Well, Mr. Adventurer, I'm Landze. You could say I'm just a nobody. Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, nice to meet you. My name's Seiichi."

"Seiichi? From the Eastlands, are you? No wonder you're dressed like that."

"Uh... Okay," I muttered to myself.

Is there some special meaning to the way I'm dressed? Come to think of it, Adriana-san mentioned the Eastlands, too.

Evidently, Landze-san caught my muttering. "C'mon, everybody knows the Eastlands are full of crazy-strong warriors. Heaven's Edge is basically a household name. Supposedly, they all have near-black hair like those Heroes the Kaizell Empire summoned. No wonder you don't want the extra attention. That's why you're covering up like that, right?"

"Uh... Right! Of course, I am!"

Seriously, though, why do the Eastlands have to be so infamous? Are they all fighters or something? And who the hell is Heaven's Edge supposed to be?!

At any rate, I could now lie and say I came from the Eastlands if anyone saw my hair.

As I laughed awkwardly, the bartender placed a steaming cup of black tea and a small cake in front of me. I shot him a confused look. He stared back at me for an awkward moment before quietly explaining himself.

"This is our free welcome set for new customers."

Shit, that voice! I could listen to him talk for days!

He spoke in a low, alluring tone that travelled surprisingly well, the kind of voice that could instantly put you at ease. Freebies were also nice, of course.

Landze laughed at my reaction. "Hah! This is the boss here, Noard."

"Indeed, I am Noard," the bartender echoed as he dipped into a low bow. "I hope we will be seeing more of each other."

"Yeah, uh, me too!"

With that, Noard went back to handwashing dishes.

Wow... Now that's a bartender.

I decided to take a bite of the free cake.

"Wh-Whoa!"

Damn, this tastes good!

I figured it'd be okay since my tastes probably wouldn't align well with this world's standards, but I couldn't have been more wrong. It was perfectly fluffy, and the cream had just the right amount of sweetness to it. The fruit garnish was just tart enough to tie the whole dessert together, resulting in a combination I just couldn't get enough of.

"That cake is based on a recipe brought from another world by the Heroes," Noard explained reservedly. "As for the tea, I used the delicate-yet-flavorful leaves of a rendel to brew it."

I've got no idea what a rendel is supposed to be, but Noard-san is clearly in a league of his own.

Even if it was a recipe from my world, it'd take a baking genius to pull it off so well. The tea was as good as he made it sound, and it was perfectly balanced so that it went down like a dream.

"If your food is this good, how come you don't get more customers?"

I realized that came off as a little rude, but I just had to know. The answer, however, came from Landze-san instead of Noard-san.

"There aren't a lot of passersby here, right? Noard doesn't want that many customers anyway."

Noard nodded softly. "I would much rather prioritize my guests' relaxation."

Landze grinned. "There you have it. Besides, I've never told anyone about this place, and the other customers don't, either. There's something nice about keeping a little secret to yourself."

"Okay... That makes sense."

When he put it like that, I could understand. It felt good to have a special spot.

"By the way," I asked Noard-san, "what does the 'Accogliente' in the name mean?"

Landze stopped to think. "I don't think I know that either. Mind spilling the beans, Noard?"

He gave us a soft, knowing smile. "I felt like it, I suppose."

"Wait, there's no reason?!" Landze-san and I returned in unison.

Noard-san shrugged slightly. "When I decided to start this cafe, the name simply popped into my head. I've no idea why, but it fits nicely, so I've never let it bother me."

"Oh, okay," I replied, deflatedly.

"Well, I guess that's as good a reason as any. A name without meaning, huh..."

For some reason, as Noard-san watched our reactions, a soft smile crept back onto his features.

Chapter 4: The Calamity's Resolve and The Monstrosity's Hesitation

I, Altria Grem, was totally confused. Ever since yesterday, when Seiichi broke my curse, I'd been feeling all wrong. This morning, when I ran into him as he ate breakfast, my heart felt almost painfully tight, and I still felt all messed up. Despite how much it hurt, though, it somehow felt *good*. I'd never experienced anything like that before.

Why the hell am I so restless?

Oddly enough, watching Seiichi and Saria acting all chummy with each other rubbed me the wrong way, too. I didn't know what I was feeling exactly, but it was like being a little angry. But more than that, really goddamn sad. I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die whenever I saw them together.

I've gotta figure out what the hell is making me feel this way.

I knew that if I solved that puzzle, there'd be no turning back. It was as though I was risking something precious to me. Just thinking about it terrified me.

"Seriously, what's happening to me?"

I wasn't expecting anyone to answer, but I heard a voice suddenly come from behind me.

"You wouldn't mind if I offered you some advice, would you?"

"Huh?"

I spun around to find Adriana-san standing there. I hadn't seen her since Seiichi and I walked her dog for her.

"Good day, Altria-chan!" she said with a smile.

Apparently she'd been taking a walk through town when she overheard me, and she invited me back to her mansion to talk. I didn't turn her down,

especially since I felt pretty lost on my own, and we took up the conversation again in her parlor.

"There's something wrong with me," I started.

"Wrong, how?"

"Well... You remember that Seiichi guy, right?"

"Of course."

"Ever since yesterday, my chest's felt all tight whenever I see him. I can't describe it, but it's like... painful in a good way and kinda warm. I dunno how else to put it."

"Is that so?" She took an intrigued sip of her tea.

"Not only that, but Seiichi's got this girl with him—she's probably his girlfriend or something—and she's super cute. Whenever I see them chatting together, I feel... I dunno how I feel. It's just... not right, you know? It's confusing. Painful."

She raised an eyebrow at me as she took another sip of tea. "Is that so?"

I'm just really screwed up, aren't I? Is this some sorta side effect of breaking the curse?

As I was worrying, Adriana-san put down her tea and looked me square in the eye.

"You're sick, Altria-chan—sick with *love*. And from the sound of it, this is your first time."

"What the...? Love?!"

Adriana nodded. "Exactly. You're in love."

"Oh... Oh, *shit*."

I could feel my cheek turning bright red, and I suddenly felt very hot.

M-Me, in love...?

"L-Like hell I'm in love? Me? No fucking way!"

If I didn't deny it with everything I had, I'd *change*. The thought of it terrified me.

Adriana didn't seem to care though. "That's the only explanation. You're quite the charming young lady, and I hardly think a crush or two would hurt you. Actually, I'm rather surprised you've never had one before."

"N-No, I can't—"

"If you can't, what's that ring on your finger?"

"That's...!"

I felt for the ring Seiichi had given me. The purple stone glittered on me from its place on the ring finger of my left hand. Even I knew what it meant to have a guy put a ring on that finger for you.

"Doesn't that mean you've pledged your love to each other?"

"O-Oh, damn..."

Somehow, Adriana-san was reading me like a book. I must've been blushing harder than I'd ever done before as I tried to hold it in.

"Let me guess," she continued. "Seiichi-san gave you that ring and, in the process he broke your curse. Am I right?"

"Yeah..."

"Remember, he's from the Eastlands, so I doubt he knows what a ring on that finger means here on the continent. He probably didn't think much of it at all."

"..."

Somehow, the very thought of that made me feel empty. Something was definitely wrong with my heart. There shouldn't be anything wrong with that and besides, he already had Saria. A ring was just a dumb piece of metal anyways. I was probably reading too far into it. It was only on that finger because it didn't fit anywhere else. That was simple enough. It should've ended there.

But somehow, it didn't. Knowing that made my blood run cold. I'd never felt so utterly alone before. My curse was finally gone, and that should've been enough on its own. I had no idea why my heart was going and complicating things now.

Shit, what does any of this mean?

Before I knew it, tears had begun to build in my eyes, and I couldn't even bear to look at Adriana-san, so I stared down at the carpet.

"Why don't you accept it?" came her soft voice.

"..."

"You love Seiichi-san, don't you?"

"..."

I slowly looked up at her.

I can't hide it anymore.

Adriana-san's words finally made it all clear.

I... I love Seiichi. I think I really do.

For some reason, tears began to spill down my face. Nobody had ever treated me like he did. Nobody treated me so earnestly. Sure, my guildmates and everyone I knew in town cared about me—but Seiichi was the only one to see just how piss-poor my luck was and stick with me all the same. When he said that he needed me, when he told me that he liked me, I was overjoyed. When he embraced me from behind, my chest felt like it was glowing from his warmth.

Huh. So that explains it... this is love.

Adriana-san gave me a reassuring hug. "Let me give you a little more advice now. It's not unusual to feel jealous or confused to see a boy you like with another girl."

"It's not?"

"Of course not. Everybody feels jealous. Of course, you should never let it take you over, but a little envy never hurt anyone. Besides, he's your *first love*. I know a lot of this must feel new to you, but it's normal, I promise."

"If you say so."

"What does it matter if he already has a girlfriend? If he's dependable enough, polygamy is always an option, even here on the continent. And if you

don't like that idea—well, you'll just have to take him from her."

"Like hell I could do that. I ain't pretty like Saria is and, in case you haven't noticed, my manners need some work—plus, I work a rough job. Not even Seiichi'd wanna be with a girl like me."

Adriana smiled sadly. "Oh, come now, don't be so hard on yourself. I'd love to introduce you to a romance specialist, but you've got to start by loving yourself. It *has* to start from there. Besides, do you really think Seiichi-san cares about that sort of thing?"

I shook my head no. I knew he wasn't like that. There's no way he would've risked his life to cover for me when I tripped that teleportation trap. He was serious about me, and if he felt that way when I was still cursed...

"You... You sure I can love him?"

"Of course."

"I'm not gonna be a pain in his ass, right?"

"Heavens, no. I'm sure he'll be overjoyed."

"You really think so...?"

Honestly, I was glad I fell for him. The Calamity didn't control me now.

Finally, I can move forward.

My heart felt all funny again. It wasn't the same sensation as before—this time, it filled me with hope.

"Adriana-san. How do I make Seiichi care more for me?"

"What?"

"I've felt like a sack of hot crap for a while now, but now I'm just plain happy. I've never felt like this before."

She didn't reply immediately, so I pressed on.

"I want... no, I gotta make Seiichi know how I feel. Sure, I'm a pretty sorry excuse for a woman, but I love him. I want him to feel the same way about me."

"Oh, Altria-chan..."

"So please, teach me. I still know jack shit about love and don't know where to start."

Fortunately, she seemed to realize I was serious. She smiled and nodded before replying.

"Of course! I'll teach you how to stop him dead in his tracks!"

With that, she proceeded to teach me the key to romance.

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"... And that's about all I've had to go through lately."

"Damn. You adventurers sure have it rough, huh?"

I—Seiichi—was still chatting with Noard-san and Landze-san in the Café Accogliente. I'd just finished telling them about the whole labyrinth affair, ending with the breaking of Altria-san's curse.

"I've been wondering," Landze-san asked, "just what happened to that girl you were with? The Calamity or whatever?"

"Well, uh... She's been avoiding me ever since I broke her curse."

"Huh? Why'd she do that? You saved her life, right?"

"Yeah... Well, about breaking her curse..." I cleared my throat awkwardly. "This is going to sound weird, but is there any special meaning behind a guy putting a ring on a girl's left ring finger?"

"Huh? Of course, there..." He gave me a baffled look, but a moment later, it hit him. "Oh, right. You're an Eastlander. Guess you wouldn't know. Wait, you don't mean—"

"Yeah. I used a ring to break her curse. That was the only finger it'd fit on. I wasn't paying any attention to the details at the time, though."

"You're kidding me!"

Even Noard-san was shocked by my reveal.

Uh... I don't like where this is going.

"Was I not supposed to do that?" I asked hesitantly.

"Well, it's not that you *can't*," Landze-san replied awkwardly.

"You see," Noard-san explained, "here on the continent, it means a great deal when one—often a man—places a ring on his lover's finger. It represents a vow of eternal love."

"Eternal what now?!"

Dammit, I knew it! I knew it'd go there!

Landze-san shot me a hard look. "You really messed up, bud. I've lived a good many years longer than you have, and I've never screwed the pooch that bad."

"I must admit, I'm surprised as well."

"That's a pretty hefty vow, too. Just try to tell her it was some kind of mistake—she'll rip your throat out."

"C-Crap." I swallowed hard.

"That vow means everything to girls. I don't know what you guys get up to in the Eastlands. But here on the continent, that vow is about the strongest thing there is."

Noard-san nodded. "From what I've heard, Seiichi-san, you've been a tad... careless, shall we say, in this matter."

"Guh..."

His words felt like a punch to the gut.

I guess that's fair, though.

It was an accident, sure, but what I did has real weight here. I couldn't just back out of it, not to mention that I'd hate to pull a bait-and-switch like that. That left one thing to do, unfortunately.

"Great... What now?"

I cradled my head in my arms.

Altria-san and I aren't a match anyways! Saria's way too good for me in the first place, so what now?!

Landze-san laughed aloud. "C'mon, it's simple. Just marry the girl."

"M-M-Marry her?!"

"What're you getting all surprised about? You swore to love her forever. What were you expecting?"

"I-I mean, yeah, I did, but..."

I still had Saria to think about, and gorilla or not, I had to respect her feelings.

Noard-san seemed to see through my confusion. "Ah. I see you've already promised your life to another."

"Uh... yeah."

"What, you shitting me?!" Landze-san nearly spit his drink across the bar. "How're you so popular in that weird old robe?"

"Weird old robe...?"

I guess I do look pretty fishy, huh... I mean, a guy in a black robe who never shows his face? I'm the stranger danger poster boy.

"So, you already have a girl you like, huh?" Landze-san wondered aloud. "Why don't you marry them both?"

"B-Both?!" I shouted a little louder than I'd intended.

"What? There's nothing wrong with it."

"Yeah, there is! You can only marry one person at a time, right?!"

Landze-san and Noard-san exchanged confused glances before finally coming to a realization.

"Oh, I get it. That's how it's like in the Eastlands, huh?"

"Uh... what?"

"I mean, polygamy's legal as anything here on the continent. Come to think of it, I heard it's legal on pretty much *every* continent..."

Wait, polygamy is legal here? What the absolute hell?

Landze-san nodded at my expression. "Only monogamy in the Eastlands. Got it."

"I suppose it is rather unusual for anyone except royalty or nobility to have multiple wives."

Uh... Wow, the things I've learned since entering this cafe. Why?

In this particular case, the marriage laws would be saving my hide. The only problem was Altria-san herself.

Jeez, what am I supposed to tell her?

I went back to cradling my head in my hands, but to my surprise, a steaming cup of tea came sliding across the counter right beneath my nose. I looked up to find Noard-san smiling at me.

"Ate tea has relaxant properties," he explained softly.

"Uh... Thanks, but I didn't order any more tea..."

"Consider it on the house. Furthermore, allow me to offer you an absolutely critical piece of advice."

"Huh?"

"No matter what happens, no matter what you do, you *must* give the girl a single, firm answer. I doubt you would string her along, but your actions have already spoken volumes. Decide whether you will accept her or whether you will apologize and hope for forgiveness. There's no room whatsoever for ambiguity."

"..."

You know what? He's right.

She'd never forgive me if I half-assed this—I'd never forgive myself, either. Even if it all started with an accident, only a total scumbag would leave her confused.

I'm already a two-timing scumbag, but hey.

"Okay," I replied firmly. "I'll let her know my answer and make it clear where I stand."

"Good," Noard-san replied with a reserved smile.

I drank the tea he'd prepared for me since he'd gone to the trouble of making it, and it really did remove a lot of the tension I was building up. It had a soft, sweet flavor—my favorite tea taste.

As I downed the last dregs of tea, I realized that I'd been there for quite some time. It had to be getting late. After thanking Noard-san again, I got up to leave.

"Thanks again for everything. The tea was amazing."

Landze-san chuckled. "Glad you like the place. Let's chat again sometime."

"Of course!"

Man, this place is great. I'll have to remember it.

Chest brimming with resolve, I began the walk home.

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"Man, to be young again," Landze said with a shake of his head as soon as Seiichi left.

"Landze," Noard said quietly. "Perhaps you should be returning as well?"

"Oh, I'll go back soon enough. I think I'll just wait for my escort."

Noard let out a heavy sigh.

"I realize you feel reassured by my presence, but aren't you being a tad careless?"

"Relax, I'm not alone. I've got Lousse with me."

"I feel rather sorry for all the trouble you put poor Lousse-sama through."

"What, you're feeling sorry for making her do her job?"

"I *do* think you could make it easier on her if you were to stop coming here."

"It's your tea's damn fault for tasting so good!"

"... It's been some time since I've seen such a marvelous display of scapegoating."

He sighed again, but Noard didn't continue to protest, and peace returned to the Café Accogliente.

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"Seriously? Evening already?" I muttered as I looked up at sunset. "Looks like my new horse is gonna have to wait."

I wasn't in a rush or anything, though, so I could put it off until tomorrow.

"I guess I'll head back to the inn, then."

Saria might be back from the orphanage already—but more than that, I had to do something about Altria-san. What I'd done had far more weight to it than its counterpart back on Earth. I'd thought I was ready for it, but just thinking about breaking the truth to her made my stomach tie itself in knots.

"Man... I really am the worst. I can't let this go any longer than I already have."

Even as I muttered to myself, my feet carried me not towards the inn but the orphanage.

I'm so pathetic... a real grade-A asshole.

I naturally found myself thinking Saria would be able to dispel some of the unease I was feeling in my solitude. I felt so sick that the first move was that I almost wanted to die, but I trudged on regardless.

Finally, the orphanage's steeped roof came into view.

"Whelp... I'm here."

So, this is what it feels like to be dead inside.

I reached out to open the door, but just before I laid my hand on it, I heard a voice from behind me.

"Seiichi..."

"Huh?!"

I whipped around faster than I'd thought was physically possible.

"A-Altria-san..."

Standing there was the last person I wanted to see, but the first person I owed an explanation to—Altria-san herself.

For a long moment, we faced each other in silence. The sunset was right behind her, so I couldn't make out her expression. We were utterly alone in the twilight, but neither of us said a word.

Hey, dumbass. She's right there. Do it! Now's your chance to explain your mistake. She might never forgive you, sure, but you owe her that much.

The thought of this being the end of our friendship—the last time I'd ever see her, maybe—choked me with a primal fear. But I couldn't stay quiet. I couldn't pretend nothing had ever happened between us. That would be a million times worse.

Say it! Open your goddamn mouth and get it over with, Seiichi! What are you so afraid of?! Say it! Say it!!

"A-A-Altria-san! About the ring... I—"

At that moment, however, something puzzlingly soft covered my mouth, preventing me from getting anything else out.

"Mph?"

"..."

Altria-san's face was right in front of me, her eyes tightly shut with all her might. Her lips were planted firmly on mine.

What...? My lips... her lips... Wait, is she kissing me?!

"Mmmmmmph?!"

My face suddenly felt hot.

H-How the hell am I kissing Altria-san?!

Even though I understood the situation, I was powerless to move a muscle. She continued to kiss me softly and more than a little clumsily. I was utterly caught off-guard—she must have rushed at me, and the impact of our collision

had knocked my hood down. I had been caught totally off-guard and had unwittingly accepted her body head-on.

Finally, she pulled her face away from mine, dropping her gaze again.



Finally, she pulled her face away from mine, dropping her gaze again.

"Don't you *dare* finish that sentence."

"Huh?"

"I know, okay? I know that ain't what you meant when you gave me this ring."

In other words, it wasn't a vow of eternal love or anything.

"Then—"

"But I don't care," she cut me off tersely, burying her face in my chest. "I don't give a shit! I-I love you, okay?!"

"Wha...?!"

"I've never felt like this before!" she screamed into my chest. "I know you've got Saria already. I might be a girl too, but even I think she's really damn cute."

I couldn't reply.

"But who cares?! I can't change how I feel, and I *hate* seeing you with her!"

"Altria-san, I—"

"Am I not good enough for you? You don't want a rough girl like me around, right?"

"No, it's not that..."

"Well, tough shit. *I love you!* I might be a crummy excuse for a girl, and you probably couldn't care less about a rusty old axe like me—but still, Seiichi. I... I still love you."

With that, she buried her face in my robes again and began to softly cry.

Uh... What do I do now?

I already had Saria. Even if it was legal to have two wives in this world, I was from Earth—from Japan. I'd had a very specific image of what a marriage should be imprinted on me since I was little, and I couldn't just overturn that in the space of an afternoon.

I'm such a filthwad...

Altria-san was incredibly important to me, of that much I was sure. I had no idea what to think when it came to liking her in a romantic way.

Dammit... I'd trade all my Stats, and every bit of fighting strength I had, if it'd mean being strong enough to decide here.

"I..."

"Accept her, Seiichi!"

"What?!"

Both Altria-san and I jumped in surprise. I turned to face the voice, only to find Saria standing there.

"O-Oh, uh, Saria!" I stammered. "This isn't what..."

Well, now I know what it feels like to be caught cheating.

She smiled back. "Don't worry, I know what's happening. Please, Seiichi, accept her love."

"W-Wait... you *want* me to?"

As much as I hated to admit it, I did kind of want to cherish Altria-san in a more romantic sense. I already had Saria, though, and I couldn't bring myself to see Altria-san as anything more than a friend.

Saria nodded with a hint of sadness on her brow. "Yeah, I'm sure. I'm a little sad I won't have you all to myself now, but you're too wonderful to keep you all to myself. I couldn't if I tried."

"Saria..."

"Remember, Seiichi. Strong males attract many females. It's how nature works. Of course, strong females can attract many males, too..."

M-Males? Females?

I was somewhat used to how Saria reverted to her gorilla logic every now and then, but Altria-san looked absolutely baffled.

"That's why," Saria continued, "you've just gotta accept her love. Don't worry, I already love her tons so I'll be fine!"

Altria-san looked like she was about to cry again. "Saria... You really sure about that?"

She smiled like the morning sun and nodded firmly. "Yep!"

God, do I suck.

If Saria—if a woman wasn't always standing behind me and pushing me forward, I wouldn't be able to make a single decision on my own. I felt like I was about to really start hating myself, so I shook my head and shelved that thought. My gaze naturally returned to Altria-san, who was still up against my chest. She looked up and into my eyes, frozen in surprise for just a moment. I realized this was probably the first time she'd seen me without my hood. Her angular crimson eyes were brimming with tears, and I could tell she was uneasy.

"Uh, Altria-sa—"

"Al."

"Huh?"

"C-Call me Al from now on. All my close friends call me that... And no more being formal around me, got it?!"

As Altria-san—no, Al—said that I smiled faintly. She was blushing bright pink.

"Okay, Al."

"... Good."

I gently traced her cheek with my fingertips. Normally, I'd never do something like that, and I wasn't sure what moved me to touch her like that now, but it just felt like the natural thing to do.

I'll save the thinking for later, I guess. Right now, Al comes first.

"I... I love you too, Al."

With that, I softly kissed her.

"Mmph?!"

I was so startled last time that I didn't even realize it, but her lips tasted like the last drink Noard-san had served me—the altel tea. It was such a light and

gentle kiss, with such a delicate, almost misty sweetness to it.

I slowly pulled my lips away.

"Al... I'm kind of a mess and I'm not exactly the most reliable guy around, but I swear you won't regret falling in love with me."

"... Yeah."

"You mean the world to me."

"... I know."

With that, I pulled her into a loving embrace.

"Yay!" Saria cheered as she glomped onto us from behind. "Now the three of us will be together forever!"

Honestly, what did I do to deserve someone as wonderful as Saria?

As the sun's last rays bathed the church in light, the bells began to toll as if to herald blessings to come for the three of us.

Chapter 5: Pickup

"Nwoooooorgh!!"

I, Hiiragi Seiichi, was flailing around on the bed in my room at the inn.

"How could I have said that?!"

Just remembering it physically hurts! Somebody, end my suffering now!

Unfortunately, every minute detail of my exchange with Altria-san—er, Al was burned into my memory.

"What was I thinking?! God, those one-liners were so lame!"

Did calling her Al totally fry my brain?! What was I thinking?!

I shuddered as I remembered what I'd said.

I... I love you too, Al.

Who are you, you sweet-talking creep?! I mean, I did say that, but I clearly wasn't in my right mind! I'm not like that! I'd never say that normally! I hope they both forget that whole part!

Floundering about and screaming helped cool my head, fortunately, and I could approach it rationally.

Yep, no idea what was up with me then. It's like I hopped out of a shojo manga or an otome game or something...

Regardless, I'd said it and I meant every word. My only problem was that I didn't know why I said any of it.

Not only that, the Necklace of Endless Love split just like it had for Saria so that there was enough for Al, too. She was pretty shocked to hear what it did, but what happened next floored me outright.

"... You put it on me," she had said.

"Huh?"

"What? I've never had matching accessories with a boyfriend before, so, uh... I want you to do it all the way. Got it?"

...

WHOA! I mean, holy crap! Just remembering it is embarrassing! The way she was looking at me all cutely, too... She and Saria both are way too cute for their own good!

I buried my face in my pillow and tried to ride out my emotional rollercoaster. It took a while, but finally, I was calm enough that a few deep breaths got me back to normal.

"Jeez... I've gotta get it together..."

Saria and Al had already left the room and were probably halfway through their breakfasts. I told them I'd be down right away, and it wasn't fair to keep them waiting.

"I'm still pretty embarrassed to see Al again, but I'll have to sooner or later anyways."

With that, I left the room and headed to the inn's cafeteria. The hall was unusually full today, but I knew Saria would save me a seat. I walked along the wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of them. Along the way, however, I happened to overhear some of the patrons' conversations.

"Hey, you heard the news? There have been tons of wolf monsters outside the city lately."

"Huh. You think they're Grand Wolves?"

"Who knows? Nobody's been able to figure that much out. We gotta be careful if we're gonna be leaving the city for a while."

"Yeah, good to know."

Wolf monsters, huh? I've never met any except those Acrowolves.

As I was thinking, another table spoke up.

"Hey, you hear about those Heroes the Kaizell Empire summoned? Word on the street is they're getting sent to some magic academy."

"Really? Which?"

"I think I heard it was the Barbodel Magic Academy."

"Ah, the only mid-ranking school. But why Barbodel? Kaizell's got some pretty great schools of its own, right?"

"How should I know?"

Wait, so Shouta and the others are going back to school?

I'd nearly died a couple dozen times and wasn't even human anymore, but it sounded like my old schoolmate was living high on the hog.

They're Heroes, so I guess I shouldn't be shocked. Maybe that means that Kaizell Empire or whatever isn't that bad? This is the first half-decent thing I've heard about it, though...

As long as Shouta, Kenji, and the others were okay, that was enough for me. I wasn't missing them at all, of course. Not in the least. Besides, they had a Demon King to defeat, so they would probably run into much more trouble soon.

I mulled over what I'd overheard while looking for the others. The next conversation I heard was a handful of men standing by the counter. They clearly had a big problem on their hands from the way they were talking.

"Hey, I got some trouble."

"What kind?"

"Well, you know those new adventurers from the other day?"

"You mean those flashy guys?"

"Yeah, them. Don't you think it's a shame?"

"Shame? How?"

"C'mon, what do you think they're here for? Picking up girls!"

"Who cares? They can pick up whoever they want."

"Nah, see, here's where it gets serious. Guess how they pick their targets?" He furtively looked around before continuing in a loud whisper. "Their *faces*."

"Their what?!" recoiled the other three in shock.

Uh... I think they lost me.

"That's just sad, right?" continued the first guy. "I mean, you gotta pick girls by how nice the back of their neck looks. That's how a real man does it!"

The second shook his head. "Nah, man, it's all in the lips."

"You guys are lame," scoffed the third. "Collarbones are where it's at."

"Listen to you; you're like little boys on the playground," said the fourth. "There's only one *real* way to tell a girl's worth... her moles."

"Whaaaaat?!" exclaimed the other three. "You're godly, man!"

"Hmph. It's only natural."

After that, the four of them bunched back into a tight huddle.

"Y'know what, though?"

"Sure, we've all got our tastes, but we've got the important part down."

"Yeah. Only a real loser would pick up a girl on her face alone."

The other three nodded gravely. "What a shame."

Seriously?! I thought they'd have something worthwhile to say, but they're just going on about their dumb fetishes! They're the real shameful ones here! I feel like an idiot for almost taking them seriously! It's way too early for this shit...

Shaking my head, I scanned the cafeteria again. This time, I managed to spot Saria and Al. They'd found a small, round table big enough for three and were holding down the fort there.

How was just finding those two so exhausting?

I made my way through the crowd towards them and I happened to overhear their conversation.

"By the way, Al, why don't you move into Seiichi's and my room?"

"Wh-What?!"

"You like Seiichi too, right? You should totally sleep with us then. I bet Fina-san could get us a room for three if we asked."

"Well, sure..." Al fidgeted. "B-But ain't that too big a step? I'd be spending almost all my time with the guy... Y'know?"

Saria gave her a puzzled look. "Hm? What's wrong with that?"

Al blushed bright red and continued in a hoarse whisper. "I-If I had to spend that much time with him, I'd die of happiness for real..."

"Bashfulness begone!" I shouted as I slugged myself full force in the jaw.

KA-RACK!

Th-This isn't the time or place to simp for her!

Fortunately, the force of my own blow let me forget my embarrassment, even though my cheek was now in agony. I had a monstrous Defense to match my monstrous Attack, and despite the sound I made, I didn't knock any teeth loose or anything.

Seriously, though, Al really went for the knockout there. My pretty-girl resistance dropped when I hit high school, so having Al and Saria around really puts me through the motions...

Before high school, of course, I spent plenty of time with my childhood friends, Kannazuki-senpai and Shouta's little sister Miu, so I was used to girls back then. Of course, when I started avoiding them come high school, all my survival skills went right out the window.

I guess being bullied factors into that, though.

After all, no matter how many hours I spent in the bathtub scrubbing every inch of my body, I was still a filthy mess at school. My classmates would dump garbage and stuff on me, putting me through things I didn't want to think back on. Of course, that only furthered my reputation as a dirty pig. In short, school *sucked*. Being that dirty completely shot any chance I had of being treated decently by girls, and quite a few of them ended up being my bullies. No wonder I couldn't get used to being around them—they terrified me.

After my time in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak with Saria, I overcame my fears almost completely. Saria's gorilla form probably helped a lot because that way I didn't have to deal with her super-hot human form right off the bat.

As I mulled over my past, I finally arrived at the girls' table.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"No, it's okay! Don't worry about it!" Saria smiled.

That made me feel a lot better and I took my seat. "We should probably order our food right away."

With that, I flagged down Lyle-san, who was Fina-san's husband and the inn's resident chef.

"Thank you for waiting." As soon as he saw us, he chuckled. "Look at you, Seiichi-kun! Someone's popular with the ladies."

"Somehow. I don't know what I did to deserve them."

That was the truth. Sitting with them, I felt incredibly out of place, but I didn't let it show as we ordered our breakfasts. After a short while, Lyle-san came back with our food.

"Here's your bread and lulunoberry jam, and your bebefish soup and salad. The soup is piping hot, so try not to burn yourself."

With that, he returned to his kitchen.

What's a lulunoberry? I don't know what a bebefish is either...

Every once in a while, there was something on the menu that I couldn't begin to make heads or tails of, but it all tasted amazing. So, I tried not to sweat the details. The Heroes had caused something of a culinary revolution, just as Gustle had said and, in general, this world's food was on par with Earth fare.

As I started eating, a question popped into my head.

"So, what do you two wanna do today?"

Al hesitated a moment. "I'd like to get some exercise in, so I was thinking of taking on a hunting quest or two."

"Makes sense. You seemed pretty beat after the whole maze ordeal, so I'm not surprised you're raring to go now."

She nodded, blushing slightly. "Yeah. And, uh, thanks for saving my ass back then."

I shook my head. "No need to thank me or anything. I wanted to save you, so I did."

"Huh. Okay." She smiled to herself a little as she went back to her food.

"I wanna go back to the orphanage!" Saria chimed.

"Again? Did something happen yesterday?"

"Well... not really. But I did promise the kids I'd teach them how to bake cookies!"

"Makes sense."

I still wasn't clear on how she'd learned to cook from her time in the forest, but Saria was god-tier nonetheless. I wasn't complaining, of course—and it sounded like she was about to make a bunch of kids really happy.

"I'd like to buy a horse," I added.

Saria blinked at me blankly. "A horse?"

"A horse, huh?" Al gave me an intrigued look. "What for?"

"Gustle recommended I get one just in case. Every adventurer needs one, right?"

She shrugged. "I guess. Even Item Boxes fill up sooner or later, so horses ain't bad for carrying stuff. Besides, they're good for protection and shit, so they're nice to have around."

"Okay."

I still don't think I need one, though.

I was faster on foot than any horse, and I could probably carry a lot more too. It still sounded useful enough. And while I wasn't planning on taking on any hunt or escort quests anytime soon, I should at least look the part of a normal adventurer. Even if I could make a living on gathering quests alone, Al seemed

to know I was stronger than I let on, and I didn't seem to have Gustle fooled either.

We all finished our food after a while, and we each got ready to head off to our day's work. Al had some preparations she had to make in her room, so Saria and I ended up leaving the inn together, resolving to walk together as long as we could.

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"Everyone seems so happy today!" Saria chirped as we strolled through town.

As cheerful as she seemed, though, the passersby seemed every bit as pleased at the sight of her.

"Yeah... I hope it stays this calm and peaceful forever," I said with a smile.

Of course, I should've seen the giant-ass flag I was waving there since the peace broke the next instant. Three gaudily-dressed men suddenly blocked the street in front of us.

"Hey, man. Nice chick you got there."

"How about you ditch that loser and come play with us, sweetie? We're a ton more fun."

"C'mon, tea's on me."

This cliché? Really? And what's with those lame pickup lines?!

I didn't know if this world had hair bleach or anything, but their hair had clearly seen healthier and more naturally colored days. They also had more ear piercings each than I could count on one hand. They came off as almost comically stereotypical frat boys. I didn't doubt for a second that they were the gaudy adventurers the men in the inn were talking about. They stuck out from the crowds of Terbelle, at the very least.

Saria took a moment to think before replying. "Who are you?" From the way she was acting, she was genuinely curious. "Do you know them, Seiichi?"

"Nope, not at all."

"Huh. What do you want from me, then?" she asked them.

One of the men—the one who carried himself just a little more cockily than the others—smirked lewdly.

"Not much. We just wanna have a little fun with you."

"We don't bite, sweetie!" cackled the second.

"We just want you, though. Let's ditch the cloaked cuck here, yeah?"

Wow. Gotta give them points for honesty, I guess.

If I ran into guys like this before, I'd be shaking like crazy. Now, I wasn't scared in the least.

I mean, I've killed Clever Monkeys, Zeanos, and even the Black Dragon God. Why would I get scared of a couple creeps like this? My crazy Stats don't hurt, either.

After a moment's thought, Saria's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, I get it!"

I was a little worried she didn't get their intent at all, but it seemed like she had figured it out after all. I hoped that was what she was referring to, at least.

She turned to face me. "Let me handle them, Seiichi!"

"Huh? Handle them how?"

Saria had already turned to face the goons, and an innocent smile spread across her face. "Okay, I'll go with you! Where to?"

The creeps all grinned.

"Hehe, looks like someone's quick on the uptake."

"There's a great place at the end of this dark alley. C'mon, we'll show you there."

"Ohh, baby! Let's gooo!"

She moved to follow them, and I hastily caught her wrist.

"W-Wait, Saria! What are you doing?!"

"Don't worry, I'll handle this!"

Uh... Okay, she's right. She's over level 700, after all!

I seriously doubted the three of them could even touch her, so I simply watched and waited as they disappeared into the alley. I got a little too uneasy to wait, so I followed them to the side of the road. It wasn't Saria I was worried about, though.

"GYAAAAAAGH?!" they screamed in horror.

Yep, that's what I thought.

Just as I was about to head inside, however, the three goons burst out of the alley, each white as a sheet as they bolted in different directions.

Wait, what'd she do?!

I peered down the alleyway and instantly regretted it.

"That end too fast."

"AAAGH?! GORILLAAAAAA!!!" I screamed.

There I found gorilla-mode Saria—Goria for short—still clad in her white one-piece. It had been forever since I'd seen her in her original form and combined with how unprepared I was, I couldn't help but scream.

Seriously, stop transforming in that dress! Your muscles are practically making it burst at the seams! If it wasn't a gift from Sheep-san, it'd be a worthless rag already!

Goria narrowed her eyes and snorted. "Seiichi, mean. No shout."

"Oh, uh... Sorry."

"Why shout when Seiichi can fall in love?"

"That's asking a little much!"

I'm already in love with her and I couldn't love a gorilla in a dress if I tried!

At that moment, though, I felt I needed to know something.

"By the way, why did you decide to follow those guys?"

"Hm? They want to see gorilla form. Right?"

"Uh... Maybe not."

I was the only one who knew Saria could transform at all. That also meant that she didn't realize they were trying to pick her up at all.

Man, that's rough.

"Anyhow, you'd better get back to human form now."

"Why?"

"Why...? Just imagine if somebody sees you..."

"Well, if it isn't Seiichi-kun!" came a familiar boisterous voice behind me. "Been lifting lately?"

Oh, great!

Sweating bullets, I turned around to find Gustle flexing at the entrance of the alleyway.

"U-Uh... Hi, Gustle."

"What a coincidence, bumping into you here! I just finished my morning run. You need to keep up your stamina, too! Why don't you give it a try?"

He has a good point, but this isn't the time for that! Of all the times to run into him...!

Gustle seemed oblivious to my worry as he looked past me down the alley.

"Who's that with you there?" he asked.

However, as soon as he laid eyes on Saria, he froze in shock.

Uh... How do I explain this?

I could only watch in horror as he opened his mouth to scream.

"DAMMIT! I LOST!" He fell to his knees, sobbing like a giant over-muscled baby.

"What the what?"

"Th-Those perfect pecs!" he blubbered through his tears. "Such lumberous lats... what titanic triceps! My muscles are matchsticks in comparison!"

"Uh... again, what?"

In my panic, I must've forgotten Gustle was absolutely out of his mind.

"I prided myself on having the best muscles in the Capital—no, on the whole continent! To think I'd be outdone so easily...!"

"Uh-huh..."

"No... I can't give up now! Seiichi-kun, I'm sorry, but I've got a lot of work ahead of me! I must go!" With that, he cast one last look up at Saria. "I don't know who you are, you gorgeously muscled giant, but you have taught me humility, and for that, I am grateful. Farewell!"

He then turned on his heel and strode off.

...

"Uh, Saria. Human form now, please."

"Okay."

Good thing we're in the one city where pickup lines are doomed to fail, and gorillas walk among us as humans.

※ ※ ※

After being scared within an inch of their lives, the three adventurers finally stopped in a small square to catch their breath.

"Shit... The hell was that?"

"How should I know?!"

"Yeah! Are all chicks in this town gorillas in disguise?! She was wearing that dress, even!"

Their voices united in a single great call. "Nobody wants to see that!"

"We haven't had any luck with the ladies since we came to this dumb-ass town..."

"Seriously, the fuck is going on here?!"

At that moment, they heard footsteps from a nearby alley.

"Looks like we got some new faces here," came one of the newcomers' voices.

The three gaudy men turned to see a trio of rough-looking adventurers in leather armor walk in.

"Who're you?" asked one of the gaudy men uneasily.

One of the scruffy men scoffed. "C'mon, we ain't gonna bite. We just noticed you guys seem to be new adventurers in town. That right?"

"Y-Yeah... we got here yesterday."

The rough men exchanged glances, grinning like hyenas before their prey.

"No wonder we didn't recognize ya... Hey, how about you have some playtime with Daddy?"

In that moment, the newcomers' fates were sealed. The rough men exchanged knowing looks before pouncing, leaving only three screams echoing throughout the dark alleys of the Capital.

※ ※ ※

In the heart of the palace, at the very center of the Kaizell Empire, lay the personal chambers of the Emperor-King himself. There, the Emperor-King Sheldt vol Kaizell was conversing with an elderly robed man—Helio Lorban—in hushed tones.

"Your Royal Majesty!" croaked Helio with a grin. "I come bearing news of the Heroes."

"Yes? Is something the matter?"

"As would happen, many of the Heroes claim that their training has already ended."

"What? Zakia has given them combat training?"

"Funny you should mention that, Your Perfect Magnificence. You see, they have yet to fight so much as a single Slime."

Sheldt's brow furrowed. "... They *what*?"

"You see, I had one of my trusty men look into the matter. And it seems Zakia is *obsessed* with teaching them the basics of swordplay and he's hardly touched on actual combat."

"What does he think he's doing?!" Sheldt stood up with a roar. "If we are to annihilate those loathsome devilkin and lay claim to their bountiful natural resources, we require the Demon King slain! Those *cattle* continue to mock us with the bounties of their realm and, even now, they threaten to mock humanity further with their make-believe country!"

"What an eloquent way to put it, my liege!"

Sheldt slammed his heavy fist on his desk. "How *dare* Zakia not have the Heroes combat ready by now?! Does the buffoon realize the damage Our empire could sustain from the Demon King?!"

Helio shook his head sadly. "Forget the damages from the Demon King, my king—if you can't even muster a rabble of Heroes, you'll be an absolute laughingstock across the continent."

"Exactly! What did We summon them for, if not for war?!"

"But rest assured, Your Royal Highness."

Sheldt cast Helio a dubious look. "What?"

A smile crept across the wizened wizard's lips. "Even the Heroes call for proper training, and as your humble servant, I know how to provide them with just that."

"... Go on."

"I propose that we enroll them in the Barbodel Magic Academy."

Sheldt's eyes flew open with shock. "You what? Why would you send them to that accursed place?! Students there attend from countries across the land! Even if you were to enroll them someplace, we have far better facilities here! Why would We besmirch the honor of the Empire's own halls of learning?!"

"Yes, I'm painfully aware that no foreign school could match our own program. However, I believe Barbodel is ideal *because* other countries' students are there."

"What are you implying?" Sheldt couldn't keep the interest from his eyes.

"The Heroes may lack combat training, but I've seen to their magic studies personally. Given their impressive latent talents, most of them have reached Intermediate proficiency with three, if not four, different elements."

"Oh?"

"Barbodel, as you surely know, specializes in magic instruction. At their current level, our Heroes would match up quite closely with the nobles and prodigies of similar ages in attendance."

"Interesting. Go on."

"Should we enroll the Heroes there, they will inevitably surpass every other student in the academy. There couldn't be a better stage on which to display the Heroes' immense powers to the world."

"That makes sense."

It would indeed be a great means of showcasing the Heroes' power. Given all the foreign students there, the tales of the Heroes' strength would spread like wildfire.

"There is, of course, another reason," Helio continued.

"What would that be?"

"Barbodel offers combat training as part of its curriculum, which would no doubt satisfy the Heroes' requests. Should we do so, we'll be indebting them to us and making it that much easier to control them."

Sheldt furrowed his brow again. "We do not think it will be that easy."

"Oh, it will. You see, the adult Heroes are all still locked in the dungeon. The ones we've been training are still so young, so foolish. We could easily request one small favor in exchange for their enrolment in the Academy."

"Which would be?"

"That they wear Armlets of Subordination."

"Oh, brilliant!"

Armlets of Subordination were globally banned, but the Heroes weren't from their world. They wouldn't know any better.

"The Armlets do, however, have the slight catch of only forcing the wearer to obey two commands. I propose those two commands be to slay the Demon King as soon as he's resurrected and slaughter any demonkin who invades our lands. That way, they'll have no choice but to comply with our core demands even from the distant halls of Barbodel, and we won't run the risk of them fleeing. It's impossible for them to remove the Armlets without our aid. And they won't be able to harm whoever gives them their orders, so they won't rebel against us either."

"Do you really think they'll put the Armlets on so easily?"

"They don't have to know what the Armlets are now, do they? They're totally ignorant, and I'll make sure to devise a few... failsafes, shall we say."

"Yes... Yes! Marvelous!" Sheldt nodded with glee. "Let it be done at once, then! We trust you will make short work of it."

"Of course, my liege. Leave everything to me."

With that, the cogs of a conspiracy began to turn, threatening the clueless Heroes beneath them...

Chapter 6: Perfectly Normal Horses

"Is this the place?"

After parting ways with Saria, I had no trouble making it to one of the stables Gustle had listed on his map. The shop's name was the Monster Shopping Center, and the sign out front had *We have only the cutest head-chompers in the city!* scrawled across it.

Hold on a second. I wouldn't call anything that chomps peoples' heads cute!

Come to think of it, Adriana-san's pet Milk-chan was decently cute despite trying to eat me, so I assumed you just had to get used to being a potential source of pet food.

Swallowing hard, I stepped inside.

"Oh, a customer?" A middle-aged man with a shiny, bald head noticed me as soon as I stepped inside. "Welcome! Is there any particular monster I can interest you in?"

"Uh... I wanna buy a horse."

The man grinned. "Ah, I get it. You want a piece of the race, don't you?"

"Huh? Derby?" I repeated dumbly.

Noticing his guess was off his mark, the man's smile strained slightly. "Ah. My mistake. See, I thought you were after the Capital Derby, too."

"Um. What's that?"

"It's a race between anything horselike that goes around the Capital walls. That's how we decide who's the best rider in the city. The winner gets a nice prize out of it, too. From the looks of it, though, you're not that interested."

"No, I just want a horse for the utility. I'm an adventurer, so I was told I should buy one."

"That so? Well, I've got a few options for adventurer horses, right this way."

He led me to a large cage. Inside it were a few creatures with the same general shape as a horse, but they had jet-black pelts and scales around their hooves and flanks.

"What the heck?" I gaped.

"These are Horse Dragons," he explained. "They're pretty violent in the wild, but if you tame 'em right, they're obedient and loyal enough. These puppies have got great legs on them, too. They're perfect for pulling wagons, and you can get some great speed."

"Huh. That's pretty neat."

A Horse Dragon, huh... That certainly sounds like a perfect fit.

I wasn't especially attached to the idea of a normal horse, and I didn't see myself getting much use of it personally, so it seemed good enough. Money wasn't an issue either, of course.

"Sure, I'll take one," I said. "How much?"

"Let's see... How about five gold pieces? Oh, right! One thing first." He turned to face me. "You have the Riding Skill, right?"

"Riding? Nope."

"Oof. No Horse Dragon for you then."

"What?!"

I didn't know how to react to that. I'd never really encountered a situation where I didn't have the right Skill for it. And as overpowered as my learning ability was, just hearing the name didn't seem to get it for me.

I guess I'll have to get on a horse to pick it up.

Just then, I got a great idea. If I could get him to explain the basics of horseback riding to me, that might be enough to learn Riding.

"Hey, this might sound kinda weird, but could you teach me how to ride a horse?" I asked.

He folded his arms imperiously. "I don't know how!"

"Oh, great."

After a few more questions, I learned that he not only couldn't ride a horse—he couldn't ride any of the many monsters in his own store.

Dammit!

At that moment, however, the strange, almost robotic voice sounded in my head.

>Universal Language Comprehension activated. Success. You can now understand Horse Dragons.

I can now what?

It took me a moment to figure out just what the voice was referring to.

Right, I picked up that Universal Language Comprehension Skill in that labyrinth when I beat the Treasure Chest.

It apparently wasn't always successful, but the description did mention activating monsters sometimes. Thinking I'd be able to understand the Horse Dragons now, I turned towards the cage and focused. I'd never had the chance to talk to a horse before, so I was curious as to what they had to say.

"You hear that?" said one. "That hooded guy can't even ride a horse!"

"Damn, that's lame!"

"Go on, two-legs! Hobble back home to your sad two-legged mommy!"

"Like hell anyone would let a monkey like you ride them!"

Instantly, I regretted everything.

How are even the horses insulting me?

Sweat started pouring out of my eyes—not tears, sweat. Fortunately, the merchant didn't notice how shaken I was.

"Well, even if the Horse Dragons are a no-go, there's plenty of rides for beginners. You don't need any special Skill to ride them, and you'll even pick up Riding with time."

"Whoa, really?"

Great, problem solved! Sounds like just the thing for my lack of experience.

"As it happens, we've got one left. Follow me."

"Perfect!"

He led me to another cage. Inside, a tall horse with deerlike antlers was waiting with a calm expression. Unlike the Horse Dragons, it had a sort of dignity to it, and even though it didn't have any scales, the horns were pretty cool.

"This breed's called a Dorse," the man announced.

Man, that's an awful name. Couldn't somebody have thought of anything better? Sure, it's kind of a deer horse, but really?

"Sure, it's a beginner horse, but it's a pretty fine steed all the same," he boasted. "This thing's got twice the speed of any old Horse Dragon."

"Twice?!"

Damn, Horsedeer!

"Not only that, they're one of the easiest horse-type monsters to train. They're also very loyal; even the wild ones don't act up. It's a pretty solid steed."

I'll say! This thing's way better than those Dragon Horses, even if the name sounds kinda lame!

With that, I was all but decided.

"One thing I'd better mention, though," he said after hesitating a moment. "These things are *really* dumb."

"So, it's not just the name?!"

Who'd have thought the name fit in more ways than one?

While I was still reeling, he continued.

"As for just how dumb these things are... well, you'd probably never reach anywhere; they're so bad with directions."

"Doesn't that defeat the point of a horse?!"

"Sometimes they forget to eat."

"Wait, really?"

"They forget who their master is."

"How am I supposed to own one, then?!"

"Every once in a while, they forget to breathe."

"Wait, so they just die?!"

"Yep. The worst part is, they're too dumb to realize they're dead."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

That thing's hopeless! Sure, it looks cool, but I couldn't think of a more useless horse if I tried! Way to waste that crazy speed!

As I shook my head, I realized something else. For whatever reason, my Universal Language Comprehension wasn't activating.

I wonder why that is?

The merchant entered the cage as I wondered about it. "Sure, he's an idiot, but with a little training, he'll be reliable as anything."

He patted the Dorse on the neck but, for some reason, it woodenly fell right over. He shook his head as he looked down at it.

"Whoops. Looks like it died."

Dorse, noooooooooo! How could you actually forget to breathe?! Is that why my Skill didn't activate? I couldn't hear it talking because it was dead?! That's just sick!

The worst part of it, though, was that the look on its face was as cool as ever as if it didn't realize anything was wrong.

If you've got time to put on airs, stop being an airhead!

After a long moment of silence, the merchant sighed. "Whelp, no selling this guy now. Guess I'm eating well tonight."

"Seriously, man?!"

You're so heartless! You could at least give it a decent burial!

He seemed to notice my shock and shook his head. "Relax, these guys are perfectly edible. In fact, their owners always chow down after they kick the bucket."

"Uh... okay."

"And hey, it helps that they're stupidly tasty!"

I pretended not to hear that sick joke.

"Anyhow," he continued, "that means I've got only two more breeds to show you, and they've both kinda... unique."

"How so?"

"It's faster to just show you. C'mere."

With that, he showed me a new cage that looked far sturdier than any of the other cages in the shop. Instead of iron bars, it looked like a solid metal box, and the only way to see in was through a slit in the door.

"Now, I'm gonna be honest with you," he started. "I've got no idea what the hell this thing is."

"You what?"

"It's kind of horselike, and that's why I'm showing it to you, but, uh... Just take a look."

He moved aside so I could get to the viewing slit, and I opened the small sliding window to peek through.

"WROOOOOOOAGHHH..."

I immediately slammed the window shut.

...

"Uh... That looked like a *monster* to me."

I popped the window open again to take another look at it.

"WROAAAAAAARRGHH...!"

The creature inside had coarse yellow fur, and it crawled around on its four cloven feet. It didn't have any eyes, a nose, or anything, but it had three large,

gnashing mouths.

...

"Shit, I wasn't seeing things after all!"

That's not a horse; that's a flat-out monster—and it's more horrifying than anything I've ever had to fight!

The merchant put a reassuring hand on my shoulder as my eyes spun.

"It sure is strange, huh? I've been in the monster-dealing business for many years now, and I've never seen anything like it. I'll be honest, it scares the hell outta me."

Uh... So even professionals are stumped by this thing?

I decided to sneak one last peek through the window, using Analysis on it this time.

>Horrifying Organism of Ravenous Slaughtering Evil> Level: ???

Damn, it is a H.O.R.S.E.! That doesn't make it a horse, though! I knew it was funny! And how come I can't see its Level?!

"Uh... Can I ask how you found this thing?"

"Lemme think... If I remember correctly, I was gathering food for the horses and the other monsters when it fell right out of the sky. Man, was I startled!"

"That's way more than startling!"

I've heard of girls falling from the sky, but monstrous horrors?! I guess this is no Studio Ghobli movie!

As I backed away from the cage, that mechanical voice came into my head again.

>Universal Language Comprehension activated. Success. You can now understand Horrifying Organisms of Ravenous Slaughtering Evil.

Uh... Wow. I guess that worked. I guess I'm finally realizing humanity's dream of making contact with the great unknown. Yippee. Yay me.

Trembling, I peered back into the cage to see if I could understand it.

"... killkillkillkillkillkillkillkillkillkill... never forgive humans... NEVER..."

"Hey, can I see your last horse now?" I asked, hurriedly shutting the viewing slit and forgetting everything I had just heard.

There's no way I heard it say what I thought it said. No way. NOT my problem.

"You sure you don't want it?" he asked.

"Positive. And don't worry, I'm never going to change my mind."

"Well, if you say so..." His brow furrowed with worry. "Just to be clear, though, the last one's a real piece of work. I can't recommend it to you with a clear conscience."

"What?"

"I've been caring for her ever since she was born, and she still won't listen to a word I say. I gave up and tried just mating her, but you should've seen the way she bucked away every stud that got close. Hell, she even lays into humans like that. I'm at my wit's end trying to figure out what to do with her since she's just eating out my whole stable. I'd hate to put her down, y'know, so I'm just trying to see things through now. 'Course, you might see something in the old mare that I can't."

"Wait... That H.O.R.S.E. still sounds way more dangerous, and you didn't seem friendly with it, either."

He scratched his head and let out a heavy sigh. "Sure, it's the most dangerous thing I've got by a long shot—but whatever it is, it's rare, which means I've got a decent shot at selling it sooner or later. This problem horse, though, is as common as they come. In fact, she's worse than any average horse. She's... no, I can't say it..."

He nudged me forward toward the last cage. The horse inside was a simple solid brown and didn't have any horns or scales. In fact, it seemed smaller than the average horse and had stumpier legs. It had long lashes that framed its emerald-green eyes, and it actually seemed quite composed and pretty to boot. There was only one way to describe it.

"It's a donkey!" the merchant screamed, his wail of despair filling the room.

Chapter 7: A Mule's Loyalty

The donkey was honestly the last thing I expected, and I was deeply confused.

This is just a normal donkey, right?

I had a hard time understanding just what the merchant had against it. As I puzzled over it, I watched the merchant head into the cage. He edged nervously towards it, evidently terrified.

"Watch closely," he said. "This is the reason why I can't reco—bweh!"

"Holy shit!"

An instant later, the donkey lurched forward and bucked him square in the face with a kick. I could only catch it because my Mind's Eye slowed things down for me.

"S-See?" he sputtered weakly. "Sh-She's a d-dangerous one."

"Yeah, surprisingly."

His sacrifice made it painfully clear how much trouble that donkey was—though, to be fair, he was the only one in any pain. After seeing me nod, he gave me a thumbs-up and collapsed by the edge of the cell. I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just ignored him. While I was thinking about how much of a pain he was, I heard that unnatural voice in my head again.

>Universal Language Comprehension activated. Success. You can now understand the donkey.

No, no need for that. I really don't care what that thing has to say now.

Unfortunately, I picked up on what it was saying regardless.

"Hmph! Only those I have acknowledged may lay a hand on me."

It sounds like somebody's too proud for her own good.

I was a little surprised that her voice was a crisp and lofty woman's tone. Unfortunately, the mule spotted me then.

"Hm? Who are *you*?"

"U-Uh, Seiichi."

Jeez, what am I doing talking to the donkey? It's livestock, right? Besides, I don't want the merchant to see me having a conversation with his ass like this...

I cast a sidelong look at the merchant.

"Hahaha... Look at the pretty flowers," he muttered, head still spinning.

Whelp, he's already lost it. I guess I don't need to look sane, then.

I looked back at the donkey.

"Seiichi, you say?" she replied curiously. "Very well. Step inside the cage."

"Uh... Do I have to?"

"Yes! In the cage, now! I shall break down the wall and kick your worthless head off if you don't!"

"Damn, that's violent!"

Kind of a dealbreaker, honestly. I wanted a friendly horse.

I was already resigned to going horseless, but I stepped inside the cage anyways. After seeing what she did to the merchant, I wasn't going to try and call her bluff.

"Okay, I'm inside. What now—"

"Fool!" She suddenly reared up and aimed a kick square at my head.

"Why?!"

I managed to duck out of the way, and the mule only narrowed her eyes at me in irritation.

"You're not half bad for a human."

"And you're damn cocky for a donkey."

"You're clearly lacking in the brain department, however! Only a fool would set foot in my territory!"

"I only came in because you *told me to!*"

This is so not fair.

She aimed another vicious kick at my head. "Enough talk! You'll fall before my hooves soon enough!"

I was able to clearly make out her motions with my Mind's Eye and duck out of the way once again.

How can she say that after she's the one who talked to me?! No matter how many times I dodge her, I bet she's gonna keep on kicking...

Saria was one thing, but it seemed like every monster I met was a total musclehead—even though the mule probably wasn't technically a monster. Even though we could understand each other well, she had to work on listening.

Maybe I need to shut her up by force? Although it didn't quite work out that way with Saria...

After thinking for a bit, I decided to just snatch the mule's hoof out of midair and hold her there instead of dodging. She was surprisingly light.

Another point for my crazy Stats, I guess.

"What?!" the donkey balked. "Unhand me!"

"Why should I?"

"I cannot kick your brains out like this!"

"Cool. I'm *definitely* not letting go now."

I decided to lift her back hoof further, effectively stringing her up in the air. Even then, she kept on struggling and flailing to land a hit on me. After a while, she seemed to realize there was no point, so she stopped struggling.

"I surrender," she said with a weak sigh. "Please, unhand me."

"Okie-doke."

I gently set her down and, after recomposing herself, she turned around to face me and dipped her head low in a bow.

Uh. What?



"I realize now just how powerful you are, great one. Forgive my insolence."

"... Again, what?"

'Great one'? What the what now?

I was more than a little confused by her sudden change in attitude. Unfortunately, my Confusion Immunity didn't kick in.

"You see," she explained, "my mother taught me one important lesson as a small foal. 'Never let anyone you've deemed unworthy lay a hand on you,' she said. 'Once you have found a worthy soul, you must devote yourself to them.' As such, I have let no one save those I have personally acknowledged lay a finger on me."

"Really?!"

That's not the kind of thing you should teach a little mule! Er, wait, her mom was a mule, too, right? I'm kinda lost.

I could feel steam coming out of my ears; my brain was working so hard.

What even is a donkey, anyway?

"Your strength is an important factor in and of itself, but you have clearly made every effort to treat me as an equal. For that, you have my gratitude."

I wasn't specifically trying to treat her like that, though. It just kind of happened since I could understand her. I'd probably treat anything I could talk to the same way. In many ways, a talking animal was the same as a human. All animals had their own thoughts and feelings, and Universal Language Comprehension only drove that point home.

Don't worry, Treasure Chest. I'm putting your legacy to good use... even though I'm the one who killed you.

With that, the donkey cut straight to the chase.

"In other words, great one, you shall become my new master. Though I still have much to learn, I ask that you take good care of me."

"Isn't that skipping a couple steps?!"

And how come she's already decided I'm buying her?

She looked normal enough, so I didn't have a problem with it. In fact, I didn't technically need a horse at all, so there was no reason to turn her down. I decided to table the 'master' talk for the time being and buy her.

"All right. It's not like I need a horse anyways, so I guess you'll work."

"Master, my proper name is Lulune. Please refer to me as such henceforth."

"Really? First Saria, and now you? How do all the animals in this world have such pretty names?!"

Is that just the style here? Is there some rule where all the monsters need cutesy names?!

When I thought about it, though, that meant that animals all had their own names and everything. Even if you had a dog you wanted to call Spot, their real name might be Watson or something.

That's a moral dilemma I'm not prepared to untangle right now.

I turned to the merchant. "Excuse me? I'd like to buy this mule."

"Hehehe," he giggled dazedly. "Cute fishies!"

Oops. Looks like Lulune might've really knocked the sense out of him.

Just as I was trying to figure out what to do, Lulune trotted over to him.

"How dare you inconvenience Master, you pig!"

With that, she delivered another swift kick to his head, cracking his skull against the cage wall.

"Gwergh?!" After a moment, though, his eyes snapped open again, and he looked around confusedly. "Huh? Where am I?"

"Wow. I guess that snapped him out of it."

I repeated myself, and he gave me a dubious look.

"You sure you want that one? She's a damn handful."

"No, not at all. See?"

I put my hand on her flank.

"Your hand is rather pleasant, Master," she said as she sidled up closer to me.

The man's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Well, I'll be... You actually tamed her, huh?"

"Haha, uh, something like that. So how much do I owe you?"

Apparently, he'd pretty much given up on selling Lulune at all, so he'd decided on the dirt-cheap clearance price of ten silver pieces. That wasn't all, though.

"Since she seems to have taken to you so much, I'll tell you what. I'll even throw in the saddle and everything else you'll need for her for free."

"Wait, really?"

I had plenty of money but was glad for the extra gift. The merchant nodded before disappearing into the back of the shop, returning a minute later with a saddle.

"Right, let me get her fitted out—bwergh!"

The second he was about to touch Lulune, she spun around and bucked him again, sending him flying.

"Damn! Y-You okay?!"

Lulune snorted. "Only Master may lay a finger on me."

Her loyalty's honestly starting to scare me... All I did was grab her leg, too.

Ultimately, the merchant ended up instructing me how to saddle her while I did everything myself. With that, I gave him his due of ten silvers.

"Great, that settles you!" he said with a grin. "If you ever find yourself in need of another monster, just hit me up. I also handle saddle maintenance and the like, but I'm afraid I'll be charging you good and proper next time."

"Nice. It was great to meet you, uh..."

"Right. Never told you my name, did I? I'm Balzas. Balzas Area. It's a pleasure!"

"My name's Seiichi. I promise I'll be back if I need anything else."

"I'll be looking forward to it!"

The merchant—Balzas—saw Lulune off with a smile as we headed out of the store and back into the city streets.

Chapter 8: An Unexpected Development

"I was born within that institution, so I'm quite ignorant of the outside world," Lulune said as I led her down the street. "It's rather noisy out here, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

Since I'd technically accomplished my goal of buying a horse, I didn't have anything else to do, so I resolved to kill some time around town until Saria got back from the orphanage.

But really, what should my next move be?

I'd only entered the guild to get information on the Heroes, and now I knew they'd be attending some academy. I wanted to meet up with Kenji and the others as soon as possible. Although I couldn't remember the school's name, that'd be easy enough to figure out if I asked around.

The real question was what I'd do after that. I wasn't technically a Hero, and I couldn't think of a good reason to go against the Demon King, no matter how hard I tried. Especially after seeing the Black Dragon God's past. Besides, even if my classmates did take out the Demon King, what would they do after that? If what I read from the *Hero Abel's Journal* was right, they'd be killed as soon as they served their purpose. God itself said there was no memory of us left on Earth, so we didn't have any place to return to.

This was a fantasy world, though, so there might be a spell or something that could restore peoples' memories back on Earth. Barring that, there might be some time travel magic or something that could rewind the world before we were teleported away. There was magic that could literally bring back the dead, after all, so it seemed possible. If we could keep some part of our powers on Earth, at least some of us might be able to be remembered, even if only by our families.

I wasn't interested in going home at all, though. I had Saria and Al, and that was enough reason to stay. It would be a little tough saying goodbye—even though I didn't have any family there and my memories of Earth weren't very pleasant, it was still home. But I couldn't abandon the family I'd found here. I had to protect them.

Not that I could tell them that, though. It'd be way too embarrassing.

Either way, my first step would be reuniting with the Heroes. We could hash out our next step from there.

Lulune snapped me out of my thoughts. "If not for you, Master, I may well have spent my entire life in that cage," she muttered wistfully.

"Nah, I doubt it. If you'd been willing to bend a little and work together with somebody, you probably could've gotten out on your own."

There wasn't any point thinking about what-ifs, anyway. Between that and her determination to only obey a master stronger than her, I was starting to doubt if she was really a donkey after all.

"Honestly, I'm pretty shocked donkeys and horses have their own special languages."

If donkeys and Dragon Horses had their separate languages and could still understand each other, that meant every animal probably had their own language but could still communicate. Humans were the only ones left out of the loop, then.

Then, the names Saria and Lulune probably have special meanings in their languages.

As I was thinking that over, Lulune puffed out her chest with pride.

"Master, I'll have you know my name was derived from Lulunelion, a great mule hero. Legend has it that they devoted their entire life to their master's service. I've always aspired to the same level of heroism."

"What the what?! You lost me again."

A 'great mule hero'? And her name does have a special meaning, after all!

Just talking with Lulune was starting to take its toll on me mentally, and I didn't know how much longer I could keep on with it. Going off what she said, though, it seemed like mules had their own storytelling traditions and other animals probably had the same thing. That was admittedly kind of interesting.

As we passed several food stalls, however, the smell made me remember how hungry I was.

"Man, I haven't eaten since this morning... Want anything, Lulune?"

"You would buy something for me, a lowly donkey?!"

"Don't start on that humble act now!"

Besides, everything she'd said so far was extremely un-donkey-like, so I didn't know how to react to that at this point. It seemed she still felt guilty about eating human food, though.

I decided to buy two buns called 'Dynamite' from the nearest stall. The name was too interesting to pass up, after all. I don't know why they decided to name a food after an explosive, but it piqued my interest enough to go for it.

Oh, wait. Aren't donkeys herbivores? This doesn't have meat, does it? I'm sure it'll be fine.

I decided to stop worrying and just pass Lulune her share.

"Master? What is this?"

"They call it 'Dynamite,' but it's food. I've never had it before, but the line was pretty long, so it's probably good."

It was a plain, white bun that was just small enough to be bite-sized. I hesitated for a moment since its plain appearance made it seem even more dangerous. Nonetheless, I stuffed the dynamite in my mouth.

"Nghuh?!"

Then, it *exploded*—but fortunately not in an instantly-lethal way. No, the bun was packed with savory meat and tons of juices. There was even the distinct taste of soup. The more I chewed, the more the meat mingled with the broths, and somehow it seemed to expand in my mouth. They had to be using some

kind of special monster meat since no Earth food actively grew and expanded as you ate it.

Jeez, I can barely keep all the soup in my mouth... How'd they fit all this in that tiny little bun? I guess that's probably a trade secret, like a Chinese soup dumpling or something.

Eventually, the meat became softer and stopped growing in the broth, letting me finish chewing and swallowing it down. It was surprisingly satisfying.

"Man, that was good."

What is it about good food that just puts you at ease?

I was curious as to what Lulune thought, though.

"Master! This is amazing!" she sputtered through her chewing. "My fodder was naught but weeds compared to this!"

"Really? Great."

I was a little surprised she liked it at all, but I wasn't complaining.

"If you liked it that much, how about I buy you another?"

"R-Really! By all means, Master, please do!"

With that, I got back in line so I could feed Lulune-san some more Dynamite.

Y'know what, that really does sound bad.

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"Master! Let's eat that next!"

"Lulune?"

"Ah, but that stall also has quite the tantalizing aroma!"

"Uh, hello? Earth to Lulune?"

"Oh, what do we eat next, Master?!"

"Here's an idea; how about you listen to me first?"

Apparently, her taste of Dynamite had gotten her completely hooked on human foods. And I found myself walking with her through the marketplace. I was already full, but Lulune's appetite only seemed to grow. I was also starting to get some strange looks since the passersby seemed to think I was having a one-sided conversation with a giddy donkey. I couldn't blame them since I'd do the same thing if I were in their shoes.

Between Lulune's appetite and all the weird looks, you'd think I lost a few hundred thousand points of Luck somewhere...

As we were walking, I spotted an unusual pair in the crowd of gawkers.

"Wait... I know that girl." I didn't recognize the man she was with, but I'd seen the girl only yesterday. "I bought a painting from her, didn't I?"

There wasn't any denying it; I knew her. She seemed to be arguing with the man.

"Just... gimme a minute, Lulune."

She didn't even seem to hear me. "Ahh, that Dynamite tasted heavenly, but those crepes were every bit as divine...!"

Yeah, okay, I'm just gonna go.

I left Lulune to enthuse over her food and went to talk to the girl instead. Fortunately, the passersby were still focused on Lulune, so it was easy to pretend I didn't know her and leave.

As I grew closer to the girl and the man she was talking with

\, I could hear more and more of their conversation.

"Any half-decent artist needs the vision to paint that which his audience has never seen!" the man asserted. "Your works are boring. Unoriginal! You lack vision!"

"I just paint what I want!" the girl grumpily insisted. "What makes you think you have the right to criticize me?"

"Because you're wasting your talents, that's why. You could draw something truly stunning if only you'd apply yourself!"

"Excuse me? Are you saying my art is bad or is that your idea of a compliment?"

"Oh, you just don't get it!"

"Ugh..."

Is this some kind of comedy shtick? It almost sounded like they were agreeing at first there...

The crowd around them didn't seem interested in their quarrel, so everyone was keeping their distance.

They're that worried about these two, huh?

When I got closer to them, the girl suddenly spotted me.

"Hey, it's you!"

"Hm?" The man followed her gaze. "And you are?"

Now that I got a better look at him, the man was dressed almost painfully fancy, and his lightly curled brown hair framed his hazel eyes nicely. He was handsome and probably about a year younger than me.

As I studied him, the girl ran over to my side.

"Thank you so much for buying my work, sir!" she said. "Sales have been so poor recently that I'd almost given up on selling my art altogether, but you cheered me up!"

"I-I didn't do much, really," I stammered. "Besides, it really was that good. I should be thanking you."

I'd never really seen art that touched me on that level before, so I was glad I had found her little stall. I lucked out back then big time.

The man raised an eyebrow at me. "Pardon me, I couldn't help but overhear. You actually paid *money* for her work?"

"Uh, yeah. It was a good painting."

"I take it you must have bought my work as well, then?"

"Nope."

His eyes flew open in shock. "Impossible! You haven't? Not even once?!"

"Jeez, why are you so surprised? I've never seen you before in my life."

He tut-tutted, running a hand through his hair. Somehow, the gesture fit him perfectly.

"I can scarcely believe you've never heard of my genius, but us meeting here must be fate. Very well, I shall enlighten you! I am Clay Berger, the first son of Marquis Berger and a gifted student of the arts! It's a pleasure, I'm sure."

"I'm May Cherry, by the way," the girl added with a polite bow, her dog ears flicking cutely as she did so. "Thank you again for patronizing me."

Looking at the two, I couldn't imagine a more unlike pair.

"My name's Seiichi," I said. "Sorry, Clay, I still can't say I've ever heard of you."

"Hmph," he scoffed. "From the sound of it, I'd wager you're from the Eastlands?"

This Eastlands stuff again? At least it's a convenient cover.

"Something like that," I shrugged.

He nodded understandingly. "I see. In that case, call me to bestow one of my masterpieces upon you!"

"Uh... No thanks?"

"No need to be humble, now. Take it! I insist!"

He forced a painting into my hands, and I grudgingly accepted it. After taking a look at its contents, I was dumbstruck. It looked extremely familiar somehow.

"Cool. So what is it?"

On the oversized canvass was a triangle. No colors, no other shapes or designs, just a single triangle. May seemed every bit as lost as I was.

"Can't you tell?" Clay huffed. "I call it 'Portait of a Maiden at Twilight Dreaming of a Youth Watching the Sunset.'"

"How?!"

It's literally just a shape! It'd be more convincing if he called it 'The Unflavored Tortilla Chip!'

Not only that, I finally placed where I felt I'd seen the painting before. It was just like all the weird abstract stuff selling confusingly well in the marketplace when I first saw May's work. I couldn't make heads or tails of any of those paintings, either.

May's ears drooped. "I'm being outsold by *this*...?"

Her work really had an impact on me, but I guess it was all pretty common stuff, huh...

Clay seemed to overhear her. He smirked. "How long have you been painting now?"

"Huh? A year. Why do you ask?"

Whoa, she's that good after only a year?! That's crazy.

Clay, however, only laughed. "No wonder you're nothing compared to me, then! You're an utter novice! You may have talent, but I'm a *genius*!"

I couldn't help but be curious. "How long have you been painting, then?"

"Three months!"

"You're four times the novice she is, then!"

Still, selling art after only three months was impressive. I hated to admit it, but he was probably a genius of some kind.

My reply seemed to rub him the wrong way, and he narrowed his eyes. "You've been poking an awful lot of fun at me, Seiichi. I take it you're an artist yourself?"

"Probably as much of one as you are."

I knew that some paintings only looked simple but took a huge amount of skill and effort to pull off. I was pretty sure that triangle wasn't one of them, though.

"Is that so? I'd like to see you try!" Nostrils flaring, he whipped a piece of paper and a brush out of his coat. "Go on, show me your best work!"

"Seriously...?"

I didn't want to get any further involved, but I didn't want to just brag and run either, so I took the brush and paper and gave it a shot. Not wanting to copy Clay completely, I decided to draw a square and call it done.

"There," I said as I handed them back.

He looked it over seriously, and May also peered over his shoulder to take a look. She only rolled her eyes at the sight of my square.

Clay, however, was another story. His eyes widened in shock. "Wh-What raw talent!"

"You're kidding!"

How far is this joke gonna go on?!

It was literally just a square, and I didn't even bother to color it in. Worse, I didn't bother finding a hard surface, so the lines were incredibly sloppy.

"Seiichi," he continued seriously. "Won't you consider becoming my apprentice?"

"Stop, stop! You don't have to keep taking out my HP like that!"

I wasn't expecting him to like it, let alone shower me with praise like that. I was starting to get a little embarrassed, and I ensured my hood was covering my face so he couldn't see me blush.

Clay cleared his throat. "Well, I suppose you *do* have the grounds to evaluate my art. You've quite the talent."

"Just... enough. Please."

"But make no mistake, the winner of the Karasti Art Show will be me! May, Seiichi, I swear I'll bring every bit of my artistic mastery to bear and win!"

"Karasti what?"

"Art show...?"

May seemed every bit as lost as I did, and we both returned blank looks.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Oh? You don't know? You know of the coming race, the Capital Derby, yes? One month after that will be the largest art competition in the whole of this fair kingdom of Windberg. While it may not

seem like much, the winner is essentially guaranteed world fame. Countless artists, the most notable among them, have gathered to participate. Artistic visionaries the world over dream of participating!"

"Oh, okay," I nodded.

"Of course, you're not an artist, so I wouldn't expect you to join." He turned to May. "You'll be participating, won't you?"

"Uh... It sounds pretty intimidating, and I'm still pretty new to art..."

"No need to fret about the experience now. There are no requirements for that. You need only be a competent artist."

Makes sense. If Clay can join, I see no reason why May can't.

I nodded, and Clay turned back to face me.

"Now, this is only a guess, but will you be joining the Capital Derby? Judging from your manner, I'd say you're an adventurer—though if you ask me, the brush suits you far better."

"Yeah, I'm an adventurer, but I don't know about joining the Derby or whatever."

His brow raised. "Really? I've heard that even second or third place offers weapons that any adventurer would kill to get their hands on. I'm quite surprised, to be frank."

"Huh. Cool. I think I'm pretty good in the weapons department, though."

"Is that so? Come to think of it, I've heard they already announced the prizes for fifth through tenth place."

"Nope, didn't hear that."

May shook her head. "Me, neither."

After hearing that, he seemed more than willing to get into the details. I knew Adriana-san was a kind noble, but it seemed Clay was a pretty good egg, too.

I guess nobles aren't all stuck-up pricks, huh.

"Sixth through tenth place," he explained, "are awarded all manner of quality healing items, including Panaceas. They're extremely rare and can recover all

your stamina and mana and even heal any wound with a single dose. Fifth place, however, awards the fabled titanic fish, a Bahamut."

"Bahawhat?!"

Holy crap! I have no idea what Bahamut is in this world, but how can they give prizes like this at a horse race?!

Bahamut was a famous monster back on Earth, but there was a chance it referred to something different here. It still apparently to a mythical animal of some kind, though.

If that's just fifth place, I can't imagine what fourth and up are. I probably wouldn't need it, but I'm dying to know what the first place is... That aside, the Panaceas alone sound crazy good.

I'd clearly underestimated it as just some race, and May looked just as shocked.

"How did they get the Bahamut, though?" she asked. "I heard that even Rank A adventurers struggle with taking those monsters down..."

He smiled. "Well, I'm not well-versed with the details, but apparently Windberg's king was taking a swim in a lake on his way to another country when he stumbled upon it. Then one of Windberg's two Great Knights—the Knight of the Sword, Louisse-sama—vanquished the creature in a single blow."

"Whoa, that sounds amazing!"

From what Gustle said, the two Great Knights were pretty hopped up on cheating themselves. By comparison, I was human only in name.

I really don't mind. I'm crying, but I'm fine. Honestly.

"Basically, you can keep that Bahamut," Clay finished.

"Okay. But, uh, why would I want it?"

I don't have any fish tanks that big.

Clay shook his head. "Are you dense? To eat it, of course."

"Oh, right."

How did I not think of that?

To be fair, though, food wasn't the first thing that came to mind when I heard Bahamut. Keeping it as a pet was also pretty out there since it didn't sound like your typical goldfish. It would be like winning an arowana.

Huh... I wonder if you can eat arowana?

As I got off on my little tangent, Clay closed his eyes blissfully. "I've had Bahamut once before. The flavor could only be described as pure art. Never before have I tasted such an incredible fish."

Coming from a noble, those words carried a lot of weight. He was probably used to all sorts of fancy foods.

It might be nice to try after all.

"Seiichi!" came a sudden braying from right behind me. "Let's do it! Let's eat the Bahamut!"

"Whoa?!" I whipped around to find Lulune standing there. "Where did you come from?!"

Clay gave her a puzzled look. "Seiichi? Is that mule yours?"

"Uh, basically, yeah. Her name's Lulune. I just bought her today, but we're going to be traveling together for a long time."

"Lulune-chan, huh?" May wondered aloud. "She looks pretty dignified for a donkey."

May went to pet her, maybe feeling some kind of kinship with her as a beastkin. I tensed up for a moment, fearing that she'd get bucked into next week like Balzas, but Lulune didn't bat an eye.

I guess girls are okay to touch her, then.

"Lulune," I whispered to her in a low enough voice that Clay and May wouldn't shoot me any weird looks. "You said you wanted to eat the Bahamut, right?"

"Of course! Why, how could you hear of such a delectable morsel and not want to eat it?"

"I mean, I wanna try it too, but..."

"Think of this as our first team-up, Master! Would this not be the perfect test of our newly-forged bond?"

"Yeah, maybe team-up isn't the best word here."

It seemed we both wanted a taste of the fish, so it couldn't hurt to enter the Derby and see what happened.

"I think I'm interested in that Bahamut after all, Clay. We're going to enter after all."

"Really? In that case, you'd best hurry. You can likely register at the same place you bought your mule, but I believe today is the signup deadline."

"I guess we'd better hurry back to the shop, then."

Clay hesitated. "I somehow doubt you'll secure fifth with a donkey, though."

Lulune's nostrils flared indignantly. "Hmph! That imbecile knows nothing of my true power. Rest assured, Master, I have the utmost confidence in my legs. I'll not let any ill-bred steeds overcome me!"

"Uh, bloodline is one thing a mule probably shouldn't get all cocky about..."

"At any rate," Clay continued, "I see you've decided against the art show after all. But what about you, May?"

May fidgeted awkwardly. "Even if I did enter, I know how it'd turn out. You've got the kind of talent they're probably looking for, though, so you might win."

"I won't deny being talented, but you sell yourself far too short. Besides, you've got a far better chance than, say, a man on a donkey in the Capital Derby. Simply participating would be a valuable experience."

"Hey, don't talk smack about my ass," I retorted.

We've got a chance. A good chance! We have just as much guts as any other racer!

May still didn't seem convinced. "Still..."

She had made barely any sales when she was selling her art in the marketplace, so I couldn't blame her for not feeling confident. Not selling anything was basically like being told her art wasn't good enough. I couldn't

shake the feeling that she wanted to join after all, though. If it was really as big an art show as Clay made it out to be, I bet May wanted to give it a fair chance.

Clay let out a heavy sigh. "Well, I suppose you're free to sit out if you please. That means one less rival for me—not that I could lose to any number of opponents, of course!"

That's a lot of guts for someone who draws on my level.

I decided to give her my own dose of encouragement. "I don't know how you feel about your art, but I like it, and that's the truth. That's why I bought it. You should feel a little prouder of yourself. Besides, it's a big opportunity, so it can't hurt to try."

"I... I know that, but..."

"You still don't feel that confident, huh?"

She only nodded.

One of my first impressions of her was that she didn't seem very confident. Some people were more reserved by nature, and that was fine. I just didn't want her to feel so down about her own work, especially since it really spoke to me. She was probably worried that she'd be laughed at for entering the art show when it was clear her work wasn't very popular.

How can I cheer her up?

Finally, an idea popped into my mind, one that might just be crazy enough to work.

"I know! Clay, how long is the Karasti Art Show's registration open?"

He blinked in surprise. "Hm? Until about a week after the Capital Derby, if I recall. You can enter any of your works, new or old, and the show begins a month after applications close."

"Great." I turned back to May. "I'm going to win that Bahamut then. I promise."

She looked up at me blankly. "Huh?"

"It's pretty much impossible to win fifth place with a donkey, right? Wouldn't you be surprised if I did?"

"Yes, for sure."

"Just watch, then. I'll get fifth. That might make your odds seem better, huh?"

"Oh..."

May's paintings looked really polished. The only issue was her confidence. If I could pull off the impossible, that might make her a little more sure of herself—or at least, that was the idea. It'd be worth it if it did anything to lift her spirits.

Clay smirked. "Interesting... I've decided. I want to see your work in the show, May. Show me where your artistic liberties take you. Prove to me your paintings are more than simple bores!"

"Clay-san..."

It almost sounded like he admitted her approach was okay—but since I couldn't understand his art at all, it seemed pretty fair to me. After a long moment, May looked up, a look of determination on her face.

"Okay. I'll enter!"

"Wonderful! You're every bit the artist I knew you were!"

"Master?" Lulune cut in. "I can't say I follow, but I swear I'll win the Bahamut for us!"

With that, everyone seemed set on their goals—Clay and May on their art and Lulune on sating her appetite. The two artists both left for home soon after, determined to start work on their entries for the art show. After seeing them off, Lulune returned to Balzas' shop to register for the Derby. We hit a bit of a speed bump when Balzas laughed at us for wanting to give it a shot, and Lulune bucked him so hard in the gut that he went flying. But aside from that, it went fine. It was then that we learned the Derby was the very next day, which was more worrying than anything else.

Can we really win this thing? Maybe this is a crazy idea after all...

Gut knotted with worry; all I could do was wait for the next morning to arrive.

Chapter 9: The Capital Derby

"Good luck, Seiichi!"

"We'll be watchin' from the stands, so don't screw up."

"I won't."

After hearing Saria and Al's words of encouragement, I headed out into the stable where Lulune was waiting. Fina-san was kind enough to give her a place there yesterday. It was the day of the Capital Derby and our impossible challenge.

It's too late to chicken out, right?

I had introduced Lulune to the others after parting ways with May and Clay. I wasn't too worried about Lulune kicking Saria or Al, given that she was fine with May and, sure enough, they got along just fine. Saria and Lulune, especially, were fast friends, maybe because of her gorilla roots. And she even could understand what Lulune was saying to an extent. I had no idea how a gorilla and a donkey were even communicating. But I decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Saria and Al were surprised to hear about my Capital Derby plans at first, but they supported me, nonetheless.

I wonder where the 'stands' Al mentioned are?

Either way, if they were going to be watching, I just had to win. Lulune herself seemed confident, and even if first place was impossible, I thought we could at least rank decently well.

Why can't I shake this sinking feeling, though? I must be imagining things...

Clay had said it was basically impossible, so that had to explain it. There was no backing out of it now.

Thoughts wandering, I arrived at Lulune's stable. Inside, I found the horses of the other adventurers and merchants staying at the inn, all munching down their grassy breakfasts. I walked right over to Lulune's stall, and she greeted me with a cordial nod that would've fit better on a king's horse.

"Good morning, Master! Today is perfect riding weather, is it not?"

"I don't know about riding weather, but good morning to you, too. Ready for the race?"

"Of course! I swear, Master, I won't tarnish your good name. I'll carry you to victory!"

"Uh-huh. Really?"

"I shall risk anything and anything for that Bahamut!"

"You don't wanna win at all, do you?!"

The Bahamut was fifth place, so winning the race wouldn't net us the fish. I didn't know what we'd get for first through fourth place, but apparently, they'd be announcing all the prizes before the race started. If we were going to have any chance at first, it'd have to be a prize that whet Lulune's appetite more than the Bahamut—assuming we stood any chance at all.

"Oh, whatever. The Derby starts soon, so we'd better get going."

"As you will!"

I led Lulune out of the stable and toward the guardhouse at the city's front gate. The race would start there. The closer we got, the more adventurers I saw, each of them leading their own horses.

"Wow," I muttered. "I've never even seen half these horses before. Oh, uh, and there are Dorses, too. I hope that works out for them."

At that moment, I heard a pair of voices behind me.

"Seiichi!"

"Seiichi-san!"

"Huh?"

I turned around to find Clay in a new but equally fancy jacket and May in a blouse and long cardigan.

"Oh, Clay, May. What're you doing here?"

Clay put a hand through his hair. "Isn't it obvious? We've come to bid you and your steed best wishes!"

May nodded. "You said you were running to give me courage, after all... I had to come cheer you on."

I smiled slightly under my hood. "Okay. I'll make sure to win for you, too, then."

"And, um, thank you for yesterday," she continued apologetically. "I know I'm going to enter now, but I still don't know what to draw. J-Just focus on your race, though. Don't worry about me. You're after the Bahamut at fifth, right?"

"Something like that."

Technically, that's Lulune's goal.

"Don't worry about winning, then! Just work towards your own goal. We'll be rooting for you!"

"Thanks."

Is it just me, or does she think I can't win either?

"Oh, by the way... How are you and everyone else able to watch the race?"

The Capital Derby was a lap around the city's outer wall, which was an impressive distance. The only thing I could think of was setting up checkpoints here and there for people to watch from. Al and Saria were supposed to be watching too, after all.

Clay just gave me a dumbfounded look. "What do you mean, how? With a mana projector, of course."

"Mana, what now?"

Fortunately, May explained in my stead. "It's an item that can take magical input from Mana Cameras and make an image in midair. That makes it so you

can watch things from far away. Apparently, the court mages will be providing the mana needed for the projector to work."

Wow. Magic is amazing.

I thought about it when I first ran into healing magic. But Earth technology would be pretty much useless even if they had it here. They had it better here, even, since they could literally bring back the dead.

"There's a dedicated viewing area," she continued, "but you can see the image from anywhere in the Capital, so you can watch from wherever you want. Of course, Clay and I will watch from the stands."

"Okay, I think I get it."

That made sense. Even if the area outside the walls was relatively safe, there were still monsters, so the spectators couldn't just sit there and watch.

"Oh, but we'd better get going," May said. "If we don't get going, we won't be able to find a seat."

Clay nodded. "May and I will be taking our leave, then. I look forward to seeing your race."

"Just give it your best!"

Before I could even reply, they disappeared into the crowd.

"I guess it's time." With that, I led Lulune toward the start line.

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"All right, ladies and gentlemen, the time has finally arrived!" echoed a young woman's voice. "It's time for the Capital Derby, with all its prizes and glory! I'll be the announcer for today, Rona Kyrzas of the Swordsaint Valkyries! Is everybody ready?!"

I could see the giant projection of the starting line appear over the city.

I bet they're using magic to amplify that lady's voice. Who needs technology, right?

I smiled faintly as the crowd of riders around me began to buzz even more loudly with excitement.

"Before I get on to the rules and the like," she continued, "I bet you'd all like to know what wonders we've got in store for our first-through-fourth-place winner!"

The crowd erupted into cheers.

"HELL YEAH!"

"What've they got for us this time?!"

"I'm gonna win for sure!"

"Victory will be mine!!"

Wow. They're sure pumped.

I was genuinely startled by the strength of the racers' reactions, and Lulune was no less excited.

"Bahamut, Bahamut, Bahamut, Bahamut...!"

"Damn, you're scary!"

Doesn't she ever think about anything besides food? I mean, I wanna eat the Bahamut too, but seriously!

"Haha, yeah, that's the spirit!" came the announcer's cheerful trill. "Don't worry, this year's prizes are amazing enough to be worth it! We've really changed up the lineup this year!"

So, they've got new stuff? I wonder what?

Lulune suddenly perked up. "New prizes? Do they have something that could surpass a Bahamut's flavors?!"

"Stop with the food stuff already!"

"Ah, what a dilemma... I want that Bahamut more than anything, but what do I do if the other prizes are also food?!"

"Stop ignoring me!"

She continued muttering about her newfound dilemma, and I felt like crying. As I lamented Lulune's food obsession, though, the announcer continued.

"Starting with fourth place, we've got a special prize—a legendary weapon that our squad captain Louisse-sama herself found in a dungeon, the Wave-Breaker! We're offering it as a prize, of course, because we don't have any knights that are especially good with axes. Even if the Wave-Breaker goes to another country, the Valkyries will never lose!"

The projection changed to an axe with a large, shimmering blue blade.

Wait, the fourth prize is a Legendary weapon? What's the first prize, then? If they can give out powerful weapons like this so willingly, those Valkyries must be super strong. I wonder if the two Great Knights that Gustle mentioned are members?

"Next up is the third prize, another Legendary-tier item courtesy of Louisse-sama's dungeon-crawling, the Smiting Gauntlets!" The projection changed again, showing a pair of glinting platinum gauntlets this time. "This armor's up for the taking because, you guessed it, none of us Valkyries can take it, either! Come and get it, you rabble!"

"YEAAAH!" shouted the throng of racers.

Most adventurers would probably kill for equipment like that. Of course, since the race was primarily for adventurers, it made sense they would have tailored prizes.

"Next up is number two!" the announcer shouted. "This one's a real steal... a photo collection of none other than Louisse-sama herself! These are one-of-a-kind treasures, folks!"

'Treasures'? More like trash! Who'd want that?

"Not only that, these are special candid photos that took noble sacrifice after sacrifice to obtain! I can only imagine how Louisse-sama will rip me a new one after this!"

Oh, god, that's stupid. Who'd sacrifice anything for a few pictures, especially if she's just going to get yelled at?

The camera showed the photos, but mosaics were placed over them, making it impossible to make anything up.

Censorship is one invention this world didn't need to replicate. And why is the second prize so bad after the third and fourth seemed so solid? Who'd want that?

"I'VE GOTTA WIN THIS!" one adventurer suddenly screamed, foaming at the mouth.

"Onee-sama's photos will be mine, all mine!!" screeched a woman in leather armor.

"Glory to Louisse-sama!" cried another one. "Glory to Louisse-sama!!"

Are you kidding me? They want photos more than those weapons? Is everyone in this whole country out of their mind?!

Even the women in the crowd seemed desperate for them, and quite a few people had a look of crazed desperation in their eyes.

I wanna go home.



I cradled my head in my arms, let out a heavy sigh, and the announcer moved on.

"All right, now for the moment you've all been waiting for! Time to announce our grand prize!"

The crowd began to mutter excitedly.

"To the ultimate winner goes the ultimate spoils... That's right, first place gets to spend *one whole day* together with us Valkyries!"

Damn! Sorry for getting my hopes up for something better than the third or fourth, I guess!

The entire crowd of adventurers suddenly went silent as the grave.

That's more like it. Who'd want a day with a bunch of randos? Even this group of weirdos wouldn't—

"I'VE GOTTA WIN FIRST!!" howled the entire group in horrifying unison.

Oh, god, somebody stop this!

"Haha, that's what I wanna hear!" came the announcer's chuckle. "Anyone would kill for a chance to meet Louise-sama in the flesh! Let's carry that energy right through the rules and straight into the race! The race is simple—all you have to do is complete one full lap around the city walls. However, you're not allowed to interfere with other riders or attempt anything overtly dangerous. If you do, you'll get disqualified on the spot. In other words, if there's a prize you're after, you'd better come to take it fair and square!"

"YEAHHHH!!!"

After pausing a moment to let the crowd calm down, she continued. "Up until now, almost every racer we've had has been an adventurer. But this year, we've added a way for spectators to join in the fun. That's right, you can bet on which racer you think is gonna take home first! Now our spectators can feel even more in action, and if you're lucky, you can walk away with a nice payout! Of course, we don't want anyone to get too addicted to gambling, or go bankrupt or anything, so each person can only bet up to 10,000G. Let's all have some fun with this!"

Betting? Just like the horse races back home, huh. Sure, that might make it a little more fun for the spectators...

I had no idea how that would play out, but since this was the first year they were doing it, they probably intended this as a trial run.

The projection switched to a board with all the participants and the odds listed on it.

"Here's everyone who'll be in today's race! It looks like the favorite to win is Michael and his steed, a Meteor Horse, said to be the fastest thing on four legs! He's even got last year's grand prize under his belt, making him a shoo-in for the title!"

Wow... I bet he's really fast.

"He sure has his work cut out for him if he wants to win since we've got so many promising racers in the game!"

I wasn't even aiming for first, of course, so that didn't matter too much. Lulune was clearly gunning for fifth.

The announcer continued going over each racer one by one, but suddenly she stopped. "Huh? What's this? We have a racer here with whopping 120:1 odds against him!"

Uh-oh. I think I know where this is going.

"His name's Seiichi, and his steed is... a d-donkey?! Are you even trying, Seiichi?!"

Dammit, stop rubbing it in! I know we haven't got a chance in hell; just stop picking on me!

I cast a glance around me, noticing the other riders were shooting me cold looks.

"W-Well, good luck to him, too, I guess!" the announcer stammered before clearing her throat and continuing. "Anyhow, with that, we've finished with both the rules and the bets! All that's left now is the Derby itself! Riders and steeds, to the start line!"

I felt like all eyes were on me, even as Lulune and I took our place. Later, I discovered that the projection was fixed on me the whole time, and most of the audience was laughing.

Can I just disappear and not do this?

As I waited for the race to officially start, I found myself wishing I was literally anywhere else.

Chapter 10: Lulune the Speed Demon

At the announcer's words, the racers all took their places along the start line. There were enough racers that we were packed in marathon style. This means some racers had a natural advantage over others based on where they were in the pack. It was the only way to fit so many racers, and nobody complained since everyone knew it'd be like this. Unfortunately, I'd need all the advantage I could get, and I just had to start at the very back of the group.

I mounted Lulune and took a moment to get my bearings. "Starting in last aside, this doesn't seem like it'll be too bad."

I wasn't that determined to win, and I was glad I could get on Lulune's back at all—if I was still the chubby kid I was before evolving, I'd never have pulled it off.

As I looked around, though, I noticed that a group of riders weren't making any attempt to move, their steeds simply standing, unmoving. Even the announcer took notice.

"Oh?" she called. "It looks like we have some drama at the start line already! What's happening?"

The riders were too focused on getting their horses to move to pay the announcer any mind.

"Hey, Johnson! Why won't you get going already?"

"C'mon, Kelly, we gotta win this thing!"

"Johnny, get a move on! Forward! Go!"

Of course their horses all have human names, I found myself thinking. Seriously, though, what's going on? Horses don't normally freeze up, do they?

I thought up a few possible explanations, but since I didn't know the first thing about horses to begin with, I quickly stumped myself. I decided to look and see if there was any similarity between the steeds.

"Oh."

Suddenly, it all made perfect sense. The riders, meanwhile, had finally gotten off their horses to talk to their unresponsive steeds.

"You okay there?"

"You're not sick, right?"

"We don't hafta run if you don't wanna"

They placed a hand on their horses' necks—and their steeds stiffly fell over, one by one. Each and every horse had the same noble, vacant look in its eyes. I'd seen that same look before and, in fact, the similarity between them all was the breed...

"Damn, it's dead," the riders lamented.

Again, Dorses?! How are you all literally too stupid to live!

I didn't even know what to say as the announcer laughed awkwardly. "Haha... uh... Unfortunately, it looks like twenty riders have been knocked out of the running already."

Seriously?! Sure, they're supposed to be fast, but how are there this many Dorse riders?!

I shook my head. It seemed like every other thing in this world flew in bodily defiance of common sense. Okay, maybe it wasn't quite that bad, but I was very exhausted, nonetheless.

Lulune licked her drooling lips. "It appears that horsemeat is on the menu tonight, Master!"

Uh... That feels like all kinds of wrong, Lulune.

The announcer cleared her throat. "Well, as bad as I feel for those Dorses, the race must go on! All racers, get ready to go!"

Despite that speed bump, all the remaining racers regrouped at the start line soon after.

"All right, folks, everyone in your places? Let's get this countdown started! Three!"

Finally. It was a long time coming but I just need to focus on the race now.

"Two!"

"You ready for this, Lulune?" I asked.

"Rest assured, Master, we shall win!"

Seeing how confident she was made me think we might stand a chance.

"One!"

That's right, Lulune has gone on and on about how fast and capable she is. She's no ordinary donkey. She can do it.

I tightened my grip on her reins.

Here we go. It's finally time to...

"GOOOOOOOOOOO!"

All at once, the horses burst into action. The cloud of dust that their hooves kicked up made it hard to see anything as we rode straight forward.

I hate to break it to you, guys, but there's no way Lulune's getting left behind!

In mere seconds, we found ourselves...

"Wait, we haven't passed anyone!"

"Hahh... Hahh..." Lulune panted as she plodded after the pack as quickly as her leaden hooves would take her.

Lulune had perfectly betrayed my every expectation—or rather, she performed just how I feared she would. The distance between us and the closest rider was rapidly growing, and the slow *clup, clup* of her hooves wasn't exactly inspiring.

N-No, she's probably just conserving her energy. She hasn't hit top speed yet!

"Uh, Lulune?" I patted her neck nervously. "We're in last. Come on, pick up the pace a little!"

Unfortunately, she didn't speed up in the slightest.

"Whelp, we're screwed."

We were already doomed. The fifth place seemed utterly impossible, let alone first. Just as I resigned myself to my fate, the announcer's voice rang out again.

"Oops, it looks like Seiichi and his steed Lulune haven't even budged an inch! They're soundly in last place! Was choosing a donkey the wrong choice after all?!"

No shit, Sherlock.

"While Seiichi has barely crossed the start line, it seems like the forerunners have already crossed the halfway point!"

"What the shit?!"

Halfway?! Yeah, no way we're getting fifth.

Lulune let out a low moan. "Gh... hahh..."

"Whoa, you okay?! Don't push yourself too hard! You've already shown me just how hard-working you are!"

She also showed me how slow she is, but that's beside the point.

She began muttering pitifully. "M-My stomach..."

"Wait, does it hurt?"

"I'm so... so hungry..."

"Then eat some grass or something!"

I felt bad for snapping at her, but it seemed justified.

She's only this slow because she's hungry, then?

I had to double-check.

"You had some hay for breakfast at the stable, didn't you?"

She shot me a reproachful look. "Master! How dare you suggest I eat that slop?! I am no livestock!"

"You're *literally* a donkey!"

Am I the crazy one here? Is suggesting she eat hay so weird?!

"Fine! Just please eat some grass! There's so much of it!" I pleaded. "You can run if you're full, can't you?"

"Grass? How dare you suggest I eat *weeds*?! I've sworn to never partake of such lowly foods again. From now on, I eat as a human!"

"But again, you're not a human! You're a donkey!"

No matter how I yelled or begged, she adamantly refused to eat the grass. I even tried to convince her of the prospect of Bahamut, but not even that made her budge. She seemed determined to never eat grass again.

Oh, why did I have to buy her that meat bun?!

"Dammit... I can't believe this is how we're gonna be finishing the race! Don't I have any kind of food on me?!"

I rummaged through my Item Box, but even though I had plenty of meat and other ingredients, nothing was edible as it was.

So, this is the end. Damn...

At that moment, I spotted something I'd nearly forgotten about.

"Wait, that's..."

It was my Fruit of Evolution Growing Kit.

Didn't Sheep-san say that there were seeds of the Fruits of Evolution in there?

"If there are seeds, then just maybe there's a Fruit or two..."

With that faint hope, I pulled out the sack that contained the kit. Inside was a booklet that probably contained the growing instructions and a surprising find—not one, but fifteen Fruits of Evolution.

"Wait, how come there aren't any seeds in here?"

I kept rummaging through it, but there wasn't any sign of them. I puzzled over it for a moment before realizing the answer.

"Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing any seeds when I ate my Fruits..."

When I had them back in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, I'd eaten them completely every time. They had decently thick skin but no seeds whatsoever. That probably meant that the so-called Fruit was actually a nut. That also explained why it looked so almond-like.

Long story short, I'd finally found something Lulune could eat. It was technically better than grass, at least.

"Lulune! Can you eat this?!"

"A-A fruit...?" she asked weakly.

If you're really that hungry, you should just bite the bullet and have some grass.

"These things saved my life," I explained. "They even saved Saria when she was in trouble. It's called a Fruit of Evolution."

"Fruit of Evolution...?"

"Yep. Honestly, I owe who I am today to these things. Trust me; they might look like a normal fruit, but they've got some great effects!"

"I'll eat it!" In the blink of an eye, she snapped the Fruit out of my hands and gulped it down.

"That was fast!"

After a moment, she froze. "By Lulunelion's name...!"

"What? Are you okay?!"

"This tastes awful! Horrible beyond description!"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, it does."

Lulune at least seemed to be in higher spirits, and I remembered how I'd felt when I first had mine back in the Forest. Despite the flavor, they had one particular quality I was counting on.

"Hmm?!" Lulune's eyes flew open. "I'm... I'm not hungry anymore!"

That's right, just what I was hoping for.

"Master! I can run!"

"Great! Take it away!"

I grabbed Lulune's reins again, readying myself for the ride despite knowing she couldn't be that fast, even at top speed.

"Do you have a good hold?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Whenever you're ready."

To be honest, my grip wasn't that tight since I assumed I wouldn't be in any danger either way.

"Well, then... Here I go!"

"Okay."

Suddenly, my whole body was hit by an odd floating feeling, and I could tell my assumption was way off the mark. A moment later, my butt slammed down in the saddle with mind-boggling force.

"Oof! What the...?!"

Before I could get my bearings, I felt myself floating again.

"Hahahaha!" Lulune laughed. "I'm coming for you, Bahamut!"

It took me a moment to realize that Lulune was jumping, clearing great distances with each bound as she tore along the course.

"What?!"

She's fast! Too fast!

I couldn't believe she had been slowly plodding along just moments before. Unfortunately, my loose grip on her reins meant I kept almost falling off her back.

"Ohgodohgodohgodohgod! I'm gonna diiiiiiiie!!"

"I am invincible! I am the fastest mule alive! I am speed!"

"Somebody, anybody, stop her!!"

Screaming all the while, Lulune continued tearing through the course.

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I, May Cherry, stared up at the projection. Seiichi-san was in the race, and he was going so far to give me courage. I had to watch him run. Unfortunately, he wound up in last place right away, just as I feared. Clay Berger-san, who was watching beside me, scoffed.

"I always knew he stood no chance. Still, it's a shame. I expected him to put up more of a fight."

Clay-san got a little arrogant about his art. Although he often lorded his 'superior genius' over me, he was a good enough guy deep down. He was, however, more than a little dense.

"Well, May. Now that we know Seiichi stands no chance, we might as well get to work. The Karasti Art Show is right around the corner, after all."

"Clay-san? Could you stop making it sound like Seiichi-san is dead?"

"It must be your imagination!"

I didn't know why he felt the need to puff out his chest like that, but he tended to overact, so I didn't think too much about it. At that moment, everything changed.

"What?!" came the announcer's voice. "This is a dark turn of events! Grand Wolves have appeared in front of the racers!"

"Huh?!"

"They what?"

I looked back up to the projection to see a group of Grand Wolves standing right in the middle of the course. Michael, who had been leading the group, made his horse skid to a halt in a panic.

Come to think of it, didn't I hear about a pack of wolves near the Capital?

I wasn't expecting the wolves to interfere with the race, however. The race officials had to be prepared for this, of course, and I was expecting a squad to drive them off at any moment.

"Wait, what's that?!" came the announcer's startled cry. "Those aren't just Grand Wolves—there's a Rank A Hellhound in that pack! Th-This is really bad!"

Her voice suddenly sounded more distant. "L-Louisse-sama! You've got to help them! The horses are gonna get eaten!"

The horses weren't the only thing in danger. It was the worst possible way to cut off the race. Now that I looked, I could see a massive black body among the ruddy brown of the Grand Wolves. Hellhounds weren't as bad as Bahamut, but they could level a village all too easily, and they had a foul temper to boot. Bahamut at least stayed away from humans at the bottom of lakes.

At least Seiichi-san is safe in the last place... Though maybe being last isn't something to be happy about at all.

All I could do was hope the racers would be all right.

"This sucks!" shouted the announcer. "Why did those dumb dogs have to interfere?! I risked life and limb to get those photos of Louisse-sama, and I put my life on the line by even admitting they exist! Now the King's gonna think we're slacking on the town's defense, and I'll get yelled at *again*...!"

Um... What was her name? Rona-san? Hang in there.

I clasped my hands, thinking of her. The photo collection was totally her fault.

As I did so, however, Rona-san seemed to notice something else shocking.

"Wha... Huh!? How is this possible?!"

The projection changed again, showing the last person I expected to see.

"I-Is that...?!"

Clay-san chuckled. "Now things are getting interesting!"

This isn't funny! How can you laugh at a time like this?! That's— "SOMEBODY STOP HER, PLEASE!!"

Seiichi-san let out a shrill scream as Lulune whinnied giddily, tearing along the course at breakneck speeds right toward the front of the group.

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"H-Hey, slow down! Are you trying to kill me?!"

"BAHAMUUUUUUUUUT!"⁴

Dammit, she's not listening at all! I guess I should've expected her to be stubborn as a mule, though!

"That joke sure sucked ass—and I'm not talking about Lulune!"

Wait, what am I doing, joking at a time like this?! Seriously, somebody better stop her soon...!

"Urp... Lulune, I'm starting to feel sick..."

"Hold on, Master! My Bahamut is surely just ahead!"

"Oh god, I'm about to lose my breakfast!"

Lulune still wasn't listening, and I really was on the verge of throwing up. As I struggled to keep my food down, the group of horses came into view. Ahead of them, I could faintly make out a problem—a whole pack of problems.

"Wait, is that...?!"

Nope, this is it. I'm gonna barf for sure.

Lulune still hadn't noticed the wolves, but they seemed ready to pounce on the racers at any moment.

"Lulune, stop! There are wolves up ahead?"

"Wolves? No wonder so many riders have stopped here."

"Yeah! So, if you could just slow down a little—"

"This is our chance, Master! We can make up for our lost time all at once! Hold on!"

"Wait, we're gonna go *faster*?!"

"I am Lulune, the fierce donkey knight! Steel yourself, Bahamut, for I am coming to eat you!"

"S-Stop! At this rate, my guts are gonna turn into a meaty milkshake...!"

Unfortunately, my pleas fell on deaf ears as she hit the ground and sprinted at the wolves with horrifying speed. While trying to figure out what she was thinking, I was suddenly hit with the same weird floating feeling as before. I

realized that she had jumped again, and as I looked over her head, I could finally take stock of our situation.

"Oh."

We were about to fall right into the very middle of the pack.

Lulune didn't even seem to hear my screams as she drove right through the heart of the horde.

"Back, you mutts! Get out of my way!!"

The more I saw, the more I could feel my grip on reality slip.

Haha, donkeys are so fast... Look, the doggies are flying away! Bye-bye~!

Blow after blow saw the wolves get knocked away as she plowed through the pack.

"Aroooooooooo!"

A massive black wolf suddenly blocked our path. Even at a glance, I could tell it was a whole different order of strength compared to the others.

Not even Lulune'd stand a chance against this thing...

"Perish!"

"Yipe!"

... Or not. Wait, what just happened?

It almost looked like a single kick to the face was enough to send the boss wolf flying backward a couple dozen yards.

"Come to think of it, I still have no idea what it was trying to say," I lamented as Lulune continued pummeling her way through the pack.

I'm getting way too old for this.

After continuing her violent outburst for a while, we finally arrived in front of the finish line.

"GOOOOOOOOOOALL!!" Lulune cried as she threw herself across the line, finishing first by a long shot.

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"Hahaha! Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! To think he truly made it to the end!"

"H-He won... He really won!"

I, May Cherry, still couldn't believe what I was seeing. I wasn't expecting to see Seiichi-san or Lulune-chan anywhere near the front. But they not only caught up but also beat even the Hellhound to a pulp, as they claimed first. Fortunately, the Grand Wolves fled as soon as they saw their leader go down. This meant that the other racers could reach the finish line not long after, ending the Capital Derby the way it was intended.

"So?" Clay-san asked with a smile. "Do you feel any more courageous now?"

"Y-Yeah..." Watching that climax made it clear what I had to paint. "I'm going to get back to work right after this!"

"Grand! I won't stand to lose, of course. You're the best rival I could ask for. We'll settle the score when next we meet at the Karasti Art Show! Don't disappoint me now."

With that, he turned and left.

First, he shows up out of nowhere and criticizes my art, but just like that, he seems to have accepted me... He's a weird one.

I smiled a little as I thought back to the projection I'd seen, where Seiichi-san and Lulune-chan saved the entire race from the wolves. At this point, it was clear what my new work would be.

"Okay!"

With that, I left the stands to get to work—but not before realizing one crucial thing.

"I guess Seiichi-san didn't win the Bahamut after all, huh."

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"Noooooooo! What have I DONE?!"

I, Seiichi Hiiragi, could only watch as Lulune broke down in tears.

"I only wanted one thing... All I wanted was the Bahamut...!"

Lulune was the fastest steed in the race by a literal leap and a bound, and as a result, we wound up in first.

"C'mon, it's not that bad. We won."

"I don't want to spend a whole blasted day with the Valkyries!"

"Yeah, me neither."

She was wailing so loudly that my ears were starting to hurt. I would've much preferred the Bahamut as well, though—better a nice meal than actual first prize.

"My... My Bahamut..." she whimpered sadly.

As an aside, I did spot the fifth-place winner during the awards ceremony, and he seemed so beside himself with glee that I couldn't bring myself to ask for a trade. We didn't stay to receive our prize since Lulune seemed upset enough as it was. I didn't want to stand out too much anyways, so it worked out just fine.

Still, who'd have thought those wolves would've totally stopped the race.

I was a little puzzled at first as to why the racers didn't just ride around the wolves, but apparently, the black wolf was really bad news, and nobody wanted to risk it. They weren't expecting Lulune and me to make a comeback like that either, and that combo was enough to win us first.

"Sniffle... I swear I'm never eating again...!"

Lulune was only continuing to wallow in her misery, and I couldn't just sit and watch her any longer. I sat down beside her and patted her flank.

"Yeah, this time was kind of a bust—but there's plenty more Bahamut in the sea. If we ever run into another one, I promise you we'll defeat it and eat it together. Okay?"

"R-Really?"

"Really. And don't forget, there's tons of other tasty stuff out there just waiting to get eaten. I'm planning on hitting the road in not too long, so we can

go around and try food from all over the place. Who knows, maybe we'll find something so good it'll put that Bahamut to shame!"

"M-Master...!"

She dove into my chest, sobbing heavily. Of course, I could understand what she said, but I could only imagine it looked like I was being assaulted by a crying mule. Worse, her whinnying was surprisingly shrill.

Yeah, that's gotta be a weird sight.

I started stroking her mane reassuringly, though.

Just then, she began to glow.

"Wait, what? What's going on?!"

Lulune still didn't seem to realize what was happening to her as the light grew from a dull gleam to a blinding light.

"Gah?! My eyes!!"

The sight was enough to sear my retinas right out, which was even more painful than I thought it'd be. I ended up toppling backward while still clutching her head.

Wait... Why am I getting deja vu?

After a while, the light dissipated, and the searing pain left my eyes. Eventually, I was able to see again. Before I could take stock of what had happened, I realized a strange weight was on my chest.

What's this soft thing?

I slowly looked down.

"Sniffle... Master..."

There I saw a young woman in a brown ponytail, her emerald eyes brimming with tears as she looked up at me. She was hugging me tight around my chest—and she was naked.

... I'm not actually horny enough to start seeing things, right? Please tell me I'm not.

Of course, I had a pretty good guess about what had happened. Everyone around us was also pretty shocked to see a naked chick glomping on me.

She just evolved, didn't she? I mean, she did eat the Fruit, and then defeated a bunch of wolves.

I was a little shocked to see her change so dramatically, especially since Saria and I had barely changed at all until we had a lot more Fruits, but it seemed possible enough. Her mane and eye color perfectly matched the girl, too, so there was no doubt that she was Lulune. But that was fine—despite all the preamble, I had exactly one thing to say.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

That was all.

Chapter 11: The Demon Army Meets

The Demon Realm, properly known as Hersa, was a land of impenetrably dark forests and countless ruins. At the very center of the land was the great city of Granbeige, home to countless demonkin and the Demon King's castle. Said castle was a daunting fortress that commanded fear from any human that laid eyes on it—and there, in one of its parlors, was the 58th meeting of the Demon Army.

I, Reiya Farzer, was headed there after aiding in the Black Dragon God's resurrection. I knew the meeting was to be held there, but I hadn't the faintest clue what we would discuss. Since I was running a little late from my detour, I hurried toward the meeting room. After hustling down several hallways of plush red carpet on marble floors, I arrived outside the door. It was an imposing wooden construct, one that always made me tense. I took a few deep breaths before knocking and introducing myself.

"Commander of the Third Regiment of the Demon Army, Reiya Farzer."

With that, the door swung open on its own. Inside, I was unsurprised to find the other top brass were already present. They were all seated at the massive table in the middle of the room. Past that, I could see the familiar imposing scarlet door.

Not wanting to stand in the doorway forever, I hurried to the closest open seat. Every time I attended one of these meetings, I found myself wanting one of the chairs for my own chambers. It was almost too comfortable. Just as I was beginning to relax, however, one of the commanders in attendance glared at me.

"Reiya! How dare you arrive late?! Don't you realize how important these meetings are?!"

"Yes, yes, I know. I'm awfully busy, though."

"Busy? Whatever you were doing, it can't be more important than this! Watch the time!"

"Honestly, you're insufferable... You should be glad I came at all."

"What did you say?!"

His name was Urs Bamew, Commander of the Fifth Regiment. He was clad in a pristine black uniform, a blue cape draped over his shoulders. His bulging muscles were apparent even through his clothes, his bulk matched only by his pettiness and insistence on bothering me at every turn. He had dark grey skin, and massive horns sprouted from his temples, marking him as a demonkin. He was the leader of the High Onikin, the race that bound the largest demographic, the onikin together.

After ignoring all he had to say, the woman demonkin at his side shook her head at us. "Oh, come now, Reiya. You could stand to be a bit more punctual, couldn't you? And Urs, there's no reason to yell at the poor dear."

He grunted disaffectedly. "If you say so, Rialetta."

I sighed heavily. "Fine, I suppose I can try."

Rialetta Balheim was the Commander of the Fourth Regiment. She had wavy cream-colored hair, and her brown eyes were always full of kindness. She had an inexplicably charming mole beneath her right eye, and as much as I hated to admit it, she was almost as beautiful as I was. That was to be expected, though—she was the queen of the Succubi, said to be the prettiest of them all. As the only other female commander, we got along quite well, and I often just called her Ria. She looked almost indistinguishable from a regular human, except for the bat wings that sprouted from her back.

"Well, as long as you try," she said with a slightly awkward smile. Judging from the look on Urs' face, he felt every bit as guilty as I did.

How does she do it...? I know we're the same age, but she seems just like an older sister.

She was deceptively innocent, though. I'd once lent her one of my romance novels, and she returned it the very next day with bright red cheeks. Not only that, she had depressingly large breasts that threatened to burst the front of

her uniform at a moment's notice. I was by no means ill-endowed, but she had me beat, hands-down.

Oh, if only I had a rack like hers! I might finally be able to spend a night with one of my boyfriends!

Ria fidgeted awkwardly. "Um... Reiya? Is there some reason you're staring at my breasts like they murdered your parents?"

"Put your hands over your chest and ask that again."

"... What?"

Nonetheless, she did as I asked. Not even both her hands could cover her voluminous bust, though.

Why do I feel so defeated?

As I was thinking about Ria's bust, a man's lazy drawl came from across the table.

"Are we holding a meeting, or aren't we? If not, I'd love to go home and get back to sleep..." He punctuated his complaint with a large yawn.

He was Zolua Waltoure, the single strongest part of the Demon Army in a way the White Dragon God and Black Dragon God couldn't match. He was clad in the same uniform as everyone else, but he was missing his cloak, and his jacket was barely buttoned. His long silver hair was tied loosely behind his head, and his eyes lacked any semblance of dignity. Unlike Urs and Lia, he was virtually indistinguishable from a human, save for his unusually long canines. He was a vampire who had overcome even the original vampire who'd turned him to perfect. Now, even a vampire's usual weaknesses meant nothing to him. Even if he was late, Urs didn't have the guts to yell at Zolua the way he did to me.

Urs, that big, pea-brained coward...

Zolua shot Urs a cold look, and the big brute hastily lowered his gaze to the table. Even Ria seemed ill at ease. He was just that strong, and they called him the Crimson King for a good reason—but of course, two others in the room could match up to him.

"Complain not, Zolua."

The voice was quiet but had a deeply unsettling quality to it.

"Huh?"

"Silence. You must wait."

He was one of the few who could quiet Zolua so easily—the Commander of the First Regiment, Zeros Arbana. His forces were said to be the strongest of the Demon Army, and he was known and feared as The Deleter. He had ruffled blue hair and almost draconic golden eyes, and his perfect facial features betrayed no hint of emotion. His uniform was crisp and spotless and didn't bulge like Urs'. The most striking thing about him was the sheer force he could convey with a mere look.

"Get off your high horse," Zolua retorted. "You ain't the boss of me."

"Would you truly inconvenience Routier-sama when she went to such lengths to summon us?"

"I don't give a rat's ass what she wants. If it's a pain, it's a pain."

The look in Zelos' eyes intensified further. "Perhaps you would prefer to cease existing altogether, bat?"

I could already feel the dark mana twisting off of him. Urs shot me a worried look.

"Th-This is bad," he whispered loudly. "If Zelos lets loose here, not even I could stop him."

I scoffed. "So, you think you could take Zolua, do you?"

"O-Of course I could!" he stuttered unconvincingly.

He did have a point, though. If Zeros let loose here, the Demon King's castle—no, the whole of Granbeige could disappear in an instant.

"Zeros!" Ria pleaded. "Won't you please calm down?"

He didn't even seem to hear her. On the other side of the table, a dark shadow was spreading out from Zolua's body. I wasn't surprised—no vampire would tolerate being called a bat so easily.

"You're dead, lizard," he hissed.

Oh, why did he have to say that?

To be fair, I enjoyed my fair share of trash talk, so I wasn't in any position to point fingers.

As an aside, nobody knew what Zeros was, exactly. His eyes were reptilian, but he wasn't a dragonkin—his parents were ordinary onikin. He was born hornless, oddly enough, but the raw latent power he possessed surpassed even a High Onikin like Urs. The only real explanation was that he was born special.

I'd much rather not be stuck between the Crimson King and The Deleter in a fight, though—that sounds like a death sentence.

"Reiya!" Ria pleaded with me. "Help me calm them down?"

"How? We can't so much as lift a finger against them."

"That's why I'm asking you to help!"

I had already tried to stop them with my unique Vapor Magic, of course, but to no avail. Zolua's darkness overpowered my mana completely, while my mana couldn't even get close to Zeros without it getting wiped out of existence. It was pointless to even try at that point, so I focused my attention on the snacks laid out for us.

"Oh, honestly! You'll help me, won't you, Urs?"

"Huh?! I, uh... I got a stomachache! Love to help, but no can do."

"Why, I never...!"

Uls looked big, but he had all the determination of a bloated gnat. Just as Zolua and Zeros were about to clash, the last Commander—the only one who could stand alongside them as equals—finally made his move.

"Oh, Zolua-chan, Zeros-chan, you silly billies! No more fighting, okay~?"

With that, he smacked them each on the back of the head. With a loud *KRONGG*, they were both sent face-first to the table.

That was quite the noise...

Fortunately, that was enough to stop their fight before it could start, and they exchanged guilty glances.

"My apologies. I overstepped my bounds."

"Shit... Fine, I'm sorry!"

His name was Jade Raven, Commander of the Disciplinary Squad. He was an incubus and every bit as handsome as the other two, but he couldn't be less interested in women, instead spending most of his time with men. In fact, he was probably more obsessed with boys than I was. It was almost a pity—he had the most charming blond hair and deep amethyst eyes. Something about him just exuded warmth; under different circumstances, he could've been quite the ladykiller. Ria and I felt as comfortable talking with him as we did with any woman so, in a sense, he was still pretty popular.

Zolua rubbed the back of his head while Zeros dropped his eyes regretfully, prompting Jade to chuckle.

"Good boys! How about I give you both a nice thank-you kiss later?"

"No!" Zolua and Zeros snapped in unison.

Well, I'm impressed. He actually got them to agree on something.

We were a bit of a messy bunch, but I felt we were still managing just fine. After that little altercation, we waited until, finally, the scarlet door on the far end of the room opened.

At that instant, everyone stood up and snapped to attention. Two figures passed through the doorway. The first was a young woman with light blue hair and eyes as black as pitch. She had finely sculpted features like a doll might, and she was every bit as expressionless. She wore a black cloak with a fur trim over the top of her long dress. It was all too clear that she was royalty—none other than the Demon King's daughter, Routier Byuute-sama.

She swept into the room, standing at the head of the table before calmly appraising us.

"Thank you for gathering," she said cordially.

In that moment, we all drew our weapons—the manifestations of our pride, our very souls—and put them point-first into the ground before taking a knee. It was the greatest means of respect a demonkin could show anyone. It

symbolized our devotion to the land of Hersa and its people. I wasn't expecting Zolua to make such a gesture, but he didn't even hesitate.

At that moment, however, the scumbag who was accompanying Routier-sama smirked.

"Hehe, good. All present, I see."

The air was immediately thick with contempt for the man. He—Kreiss—was the one person I truly hated. He had pudgy fingers, equally chubby cheeks, and a bloated gut. He was short and always seemed to be wheezing for breath, and his forehead housed two laughably small horns, marking him as an onikin. Of course, it didn't matter how he looked. What I loathed about him was the way he seemed arrogant, like he believed himself to be better than everyone else. He was Routier-sama's closest aide, as well as her father's, and he never passed up an opportunity to rub our noses in it.

Of course, Kreiss wasn't the one who summoned us—Routier-sama did. The cretin was only allowed in the room to begin with because Routier-sama allowed him to be. He was no Commander. Unfortunately, he had another invaluable skill—foresight. His future predictions were almost always correct, and he had even foreseen the last human invasion. He had always been at the Demon King's side so that he could warn the king of any danger as soon as the potential arose.

Personally, I never felt that I could trust him. His attitude aside, there were times I doubted how loyal to the Demon King he really was, and the other Commanders likely felt the same way.

He chortled, oblivious to his infamy. "Of course you would gather for my sake! Heh-heh-heh!"

Ugh, enough with the creepy laugh already.

Routier-sama shot him a blank look. "Kreiss. Silence."

"Ah... My apologies, Milady."

Yeah, I doubt he's sorry.

After that, Routier-sama encouraged us to all take our seats again. As soon as we were all seated, Kreiss was the first to speak.

"Well, Routier-sama? Might you enlighten us as to the objective of this meeting?"

I would've thought Kreiss would already know, but apparently not.

She nodded. "I've called you here to discuss an alliance with the Kingdom of Windberg."

"What?!"

The room was suddenly dead silent. An alliance with Windberg meant an alliance with humans, of all things. It was the humans who sealed away the Demon King and humans who had tormented us for centuries on end. It was simply unthinkable—but that wasn't the only thing on my mind.

Why Windberg, of all places?! That's where that worthless fool Bel and his lackeys set up all those teleportation traps! What if we really do form an alliance with them?

It would be fine—it had to be. Monsters were just as likely to trigger the traps, after all, and there were only a hundred, to begin with. It was far too early to start panicking over it.

"Reiya...?" Ria whispered to me curiously. "You look rather pale."

"D-Do I? O-Of course not, don't be ridiculous! You're such a joker!"

"... Are you sure you're not feeling under the weather?"

Ria only seemed to get more worried, but I couldn't come clean about my worries here.

I'll have to punish those good-for-nothings again as soon as I get back.

I smiled faintly at the thought.

"Are you quite sure, Milady?!" Kreiss asked, visibly flustered. "An alliance with the humans is... it's unthinkable!"

"I'm serious," Routier-sama replied flatly.

"I-Impossible!"

"Humans have hurt us before," she continued. "They treated us like livestock. They even sealed Father away."

"Then why would you suggest such lunacy?!"

"We need to take the first steps to fix things."

"What 'need' do we have for such insanity! Have you lost your reason?!"

"No. I'm serious. We can't keep living in the past. We need to build a better future; to do that, we must overcome the past. We need to learn to live with them." The look in her eyes made it clear she believed so from the bottom of her heart. It was a fierce gaze, every bit as proud and commanding as the Demon King himself. "I have some friends who are adventurers. They say Windberg's king wants to be on better terms with us, too."

Kreiss wrinkled his piggy nose. "You would trust the lies of such rabble? That's simply—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence, however, as Routier-sama cast him a murderous look.

"My friends are not rabble," she spat coldly.

He could not reply, his breath growing ragged as he paled in terror.

Serves him right.

"B-but... yes, my premonitions! They've been very clear! Any demonkin that deals with humans will be met with calamity, I'm sure! Forming an alliance with them would simply spell the death of us!"

"If you're right, I'll pay the price with my own head."

"B-But do you really believe your people will accept—"

BANG!

Everyone turned to the source of the voice to find that Zolua had just slammed his hands on the table. He glared at Kreiss.

"Shut the hell up already, pig. Routier-sama gave her orders, so you'd better follow them. Or would you rather I break every rotten bone in your body?"

Hmm. He's not secretly a tsundere, is he?

Even though he complained a lot and seemed disobedient, he always showed his devotion to the throne in the weirdest ways.

"I hate to admit it, but Zolua is correct," Zeros begrudgingly added. "You may adhere to your orders or be obliterated; the choice is yours."

Again, Kreiss went white as a sheet.

Jade put a finger to his lips. "Don't you think you're being a little selfish? Keep it up, and I might have to break out my special nighttime punishment for you."

Kreiss squealed in sheer terror. Realizing he was totally outnumbered by the three strongest Commanders; he began to visibly tremble. He bolted back to the scarlet door, fumbling to open it as he shouted back at us.

"D-Don't say I didn't warn you! An alliance with the humans is impossible; you'll see!"

With that, he slipped through the door and fled.

My, what a pathetic thing to say. Just what is he trying to pull?

Nonetheless, having him gone removed a good deal of tension from the room, and Routier-sama could continue.

"Thank you for your support. I know some countries, like the Kaizell Empire, still want to crush us. I know this is a risk, but... We need to look to the future." She paused for a moment before finishing weakly. "Please, lend me your strength."

There was no need to even consider it, of course. We all took a knee once more.

"Whatever the Demon King wills."

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Alone in the darkness, a single man's voice rang out.

"Shit, shit, shit! All my plans for naught!"

After a moment, however, he took a few deep breaths before continuing in a whisper.

"Fine... My plan may have derailed somewhat, but I've still got a hand to play. Nobody can stop me! Heh-heh-heh!"

With that, his unpleasant chortle melted into the night.

Chapter 12: Into Custody

"Master...?"

Finally, my brain started working again, and I realized the now-human Lulune seemed worried about me.

Huh. She's a donkey, but she's got a ponytail. Funny, that. Hahaha... oh god, I've got to actually deal with this mess, don't I?

As much as I wanted to stay frozen, Lulune was still naked and people were starting to stare—or so I assumed. I didn't have the guts to check.

"S-So, uh... You're Lulune, right?"

"Hm? Of course, I am... eh?"

Her surprise slowly turned to shock as she seemed to finally grasp what had happened. She looked down at her body, wordlessly.

For a long moment, both of us were silent. Then, she slowly looked back up at me.

"M-Master?! H-H-How am I human now?!"

"Just calm down, okay? I'll explain, but first things first."

I took off my robe and draped it over her.

"Huh?" She blinked at me.

"You, uh... can't stay naked forever."

"Ehh?!"

She finally seemed to realize she wasn't wearing anything. She blushed bright red and hurriedly wrapped herself in my robe.

Seeing her react like that is just making this more awkward... Hasn't she been naked this whole time, though? Why is she suddenly all embarrassed about it now? Saria was the exact opposite.

That aside, I'd wound up taking off my robe. I didn't have time to worry about being taken for a Hero—walking around with a naked woman would've attracted way more attention no matter how I looked at it. Besides, I could just claim I was from the Eastlands or say it was a weird congenital disability or something, but I'd cross that bridge if I came to it. I wasn't too worried, especially considering how welcoming Terbelle seemed. They were even nice to Al, and she was literally cursed, so having black hair shouldn't be that bad.

Still, what do I do now?

I gave Lulune a few idle pats on the head, as I thought. Just as I let out a sigh, I heard a familiar pair of voices.

"Seiichi!"

"Damn, what's with this crowd...?"

Saria and Al pushed their way through the group toward us. Normally, I'd be thrilled to see them, but this was the exact worst situation I could've possibly asked for. As soon as I laid eyes on them, I went pale as a ghost and broke out in a cold sweat.

Don't come any closer! Please, please don't see me like this!

Unfortunately, they pushed through the crowd until they were right in front of us. As soon as they saw me sitting there robeless, and Lulune beside me, they both froze in surprise.

Who'd have thought it'd end like this, caught in a love triangle... er, square? Man, to think I was a loser among losers... Life's funny, huh.

"Y-You..." Al stammered, eyes slowly gathering in her eyes.

Wait! P-Please don't!

Unfortunately, my voice wasn't working, so I could only sit there, flapping my mouth open and shut like a goldfish.

Nope, it's all over. I'm so, so dead.

"You... You finally took off that robe!" she finally said.

"I'm so, so sorry! I... I what?"

I did a double-take.

I misheard her, right?

"What's with that face?" she asked confusedly. "You've been wearing that thing 'cause you didn't trust folks here, right? Ain't that why you were hiding your face? Damn, I'm just so happy I have to cry."

"Uh..."

So, she's totally okay with a random naked lady hugging me, then? Okay.

Somehow, I'd escaped by a hair.

"Hey, Seiichi? Who's that girl with you?"

Never mind, I'm screwed.

Still sweating, I turned to Saria. She seemed genuinely curious. Al, however, seemed to grasp the situation immediately.

"Seiichi?" she said flatly.

"Y-Yes?"

"We gotta chat."

"..."

As Al smiled thinly, I knew my luck had completely run out.

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"Wait, so you're trying to say this chick is actually your donkey?"

"Um... Yes?"

We had gone right back to the inn, where Al made me sit on the cold, hard floor throughout her questioning. Fortunately, the inn was empty when we arrived except for Lyle-san. He looked surprised to see us, but as soon as he puzzled out what had happened, he looked at me the way he might a clump of wet dog hair.

Oh god, I could die from embarrassment.

Fortunately, Al gave me a chance to explain myself, which I had just finished doing. For some reason, she only let out a heavy sigh and glared at me.

"You seriously couldn't think of a better excuse, huh?"

"It's the truth, honest!"

To be fair, I wouldn't believe it if someone told me their donkey had turned into a girl, but what am I supposed to say? It really happened!

Even Lulune seemed pretty dubious which didn't convince Al.

"If she's your donkey, then prove it. Do that, and I'll believe you."

"Prove it...?"

"Yeah. You got proof, don't you? How am I supposed to believe you otherwise?"

Good point.

The question was how I was supposed to do that. I considered asking Lulune to turn back into a donkey, but before I could do anything, Saria cut in.

"He's telling the truth, Al."

Al shot her a cold look. "Oh yeah?"

"She's Lulune-chan, honest." Saria turned to smile at the former donkey. "I guess you ate a Fruit of Evolution, too, then!"

"Hold up! You're saying you believe this rat bastard?!"

"Yeah. I was the same way?"

"The same what?" Al gave her a blank look.

Saria only smiled before turning into her Kaiser Kong form. "Me, was monster. Me, eat Fruit of Evolution, become human. You believe now?"

Saria then returned to her human form and beamed at Al.

Al stared at Saria for a long moment, utterly frozen in place, before finally relaxing a little.

"Screw reason. Nothing makes sense anymore."

Yeah, thought as much.

She'd just witnessed the impossible, so it was no wonder she was taken aback. I felt the exact same back in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak.

Al turned to Lulune with a sigh. "Still, she was a donkey? That's new to me."

"I-I didn't think such a thing was possible either..."

She was still clad in my robe, huddled in the corner of the room. Seeing Saria's transformation seemed to help her come to grips with what had happened to her.

"B-But, uh, hugging Seiichi in your birthday suit is a little... y'know?" Al blushed a little, fidgeting. "You gotta get married before you pull that shit."

At the thought of it, both Lulune and I started blushing, too.

"But damn..." Al muttered. "I-I guess I'll get to do that soon enough, huh..."

I blinked. "You what the what now?"

"Sh-Shut up! I didn't say anythin'!"

I didn't know what I did to tick her off, but it didn't seem close to fair.

After watching our exchange, Saria cut in.

"By the way, why'd you give Lulune-chan your robe, Seiichi?"

"Why? I mean, she was naked, right?"

"I know, but why didn't you just give her some of my clothes? Sheep-san gave you a ton, right?"

"Oh."

I totally forgot all about that! Why didn't I think of those clothes first?! They can even change the size to fit the wearer and everything! Seriously, how am I that stupid? I didn't have to take off my robe at all! What about my weird congenital disability alibi? Was that all for nothing?

...

I took my head in my hands and moaned, and more mystery sweat started coming out of my eyes. "Dammit..."

Al shot me a pitying look. "Uh... Cheer up?"

Can somebody tell me why I can't stop crying?

After a little while, I pulled myself together and handed Al two gold coins. She was the most likely candidate for taking Lulune clothes shopping. Sure, Saria seemed to have wearing clothes down pat, but she'd never gone shopping for them before and asking to buy her own things, Lulune seemed equally pointless. If she was going to be a human now, though, she'd need more of an actual wardrobe.

"Al, could you go buy some clothes for Lulune? I'd hate to make her share Saria's clothes now."

"Huh? Sure, but I dunno what her size is."

"There's clothing that changes sizes automatically, isn't there? Just get her a few sets of those... oh, and grab her some shoes and underwear, too."

"Alright, I can do that. Be right back."

With that, Al went out shopping. She returned about twenty minutes later, and we had Lulune get dressed right away. Al made sure I was blindfolded within an inch of my life, but that aside, it went pretty smoothly. Al had gotten her a simple black shirt, white jacket, and matching brown pants. She had a black belt wrapped tight around one of her thighs and knee-high boots in a matching color. The outfit suited her nicely, drawing out her natural dignity to make her seem even cooler than before.

"I hope this looks okay on her," Al said with a grimace. "I kinda just grabbed whatever I saw, and the auto-adjusting clothes were pricey enough that there ain't any change left."

She picked out this outfit at random?! I never would've guessed!



I never had an eye for fashion, and even now, I didn't see any point in dressing up if I was just going to be adventuring. Even now, I was just wearing a simple white shirt and black pants.

Lulune looked down at herself uncertainly. "Um... Master? Do you think this suits me?"

"Yeah. Like, perfectly. You've got great taste, Al."

"I-If you say so, Master..."

"I got taste, huh? Never heard that before."

Lulune blushed happily, and Al scratched the back of her head bashfully, averting her gaze.

With that, though, I could put my robe back on, and I put the hood back up over my face. Al gave me a depressed look.

"What, so you're keeping the hood up after all?"

"Huh? I mean, I guess I'm just used to it at this point..."

That was true, of course. It was surprisingly comfortable and even helped keep the sun off my head.

Oh, that's right—my hair. I'd better ask if black hair means anything special here.

"By the way, Al, is black hair rare here or something?"

"Huh? Right, you're an Eastlander, ain't you?"

"Something like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She shook her head as she continued. "Well, I've never been to the Eastlands, but I heard pretty much everyone over there has black hair. On the continent, it sure ain't common. Come to think of it, the Heroes the Kaizell Empire summoned are supposed to have black hair, too..."

"Oh, okay."

That was a bit of a relief, honestly. I'd be able to pass myself off as an Eastlander, which seemed to be this world's equivalent of being Japanese.

"It's still a shame, though," Al added.

"Hm? What is?"

"Nah, it's just you're pretty ho—wait."

"I'm what?"

A look of horror quickly spread across Al's face.

"F-Forget what I said!"

"Wait, forget what?"

"Don't you dare take that hood off, got it?! Especially not around any girls!"

"Isn't that the exact opposite of what you were just saying?!"

"Ignore what I said and listen to me! Never take off that hood, never!"

"Uh... Sure? I wasn't planning on it, anyways."

Hearing that, Al let out a heavy sigh and started muttering to herself. "Good... He'd be hella popular with the ladies without that thing... That's the *last* thing I want..."

I couldn't quite make out what she said, but I decided it probably didn't matter. More importantly, we had to rent another room now that there were four of us. She could keep staying in the stable if she went back into her donkey form, of course, but she seemed to like being a human.

If we're staying in this city for awhile, I may as well just buy a house. I've got more money than I could ever spend, after all.

We might be moving on soon if I was going to reunite with Shouta and the others, so I decided to put off on a house just in case.

As I thought about the future, I headed down to the first floor to rent another room. Fina-san still wasn't home yet, so I just went through Lyle-san after explaining the gist of our situation. Of course, I didn't tell him Lulune was my donkey since I didn't want him doubting my sanity or anything.

The only hitch in the plan was that Lulune seemed determined to stay in the same room as Saria and me. It made sense—she seemed to think of herself as a knight, so she wanted to be ready to protect her master at all times.

Her appetite isn't exactly knightly, though...

Eventually, we convinced her to stay in the new room, although she seemed pretty put out by it. As we were about to return to our rooms to sleep, however, I heard a commotion near the inn's front door.

"I challenge thee!"

"Um, you challenge who? You do know this is just an inn, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Clau-chan! The fight's already begun! If you don't snap out of it, they'll get you, too!"

"And just who are you fighting, Rona?"

"How should I know?"

"Um... Well. Good for you."

"Wait, why are you looking at me like that?"

I turned to see a pair of women walk inside. One had medium-length orange hair and a slight build, while the other had short-cropped blue hair and a tall, lanky build. They seemed different in virtually every way except one—they wore matching armor. It was similar to Claude and the other guards' silver armor, but theirs seemed to be made of gleaming platinum, and it was far more ornamental. They each had a sword at their hips, making it clear that they were knights. That only made their exchange more surreal, though. Of course, I could also add that they were both extremely pretty, but that seemed to apply to literally everyone in Terbelle.

I hope they aren't perverts, too... There seems to be a huge number of them here, too.

Lyle-san was the first to come to his senses, and he approached them warmly. "Um... If you don't mind my asking, do you have any business with us?"

"Hm?" The blue-haired one turned to him. "Oh, sorry. My partner is a little... you know... so it seems we forgot to introduce ourselves."

"Clau-chan? What do you mean, I'm a little 'you know?' You know what?"

"Hahaha..."

"Laughing awkwardly isn't an answer!"

They look like knights, but I guess they're comedians or something.

Finally, though, the pair seemed ready to introduce themselves.

The blue-haired one cleared her throat. "I am Claudia Asterio of this country's division of the Swordsaint Valkyries."

"Also, of the Valkyries, I'm Rona Kyrzas! Recognize my voice at all? I was the announcer for the Capital Derby!"

"Uh... Okay."

Their introductions left me with more questions than answers, though.

Why are a bunch of knights here, of all places?

I did recognize Rona's voice, though. She seemed every bit as cheerful and energetic as she sounded over the speakers. On the other hand, Claudia seemed perfectly cool and composed. She seemed like one of the cross-dressing actors you'd see in a Takarazuka play.

Lyle-san also seemed baffled. "Is there anything I can help you two Valkyries with?"

"Oh, yes. I'd almost forgotten."

"What, you're forgetting work now, Clau-chan? That's just sad! Hehehe!"

"Ignore her," Claudia-san said with a tad of irritation in her voice. "We're actually looking for someone."

"Someone? Do you have their name?"

Claudia-san nodded. "Yes... though it seems we've found him already."

"Huh?"

For some reason, she turned to look right at me. "You're Seiichi-kun, aren't you?"

"Uh, yeah. How do you know my name?"

She chuckled. "You won the Derby with a *donkey*. Besides, you stick out like a sore thumb in that robe."

I shot her a suspicious look. "Alright, but what do you want from me?"

"I'll get right to the point, then. Could you accompany us to the palace?"

"... What?"

"Unfortunately, we won't be taking no for an answer."

"Why?!"

Seriously, what did I do?! Did I break some kind of law? This whole accompany-us-to-the-Palace bit sounds like this world's equivalent of getting arrested! And why can't I say no? Don't I have rights in this world?

Saria and the others seemed every bit as surprised as I was, but Claudia-san and Rona-san ignored them as they each took me by the arm.

"I'm sorry, everyone. We'll be borrowing him for just a spell."

Rona-san cackled. "That's right, asshole! Your crime spree ends here!"

Claudia-san sighed. "Come on, Rona. You know he isn't in any trouble."

"Well, yeah, but doesn't that line just seem perfect for this?"

Oh, so I'm not in trouble. That's a relief.

As I was being taken out of the inn, I realized that Rona-san was right. There was something I was dying to say.

"I-I'm innocent! Innocent, I tell you!"

Oh, yeah. That felt good.

Chapter 13: The Swordsaint Valkyries

"Uh... So could somebody tell me why I'm being brought to the palace?"

Claudia-san and Rona-san were dragging me through the town by my arms, and I could only imagine how weird I looked. A few people even broke into tears at the sight of me.

Why do I feel like a lamb being dragged to the slaughter?

"I suppose we haven't told you yet, have we?" Claudia-san said after a pause. "You won the Capital Derby, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"That's why."

"... Excuse me?" I replied dumbly.

"Don't you remember first prize? Whoever wins gets to spend a full day with us."

"Oh, right!"

"Looks like you finally remember. Since you didn't appear at the awards ceremony, we were worried you didn't care about the prize itself. Apparently, you're plenty interested, though."

Damn. I totally forgot.

Even though I had a Skill that gave me a perfect memory, I kept forgetting all kinds of stuff.

Is it some kind of Skill scam? Can Skills even scam me? What's next, Skill prank calls?

I could remember my magic and the details of all my Skills perfectly. So maybe my memory Skill was only picking out what it thought was important. That still left the question of how that was even possible.

That aside, I couldn't believe the one-day reward would kick in so soon. The Derby had only ended that day at noon. It was all a little sudden.

Claudia-san, no doubt guessing my thoughts, smiled faintly. "I'm sorry this is so sudden. We're busy, so your prize is aligned with our schedule."

"Oh, look over there, Clau-chan! That stall's meat skewers look soooo good! Let's come back and grab some tomorrow! We can hit up that accessory shop while we're at it! I heard there was a new line of clothing out, too... There's too much to do!"

Claudia-san sighed and faced the sky, shaking her head faintly. "We're honestly very busy. Please believe me."

I guess she has it rough, huh.

Before I knew it, I realized we were outside the palace.

Claudia-san puffed out her chest with pride. "Here it is, the main palace of the Kingdom of Windberg—Arkciel Castle."

I could barely even register her words, let alone reply—the castle was that massive and beautiful. I'd felt pretty excited when I saw the castle in the distance for the first time but seeing it up close was a whole different experience.

"Wow," I breathed in awe.

I'd never had the chance to see a castle back on Earth. I'd seen Japanese castles, of course, and videos of a certain fantasy castle associated with a certain famous mouse. But I'd never seen a medieval-style castle in person. Standing at the foot of Arkciel Castle was downright overwhelming.

Claudia-san smiled at my reaction before smiling in satisfaction. "I'm glad you like it. Let's head inside, then."

With that, we followed her inside. The gate was protected by a pair of guards wearing armor like the other town guards. They saluted as soon as they saw the Valkyries and quickly let us through.

Hehe, cool.

I soon found myself in a gorgeous garden covered in all sorts of flowers in bloom. It smelled quite strong, but none of the flowers' scents clashed, blending into a heavenly aroma. Somebody had clearly put a lot of thought into the gardening. At the center of the garden was a fountain, probably powered by magic somehow.

Damn, this place is amazing... I really wish I had better words for it, but it's really amazing.

Claudia-san finally stopped in front of a small field in one corner of the gardens.

"This is where Windberg's knights train."

"There's a super strong barrier around it!" Rona-san added. "Even if the whole Magic Corps threw their best spells at it at once, it wouldn't even crack! Of course, if anyone tried magic that powerful in here, Lousse-sama would get really mad!"

"To be fair, it's her job to get angry at stuff like that. Even when Lousse-sama was punishing Rona over the whole Capital Derby thing, she seemed even more composed than usual."

Rona-san shuddered. "Don't remind me! I remember how George-kun from Intelligence—he helped me take all those pictures, by the way—got totally broken by her punishment. The whole way back to his room, he was mumbling about 'her sword's coming!' and 'she can cut through steel, and now she's gonna cut through me!' and so on. He was screaming pretty hysterically, too."

"Um... Did you take him to the infirmary?"

"Nah, it seemed like too much of a pain. But don't worry, my friend, I'll never forget your noble sacrifice!"

"But George-kun is still alive, right?"

"Geroge-who? Never heard of him."

"You're the devil. You know that don't you?"

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "Can I go home already?!"

The longer I listened, the less I wanted to stay. It sounded downright dangerous there, and poor George, or whoever, had already paid the price—even though he half-deserved it.

Claudia-san planted a firm hand on my shoulder to keep me from fleeing. "I'd give in if I were you. That's just how the country is these days."

"Wait, so the castle has as many weirdos as the guild?!"

Is there anyone in this country who isn't balls-to-the-wall insane?! From the sounds of it, it'll only get worse!

If it was a country of perverts for perverts, that might not be too bad... or maybe that only made everything worse.

Claudia-san scanned the training grounds, stopping a moment later. "Oh, perfect. Look over there, Seiichi-kun."

"Hm?"

I followed her gaze to find a group of women clad in the same armor as Claudia-san and Rona-san.

"Are they training?" I asked.

"That's right. It looks like the other Valkyries are doing some trial combat."

"Oh, and look! The captain's there, too—Louisse-sama herself!"

Now that Rona-san mentioned it, most of the knights were surrounding one woman in particular, although we were still too far away for me to make out her face.

"Let's get closer!" Rona-san suggested.

Claudia-san nodded. "I'm sure Seiichi-kun could learn a thing or two from seeing them up close."

With that, we got close enough that I could get a good look at the woman in the middle. She had aqua-blue hair that streamed loosely to her waist and a perfectly proportioned face. Her armor was azure instead of platinum, polished to a brilliant shine. It was easily the most elegant armor I'd ever seen. She held her wooden practice sword at the ready in front of her, her eyes closed as the

other knights carefully edged closer. She was easily the most knightly person I'd ever seen.

Lulune could learn a thing or two from her.

"You see the woman in the middle?" Claudia-san asked. "That's Louise-sama."

"Don't you dare blink!" Rona-san chuckled. "It'll be over in an instant!"

Is she really that good?

I focused on the captain. Suddenly, all her mock assailants attacked her at once. Even though I was technically a master of the Zeford Duelling Style, courtesy of Zeanos, I had none of the experience to back it up. I was a total novice, but even I could see how polished each of their swings was. Even with my Mind's Eye Skill taking effect, they were fast. It looked like all their strikes would hit Louise-san for sure.

At the last moment, however, Louise-san calmly opened her eyes. In that split-second, her sky-blue eyes took stock of all her attackers. Wordlessly, she swung her sword just once. Her counterattack was blindingly fast, to the point where even the slow-down effect of Mind's Eye didn't help me follow her weapon. Even though she was using a wooden sword herself, the other knights' weapons fell apart in their hands, and each of their blades was smoothly cut in half.

The knights stared wordlessly at their useless weapons as Louise-san returned her wooden sword to her hip.

"You've improved your speed greatly, but your attacks are far too predictable," she said aloofly. "Focus on that."

"Th-Thank you, Captain!"

The knights all bowed in gratitude.



H-Holy crap... How is she so much stronger than the others? If I didn't know better, I'd say she's more of a monster than I am.

Claudia-san smiled at my reaction. "I still can't even see her sword. All those knights are above level 250, and I still can't come close to her at level 380. Did you see her sword, Rona?"

"Why do you think I could? You're a good 20 levels higher than I am, y'know."

She sighed. "You're right. I think that even against someone else at level 500, she'd still move too fast to see."

"No, that's... um... Pretty likely, actually."

So, Claudia-san's level 380, Rona-san's level 360, and Louise-san is level 500?

Louisse-san seemed to finally notice us, however, and she walked over.

"Claudia, Rona. You've returned."

Both of my escorts bowed formally.

"We've returned, Captain!"

"Our mission was a big success!"

"You wouldn't have had a mission in the first place if you'd done your job properly," Louise-san replied coldly.

Rona-san pretended not to hear her, and Claudia-san smiled awkwardly again.

Finally, Louise-san turned to me. "You're Seiichi-san, are you not?"

"Uh, yes. That's me."

"I am the captain of the Windberg Kingdom chapter of the Swordsaint Valkyries, Louise Palse." Her expression didn't change once as she talked, as distant as ever. "Here, take this."

"Huh?"

She thrust a wooden practice sword into my hands as I tried not to stare.

Wait, she can't mean...

"We're having a practice bout right now."

"Can I go home instead?"

I didn't mean to blurt that out, but given the circumstances, I wasn't surprised.

She only shook her head.

"Had my subordinate not offered such a ludicrous prize for the Derby, we would both be spared this farce. Nonetheless, you have won, and as your prize was a day with me, I've no choice but to oblige."

"Great. It's, uh, nice to see you're so responsible... but why are we training?"

She blinked at me in muted surprise. "Why? What could we spend a full day together doing, if not training? Am I misunderstanding, perhaps?"

Wow, no self-awareness at all!

The prize was probably meant for a day on the town or something, a chance to have some fun with all of the Valkyries' beauties. Lousse-san's idea of fun didn't seem to align with mine at all.

How is training a reward?!

"At any rate, I would like to see your skills with my own eyes," she continued, walking away from me to her spot in the practice field. "I shall direct you if I see any room for improvement. You'll no doubt become far stronger than you are now."

"W-Wait, hold on a second!"

She was poised and ready to attack at a moment's notice. I turned to Claudia-san or Rona-san for help, but they and the other Valkyries had already fled to give us a wide berth. They were clearly intent on watching our match.

Dammit, I can't run away!

As I panicked, Lousse-san called out to me.

"I'm prepared. Come at me when you're ready."

"I, uh, don't want to— "

"Ah, I see. Very well, we shall test your defenses first."

God, I'm so stupid! Why couldn't I just say no?! It's way too late now!

She coolly readied her blade. "Steel yourself. Here I come."

"Wha?!"

She zipped toward me with the same insane speed she'd shown off just minutes ago, swinging at my blade to hack it apart. I backstepped out of the way on reflex alone, pretending not to notice the small crater I'd left behind when I kicked off.

"I'm impressed," Lousse-san said flatly. "I didn't expect you'd be able to dodge my first attack so easily."

"It wasn't easy at all, actually."

"Very well. I shall come at you with my full power, then."

"Is everyone in this world deaf or something?!"

Or is she just picking on me? This is just sad.

This time, she didn't even bother closing the gap, swinging her sword with such an overwhelming speed I could barely glimpse it, even with Mind's Eye. It seemed to pass through the air silently, but then— *Bang!*

"Wait, how come the sound hit me *after* the attack?!"

Like, zoinks! She's breaking the sound barrier with her attacks!

The blade of supersonic air came zipping toward me, and I dodged it by a hair by jumping to the side.

"I WANNA GO HOME!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

With four more lightning-speed slashes, she sent another volley of blades toward me.

How is she even doing this, especially with a wooden sword?! Wood or not, I'm dead if even one of those attacks hits! I mean, she's carving up the ground like crazy!

I moved however I could dodge her, even bending over backward at one point to dodge a near miss to my face.

"Wow," I heard Claudia-san say from the sidelines. "I knew Louisse-sama was powerful, but she hasn't even hit Seiichi-kun once. That's inhuman."

"No wonder he won the Capital Derby with a donkey! What level d'you think he is?"

"Forget what level he is; there's no way he should be able to dodge her at all. Even if he was also at the human level cap of 500, she should be getting at least a few hits in. Maybe he's not just a regular adventurer?"

"Nah, I'm not so sure. I had George-kun check him out and, apparently, he just recently came to town and registered at the guild. He should be a total greenhorn."

"Wow. You sure keep George-kun busy..."

The more I heard of Claudia-san and Rona-san's conversation, the more my heart sank.

Dammit, this could be bad.

"I'm surprised," Louisse-san remarked coolly. "To think I'm still unable to even graze you... How will you handle this, though?"

For a moment, her flurry of attacks ceased. Then, she charged right at me with even greater speed than before. "Hah!"

It was a large overhead cleave, and I could not dodge it at this range.

Wait, is this how I'm gonna die?

If I could gauge her speed accurately and predict it, I might have been able to throw myself to the side at the last moment. Her attack was far too fast for that, however, and I wouldn't be able to react in time if I tried. I might as well let her hit me at this point—there was no need for me to get so desperate over a random practice match, and at least that'd be the end of it.

No, scratch that! She was leaving all those big scars in the ground, so if she's got a Skill like the Black Dragon God's Armor Piercer, she'll rip me clean in half! I

don't even have the guts to risk it now! And I thought I was the only monster around here!

Since I was summoned, I'd tried to avoid standing out just in case somebody linked me to the Heroes. I didn't want to be treated like the others were, and I was careful to limit my strength whenever I had an audience. Louisse-san's attack was serious enough that I might not make it unless I used at least a little of my full power.

But even if she hits me, I won't die, right? Right? Oh, I bet it'll hurt like hell...

In the face of her falling blade, I was all but resigned to my defeat.

>Skill: Evolution has been activated. Your body will now be optimized for the present situation. Body optimization has combined Mind's Eye and Detection into Clairvoyance. Skill: Autodefense has been unlocked.

That mechanical voice rang out in my head again, but I didn't have the time to puzzle out what it meant. The edge of her wooden blade was a hair away from hitting me. At that very instant, though, everything changed.

"Wha?!"

My body suddenly moved on its own. I ducked in perfect timing with her strike so that her blade wouldn't hit my head, then somersaulted backward out of the way. As I rolled, I extended my leg and kicked it clean out of her hands in a way that didn't hurt her hand.

When I'd stood up again, she was completely disarmed, and my wooden sword was pointed at her neck.

Chapter 14: Conspiracy

For a long moment, none of the Valkyries so much as breathed. I was every bit as shocked. I stood there speechless as I tried to parse what had just happened.

Then—

"WHAT?!" cried the Valkyries.

"WHAT?!" I cried in perfect unison.

"Why are *you* shocked?!" Rona-san shouted. "You're the one who beat her!"

"No wonder you won with only a donkey," Claudia-san said with a shake of her head. "I never thought I'd meet anyone more powerful than Louise-sama..."

I had no idea I could even react like that?! What the hell, body?! Is this your doing, you stupid voice?!

I ensured my hood was on securely enough that nobody could see me before pulling up my Stats. Just as I'd feared, two new entries were in the Skills section.

Skill Details
<p>CLAIRVOYANCE:</p> <p>A Skill that alters the very laws of nature. You can identify and detect any and all beings within a 500-yard radius. However, by default, only the regular effects of Detection are active. In addition, the effects of Mind's Eye are greatly increased, and you can easily see even swifter motions. You gain the ability to see more than you probably want to. Passive..</p>
<p>AUTODEFENSE:</p> <p>Your body will dodge automatically against attacks that you cannot normally react to. This does not apply</p>

to attacks from your blind spots. Passive.

GOD, MAKE IT STOP!!

Just when I thought the shower of OP Skills had finally stopped, these two fat asses dropped onto my Status page. It was only the calm before the storm.

Why can't I decide my own Skills?! Why is my own body stealing away my say in this, dammit?!

I didn't want the Valkyries to think I was crazy or anything, so I didn't let any of my frustration show.

Seriously, how am I supposed to use any of these Skills?

From the way Autodefense activated earlier, it seemed like I'd officially lost any actual control over my body. I could barely grasp most of my Skills, but Autodefense was literally using *me*.

Seriously, Evolution pulls no punches... though I guess I am the Unbounded One. Mom, Dad, do I still get to go to human heaven when I die?

I cried at the sky for a moment, but after a while, I realized Louise-san was staring at my sword. She took a step closer.

"Wh-What?" I asked nervously.

She didn't reply, and I couldn't get a good look at her face from my current angle. I had no idea what to say. I'd kind of defeated the strongest knight in the country, and I had no idea what would happen next. Even the other Valkyries seemed to be waiting for Louise-san's reaction.

Why so quiet all of a sudden?! Rona-san, this is the time to show off that mouth of yours! Just somebody, please break this awkward silence!

I took another careful look at Louise-san. As I did so, she finally looked up and met my eyes.

Uh... Why does she look so impressed? Like, her eyes are practically sparkling...

Finally, she opened her mouth.

"May I call you Teacher?"

"Stop whittling away my HP already!"

Why'd it have to be that, of all things! Haven't I been through enough already?! Just look; all your knights are stunned! Who wouldn't be surprised? Why would you, the strongest person in the kingdom, ask a weirdo in a robe to be your teacher, anyways?!

She nonetheless drew the glittering silver sword at her hip, planting the tip into the ground as she dipped her head. "I am yours to direct, Teacher."

"You're kidding!"

It looked almost like she was pledging allegiance to me or something, but that couldn't be right. The other Valkyries had finally broken their silence, but they were running over to us and cheering.

"You did it, Louisse-sama! You finally found someone at your level other than Black Paladin-sama!"

"Forget at your level; he thrashed you! Now you're bound to get even stronger and more beautiful!"

"Good to see you can finally get out of teaching! I'm so happy you found someone to train you!"

Wait, where did my say in this go? Hello? Anyone?

Finally, Claudia-san turned to address me. "You're *really* strong, Seiichi-kun. Oh, wait, I guess I should call you Seiichi-sama if you're Louisse-sama's mentor now."

"Oh, hell no. Anything but that."

Claudia-san only smiled, somehow showing off even more of her androgynous charm. "If you say so. Still, I'm glad you're stronger than her." Her expression drooped just a little. "You see, Louisse-sama was born an absolute genius with a sword."

"She was, huh?"

"But... she still can't use any Skills, let alone Magic."

"... I'm sorry, what?"

That was the last thing I was expecting to hear.

Nah, no way. That makes no sense at all. I mean, what were those supersonic air slashes, then? That stuff was downright superhuman.

At that moment, I realized something. Neither my Skill-Taker nor my Arrange Unique Skills had activated even once during our battle. For a moment, I thought I must've had her Skills already, but my Second Sight didn't tell me she was using any Skills at all. It wouldn't have picked up any passives she was using, like how I couldn't see the Black Dragon God's Armor-Piercer. But that would only make it weirder that my Unique Skills never activated. I sure didn't have any Passive Skill that could make air slashes like that, so there was only one possible conclusion.

"But Lousse-sama really is a genius," Claudia-san pressed. "Even with that handicap, she's a natural-born swordmaster! No matter the style, all she needs is to see someone fight once to copy it perfectly. She's not bad at martial arts, either—she can beat out most professionals."

"Whoa."

I guess she's even better than I thought.

"Nobody's ever been able to compare to her, at her age or otherwise. Everyone either respects or fears her. She's been so alone for so long."

"..."

"Fortunately, we have Black Paladin-sama here, too. I've never seen their face, but they're as strong as her. Her real equal, can you believe it?"

"..."

"The Black Paladin-sama seems just as lonely as her, though. Lousse-sama sometimes seems so sad when she's training. She's so strong she ends up pushing everyone away from her. It's not my place to say since I'm just one of her subordinates, but I've never seen her with a real friend. She walls us off, too, so we can't get too close to her. That's why I've got to thank you for defeating her. I don't think I've ever seen her that happy."

With that, she turned and went back to Rona-san.

I've only been strong since coming here, but Louise-san's been grappling with this her whole life. Who knows how lonely she's been all these years?

She seemed to notice I was staring at her and, for probably the first time, she smiled at me just a little. "Thank you once again, Teacher."

It was only the slightest change, and it only lasted for an instant, but something about that fleeting look made my heart skip a beat.

"Uh, no problem."

Oof. Talk about a lukewarm reaction, me. But seriously, what am I supposed to do? Train with her like the other Valkyries or something? I'm basically a total noob when it comes to actual fighting. There's no way I could teach them anything...

"Um, Louise-san? I really don't know what I can teach you..."

"Don't worry. I'll just copy what you do."

Damn, spoken like a real genius.

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

>Skill: Evolution has been activated. Your body will now be optimized for the present situation. Body optimization has unlocked Skill: Instruction.

With a surrendered sigh, I checked what my latest Skill was supposed to do.

>INSTRUCTION: You can teach any Skill, Magic, knowledge, or other ability you possess to a second party.

Uh... Yay? Now I can teach her.

Somehow, I only felt like crying.

Can I please go home now? Haven't I done enough damage for today?

There shouldn't be anything left for me to do. Besides, I'd already used the telepathy feature of the Necklace of Endless Love to fill the others in on what was happening, and they were waiting for me back at the inn. I nearly gave Al a heart attack in the process, of course.

I should be totally free to go home now, right?

I was just about to open my mouth when something cut me off.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

It was a woman's voice coming from inside the castle. All the Valkyries, including Lousse-san, seemed baffled as a maid ran out into the courtyard.

Wow, a real-life maid! Never thought I'd ever see one.

"L-Lousse-sama!" she stuttered. "Th-The king... The king is...!"

"Please, calm yourself," Lousse-san urged her. "Is something wrong with His Majesty?"

The maid took a deep breath. "His Majesty was attacked... He's collapsed!"

In an instant, every Valkyrie in the courtyard was at attention, and they rushed into the castle.

Wait, they're just gonna leave me here?

It was clearly a pretty big deal, but that meant I couldn't just waltz off like nothing even happened. If somebody found me wandering around, they might mistake me for one of the attacker's accomplices. There was only one thing I could do.

"Doctor!" I shouted. "Somebody call an ambulance!"

Er, wait. That doesn't sound right.

"Medic!"

... Okay, that's enough screwing around for now. I guess the stress must've gotten to me or something.

Now that I'd calmed down a little, I decided to rely on my Clairvoyance to see if I could pin down whoever attacked the King.

Chapter 15: Curses and Conviction

Left alone in the courtyard, I decided to try out my new Clairvoyance Skill. Its passive effect was pretty much the same as Mind’s Eye, but by focusing, I could get details like I would with Detection. I used it and decided to focus on anyone heading away from the castle. Just like a radar, I could feel Louisse-san and the other Valkyries like little blue dots on an imaginary screen. What interested me more was the red dot speeding away from them all. Regular old Detection never gave me results that precise. But apparently, I could tell friends from foes by the color of the radar blips.

That’s nice and all, but I wish I could get a little more detail on here... The Skill’s description said I could do that, right?

At that moment, a small display with more details on the red dot popped up in front of me.

ORIGA KARMELIA	
ORIGIN: Kaizell Empire.	
RACE: Beastkin	
SEX: Female	
JOB: Assassin	
AGE: 8	LEVEL: 455
CONDITION: Subordinated	ALIAS: The Twilight Killer
BUST/WAIST/HIP MEASUREMENTS:	

...

"HOLD UP!" I screamed at the display.

Hasn't this Skill ever heard of privacy?! This is way more detail than I need! I mean, her measurements? Seriously?!

I didn't get a good look at that section or anything past it because I had the decency to look away as soon as I realized what it was.

Nice one, me.

Her Stats didn't come up, of course, but I had other Skills for that, and this way, Clairvoyance retained some sense of balance at least. I had plenty to go on already.

It says she's from the Kaizell Empire... That's the place that summoned Shouta and the others, right?

I remembered hearing that they were also the most enthusiastic country out there when it came to taking out the Demon King. Since Windberg's king wanted to live with the demonkin in peace, the Empire probably saw him as a threat. The assassin was also a beastkin girl who seemed pretty young. Her Level seemed way too high for her age, too. That wasn't what stuck out to me most.

"What's with her condition? What's 'subordinated' supposed to mean?"

That still didn't make sense to me.

So, what is she, a slave or something? I didn't think they had slavery in this world.

If that was true, that only made me more worried about Shouta and the others. If the *Hero Abel's Diary* was anything to go by, they could easily get manipulated and thrown out with the trash. The whole slave thing still didn't quite click with me, though. I'd heard the impression 'to work like a slave,' but we didn't have any actual slaves in my world. The technology and culture the Heroes brought over made it hard to tell sometimes, but this really was a totally different world from the one I knew.

Eugh... This's leaving a bad taste in my mouth.

It looked like I wouldn't have much more time to think about it, though—the assassin was headed right toward the training grounds I was in. A moment after I realized that a black, shadowy figure leaped out of the castle at an incredible speed.

"Huh," I muttered. "She really looks like an assassin."

The figure was pretty small, and she wore a pitch-black robe just like mine. I couldn't make out her face, but it was clear enough that she was the one I was looking for. When the figure realized I was watching her, though, she froze.

"Hm?! Y-You can see me...?"

"Uh... Yes?"

I had no idea why she was so confused. Before I could question her any further, though, she reached into the folds of her robe and threw something at me.

"Wh-Whoa, hold up! Why're you attacking me?!"

Just my luck.

Since she did just take out the King, though, it made sense she'd want to erase any witnesses. She'd thrown a pair of knives at me. And it'd be easy enough to dodge her attack and *very carefully* incapacitate her. If I hit her too hard, I might accidentally vaporize her.

Man, being superhuman sucks.

As soon as the knives got close to me, I found my body springing into action on its own.

"Huh?!"

To my surprise, my arm whipped out, and I snatched both blades one-handed, securing them between my fingers. Then, I found myself whipping them right back at her.

"Wh-Whoa!"

"?!"

Killing monsters was one thing, but I didn't want to hurt, let alone kill, another human being. Despite all my time with Saria so far, I still thought of humans and beastkin as being different from monsters, so seeing my body attack her so readily was honestly terrifying. The match with Louisse-san was one thing—I was convinced I was gonna die, after all—but this was different.

Don't tell me Autodefense is going to kill her?!

The knives flew at her with terrifying speed, far above what anyone could dodge. Just when I thought they would hit her, they pierced through her robe instead, pinning her fast to the castle wall behind her.

Whew... Thank God Autodefense is so good.

"What?!" she exclaimed.

It looked like I'd somehow totally immobilized her. I was honestly afraid I'd accidentally kill her, but I'd pulled off the impossible without even meaning to.

I'm not sure I should be happy about it, but Autodefense did kind of save me there, so I guess I shouldn't complain.

The assassin, not wanting to stay stuck to the wall any longer, threw aside her cloak in one swift motion.

"Huh...?"

I blinked a few times, but there was no mistaking it. She had short black hair, just like I did, but she also had a pair of cat ears on her head and a long, furry tail. Her eyes were slit like a cat's and a shade of bright gold. She looked as young as Clairvoyance had told me, but the way she was staring daggers at me made her about half as cute as she normally would be. Without a doubt, she was still a proper assassin.

I guess she's a black cat beastkin? That's what it looks like, at least.

She was dressed in a black ninja-like getup and had a matching collar around her neck. I didn't know if ninjas existed in this world, per se, but she looked the part.

Still, I'm kinda relieved to see she has black hair, even though she literally just tried to kill me. Maybe it's not that rare in this world after all? It's probably not

as big a deal as I first thought.

I didn't have much time to relax as she drew another dagger and rushed at me with startling speed.

"W-Wait, don't hurt me! Can't we talk this out?!"

"..."

Jeez, getting knifed by a little girl was NOT on my to-do list for today.

Letting out an inward sigh, I tried to dodge out of the way, but my body suddenly took control once again.

"Wh-Whoa, hold up!" I cried out but to no avail.

I'm sick of getting used by my Skills already!

Powerless to stop myself, I grabbed the flat of her knife with one hand, then reached out and flicked her forehead with my other hand.

"?!"

The girl stumbled, eyes spinning from my blow as she passed out and began to fall.

"Whoops!"

I managed to scoop her up before she hit the ground, then sighed.

So, I can knock people out with a single finger now? I-I guess if I'm crying about it, I'm still human enough... right?

Shaking my head, I looked down at the assassin. When she was asleep, she really did look like any other kid. The thought that she, of all people, was a seasoned killer sent a shiver down my spine.

Man, this world's more screwed up than I thought... I know I've killed my share of monsters, but I hope I never get used to murder. That'd be a hundred times worse than losing my humanity.

I technically only hit her in self-defense, but I couldn't imagine doing anything like that back on Earth. I've already changed since then. Fighting was normal here, and I'd have to keep on fighting to survive.

That's right, Seiichi. You're not in Japan anymore.

I knew that, of course, but that still wasn't comforting. I took a deep breath to let some of the tension out of my shoulders.

As I tried to relax, though, I heard a bit of a commotion from over by the castle's entrance. I looked up to see the Valkyries rushing towards me, led by Louise-san. They all had serious looks on their faces.

"Teacher?" Louise-san asked as soon as she reached me. "I'm sorry, but could I ask you to please return home for the day?"

Looks like I'm 'Teacher,' huh...

"Yeah, I don't mind. But one thing first, Louise-san."

"Please, call me Louise. Don't be so uptight with me." There was a hardness in her eyes, making it clear she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Uh... Louise, then. Anyways, I'm pretty sure I found the person who attacked the king."

There was a long moment of silence.

"You what?" she finally asked, dumbfounded.

No wonder she's surprised. The assassin was at large for what, two minutes?

"See?" I showed her the kid in my arms. "She bolted out of the castle a little while ago and attacked me out of the blue."

That... sounds like I'm lying, but I'm not.

Louise's attention was completely on the girl though, her eyes wide with surprise. She said something to Rona-san that I didn't catch, and Rona-san also turned her attention to the girl.

Is it just me or did her eyes gleam for a second there?

Come to think of it, I recognized that look. When my classmate Ooki used Analysis on me back in the classroom before we came to this world, his eyes shone the same way. My Second Sight probably kicked in to tell me she was using a Skill there to investigate the assassin.

"So, Rona? What did you see?"

"Probably just what you thought I'd see, Louise-sama."

"I was afraid of that." She gave the sleeping girl a hard look. "... I'll leave her interrogation to you."

"Roger that!"

With that, I passed the assassin off to Rona-san, and she carried the girl away.

Wait, did Louise just say 'interrogation?' Is Rona-san really up to that kind of thing?

Claudia-san seemed to guess what I was thinking. "You can leave everything to Rona. She won't hurt the girl."

"Okay, but... Rona-san? Really? N-Not that I don't trust her or anything but, y'know..."

She smiled uneasily. "Hahaha... Don't worry; I get what you're trying to say. Believe it or not, she's the top interrogator in the whole kingdom."

"Wait, seriously?!"

"Totally. She's mastered all of Ellis-jou's sadomasochism courses at the Guild. She even aced the advanced class."

"Wait, you know Ellis-san?!"

So, people take her classes?! Why would Rona-san waste so much time getting so good at that stuff?! Does that mean Gustle has people who take his muscle-building classes, too? Damn, it seems way too likely. And here I thought they were just wastes of time.

"But enough of that," Claudia-san continued. "I hate to say it, but you really need to go now."

"Yeah, Louise said the same thing."

Louise nodded. "My apologies, Teacher. I'll invite you back soon."

"N-No, don't worry about that. So is the king okay?"

The air suddenly grew tense.

"The Magic Corps arrived in time to administer healing magic," Louisse finally said. "His life isn't in danger, but..."

"But what?"

Louisse didn't seem able to continue, so Claudia-san finished for her, "His Majesty won't wake up."

"Huh?"

So, he's unconscious but alive? Was he that badly hurt or something?

"You already caught the culprit, so I feel assured in telling you this," Louisse started, "but you must promise to not breathe a word of this to anyone."

"Uh... Okay. I wasn't planning on telling anyone about this, anyways."

"Very well. It seems that when the assassin assaulted His Majesty, she used the worst imaginable weapon—an Anathema."

"Anathewhat?"

Never heard of it.

"An Anathema is a tool or weapon that bears a powerful curse or evil spirit, created specifically to inflict great harm," Louisse explained. "Some of them possess the power to drive their wielder mad or kill them outright. Fortunately, very few of these weapons exist. It appears the assassin used one here, however—a dagger with a curse of Unending Slumber."

A curse, huh? Come to think of it, Al's Calamity-Borne curse made her Luck negative, and there was no way to break it no matter what she tried. That means...

"His Majesty might never wake up," Claudia-san concluded, her unease barely hidden in her voice.

"..."

"There's some silver lining, though," she continued weakly. "The First Prince Roberto, Second Prince Gionis, and First Princess Latis are all at the Academy, so none of them was targeted."

They both seemed deeply conflicted, though, because they couldn't protect their king.

Isn't there anything I can do to help them?

I wasn't too worried about not standing out at this point—all that mattered was helping the king. The kingdom had honestly impressed me quite a bit so far, and I'd fallen in love with life here. I didn't know if the current situation was thanks to the current king or a holdover from the last king's rule, but it was great either way. I wasn't about to let everything just suddenly end now like this. If there was anything I could do to help, I was prepared to do it. Back on Earth, I needed all the help I could get. Now, I hopefully had enough strength to help others—no, it *had* to be enough.

I checked every last spell I knew how to cast, searching for anything that could dispel a curse. In the end, though, nothing fit the bill.

Isn't there anything I can do?!

It was then that I realized the one thing that might work.

I muttered under my breath. "There's no magic that can get rid of curses *yet*, that's all."

"Huh?"

Louisse and Claudia-san gave me puzzled looks.

That's right, this is the time for my crazy Stats and all my Skills to shine!

Maybe I was still hopeless with Skills and barely knew the first thing about magic, but pretending I didn't have all that strength helped nobody. I'd been running from my growing powers for a long time. Now, it was time to face what could be the perfect tool for the job—Magic Creation.

This'll be my first step towards mastering my strength and my first custom spell.

Eyes burning with determination, I looked at the two Valkyries.

"Take me to the king."

Chapter 16: Reversal Magic

"This is where His Majesty is sleeping."

Fortunately, the Valkyries were more than willing to take me to the king. I was a little surprised that they just took me in so quickly. According to Louise, though, there was no reason for me to take such a roundabout route; if I really wanted to hurt him, I was strong enough to just break in and do it.

Damn, is my power level really that high? I'm practically one of those Sai-whatevers! I guess I should be glad for once?

Still feeling a little deflated, I was just outside the room the king was supposed to be in. The door was made of thick carved wood, giving off an impression of importance. The inside was a surprisingly normal room, aside from the four-poster bed in the middle.

I guess he's still royalty, after all.

Claudia-san and Louise accompanied me right up to the king's bedside. As soon as I got a look at the man slumbering in the bed, my jaw dropped.

"What?!"

I know this guy!

"Is that you, Landze-san?!"

There was no mistaking him. It was the same guy I'd talked to in Café Accogliente. The only difference was that he wasn't dressed in the same ratty clothes as before. He was dressed... well, like a king.

Louise gave me a baffled look. "What do you mean? Do you know His Majesty somehow?"

"Uh, kind of. We met in a place called Café Accogliente, and he gave me some advice."

She nodded, realization dawning on her. "Noard-san's cafe, you say? That would make sense. His Highness has never appeared in public so as to be able to investigate his subjects more easily, but it tracks that you might have met him there."

If Landze-san is the king, though, who's Noard-san? He's gotta be somebody to have such close ties with the king, right? And wait, can he really never appear in public like that?

I had so many questions that I could feel the smoke coming from my ears. I didn't even know how to react to everything that had just come to light. One thing was certain, though: the king didn't look good. He was as energetic as anyone in the cafe, but now it really was like he'd fallen asleep forever.

The doors opened again from behind us, and in walked a group of people dressed in long white hooded robes. They looked like textbook wizards.

"Are you the one I heard might be able to awaken His Majesty?" asked the man at the head of the group.

"Something like that, I guess... hopefully."

"The odds are no object," he replied with a ready nod. "If there's even a one percent chance you can help His Majesty, we'll do all in our power to aid you. Please, help our king." He bowed, and the rest of his group followed suit.

Wow... Landze-san sure is popular.

Of course, I owed him a favor myself—not that I needed a reason to try to help him.

"I'll do whatever I can," I promised.

"You have my thanks."

With that, the group's leader removed his hood, letting me see his face for the first time. He was a handsome young man with aqua-blue eyes and hair and a calm and relaxing smile.

Whoa... He could easily charge for a smile like that.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Florio Palse and I lead the Mage Corps of Windberg."

"Uh... I'm Seiichi."

"Seiichi-kun, is it? His Majesty is in your hands."

With that, he and his followers all retreated near the walls to give me some space.

Is it just me though, or did he seem familiar?

"That was my brother," Lousse explained. "He headed the efforts to heal our liege."

"Your brother, huh?"

Now that she mentioned it, I could see the resemblance. They had a similar kind of handsomeness.

"Teacher? Do you truly believe you can awaken His Majesty?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. This'll be my first time trying this."

I didn't want to worry them, of course, but I had to tell them the truth. It was still probably the best shot we had.

She furrowed her brow slightly. "At the risk of sounding rude, please do not overextend yourself, Teacher."

"..."

"Curses cannot be removed—they plague the afflicted for life, perhaps longer. The ancients spent countless years refining them. You cannot expect to—"

"Just leave it to me," I interrupted. "Don't worry, I'll figure this out."

"... If you say so."

With that, Lousse backed away, leaving me to face Landze-san.

Shit. So, uh, what now? I'm really getting antsy...

I couldn't bail out now, so I stretched my hands out over his prone body. Then I took a deep breath. The entire room watched me in total silence, and I could feel everyone watching me.

Let's see... For Magic Creation, I need a clear image of the effect I want and the spell's name, right? Then I can use it with Voiceless Incantation or whatever

later if I want. But how is breaking a curse supposed to look? Fire or something is easy enough, but this isn't a concrete thing...

I broke out in a cold sweat.

C-Calm down, Seiichi! You got this! Just do, like... FWOOM, no more curse! Right? Dammit, I really wish I had a better imagination! I guess... I just imagine him getting better? Maybe repeat "get better" over and over in my head? That's literally all I can think of. You know what, fine, that's good enough! I'm just gonna do it!

I shut my eyes tight.

Get better, get better, get better, get better, get better, get better, get better...!

I repeated the words in my head over and over again, like a broken record. After I'd thought it enough that I had a solid idea of what I wanted it to do, all I had to do was say the spell's name.

"Get Better!"

"..."

Oh, shit. That was NOT what I meant to say! I can feel them all staring at me, dammit!

I could practically feel the air get colder behind me.

Geez... I guess after all I said about how I'd heal him that sounds just so lame. Can I cry? I can cry now, right?

I froze up from embarrassment... but a moment later, I was struck speechless for a different reason.

"Huh?"

My hands started glowing, and a moment later, the motes of light moved to envelop Landze-san's body. Everyone else in the room seemed every bit as shocked. Then, something even more surprising happened.

"Mm... Huh...?" Landze-san opened his eyes. He blinked a few times before slowly sitting up. "Hm? What're you doing here, Seiichi? Why are there so many

people in my—?"

"Your Majesty!!"

Before he could even finish his sentence, everyone rushed in toward him, and he looked around in shock.

"Wh-Whoa! The hell's wrong with you guys?!"

After a moment, Louisse and Florio-san were calm enough to explain the situation to him.

His expression turned grim. "I almost got done in by a curse, huh?"

"What should we do now, my liege? We've reason to believe the Kaizell Empire is behind the attempt on your life."

"Nothing, that's what. Damn, this is a pain..." He sighed. "This whole situation's a mess. I never thought they'd only send one person. No wonder Ocean and Mountain couldn't handle her. We'll be prepared for next time, though. There's no reason to scramble the armies and throw the whole kingdom into a panic, right?"

"Well... Perhaps, but..."

Okay, they lost me. Mountain? Ocean? Is he going on a vacation or something?

Landze-san turned to me. "Seiichi."

"H-Huh? What?" I tensed up, ready for whatever he was going to say next.

He smiled just a little. "C'mon, no need to worry. You saved my life."

"Uh... I guess?"

"I gotta ask, though—how'd you do it? Forget that; why'd you even try? Wanted to get on my good side or something?"

He seemed to be asking seriously, but I didn't even know how to answer that.

"If I had to say... I just wanted to."

"You just what?"

"Yes. See, I'm only here because I won the Capital Derby. That's how I got tangled up in this mess and ended up saving you." He didn't say anything, so I continued. "When you fainted—er, I didn't know it was you at the time, but you know—Louisse looked so desperate. She was so happy just moments before, but all that joy vanished in an instant. Maybe I haven't lived here long enough to see the bad side of Terbelle or anything, but it wasn't just her; everyone here is smiling all the time. I couldn't stand to let them all despair. That's why I saved you. I wanted everyone to be happy again."

"Teacher..." Louise muttered.

Still, Landze-san didn't say anything.

"Besides, I had no idea if that'd work," I admitted. "I've never tried removing a curse before, but it went pretty well for a test run!"

"You were experimenting on me?!" His eyes nearly popped out of his head. "I'm the motherfucking king!"

Uh... Sorry?

"I didn't exactly have the time to waste perfecting it... and to be honest, I still don't really know how I pulled it off."

He shook his head. "C'mon, now. You're making it sound like you made up a new spell on the spot."

"Yeah, I did. And it worked!"

Landze-san only sighed and shook his head. "How likely does that sound, Florio?"

"Impossible," Florio-san replied immediately. "I've the same ability myself, so I know exactly how difficult the process can be. Not only that, nothing I've tried so far has had any effect on curses whatsoever."

"You heard him," Landze-san echoed.

"Wow. I guess I pulled off something pretty cool, huh?"

"You know what? Fine, let's forget about how you did it for now. What I wanna know is what exactly that new spell of yours does."

I had no idea myself, but I couldn't exactly tell him that—he'd only have more questions for me. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be anything else I could say.

Before I could open my mouth, I heard a familiar voice in my head.

>Skill: Magic Creation has been activated. You have created Reversal Magic: Get Better.

Goddamn! Is that seriously this spell's name now?! And how come it's Reversal Magic instead of Dispelling Magic or whatever?

The category of magic didn't really matter, but I really wished I could redo the name. I decided to check my new spell's description.

>GET BETTER: Changes the target's curse into an enchantment.

Uh... Okay. What does that mean?

As I puzzled over the meaning, Landze-san looked suspiciously at me.

"What? Don't tell me it's got some crazy side effect?"

"Uh, no, nothing like that. I think."

Realizing I couldn't puzzle out its meaning on my own, I decided to read it out to them word for word.

For a long moment, nobody spoke or even moved a muscle.

Uh-oh. I screwed up, didn't I?

As I started getting really worried, I saw Florio-san's eyes flash—evidently, he'd used Analysis on him.

"Y-Your Majesty... Your curse, Unending Slumber, has become the enchantment Unending Health."

Again, silence. I still had no idea what that meant, so at the risk of coming off as rude, I used Analysis on Landze-san as well.

LANDZELF FORD WINDBERG	
RACE:	Human

SEX: Male	
JOB: King	
AGE: 48	LEVEL: 134
MANA: 1,00	ATTACK: 2,500
DEFENSE: 3,000	AGILITY: 5,870
M-ATTACK: 1,110	M-DEFENSE: 3,300
LUCK: 3,000	APPEARANCE: Indeterminate
CONDITION: Unending Health	

Wow, he's pretty strong... no, forget that! He's over level 100?! Not that I'm one to talk, I guess. And let me say it, I'm jealous of that Appearance! What's that Unending Health thing supposed to mean, though?

The effect popped up in front of me just as I thought that.

>UNENDING HEALTH: Enchantment. Lengthens the target's life by ten years and prevents them from becoming sick ever again. Injuries also occur less frequently.

Wasn't expecting that! So what, Unending Sleep just turned into this crazy enchantment thing? If I'm right, then no wonder they're all shocked.

Everyone was still absolutely speechless, but one thing was certain—I'd succeeded in ridding the king of his curse.

Chapter 17: Bathtime

"All right, from the top—thanks again for saving me. I'm the king of Windberg, Landzelf Ford Windberg. You've saved me from my curse, so please, continue to call me Landze like always."

"Thank you!" echoed everyone else in the throne room with a bow.

"N-No, it was no big deal, really!" I insisted. "You don't have to bow!"

Nobody had ever thanked me like that back on Earth, so I honestly had no idea how to respond.

"This is the least we can do," Landze-san said with a shrug. "You saved my life."

"Yeah, but... please, I don't know if I can take any more of this! I'll die on the inside, I swear!"

"Damn, uh... Okay."

Fortunately, that was enough to make everyone stop bowing. Landze-san's face was stern as he continued.

"Still, I've gotta reward you."

"No, really, it wasn't that big a deal."

He smirked a little. "Relax, I get that you didn't save me for a reward. I can't just say toodle-loo and send you on your way, though. Tell me what you want, and I'll do everything in my power to make it happen. I owe you at least that much."

"Uh..."

I had no idea how to reply to that. I couldn't just walk out now, though, or else that might reflect badly on him. Luckily, I thought of something that seemed perfect.

"I think I know what I want."

"Already? Let's hear it."

"I want you to help me with my Skill and Magic practice."

"... You what?"

The rest of the room seemed just as confused as Landze-san was.

"I know this probably sounds weird, but I barely know how to use my Skills, let alone my Magic. I haven't had any real training chances, so I'm still pretty much at the whim of my abilities. I'd like to change that, and you have some real experts in your service, so I was hoping they could maybe give me a hand on that front. Or, y'know, if it's too much trouble, I could come up with something else..."

Everyone was getting more confused, though, so I trailed off awkwardly. I'd love to get Louise to teach me how to move like she did, but she was one of the two strongest knights in the whole country, so she probably didn't have that kind of time.

That was a really dumb thing to ask, wasn't it? I'm so stupid.

"Teacher," Louise started. "I'm honestly impressed that you're determined to elevate yourself to even greater heights."

Claudia-san nodded. "That's real work ethic for you."

"To think such magical mastery is still not enough for you," Florio-san said with a shake of his head. "I've still much to learn, I see."

Uh... I'm really not that great, though. That's just the truth, guys.

It was clear that I didn't have any reason to worry, though.

"Florio, Louise," called the king.

"Your Majesty?" they returned in unison.

"I hereby command you both to aid Seiichi in his training. I imagine you'll learn as much from him as he will from you."

"As you will!"

Oh. It's that easy, huh? Nice.

Fortunately, it seemed like I'd been worrying for nothing, to the point where they seemed a little let-down.

Louisse and Florio-san both came forward.

"I would consider it an honor to train alongside you, Teacher. I'm looking forward to our joint efforts moving forward."

"I must admit, I'm rather interested in your magic as well. Of course, I imagine that the spell you used to break His Majesty's curse is some form of Unique Magic, and I doubt anyone could come close to replicating it. Either way, I imagine you'll prove quite the inspiration. Let's strive to better each other, shall we?"

"Uh, yeah. Of course."

It looks like I've finally found some people who can teach me how to use my strength properly.

"All right," Landze-san said with a roll of his shoulders, "enough with the formalities. Seiichi, you're gonna take a bath here."

"Uh. We're what?"

I honestly wasn't expecting that.

"We don't have any public bathhouses here, y'know? I bet you haven't had a bath since you came here."

"Yeah, I haven't."

I hadn't had one since coming to that world, come to think of it. It sounded really gross, but I had a spell that could wash my body in a flash. That spell couldn't replace the warm, relaxing feeling of getting out of a hot bath, though.

"C'mon, stop thinking! You're not gonna just pass this up, are you?"

For a moment, I considered refusing on account of my hair—but then again, it felt like half the town saw me when I took off my robe to cover Lulune when she first got her human form.

"Well, if you insist."

He was right; I couldn't pass it up.

I mean, I'm Japanese. Bathwater's in my blood.

It turned out that Landze-san wanted to take a bath with me, and he even led me to the royal bathhouse personally.

Man, I've never had a king show me anywhere before...

The changing room was the size of a whole hot spring inn, and it was fancier than anywhere I'd ever seen. While I gawked at it, Landze-san threw off his clothes and headed into the bath ahead of me. I hurriedly stripped and followed him inside.

My first impression of the inside of the bath was simply stunning. Marble statues of merlions spewed steaming-hot water from their mouths in great sprays, and there were even a few full-fledged fountains. There were enough houseplants to make an indoor jungle, and the ceiling was totally glass so that you could look up and see the sky. Oddly enough, they even had water jets and the like, like what you'd see on an Earth jacuzzi.

Is that all magic, too? Who needs electricity, right?

After looking around for a while, Landze-san walked up to me. "Stop just standing and staring. Why don't you come over—" His gaze dropped, and he suddenly froze, his eyes fixed in place. "Whoa... I heard you had a hell of a sword, but *hot damn*."

"Where are you *looking*?!" I shouted, hurriedly covering my crotch.

And here I thought he'd comment on my hair!

He only nodded as if everything suddenly made sense. "I get it. No wonder you've got girls all over you. Size really does matter, huh? That's one long schlong."

"Sh-Shut up! I'm not that popular, and I'm pretty average, I swear!"

Jeez, I'm not some flasher! I never meant to pull out my schmeat in front of the king at all!

"Sorry," he chuckled as I blushed bright red.

With that out of the way, though, we finally got into the water.

"Ah... ahhhhhhhhhhh...!" I sighed as I let the piping-hot water splash over me.
"God, that feels good!"

There's something about a hot bath that just hits differently.

"Looks like somebody's no stranger to baths," Landze-san said. "Here on the continent, though, only nobility can get in the baths. Are the Eastlands different or something?"

"Uh, yeah. You could say that."

Sorry, all you real Eastlanders out there. I guess I'm just making up your customs willy-nilly now.

I did have my fair share of baths back in Japan, though, so he wasn't totally off the mark. Apparently, they had some kind of bath culture in this world, though—I heard that most people in the West back on Earth just took showers. Of course, nothing was wrong with a quick shower, but nothing quite cleared up your fatigue like a hot bath.

Yeah, this is the best...

As I was letting the steam melt my brain, Landze-san shot me a serious look.



"I've got a dream, see. I wanna build bathhouses all over the place—not just in the capital, but all over the place, at least one for every village. I've gotta teach the whole country just how great a good, long bath can be. Regardless of what country you're from or what race you belong to; the water welcomes everyone. But, well, you know how it is these days. It's always one war or another. I don't have the time to get those baths rolled out, let alone the money."

"Yeah..."

"But just you watch—one day, we'll stop all these batshit wars, and all get naked in the tub of peace and brotherhood. That's what this world really needs."

"Yeah..."

"Call me an idealist, a dreamer, or whatever; I don't care. What's wrong with sharing your dreams? It's all 'cause of those dreams that we work to change our reality. Besides, you only live once, y'know? Just let it all out! Who gives a damn if it ain't possible? If your head's not up in the clouds, you're stuck in the dirt!"

He chuckled for a moment, his cheeks blushing slightly with embarrassment.

"Heh... Guess I might've gone a little far, huh? That's baths for you—they even strip your heart right down. I've been dealing with so much shit lately; I just needed some way to blow it off. You can forget I said anything."

His expression turned a little distant—lonely, even.

"You should invite me back for another bath sometime," I finally said. "I can introduce you to a few people I know from the guild."

He blinked at me blankly for a moment before replying.

"Yeah... I'd like that."

With that, he smiled in a way that only a king could.

To Be Continued...

Extra: Stirrings of Feelings

I, Saria, could only sit and watch as the two knights took Seiichi away. It wasn't long after they were gone that I returned to reality, and it seemed like Al and Lulune-chan snapped out of it at the same time.

"Shit! Did we really just let them waltz in and grab Seiichi!"

"Y-Yes! They took Master!"

"Don't worry," I reassured them with a smile.

Lyle-san, who'd been standing behind us the whole time, shook his head at me, baffled. "How can you stay so calm? It sounds like Seiichi-kun isn't in any trouble, but aren't you worried about him even a little?"

He was right. I was a little bit worried—but I trusted him too much to let that bother me.

"He'll be okay! He always is. I know him super well!"

Al raised a brow. "Always, huh?"

Oh, she doesn't believe me. I guess I'll have to explain it, then.

"I've never seen a mess Seiichi can't get out of—and he always does it in the funniest ways, too! I don't know how to describe it better, but he won't get in any trouble."

"Huh." Fortunately, Al seemed to understand what I was trying to say.

Lulune, on the other hand, seemed as lost as before. "Saria-sama? Maybe I haven't accompanied Master long enough yet, but I'm not sure it works that way."

"There's no need to rush it," I assured her. "The longer you stay with him, the more you'll know about how amazing he is!"

Lyle-san chuckled. "Man, Seiichi-kun's a lucky guy."

"Yep! I love him!"

It was a little embarrassing to say it so frankly, but it was the truth.

After that, Lyle-san had to return to work, leaving only the three of us.

"How about we go back to our rooms?" I suggested.

At that, Al finally looked up. She'd seemed troubled ever since our conversation with Lyle-san.

"I can't take it anymore! I gotta know!"

"Huh?"

"Maybe you don't know 'em, but those knights that took him away were Swordsaint Valkyries! They're famous for all being drop-dead gorgeous! What if he brings back another girl or two?! Would you just sit and take that?"

"Hmm..."

For a moment, I felt an icky-black something take hold of my heart, but it was gone as soon as it came.

She's right. Seiichi is super handsome, and he's a quality male, too. He'll be really popular with them.

The law of the jungle was clear—the best males naturally attracted the best females. Seiichi said that was a very 'animal' way of thinking and that most people probably wouldn't agree with me, but I doubted that. Even Lulune-chan seemed confused by what Al was saying.

Maybe Al's way is how humans think?

I thought it all over again; the dark feeling returned stronger this time.

What is this, though? I never felt anything like it back in the Forest...

"Uh, Saria?" Al waved a hand in front of my face. "You okay?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, I'm great!"

That seemed to make Al think in turn, though. Finally, she turned back to me. "Sorry. Bet you don't wanna hear me bitching about that kinda thing, right? Jealousy ain't very ladylike."

"Jealousy...?"

Suddenly, it clicked.

Oh. Am I jealous?

I imagined Seiichi smiling with a random woman, and I felt my chest tighten.

What's wrong with me all of a sudden?

In the end, I just couldn't figure out what was bothering me.

"I'd expect no less from Master!" Lulune-chan chirped in. "He's awfully popular!"

Even though I had lost Seiichi for the night, I found myself with a newfound sense of awe towards Lulune-chan.

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. (July 2015)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

Il was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (July 2015)



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Índice de contenido

1. **Chapter 1: On Either Side**
2. **Chapter 2: Gathering Information**
3. **Chapter 3: The Books' Curse and a Bit of Peace**
4. **Chapter 4: The Calamity's Resolve and The Monstrosity's Hesitation**
5. **Chapter 5: Pickup**
6. **Chapter 6: Perfectly Normal Horses**
7. **Chapter 7: A Mule's Loyalty**
8. **Chapter 8: An Unexpected Development**
9. **Chapter 9: The Capital Derby**
10. **Chapter 10: Lulune the Speed Demon**
11. **Chapter 11: The Demon Army Meets**
12. **Chapter 12: Into Custody**
13. **Chapter 13: The Swordsaint Valkyries**
14. **Chapter 14: Conspiracy**
15. **Chapter 15: Curses and Conviction**
16. **Chapter 16: Reversal Magic**
17. **Chapter 17: Bathtime**
18. **Extra: Stirrings of Feelings**
19. **Back Matter**