

10

The FRUIT of EVOLUTION

Before I knew it,
my life had it made!

美紅
MIKU
Umiko
U35
illustrator

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Hanashi
MEDIA



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

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PUBLISHING MGR:
**Andres Cabascango/
Andres Mata**

The Fruit of Evolution: Before I knew it, my life had it made!
Vol. 10

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First published by Futabasha Publishers Ltd., in 2019
English version published by Hanashi Media, LLC

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Hanashi Media, LLC
838 Walker Road
Suite 21-2 #103
Dover, DE 19904
<https://www.hanashi.media/>

ISBN: 978-1-961788-24-4



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

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美紅
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"Wow,
you're
right!
I'm so
full of
energy
now!"

Destora
Enemy

"What...?"

Saria
Kaiser Kong

Seichi

"Could
you please
blast her
with your
power
now?"





Swinn
Spy

"Are you a god?
You're a god,
aren't you?!"

Leyll
Knight

Bun
Bun

Seichi
Former
Bullied Kid

"Leyll,
stop
that!"

"llllllll'nnnnnnnnnnnn
nooooooooooooooot!"

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A grayscale illustration of the Vocaloid character Miku Hatsune. She is shown from the chest up, wearing her signature long, dark hair with a white star-shaped ornament on the right side. She has large, expressive eyes and a slight smile. A semi-transparent rectangular box with a double border is centered over her face, containing the title and quote. The Hanashi Media logo is positioned at the bottom center of the image.

THE FRUIT OF EVOLUTION 10

Before I knew it, my
life had it made!

Miku 美紅



Chapter 1: Returning to the Tranquil Tree

With the Academy closing and Helen's request that I help her train, we returned together to Terbelle, capital of the Kingdom of Windberg. We stopped in at the Guild HQ first, but while I was doing that, Al took Zora and Helen out for their adventurer certification exams.

We planned to meet up and talk once they got back, and by the time the rest of us arrived in front of the Tranquil Tree, I was beside myself with emotion.

"Now it really feels like we're back," I told myself.

Saria nodded. "Yep! Remember how everyone said goodbye to us here last time?"

I wasn't allowed to take in the sight for too long, as I felt Origa-chan tug at my sleeve. "Seiichi-oniichan? Are we gonna go inside?"

"O-Oh, right. Of course. Let's get checked in."

I grabbed the catgirl by the hand, prompting a faint blush to spread across her cheeks.

Saria brightened up at the sight of us. "I wanna hold hands with Origa-chan too!"

"Yay," the little girl muttered, eagerly grabbing hold of Saria with her free hand.

Lulune sighed as she watched us. "How lucky."

Routier raised an eyebrow at her. "You're not a child, are you?"

"It's not that!" Lulune protested. "I just wish that Master and I could, well..."

Origa-chan glanced back at the donkey and let out a tiny chuckle.

Lulune's eyes flew wide in indignation. "What was that?!"

Wait, Origa-chan? Why're you making fun of poor Lulune like that?

As we stepped inside, we were greeted by a familiar voice.

“Oh, welcome... Wait, Seiichi-san?!”

Mary, the innkeepers’ daughter, stopped cleaning the cafeteria belonging to her father, Lyle-san, and stared at us as we stepped inside.

“Mary-chan!” Saria called to the girl and waved.

“It’s been a while,” I said with a smile.

The girl barely registered our greetings, rushing for the back of the inn. “Mom, mom! It’s Seiichi-san, he’s finally back!”

“What?!”

A moment later, we were joined by Lyle-san, and Fina-san; the inn’s proprietress and Mary’s mother.

“Seiichi-kun, Saria-chan!” The kindly older woman beamed at us. “And look, you brought Origa-chan and Lulune-chan along with you! It’s been far too long.”

“I’m glad you seem to be doing well,” Lyle-san greeted us.

I scratched my head. “Yeah... A lot’s happened, but we’re doing well enough.”

I won’t mention that I’m technically dead after my time in the Underworld...

“So?” Fina-san pressed. “What brings you folks all the way back here? I thought you got yourself a gig as a teacher at some school.”

“Uh, about that... Long story short, I got fired.”

Lyle-san’s eyes widened. “What?”

Fina-san averted her gaze a little. “Oh... Sorry to hear that.”

“How’d that happen?!” Mary questioned. “Are you OK? You’d better still be able to provide for the girls!”

I nodded firmly. “Money’s not an issue, trust me.”

I could tell she was making a show of overreacting to put some positivity back in the situation, which I did appreciate. She took her job as the inn’s poster girl seriously.

Money really wasn't an issue, though—if anything I had way too much of it, even though I had no way of properly checking it with my Status still out on break. It hadn't been keeping proper count before that, even, so I could live however the hell I wanted without needing to budget or save. It sounded like bad financial planning, but it was actually true in my case.

“Didn't mean to pry like that,” Fina-san apologized before getting on to business. “I take it you'll be needing a room?”

“Yep— Oh, and there are three more of us coming later.”

“Eight people total, then... You're one big family now.”

Mary grinned, elbowing me jokingly. “You sure get out there, huh? Just don't go staining our rooms too much!”

“Wh-What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!”

Doesn't she realize Origa-chan is right here?! She's not old enough for those kinds of topics!

Saria cocked her head at Mary in confusion. “Stains? From what?”

“Don't play dumb, I can see how much you're into him! I bet you two get freaky every single night!”

“This is bordering on literal harassment!” I wailed.

Why aren't Fina-san or Lyle-san stopping her?! She's going to teach poor Origa-chan all the wrong things!

To be clear, Saria and I hadn't done anything like that. Part of it was that I was an awkward mess, but we didn't have a lot of chances for that, not to mention the mood never felt right. I was happy enough just to be with her and the other girls... In fact, I didn't see any of them in that light.

Wait, am I weird? I get the feeling most high school relationships go further than this.

I shuddered at the thought that I was getting left behind. Mary seemed to guess what my silence meant, however, as she took a step back in shock.

“Wait, you’re kidding! You went off to school together, and you were literally living in the same room together the whole time you were here last! Nothing’s happened?!”

“I-Is that weird?”

Dammit, I can’t even tell anymore...

I’d never dated anyone before, and nobody had talked to me about their own adventures. There was no baseline for me to compare it to.

“You’re a dying breed... and there’s *two* of you?! I thought every couple in the world was getting some!”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

She can’t be serious about that, right? Is this world that horny a place? I... I don’t even know how to reply to that.

Fina-san sighed and gave her daughter a sharp flick on the back of the head.

“Ow!”

“Honestly, Mary... I know you’re getting to be that age, but you should at least try to learn about reality, or better yet, meet more normal couples.”

“I... What?”

Lyle-san smiled a little. “At this point, you’d best get a boyfriend for your own good. Hopefully that should teach you about normal relationships.”

It’d probably be easy for her too. She’s really outgoing and pretty to boot.

“Anyhow.” Fina-san turned back to us and smiled. “Now about those rooms, I’m afraid we don’t have any big enough for the eight of you. We do have two rooms for three and one room for two open, if that’s OK by you.”

“Great. Can we check them all out now?”

“Course. How long will you folks be staying this time?”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about that... We’ll pay for a month up front.”

I counted out enough coin for our stay, and Fina-san smiled. “That’s three rooms for a month, paid in full. If you’re hanging around the city, though, you’d

probably be better off renting or even buying a house around here.”

“A house?” I echoed dumbly.

“Yep. I know telling you this is like chasing customers away, but I don’t want you wasting your money.”

“That makes sense.”

I’d never considered renting a house before, let alone buying one. With all that was going on, though, it made sense to set up in Terbelle, and for that we’d need a house.

After thanking Fina-san and Lyle-san, we headed up to the rooms to rest and wait for Al and the others to arrive. I took one of the three-person rooms to share with Saria and Al, but with Mary’s words still fresh in my mind, I felt oddly conscious being alone with Saria.

No, I need to keep acting normal! Nothing’s changed!

“Seiichi?” Saria broke the silence, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

I turned to face her—

“Seiichi, want mate?”

—and found myself face-to-face with Goria. My angst faded in an instant.

“No thanks,” I replied bluntly.

“Oh...”

Why’d she have to go gorilla for that?

If nothing else, this proved Saria was feeling at least as conscious about Mary’s words. I wanted to talk about it with her, but the sight of her big, furry form completely dissipated the sexual tension in the room. It was like post-nut clarity without the nut.

If we did have kids together, though, I wonder what they’d look like?

“Ook, ook, eek!”

*Never mind. I knew there was no way my genetics would win out over hers!
Though I guess I'm really just letting my fantasies run wild now.*

With that, the two of us hung out while we waited for Al and the others to return.

Chapter 2: Goodbye Normal, Hello Evil

“**T**hat’s a wrap!” Al declared.

Helen sighed. “Gotta admit, that wasn’t really a challenge.”

“I-I had fun, though!” Zora stammered.

We hadn’t been chatting at the Tranquil Tree for long before Al, Helen, and Zora came back triumphant from their guild entrance exam.

“I’m glad it went smoothly,” I greeted the trio.

“It’s supposed to,” Al said with a pointed look at me. “It ain’t the exam’s fault *somebody’s* a disaster magnet.”

“Ahahaha... yeah...”

That was fair. First Al had gotten upset at me for taking down a building, then I hadn’t been able to find even one of the herbs I was supposed to, and we’d wound up getting warped into the Black Dragon God’s labyrinth dungeon. None of that seemed par for the course.

Helen shot me a puzzled look. “Uh, Seiichi-sensei? Was your time really as bad as it sounds?”

“I keep trying to be normal, it just keeps getting away from me...”

“How does normalcy ‘get away’ from anyone?!”

That’s what I’d like to know. I haven’t had a single normal experience since coming here!

I shook my head. “E-Enough about me! Let’s talk about you.”

The levity left her eyes all at once. “You’re going to make me stronger, aren’t you?”

“I... I don’t know how strong you can get,” I admitted. “Gustle did give me a relevant bit of intel, though.”

Al raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? What'd he say?"

"Apparently, a new dungeon just formed close to the Capital."

"A dungeon...?"

The disbelief on her face grew, and I couldn't blame her. It was rare for dungeons to form at all, but they were cropping up everywhere lately. My hunch was that the Cult of the Wicked One was involved, but I had no proof of that yet.

"So that dungeon's supposed to make me stronger?" Helen pressed. "This better not be any old cave. I need power fast."

"No worries. Apparently, the monsters in there are about Level 500."

"No worries,' my ass!" Al spat.

Wait... Is that high or something?

I looked about at the other girls, but they seemed just as confused.

Saria shrugged. "I dunno... That's about the level of the Forest of Endless Heartbreak and the Black Dragon God's place, after all!"

"I couldn't care less," Lulune replied bluntly.

Origachan looked up at Al. "Altria-oneechan, I know it sounds high, but think about it... That's the level of Zora-oneechan's dungeon. I don't think it's that surprising."

Routier nodded. "She has a point. The monsters there were exceptionally strong, to the point that we scarcely have their match in the demonkin realms."

"Th-That sounds pretty normal to me," Zora admitted.

Upon realizing nobody else thought it was weird, either, Al sighed and put her head in her hands. "And here I was callin' everything impossible or sayin' it wasn't normal... When'd I get as screwed up as everything else?"

I smiled awkwardly. "Join the club."

She blushed a little and averted her eyes. "At least I won't be holdin' you back now... I guess this's for the best, huh?"

That didn't make me feel any less guilty about it, though. I'd led us all off the path of normal humanity—even though some of us had been donkeys or gorillas all along.

Finally, Helen overcame her shock. "W-Wait, everybody stop! Did you really say five hundred?! That's insane!"

"I thought you wanted some kind of special dungeon?" I asked.

"I do, but there's got to be some limit!"

A limit? Huh... Weird thought.

"It'll be fine," I assured her. "If the monsters are too high levelled, you just need to get that much stronger. Think on the bright side!"

"The bright side?" She scoffed. "OK, I'm positive you'll get me killed."

Whelp, it's official. Goodbye, normalcy! I can't even tell you exist anymore.

Helen massaged her temples. "Look, Seiichi-sensei, can I ask you something?"

"Uh, sure?"

"Just how strong are you trying to make me?"

"I guess we'll start by making you a Transcendant?"

"You'll *start* with that?!"

Everyone I knew was one, so it felt like a natural baseline to work off. If she had the resolve to grow, she deserved at least that.

"Oh, Gods," she muttered, "I'm going to lose all sense of normalcy from this..."

Origa-chan softly shook her head. "When you're with Seiichi-oniichan, you can't think... You need to believe."



Uh, Origa-chan? I'm like gravity, I stick around even if you don't believe in me.

A moment later, however, Helen gave herself a sharp slap on both cheeks.

"H-Helen?"

"Sorry," she apologized. "I just needed to find my resolve again. I *need* this. If I keep chickening out over levels or whatever, I'll never get anywhere. I need to become a Transcendant if I'm going to beat one... I need to meet that devil where he's at!"

She had her share of troubles, it seemed, but all I needed to know was that she wanted to go through with her training as planned.

"We'll hit the dungeon tomorrow," I announced. "Until then, we should take this chance to rest."

We all headed back to our respective rooms. I felt a little nervous again at being alone with both Saria and Al, but nothing happened between us, nothing at all.

※ ※ ※

"Hmph... This is the new dungeon, eh?"

An elderly man with a stark white beard and piercing jade eyes stood in front of the very dungeon Seiichi and his comrades would be challenging the next day. There was no weapon to be seen on his person, and he was dressed with the rustic informality of a peasant. Something was in the atmosphere about him, however—a latent malice that seemed to smother the very air.

"I suppose I'll be killing all of Terbelle after this, but I believe there are still a few obstacles about." His every word carried an almost lazy quality to it, dripping with apathy. "Clearing out this loathsome hovel and taking anything of value comes first. I doubt I'll be insufficient for the great battle to come, but that damnable Omnipresent won't get off my back... I suppose I could kill them as well."

"I'd ask you refrain from that," came a voice.

“Hm? I didn’t notice you were here.”

The elderly man turned to the voice’s owner, Yutis, Apostle of the Cult of the Wicked One.

“What’s the matter?” the elder pressed. “Come to help an old man with this dungeon?”

“I’m here on a different matter. You must complete this task on your own.”

“Hmph, how dull. Why are you here, then?”

“I come bearing a warning, obviously.”

“You? Warning me?”

The elderly man’s eyes narrowed with discontent, but Yutis ignored him.

“Heed my words well. No matter how great the power of we Apostles may be, we must move with caution in our preparations. There remain unknown elements that may yet threaten us. Said preparations, of course, involve procuring weapons that can easily increase our strength further.”

The elder snorted. “What need have we for weapons with the Wicked One’s power?”

“The surety of that is questionable. Three Servants suffered defeat in Terbelle a short while ago.”

“Again, why should I be bothered? What should it matter that those weaklings were put in their place?”

Yutis grimaced. “Stop being so bitter about it. You’re not the only one plundering dungeons’ depths, much less the only one to produce results. You were chosen for this dungeon specifically in recognition of your talents and the unusually powerful monsters within. We expect the weapon inside to be a potent one. Such power is essential to the solidification of the Cult’s strength and the fruition of our designs.”

“Fine. I suppose I can do it, for the Wicked One and Him alone.” He sighed. “But what do you mean by ‘unknown elements’?”

For the first time in ages, the man saw the smile drop from Yutis's face, replaced with an irritated sneer. "*This* is why I insist everyone attends the Wicked One's meetings... Listen well. Not even *I* could determine who vanquished the aforementioned Servants."

"What?!"

The elderly man knew Yutis's dark gift well, and that made his words even harder to swallow.

"The Servant who assaulted Barbodel Magic Academy was also captured, and the Wicked One's blessing was somehow torn from him. I peered through the memories of the headmaster, the Great Sage Barnabus, but found nothing of this travesty."

The elder remained solemnly silent, and Yutis continued.

"I did, however, succeed in retrieving our Servant and planting a Seed within Barnabus, so I expect our power to grow."

"Shrewd and calculating as ever, I see."

"I was being cautious, nothing more and nothing less."

"What's the point? With myself, you, and the other Apostles, nothing can possibly stop the Wicked One's return." The elder shrugged apathetically. "I suppose I can root out this miserable dungeon, though, as a favor to you. When I'm done, I'll return to my usual work."

"What's your next target?"

"There's a perfect place not far from here. I can only imagine the despair I'll get to see when I walk among them there!" A cruel, sadistic grin spread across his face.

"Quite the misfortunate bunch to be targeted by the Suredeath himself. Which country?"

"The Varcia Empire. They've had the odd clash with the Kaizell Empire—quite the amusing development, I suppose. Just wait, the Wicked One will soon have his fill of despair!"

With those words and an offhand wave, Suredeath strode into the dark depths of the dungeon.

Bemused, Yutis watched the man leave.

“Perhaps Suredeath is correct... I may be overthinking this. He cannot possibly fail, so I had best focus on my own task.”

Then, just as silently and swiftly as he appeared, Yutis was gone.

Chapter 3: Helen's Training

The next day, our group arrived at the entrance of the dungeon Gustle had told us about. We made sure to stop by the guild to report we'd be heading out. It took a little longer than anticipated with all the perverts running around, but Gustle was waving us goodbye with a giant grin on his face soon enough.

The dungeon turned out to be a cave in the side of a mountain just outside the city, out of the way enough that the average citizen would never stumble across it. Unlike most dungeons in the area, there wasn't anyone out front to check us in. It was simply a big hole in the side of a mound.

I turned about to cheerfully address my party. "Let's get in there and clear it out!"

"Yeah!" everyone called back.

"How are you so carefree about this?!" Helen moaned, putting her head in her hands. "Are we really walking into near-certain death like this? Why am I the only one worried? Am I the weird one here?!"

Trust me, you're normal for thinking that.

More pressingly, we'd decided that we wouldn't all be exploring the dungeon together. Routier would be leaving to meet up with Lucius-san and the other members of the Demon Army, and Lulune, Zora, and Origa-chan would be accompanying her. Lulune insisted on coming with me at first, but Origa-chan was able to quickly talk her down with the promise of food. Despite her claims of loyalty to me, she obeyed her stomach more than anything else. Only I, Saria, and Al would be joining Helen on her expedition.

"I still wish we had two others," Al muttered to herself. "We could use a healer and a tank." She gave me a pointed look, then sighed.

"What'd I do?!"

That's just rude! I don't even know what I did!

“As if that ain’t obvious!” she snorted. “You’ve gotta be the only person in the world who can fill every role in a party on your own!”

“Th-That’s not true, honest!”

Whether or not her accusation was true, most adventurers did tend to form parties of six for dungeon delving. Literally destroying entire dungeons single-handedly wasn’t the norm.

Al sighed again. “Well, whatever. Let’s head inside, we’ll hash out specifics as we go.”

The air was still a little strained as the four of us stepped into the dungeon.

Saria, noticing the grimace on Helen’s face, cocked her head to the side. “Why’re you so nervous?”

“I think that should be clear enough!” Helen snapped back.

Looking back on it, I wasn’t sure I’d ever been as nervous as Helen was now. Even when I had been stranded in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, I remembered being pretty lax about it. It had been life-or-death, sure, but the adrenaline had kept me going.

“So? What now?” she asked pointedly. “Do we just fight whatever we see?”

I blinked. “You’re almost making it sound like that’s a bad thing.”

She shrugged. “Sure, that’ll boost my level, and if I become a Transcendant that’d be a solid bonus. Stats aren’t as great as picking up new skills or techniques, though, and that’s more what I’m hoping for here. I mean, jacking up my level alone might not be enough to take on the Kaizell Empire.”

Oh, damn. And here I thought levelling alone would be enough...

Saria beamed at her. “I have an idea, then!”

“Yeah?”

The gorilla girl looked at me. “Seiichi, can you take a few steps forward?”

“Me? Sure... *Whoa-ly shit!*”

As soon as I did, a flurry of spears shot down from above, the floor fell away into a spike pit, and poison darts shot out of both walls. I had to contort in gut-

wrenching ways to avoid all the traps.

“See?” Saria puffed out her chest proudly. “You just have to jump into traps, like that!”

Helen didn’t so much as blink. “Are you fucking stupid?”

Sorry, Saria, but I’m with her. That sounds like a great way to get her killed.

“Settin’ off traps with your own body is just suicidal!” Al agreed. “What d’you think the traps are even for?!”

“Um... Training?”

“Gods, I almost feel bad for the dungeon!”

Setting off traps seems like good training, sure, but I’m with Al. The dungeon didn’t set all this up so we can stomp all over it like this!

“I thought it was a good idea,” Saria muttered bashfully. “You walked through all the traps in Zora-chan’s dungeon, right, Seiichi? I thought that was training...”

Helen rolled her eyes. “Wow, I was *not* expecting you to be this ridiculous. I’m fine with just levelling normally or whatever, there’s no way I can keep up with this.”

“That’s just slander,” I retorted.

Seriously, what the hell? None of this is on purpose, so why the hell is everyone tearing into me like this?

As I fought back my tears, however, Helen had already started deeper inside the dungeon.

“Wait, you’re going to leave me? Like this?!”

I had to scramble after the trio, body and heart alike aching from the encounter with the trap.

※ ※ ※

“Hahhh!!!”

With Helen's levelling as our main goal, we let her fight the majority of the monsters as we went, only lending our aid when she was truly in danger. Saria, Al, and I put most of our energy into keeping things one-on-one between her and the monsters as much as possible. At first, I had been worried that the monsters would still prove too much for her, but she'd been good enough with her daggers that she'd steamrolled every threat we'd faced yet.

Even now she ran circles around a Level 201 Armored Mantis, cutting gash after gash into its massive body as she kited it. Finally, after it missed a particularly large swipe with its scythe-arms, she took its head clean off, and it faded into motes of light.

She took a deep breath. "Looks like I levelled up again."

"Great! Congrats!" I called back to her, grabbing the Level 411 Killer Hopper I was fighting by one of its chitinous locust legs and lifting it helplessly into the air.

Helen looked at me for a long moment in silence before heaving a sigh. "I know I'm taking my sweet time with these things, but could you stop showing off for one goddamn minute?"

"Showing off? This is perfectly normal!"

She was just being unfair now. I was just amused by the grasshopper, since it looked so similar to the ones I'd catch as a boy, and I couldn't help catching it. It was all about size back then, and I would've been absolutely giddy with how large this thing was.

We continued down the corridors with much the same energy until Al stopped us all in our tracks.

"Hey, hold up."

I peered around her at the hallway ahead. "What's up?"

She crouched, pointing out something in the dirt. "There... Footprints."

"Huh?"

I peered at where she was pointing, but I couldn't identify what part of it looked like a foot.

Saria glanced at it, eyes widening. “Wow, you’re right!”

Helen nodded. “I see it. That’s definitely a human track, not a monster’s.”

Am I the only one who doesn’t see it? How can they tell anything? All I see is stone floor.

Al looked at me and sighed. “You don’t see it, do ya?”

“O-O-O-Of course, I do! Look, it’s right here!”

I hurriedly touched the ground by a mark I saw, and to my horror, the stone sunk into the floor with an unsettling *click!* Then the ground at my feet disappeared.

“Another trap?!”

With superhuman agility that disgusted even me, I kicked off the open air and scuttled to safety beside the pit.

“Whew... That was close.”

Al shook her head. “I don’t get it... You can’t see one goddamn footprint, but you can evade sure-death traps like nothin’.”

“What I wanna know is, how can you see shit like that?” I looked again, but there was just stone, no different from everywhere else in this place.

Al sighed. “I dunno whether to be relieved you’re not actually all-powerful or disappointed you don’t even have the fundamentals of adventuring down yet.”

Helen nodded. “You’re even more of a mess than I thought.”

“I had to track prey all the time in the Forest, so I’m just used to it!” Saria chimed in.

Yeah, but I bet that’s more instinct than habit.

I had no idea track-finding was such a fundamental skill, but I guessed it made sense. Some specialized in it, even, and had Skills to help them, and a good deal of practical knowledge to boot.

I guess I never studied dungeoneering properly, so I shouldn’t be too surprised. No wonder none of this makes sense. All the power in the world can’t make up for good fundamentals.

I turned back to Al, resolving to look into skill building more later. “So, what’s up with the footprint? Gustle and his guys were in here before, right? I don’t see what’s got you so worried.”

“This track’s fresh,” she asserted. “Gustle’s already figured out this place is dangerous, right? It doesn’t matter if the entrance’s unguarded, news has got to have spread through the Capital guild. Can’t imagine any of those hedonistic whack jobs would wander in here.”

“But what about that guy who keeps going on about breaking shit? This seems like the kind of place he’d come to.”

She shrugged. “Sure, but we saw him back in Guild HQ before we left, remember?”

“Wait... you’re right.”

Now that she mentioned it, I could remember that guy bashing a desk with a big grin on his face.

“Not only that,” she added, “these lead in, and there ain’t any coming back out. That’s gotta mean there’s someone still in here.”

“So, you’re saying a civilian wandered in? Or maybe another adventurer beat us here?”

“Ain’t no way it’s some greenhorn. No one could get this deep in without running into a monster or two, and that’d be the end of that. If it is an adventurer, they have to be Rank S...” Al looked back at the tracks and frowned. “Well, whatever. Long story short, there’s someone else in here, and we’ll probably run into them before we’re done.”

“Huh... Is that rare or something?”

My video game experience told me it was pretty rare to run into other adventurers in a dungeon, but this was real life.

Al nodded. “You’ll often run into other folks in more popular dungeons, always tryin’ to poach each other’s kills. It ain’t a total free-for-all, o’course. There’s unwritten rules even out here.”

Saria grinned. “We’d better say hi when we see them, then!”

Al grimaced a little. "Nah... The question is, can we trust whoever's ahead of us?"

"Huh?"

She shook her head. "Nothin', forget it. Let's focus on the dungeon. It's been ages since we've been in one, so we may as well keep our eyes peeled for prime loot as we go."

"Exactly!" Helen nodded proudly. "Good equipment is worth its weight in gold. I can't believe I got so distracted as to forget that."

"Sure, but if you don't got the strength for it, the best gear in the world ain't worth shit," Al pointed out. "We'll keep on levelling while we look."

"Of course!"

With that, Helen eagerly followed Al down into the depths.



“Which one of us was her teacher, again?” I muttered dejectedly.

“Cheer up, Seiichi!” Saria tried to console me, but by that point nothing could stop my tears.

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“Hnngh... I’m so tired...”

While Seiichi and his allies progressed through the dungeon, the Apostle, Destora the Suredeath, was strolling its deepest depths. His casual stride belied the visceral danger of the beasts that roamed the floor about him, and he seemed all but defenseless.

“Oooh, a treasure chest!”

Without so much as a cursory glance for traps, he strolled up to the box and threw it open. A gout of purple mist shot out, hitting him square in the face.

“Ugh! Kagh, gagh...” He wrinkled his nose in discomfort. “Honestly, why would they need to lace this infernal box with instant-death gas?”

One whiff of it would be enough to kill the average human instantly. Even if one were to hold their breath, it could seep in through the skin just as easily.

“What an irritating dungeon,” he muttered, eyes narrowing. “Perhaps I should just kill it?”

The threat seemed to make the very structure of the place shudder. Destora hardly noticed, however, as his mood was already restored by the sight of the chest’s contents.

“Ah, how lucky! It’s a proper weapon, even, not some shoddy accessory.”

It was a Legendary weapon, a blade known as the Torrent of Blood. Its black metal body was latticed with crimson veins that were throbbing and pulsing in an unsettling rhythm. He used Analysis on the blade, and the further he read, the wider his smirk spread.

“Let’s see... Ah, so anyone cut with it will be unable to close their wounds? Not only that, it changes form to suit its wielder’s will... Yes, excellent! A truly

perfect weapon for me! This isn't half bad at all!"

The dungeon's quivering subsided with that—but no sooner than it did so, the Level 789 Assassin Spider that had been lurking on the ceiling above Destora began to descend. It silently extended its spindly legs toward the old man's back.

"K-Kyigh? Kiii..."

Before it could touch him, however, it slumped to the ground, dead.

"Hm?" Destora turned around, noticing his attacker for the first time. "So, I was being targeted? The poor, luckless beast."

Without even blinking, he stepped over the dead monster. He paused at the sight of the corridor ahead.

"Huh... I didn't expect there to be other people in a place like this. I'd rather they not spot me, but if I were to simply leave now, Yutis would surely throw another tantrum. Only one thing for it, then!"

He extended his hand threateningly but stopped.

"No... I'd much rather see the light leave their eyes myself!" He lowered his hand and began walking once more. "Oh, I can't wait to see who's bold enough to come all the way down here!"

With every step, Destora grew closer and closer to his fated meeting with Seiichi's party.

Chapter 4: The Dungeon Shifts

“Huh? What’s that?”

We continued delving the dungeon’s depths, levelling Helen all the way, until we saw something odd lying on the path ahead.

“The hell?” Al muttered, squinting at the distant shape.

We carefully edged closer to it, finally realizing it was a human-sized spider lying on its back. Its obsidian clawed legs were curled up to its gut, and its massive fangs were stiff and unmoving. Even when we were nearly on top of it, the monster didn’t so much as twitch.

Helen’s eyes grew wide. “Wh-What’s wrong with it?”

Nobody had an answer for her. Finally, Al worked up the resolve to approach it. When she took a closer look, though, she appeared just as spooked.

“I-It’s dead,” she muttered.

“Huh?!”

Dead? I mean, sure, that much is obvious enough from how it’s acting, but that isn’t the problem.

“How’s the body still here?” I finally managed to squeak out.

In this world, dead monsters always turned into light and vanished, leaving only their loot drops behind. To be fair I didn’t know if that was only for monsters or if that happened to humans too, but that was beside the point. This monster and this monster alone was an exception to the rule, somehow.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Al admitted. “This ain’t normal...”

It was a little bizarre by my world’s standards, but it was an immutable law of nature as far as the girls were concerned. They were taking the news far worse than I was.

We didn't have long to puzzle over it, however, as that was when the whole corridor began to shake.

"Wh-What the hell?!"

"What's wrong with this place?!" Helen cried.

We all crouched low to wait out the quake, and after a short while, the tremors stopped just as suddenly as they'd begun.

"Seriously, what's with this place?" I wondered aloud.

"No clue." Al shuddered. "I bet this's got somethin' to do with whoever else is in this place. We'd better keep that in mind."

We didn't have any proof the two were connected just yet, but it was the only thing that made sense. After quickly scanning the area for any more signs of the oddities and finding nothing, we hurried ahead to the next room.

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From that point on, we encountered the weird dead spiders more and more often, putting us more on edge and making us more certain that whoever was ahead of us was the cause of it all.

"I only wanted to gain a few levels," Helen muttered. "How did this all get so weird?"

"'Weird' is one way to put it, for sure," Al grunted. "There was no predicting this shit."

Saria nodded uneasily. "Some monsters died of old age back in the Forest, but they disappeared, too... I've never seen anything like this."

While the girls were talking to each other, however, something had occurred to me. If the whole body was left behind, then forget drop items, you could put every part of a monster to good use. Monster parts fulfilled a crucial niche in this world's crafting and economy, so that might not be a bad thing. The issue was, of course, who was doing it and why.

Before long, we arrived at a large oddly lavish door in the stone.

“First the good monsters for Helen to level off of disappear and now the boss door,” Al noted with a hint of unease.

“By the way, Helen, what level are you?”

She blinked at my question. “Um... Level 488.”

“Oh, so you’re not a Transcendant yet.”

That was our main objective in this expedition, and I felt oddly guilty she hadn’t hit that goal. We hadn’t found any equipment she could use either. That meant we could either make our way back to the entrance and hope we ran into enough monsters on the way out, or we could try our luck with the boss and wait for the experience to tally up enough for her last twelve levels.

“N-No, this is plenty!” Helen hurriedly assured me. “I was only Level 203 before, so you’ve helped me become plenty strong!”

“So, what do we do now?” Saria asked. “Do we turn around and fight our way out?”

“That ain’t a bad idea.” Al frowned, glancing at the door. “... I dunno if you know this, but only one party can tackle a boss room at a time. That means when this door opens next, either that other guy’s killed the boss or they got killed themselves. This whole deal’s got me uneasy, to be honest, and I don’t wanna leave without knowin’ who’s behind all those weird killings and why. The more we know, the better.”

“But when the door *does* open, we probably won’t get to meet whoever it is anyways,” Helen protested.

“Sure, we probably won’t, but that’s still valuable info. If they win, we’ll know they’re strong. If they’re dead... well, that’s one less thing to worry about.” Al let out a heavy sigh before turning to address us again. “That’s why I gotta know what’s inside here before we turn back. Just a peek’s enough; we can walk on out after that. That OK with everyone?”

“Of course!” Saria chimed eagerly.

Helen nodded. “One peek can’t hurt.”

“I don’t mind,” I echoed. “Besides, if we check out the boss room first, we’ll probably get more monster spawns on the way out.”

With that, we were decided.

“So, do we wait for the door to open on its own, or—”

I didn’t get to finish, as the door began to slowly open on its own.

“Looks like they’re done in there,” Al muttered, stiffening.

We exchanged glances briefly before stepping within. Inside the room was a massive rolling plain, and just like in Zora’s dungeon, the ceiling was replaced with open sky.

“Hey... Look at that.”

“Huh?”

The change had sent me reeling, but the fear in Al’s voice brought me back to my senses. I followed her gaze, unprepared for what I’d see there.

“What the fuck...?!”

“Wh-What’s going on here?” Helen whispered hoarsely.

“I’m scared,” Saria mumbled, clinging tightly to my arm.

One part of the plains was dead, the grass dried and brown in a perfect circle. All kinds of giant insect monsters, from grasshoppers to mantises to stag beetles, lay shriveled and dead in that field of death. The most unnerving part of it all, however, was the unarmed silver-haired man who stood in its exact center.

“The hell’s going on here?” Al cried. “How’s he still here after the door opened?!”

“Oh?” The man finally noticed us. “Ah, there you are!”

He began to stroll toward us.

“Get back!” Al spat, raising her axe threateningly.

He stopped obediently. “You aren’t afraid of me, are you? How cold of you.”

“Those bugs and all the dead monsters in the dungeon... did you do that?”

“Hm?” He glanced back at the mountain of corpses, still smiling jovially. “Oh, that was me, yes.”

“Why the hell’re you still here? You killed the boss already, right?”

There could be only one party in a boss room at a time, meaning it should be impossible for us to meet like this. Normally, the preceding party would be warped out of the dungeon as soon as they cleared it, and the door could only be opened otherwise if all the adventurers within were dead.

“I’m here, girl, because I killed the rules of this dungeon.”

“You... what?”

His smile broadened, and he bowed flamboyantly to us. “I am Destora the Suredeath, an Apostle of the Cult of the Wicked One.” When he looked up to address us again, his eyes were ice cold. “Now then, could I trouble you all to perish?”

Chapter 5: Destora the Suredeath

“**N**ow then, could I trouble you all to perish?”

The second the elderly man said those words, we all leaped back away from him, readying our weapons with renewed caution.

Destora chuckled. “It doesn’t matter how far from me you are. No matter where you go, no matter how you try to run or hide, nowhere—no *world* is safe from my powers.”

Al’s brow furrowed. “Powers?”

His grin widened. “Curious? Let me teach you, then...”

He reached out to brush a tall blade of grass, and as soon as he touched it, the plant wilted.

“Hehe! Well? Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Uh...”

Wow, the guy can dry out grass... That still doesn’t explain all the dead monsters.

There was a chance there was something else happening to the grass we couldn’t see, some kind of nifty side effect, but there wasn’t any visible sign of one. That meant there was only one conclusion I could draw.

“It’s boring,” I confessed.

He blinked, face rapidly reddening. “Boring? Did you say *boring*?!”

I guess I could’ve phrased it better...

“D-Don’t worry, I’m sure farmers really appreciate you!” I hurriedly added. “Imagine all the weeding you could do!”

“The hell’re you on about?!” Al shouted at me.

Wait, did I say something weird?

More importantly, the guy mentioned something about being an Apostle, not a Servant. That was frankly just confusing. For now, I could be content in knowing he was a bad guy.

Destora's lips tightened into a hard line. "Weeding? Hehe, hahahaha! I've never been mocked like this before, never!"

"Whoa?!"

At that moment, *something* burst forth from his body. I reflexively drew one of my swords, Black, to deflect it.

His eyes widened just a little. "Hm? And here I thought that'd kill you for sure."

"Kill who?" I wondered aloud.

"Seiichi, this guy's bad news!" Al shouted. "Don't let him do that again!"

She has a point... This guy's kinda giving me the creeps.

"Time to sleep, buddy!" I shouted, closing the distance and swinging at him.

I was careful to use my Endless Hell Skill to limit the damage to the point he wouldn't die. I didn't even need my full power to move faster than the eye could track, and I had no problem getting in range. I slugged him in the stomach —

"Heh!"

"... What?"

He didn't die from my punch—or take any visible damage at all. Destora was totally unaffected by the hit.

That's weird.

"Confused, are you?" he asked with a smirk.

I stepped back from him warily. "Uh... Maybe you're not just a weedkiller?"

"You seem to have gotten the wrong idea." He bared his teeth in a "smile." "I have the ability to kill *anything* at will."

"Huh?"

“I’ve already killed every future in which I’m hurt, let alone killed. I’m immortal in every way!”

“You’re what?!”

That’s just cheating! I know I’m not one to talk, but not even I have anything that overpowered... I think.

“Ah, but there’s more!” he continued giddily. “My Suredeath allows me to choose the method, means, reason, events surrounding it, or even the very notion of death itself! I can slay any god, even the world itself. Granted, there are times when idle thoughts or emotions can make my power trigger on its own, but I can kill even unintended activations of Suredeath should I desire. Well? Haven’t lost hope yet, have you?”

That’s insane! How am I supposed to beat this guy?! I guess I’ve already died so I might be immune—but if this guy exists, there’s bound to be someone out there who can do the same thing but with reviving, and that’d totally screw me over.

Destora cackled at the sight of my face. “You were trying to think of a way to beat me, weren’t you? Were you hoping my power wouldn’t work on the dead? Well, you’re out of luck. I can kill even the dead. I can kill *anything*.”

“What the hell?!”

This guy’s even more of a monster than I am! Why would you even want to kill a dead person? How would that even work?! Is this prick invincible or what?!

“Anyhow,” he continued as he extended a hand toward me, “time to die.”

“Shit—!”

“Hahahaha! You’ll regret having mocked me in hell!”

“Nooooooooooooo! I can’t die here!!!”

“Seichiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!” Saria cried.

>Skill: Evolution has been activated. Your body will now proceed to evolve.

...

“Never mind, I’m OK.”

Destora’s jaw dropped. “You... you what?! There’s no way Suredeath can fail! There’s nothing in this world or any other that can withstand it, not even the very gods!”



“Uh... I guess I have a Skill for it, so I’m OK.”

“You’re saying a mere Skill, a power so meaninglessly sealed to this world alone, can best me?!” He huffed, rapidly cooling his temper. “No matter. Now that I know the reason, I can adapt. I need only kill that Skill and you’ll perish!”

“Oh no!”

He reached out his hand toward me—but again, I heard that mechanical voice in my head.

>Adapted.

I shook my head pityingly. “Sorry, no dice.”

“Why? *Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?*!”

He held his head in his hands and began to howl. The guy was so defenseless now that even Al and the others were getting visibly weirded out. None of the girls could move a muscle, though, out of fear they might get targeted with the next death attack.

“This is wrong! All wrong!!!” he raved. “Sure, there are others with powers like mine, in this world or in others, but I’m the strongest by leaps and bounds! How is my power not working?! I can slay anything, any divinity, even existence itself! My power is complete and absolute! Why?!”

Jeez, someone’s overreacting... Also, I think he’s overestimating himself. I mean, killing all of existence?

“You’re a part of the Cult of the Wicked One, right?” I asked. “Why do you keep going on about killing gods?”

He snorted and looked at me as if I were the stupidest person he’d ever seen. “What, you think I would stoop so low as to ever serve anyone?”

He doesn’t have to be so mean about it...

“Ain’t those powers from the Wicked One?” Al asked.

“Obviously not. If my powers were from Him, I could never hope to slay Him. I was born with this power, and I can kill Him whenever I please. Murdering Him and being done with it would be incredibly dull, though. Just imagine—at the

moment of His greatest triumph, to be slain by His own servant! Oh, can you imagine the despair on His face then?! The thought is simply exquisite!”

He was getting oddly aroused by the idea, it seemed, to the point where even I started feeling uncomfortable.

This guy's insane.

Finally, Destora refocused on us—no, on me—glaring maliciously. “So, why won’t you die?! My power is absolute! No matter of immunity to instant death, no amount of mental acrobatics could possibly deny me! Your death is inevitable!”

Uh, voice in my head? No, wait, body? Anything you wanna say to that?!

I was talking to myself more than anything, but to my surprise, I heard a reply.

>Absolutes, impossibilities, such claims of what one can or cannot do... His caliber as an opponent should be abundantly clear. What does not work, does not work. Nothing more, nothing less.

Gods, he keeps on with all that fancy stuff and I just nope him? That's almost disrespectful, but at least I'm keeping it simple... Good thing too, I can barely understand what he's getting at.

My bigger surprise, however, was that the voice had replied to me at all. I’d only known it to speak when I levelled up or a Skill activated, so it was weird to have it talk back to me like that.

“This can’t be... Impossible!” Destora raved. “Your pathetic Skills and Status only hold bearing in this world, so how could you possibly stand against my absolute power?! This is a horrific corruption of the natural order!”

“Uh... sucks to suck?”

“How are you so damn calm?!” Al shouted at me.

Why shouldn't I be? This guy literally can't hurt me.

After a moment, however, a new light shone in Destora’s eyes.

“I know! Maybe I can’t kill you, but your friends are helpless!”

He extended his hand this time toward Al, Saria, and Helen. I didn't know what to do, and I found myself readying Black reflexively—but before anyone could move another muscle, I heard the mechanical voice again.

>Skill: Tuning has been activated. Now proceeding to tune your surroundings.

Wait, Tuning? Here?

Even as Saria and the others recoiled in fear, and Destora grinned like the devil, I found myself staring blankly into space in surprise.

>Tuning is now complete. Changelog is as follows: Seiichi-sama's physical and mental properties have been applied to Saria-sama, Altria-sama, and Helen-sama.

There was a long moment of tension before I finally spoke.

"Uh... about that. My Skills just made them immune too."

"How? Whyyyyyyyyyy?!"

Destora fell, weeping, to his knees.

Wait, is that weird power the only way he can fight?

More importantly, now that I knew the girls were safe, I could wipe the sweat off my brow.

"You did it!" Saria exclaimed, clapping giddily.

"Seriously, what the *fuck* are you?!" Al shouted.

Helen shook her head. "Seiichi-sensei... When that man was describing his powers, I was convinced he was beyond overpowered. You've reminded me just how beyond the pale you really are."

My jaw dropped. "Why?! I swear I'm totally normal, through and through! Honest!"

"No normal person would totally nullify another guy's powers without trying, *especially* when said guy is so goddamn confident in them!" Al spat.

Saria seemed to realize something and smiled cheerfully at me. "Oh, so we're all OK now... thanks to you, Seiichi!"

I felt myself blush. “N-Nah, I just... I don’t know what to say. It’s not like I did anything.”

I wished I could take the credit, and I was overjoyed they were all still OK, but my body did all the work on its own.

It feels weird to say this, but thanks, body. I’m still not sure what kind of “human” I’m supposed to be, though, so I’d appreciate it if you tried to reply to stuff like this with some degree of normalcy in the future.

Before I could relax completely, though, Destora started shrieking again.

“I can’t accept this... I won’t! This is all some cruel, twisted trick!”

His body twitched disturbingly while he wailed, as if something was bursting out of it, but he literally couldn’t hurt us now. I just ignored it.

Still, that death power... I don’t care if I’m immune, that shit’s creepy. It’s not like I can see instant death, after all—

>Adapted.

“... Fuck.”

Suddenly, the sticky black fog that oozed out of his body became visible to me.

You’re kidding... I can see death now? How does that even work?

There was no mistaking the sight of the gas, though, and it was visibly coming from Destora just like I’d thought. I was snapped out of my thoughts, however, when the fog lunged at me as though it were somehow alive. Since I didn’t want to risk it hitting my party members behind me, I grabbed it as it passed.

I grimaced. “Eww... So, I can see it *and* touch it?”

“Uh, Seiichi?” Al shot me a disturbed look, and I noticed Helen was doing the same. “The hell’re you doing, groping the air like that?”

“Hold on, I have my reasons, promise! Don’t look at me like that!”

“Yeah, but... what’re we supposed to think?”

Helen rolled her eyes. “Stop with all the suggestive finger wiggling and we’ll talk.”

Fine, I'll admit they have a point!

Saria, however, looked at my motions confusedly. "I don't really get it, but... is there something nasty in your hand there?"

I blinked. "Wait, you can see it?"

"Mmm... not really. It's more of an animal instincts thing."

There she goes with the "instincts thing" again... She's never been wrong with it, though, so I'm not complaining.

"How? Why?!" Destora cried. "How is it not affecting you?!"

The old guy was waving at me frantically now, sweat pouring down his face.

I wish he'd just give up.

I went ahead and pulled all the fog together, but as I balled it up, I accidentally misjudged my strength.

"Oops, I crushed it."

The fog itself seemed to be silently judging me now. More pressingly, I was getting the feeling that the weird mass was Death. It was similar to the Underworld, somehow, though I couldn't explain it any better than that.

I frowned at it. "So, if this is Death itself, and it really is Destora's power... Jeez, this feels nasty. Killing so easily and without reason is just wrong."

"?!"

The fog jolted, hardening up in my hands. Then it began to give off a weird kind of glow.

"Whoa, shit!" I exclaimed. "What the hell's happening now?!"

Al shook her head. "That's *my* line. I can't see a goddamn thing."

Sure, I guess it's weird to get so worked up about stuff only I can see, but I can't just pretend I'm not seeing this!

Saria cocked her head to the side. "Huh? Seiichi, I think that super bad thing in your hand just became something super good."

I took another look at it, this time a lot more calmly. Unlike before, it felt curiously warm, like it was an abundance of life now instead of the absence of it. It felt oddly responsive to me, too, and I felt as though I could hear its words in my head.

“B-Boss, I’m feckin’ sorry! I won’t kill nobody no more, honest! I’m gonna heal everyone from here on out, so don’t go roughin’ me up no more!”

I stopped in confusion. That meant that this Death was now Healing, or maybe Life. The light in my hands snaked its way back to Destora, and I watched as the fog that spilled out of him was corroded by and replaced with the light.

“Why?!” the old man wept, desperately trying to wrap his hands in the dissipating fog. “Why isn’t it working anymore...?”

He extended his hand to attack me again, but only the light came out, and I let it hit me square in the chest. As it did, I could feel my body overflow with vitality.

“Wow... I feel amazing!” I exclaimed.

“Huh?”

Al, Helen, even Destora stopped in confusion. Destora himself seemed the most shaken by far.

“Oh, me next!” Saria exclaimed.

“Really? OK.” I turned back to Destora. “Could you please blast her with your power, now?”

“What...?”

He didn’t so much as budge, but at my request, the light enveloped Saria of its own volition.

“Wow, you’re right! I’m so full of energy now!”

“Right? Al, Helen, have him hit you next.”

“The hell’s even going on here?!” Al cried.

Helen just shook her head. “I don’t know... I’m not following any of this. What are you even trying to do here, Seiichi-sensei?”

Right, of course they're getting left behind here.

As I was thinking about how to explain it to them, the light burst out of Destora a second time, hitting Al and Helen this time.

Al's eyes widened. "Whoa?! What the hell...?"

"Amazing," Helen breathed. "All that confusion and mental fatigue from Seiichi-sensei is already gone!"

"Hold up."

I'm the source of her mental damage? Don't make me cry, I'll do it!

At any rate, though, this made the matter of explaining Destora's power's change that much easier.

"As you can feel, Destora's, uh... Suredeath? Yeah, it's now a healing power."

Al's face twisted in surprise and horror. "What the actual fuck is that supposed to mean?!"

Helen just shook her head. "I'm not even going to ask how that happened."

Great, I don't get it myself. Suredeath changed all on its own, after all.

Destora stared vacantly down at his hands. "M-My power... is healing now?"

He reached out to the nearest stalks of dead grass, and as soon as he touched them, they returned to their tall green selves.

"No... No, this can't be... I like sowing unhappiness. I loved seeing the despair on my victims' faces. My power is supposed to make it all possible..."

With frantic urgency, he turned his back on us and began touching all the dead grass he could. Despite his hysterical pleas, the grass eagerly sprang back to life, nearly glowing with pleasure at his touch.

"Agh... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

He fell weakly to his knees, wailing in despair. Al seemed almost sympathetic as she walked up behind him.

"Whatever, it's nap time."

"Gah?!"

She slugged him full force, and he fell like a sack of bricks. Just before he passed out, I heard him mutter something.

“M-My power... even my future... has changed...”

He slumped into the grass and didn't move again.

Chapter 6: Looting Destora

>You have gained a level.

The second Destora fell, I heard that familiar sound in my head.

Another level-up? You've gotta be kidding me. I can't even say I really "beat" him...

"Um... It looks like I got a level-up," Helen muttered beside me. "But what does this even mean...?"

"Just one?" Saria asked.

"Let me check... Oh. That can't be right... It says I'm Level 609 now."

She rubbed her eyes a few times and kept rechecking her Status.

One way or another, I guess we beat him, and that was enough to make Helen a Transcendant... Seriously, though, how was Destora worth that many levels?!

"A-All's well that ends well!" I declared. "You wanted to be a Transcendant, right?"

She hesitated a long moment before nodding. "Yes... I've also learned that being with you means nothing normal happens ever."

"C'mon, that's gotta be an exaggeration!"

"Nah, she hit the nail on the head." Al nodded. "That Destora seemed stupid crazy strong, but the way we handled him, you could say we're all that stupid strong. The guy went down with none of us gettin' why, after all."

I fell to my knees.

That can't be... Nothing normal, ever?

"I'm glad, though!" Saria chirped happily. "We all made it OK 'cause Seiichi's so abnormal, right? Thank you!"

"I-I mean, uh... You're welcome."

I guess I don't mind if I'm super abnormal, as long as Saria and the others are OK!... Wait, I'm OK being abnormal? That doesn't sound right.

Al nodded as she addressed us. "Well, since Helen got a few levels, everyone had better check their Status before old an' sadistic here wakes up."

I brightened up a little. "Right, I got a level! I should check."

She just sighed. "Of course you need to get more powerful."

It's not like I asked for any of this!

Still feeling salty, I went to open up my Status.

"Oh, right... My Status ran away from home a while ago."

Helen's eyes widened. "It what? How?!"

Trust me, it makes just as little sense to me.

With my Status away, though, I had no way of checking my Skills or anything.

>Would you care to see your newly acquired Skills?

"Whoa! You can do that?!"

>Indeed. Allow me to show you.

That was surprisingly easy.

Feeling someone staring, I turned and found Al and Helen wearing worried looks.

"Seiichi?" Al's brow furrowed further. "Who're you talking to?"

"Uh... the robotic voice in my head?"

"Yeah, you're weird as hell."

Helen nodded. "I just don't understand you."

There was an odd familiarity in the way they looked at me, though, as if they expected me to do this kind of thing. Helen pointedly averted her gaze and sighed.

Why're you both so harsh?!

Before I could complain too much, the familiar translucent Status screen popped up in front of me.

>You have acquired the racial Skill, Power in Diversity.

“Power in what?”

That sounds like some corporate slogan, not a Skill name.

>As I said, Power in Diversity.

“So, it’s not some mistake?!”

That’s a whole three words! I agree with it, of course, but why’s it like that?! I can’t even imagine what it’d do...

<POWER IN DIVERSITY> You can acquire special racial abilities, genetically derived abilities, techniques derived from sudden mutations, qualities of other beings’ souls, and any/all other Skills and techniques. This also applies to beings outside your present planet, world, or dimension, and extends even to the gods. You need only wish for a given ability to acquire a copy of said ability, Seiichi-sama, from whatever plane of existence it may exist on.

Seriously, when is my body gonna learn to stop pulling this shit? And why does it mention me by name?! This means I can use my Skills literally anywhere, and I can pick up whatever I like, but how the fuck is the activation requirement so easy?! Besides, why’s the Skill called that when it’s actively decreasing diversity?! What’s the point if I can just take away anything that makes someone else unique?!

While I was occupied screaming at myself, Al approached Destora again.

“So, what’re we gonna do with this guy?”

I shrugged. “Hand him over to Landze-san, I guess. This is his kingdom, and he’s been wanting info on the Cult for a while.”

“Fair ‘nough. We’d better take his equipment, though, just in case he gets any bright ideas.”

“Oh, good idea. I’ll handle that, on the chance he wakes up and tries to pull something. I don’t want you or the others getting hurt.”

Al went bright red and backed up. “Oh, uh... Thanks.”

Considering Destora was totally unarmed, though, there was a good chance most of his stuff was in an Item Box. There wasn’t much I could do about that. Just before I gave up, I heard that voice in my head again.

>Skill: Evolution has been activated. You can now freely access other’s Item Boxes.

You know what, I’ve done enough bitching for today. I’m not going to respond to that.

Even though the problem had been solved, I didn’t know how I was supposed to pull anything out of his Item Box—or so I thought, but a translucent screen popped up with a full list of his Box’s contents on it. I touched one of the entries, a Flame Knife, and a red dagger appeared out of thin air.

Whoah... I really can access his stuff. Is this all loot from this dungeon?

We’d only run into empty treasure chests, so that was the logical conclusion. Getting so much loot so easily made Destora feel more like an extra rare enemy than anything else, especially given the ludicrous amount of XP he’d given us.

I wonder if there’s another spawn of him kicking around somewhere?

I kept scanning the list until I found something that seemed like it’d appeal to Helen.

“Hey, Helen! What do you think about these?”

“Huh?”

I handed her a pair of short swords called Wind-God and Thunder-God. Just like the Japanese myths, both were beautiful blades, the first green and the second yellow. They were elegantly adorned with wind and lightning motifs, respectively. Wind-God raised the wielder’s agility and had the added perk of automatically deflecting projectiles and weak magic. Thunder-God had the same agility-boosting effect, but it paralyzed anything it cut. Both were Mythic-tier weapons.

I guess I’d expect gear that good from a dungeon this dangerous.

Helen turned the swords over in her hands, enthralled. “They’re gorgeous...”

“You think you could make use of them?” I asked her.

She blinked in surprise. “You sure? They look like incredible weapons... According to Analysis they’re Mythic weapons, which means they’re rare *and* powerful.”

I smiled. “You really think I need them?”

“Good point.”

Uh... I intended that as a joke, but I really don’t have any need for them.

“B-But if you sold them,” she protested, “you’d be set for life. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Sure, but I have way too much money as it is. I couldn’t use it all if I tried.”

“... Seriously, just who are you?”

That’s a question for the philosophers. I sure don’t have an answer.

“Just go ahead and keep them,” I urged her. “We’re here to make you stronger, after all.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry!” Saria smiled warmly at her. “I already have a weapon I’m happy with!”

Al nodded. “That’s right. No need to be shy, now. You need power, so go ahead and take it.”

Finally, Helen accepted the swords. I scanned the rest of Destora’s Item Box but came up empty on other gear she could use. The rarest stuff on the list was Mythic, with no whiff of Phantasm-tier stuff. Some of it looked spooky, too, so I was glad we could take it off his hands. The blade that left unhealable wounds was especially worrying. The Cult was the last group that needed something like that—although I wasn’t sure Destora would have handed it over anyways, given how much he’d seemed to look down on them all.

I kept rooting through his Item Box, letting all his things fall to the ground around me. I didn’t find much of interest, though, until I stopped to check his pockets. Stuffed inside one was a nondescript sphere of crystal.

“Huh? What’s this thing?”

The more I examined it, the surer I was that I’d seen it before. Just before I used Analysis on it, Saria stopped me.

“What’s wrong, Seiichi?”

I turned to face her. “Well, this thing is...”

The distraction was enough to cause the sphere to slip from my hands. I hurriedly tried to catch it, but my superhuman reflexes were no match for my natural clumsiness, and it kept slipping through my hands until it finally hit the ground. It shattered, and smoke burst out of it to envelop me.

“What?!”

“S-Seiichi!” Saria cried.

“What the hell?!” Al yelled.

The next thing I knew, I was alone in the middle of an unknown forest.

Chapter 7: The Magicless Forest

“... Huh?”

I could only look vacantly at the dense mass of trees around me.

Where is this? Who am I? Wait, no, I know the answer to that second one.

“Seriously, where the hell is this?! Saria! Al! Helen!”

My shouts echoed emptily through the woods. That was unnerving, but luckily the Necklace of Endless Love the three of us had should still work. I decided to try it.

“Saria! Can you hear me?”

“What? Oh, Seiichi! I can hear you!”

I let out a sigh of relief at her familiar voice. Unlike when I’d gone to the Underworld, this had been totally unintentional, and I was already beside myself with worry. If the Necklace worked, though, that was a good sign.

“Hey, Seiichi!” came Al’s voice. *“The hell’d you go this time?!”*

I felt a pang of guilt that Al was left doing cleanup again, but the thought was oddly calming.

Sorry for making you worry, though.

“I, uh... I honestly don’t know where I am,” I confessed.

I didn’t remember the trip here, and none of the trees gave any indication of where I was. All I knew was that I had to be on the same planet because the Necklace was still working, and that meant I should be able to rejoin them pretty easily.

“I’m so glad you’re OK!” came Saria’s voice. *“I know you’ll be fine no matter what, but I still worry!”*

“I’m sorry...”

If even she's worried, I must've really messed up.

Next was Al's voice again. *"You can teleport back here, right? Hurry up and do it already. We've gotta take this Destora creep back to the palace, and, uh... I'm worried."*

I could imagine her blushing, and with that thought in my mind, I cast teleport on the spot—or rather, I tried to.

"Huh?"

"Is everything OK?" Saria asked.

"I'm not sure."

I attempted to cast it a few more times, but it didn't once activate for me.

"What the heck? Is there something here blocking me?"

If that's true, then I'm sure my body will have something to say about that... It always does.

Sure enough, I heard the voice in my head a moment later.

>Seiichi-sama, it appears this region prohibits the use of magic.

"OK, then just activate Evolution or whatever and make it so I can."

>I regret to inform you that is not possible. The restrictions of this region are placed upon magic itself, not you. As such, Evolution cannot be used.

Wow... That sucks, but I guess even Evolution has a weakness or two.

Evolution only applied to things done to me specifically, then, instead of dealing with issues in my environment. It wasn't enough to make me feel less omnipotent, though, and at this point it felt like more of an inconvenience than anything. It was similar to finding a bug in a game-breaking cheat code. That was almost relieving.

Since I was officially stranded, I sighed into the Necklace. "I can't use magic here, apparently, so I'll have to go someplace I can first."

"You gonna be OK?" Al asked.

I grimaced a little. “Hopefully. Don’t worry, I’ll be back as soon as I can, and I promise I’ll contact you two if anything happens.”

After a moment, I heard her grunt. *“Guess we’ll be waiting, then.”*

“Oh, and make sure you two keep me posted, OK? I’ll blow this forest away to make it there if I have to.”

It was a stupid idea, I had to admit. My body must’ve been influencing my mind more than I’d thought. The worst part was I was confident I could do just that. I didn’t want to wipe this place off the map, but if Saria and the others were in danger, I was willing to do it.

“Let’s let luck resolve this, then,” I reasoned.

I picked up a nearby branch and stood it up tip-first on the ground.

“Which way’s it gonna fall?” I let go of it, and it readily fell. “Right, it is.”

I didn’t know my stats with my Status out, but I was pretty sure they were decently high—or rather, I hoped they were, since Status wouldn’t give me any numbers even before it left.

With few other options, I wandered further into the woods.

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“Dammit, Seiichi, you idiot! Why’re you always causin’ trouble like this?!”

Following Seiichi’s disappearance from the dungeon, Al and Saria had just confirmed he was alive, but that he wasn’t able to return for the foreseeable future.

“D-Don’t tell me... This ain’t my curse, is it?! I thought it was gone for good!”

The thought of her supernaturally bad luck making him suffer made her heart ache.

Saria shook her head. “He’ll be OK, promise! This isn’t your fault at all.”

“But—”

Saria cut her off with a tight hug. "It'll be OK! Seiichi said he'll be back soon, so even if it is your curse, he'll just get rid of it!"

Al finally returned the embrace with a worried smile. "Thanks, Saria."

"Of course!"

They then turned to Destora, who was still unconscious, just where they'd left him.

"Now, for this guy... Seiichi looted everything he had, so I don't think he's any danger to anyone now."

Saria's eyes widened. "Oh, I think I remember something! You know those guards Seiichi fought outside the Academy before? I think they used one of those crystals at the end."

"Oh, that 'fight'! I dunno any specifics, but apparently you can use those to teleport to wherever they're set to. That forest place Seiichi's in now was probably Destora's next stop or somethin'."

Saria nodded. "Let's get this guy to the guards before we make any other plans."

"Yeah, totally."

Al slung the Apostle loosely over her shoulder, but she stopped when she noticed Helen.

"Could it be...?" the girl was muttering.

"Hey! What's up?"

"A place he can't use magic... No, it can't be..."

Saria peered into her face nervously. "Helen-chan?"

She jumped. "Wh-What?!"

Al raised an eyebrow. "Whaddya mean, 'what'? You're actin' weird."

She paused. "It's nothing. Besides, Destora seemed like one of the Cult's more important members, so Seiichi-sensei could be in one of their hideouts just as easily."

“Right... I guess that’s possible, yeah.” Al frowned for a moment, then shook her head. “No point mullin’ over it now either way. For now, we gotta get outa here. Sound good?”

Helen nodded. “Yes, of course. I’ve gotten stronger, after all, just like I asked.”

“Good. C’mon, we’re goin’ home.”

With that, the remnants of their party headed back to the Capital.

Chapter 8: A Woodland Encounter

Dear mom and dad, and Saria, and everyone else too. I hope you're doing well. Right now, I'm, uh...

"I'm getting chased by maggots?!"

"GWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

After getting sent to the magicless forest, I spent the whole night wandering. I wasn't tired or hungry so I didn't stop to rest, and there was no sign of human life anywhere. That included myself, frankly—nobody could go so long without sleeping or eating and still be fine.

Compared to my time lost in the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, I had a lot more going for me now. I could contact the people I loved whenever I needed to, and despite not having my magic, I was still plenty strong enough to fend for myself. Unfortunately, when I'd killed a level 78 Berserker Butterfly, I'd accidentally driven a few hundred five-meter-long Level 55 Berserker Caterpillars mad with rage. I hadn't even been able count them all, there had been so many.

"I don't care how many grasshoppers or butterflies or praying mantises you throw at me!" I shouted into the air. "But no maggots! Those things are too gross!"

"GWEEEEEEE, GWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

It was a weird sound for a bunch of giant larvae to make, but I was too busy running to question it further. If I ran full-out, I could get away from the squirmy creepy crawlies no problem, but I'd probably blow away half the forest in the process. That was a step too far, though I clearly had to make a move soon or I'd get swarmed.

Ugh... I'm gonna have to fight these things, aren't I?

I steeled my resolve, drawing Black and whipping around to confront the horde.

“Leave me alone, you squirmy freaks!”

I swung my sword as hard as I could taking care not to blow away the whole forest. The front ranks of caterpillars split in half, then the shock wave rippled through the herd until it reached even the heart of the group.

“G-GWEEEEEEERK?!”

Greasy, grimy green guts burst out of them in a wave, reaching even me and drenching me. I could only stare in silence as the survivors scurried forth to take the place of the fallen.

“Ew... I can’t do this, noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooope!!!”

No, nuh-uh, no way, impossible! I don’t care how weak they are, my stomach can’t hold up any longer! How is it fair that I get scared every time I hit them?!

I sprinted blindly away from the group—so blindly that I didn’t even notice the cliff until I’d stumbled off it.

“How? Oh, shiiiiiiit!!!”

How stupid am I? I never thought this cartoon shit’d be possible in real life!

My brain froze up so completely that I wound up falling the whole thirty meters down to the ground below.

“Gwegh!”

The impact was a little unpleasant, but it didn’t hurt—I wasn’t even bleeding.

Nope, no way I’m still human.

I climbed to my feet to look up at the cliff, and there I noticed the caterpillars were glaring at me, unmoving, along the ledge. They watched me for a few moments before giving up and leaving back the way they came.

Wait... I’m wearing my Garuda Boots. If I’d thought to activate them, I wouldn’t have faceplanted off the cliff like that.

I picked myself up and dusted myself off, but as I turned around, the endless expanse of trees in front of me exhausted me all over again.

“Jeez... Just how big is this place?”

The forest at the base of the cliff wouldn't let me cast magic either. I tried using my Garuda Boots to gain some height well over the tree line, but that also failed to reveal anything useful. It was good to know that my equipment still worked, both the Necklace and the Garuda Boots, even though I didn't know how they differed from magic.

Man, I wish I'd brought a teleportation item with me.

“No point moping about it now, though. I guess I just need to walk until I can cast magic again.”

With that, I started marching forward.

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“Hm?”

I wasn't walking for long before the sound of running water hit my ears.

“Is that a river or something?”

If I was right, I could follow it and reach a human settlement eventually.

“I guess that's where I'm going.”

It was about noon at that point, and the sun was almost directly overhead. I still wasn't tired after walking all day and all last night, but I was feeling oddly unclean. It'd be nice to at least wash my face, especially after that clash with the caterpillar monsters.

Luckily, I didn't run into any more monsters, and soon enough I came upon water.

“Finally, I'm here!”

“What?!”

“... What?”

I blinked at the voice. Standing there was a woman with eyes as red as blood and flowing purple hair. Her skin and hair were wet—she must've been taking a

bath when I arrived. The biggest clue on that front, though, was that she wasn't wearing any clothes.

For a long moment, neither of us even breathed. Then—
“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

We both screamed in near-perfect unison.

“Wh-Why are *you* screaming?!” she shouted, livid, as she covered her body with her hands.

“Y-You're naked, in a place like this!” I cried back. “You must be some kinda pervert!”

“*I'm* a pervert?! No, you're the one barging in on me! I'm the one asking the questions here!”

“Oh... right.”

“So, who are you?!”

I didn't have time to reply, however, as a tall figure in plate mail emerged from the bushes behind the woman. “Your Excellency, are you all right?!”

The knight—a woman, I realized—wore her snow-white hair in a simple braid over one shoulder. It only took her a moment to size up the situation, and with a sharp glare, she drew her blade and lunged at me.

“You insolent cur!” the knight hissed.

“Wh-Whoa! Let me explain mys—”

“Perish!!!”

“God, I'm so tired of this world!”



No matter how I tried to explain myself, the knight kept swinging at me. Something about the sharpness of her movements reminded me of Louise, so if I had to guess, the two were similarly strong. I kept reflexively dodging her, though, contorting in ways that made even my head spin.

“Such disturbing motions,” she seethed. “You must be a servant of evil!”

“How’d you come to *that* conclusion?!”

I mean, “servant of evil”? Like someone from the Cult of the Wicked One? To be fair, I’d feel the same away about me from the way I’m squirming around her attacks!

It was my fault I’d rushed onto my riverbank without checking, though, so I couldn’t fight back in good conscience.

How do I get them to understand?

“Leyll,” came the voice of the bathing woman. “Cease thy violence.”

She’d gotten out of the river and dressed herself at some point, and she was now clad in fancy embroidered clothes. There was an air of dignity to her now, even in the way she spoke.

“B-But, Your Excellency!”

“We bid you cease. We shan’t repeat Ourselves again.”

“A-As you will.”

The knight, Leyll, obediently sheathed her sword, though from the way she was glaring I was sure she’d take any chance she got to try to kill me again.

Jeez, she’s intense.

I hurriedly looked away from her, noticing the fancily-dressed woman was now staring right at me.

“Identify thyself.”

“Identify...? I’m Seiichi, the adventurer?”

Is that enough? There’s not much else I can say, though.

The woman exchanged a glance with Leyll, and I could feel the mood lighten.

“Thy name... ‘tis not of the Kaizell Empire. Thou art surely no spy.”

Leyll shook her head. “He may be one of their summoned Heroes.”

“Unlikely. His neck and arms alike are bare. We cannot imagine they would allow a Hero free rein, regardless of their design.”

“Could he be with the Cult?”

“Again, We doubt it. Were he an enemy of Ours, he could have struck Us down by now.”

They were talking in low voices, but I could hear their every word with perfect clarity. It was rude of them.

More importantly, I got the impression that the pair were familiar with the forest, meaning they probably lived nearby. That would explain why they knew I wasn’t from around here.

“Uh, excuse me? Can I ask you just one thing?”

The regal woman turned to me. “Speak.”

I frankly couldn’t believe she was the same person that had shrieked at me, looking at her now.

“Is there anywhere around here I can use magic?” I asked.

“Even if there were, what reason would We have for telling you?”

“Oh. Uh...”

She’s got me there. We’re strangers; she doesn’t have a single reason to trust me.

While I puzzled out how to reply, Leyll-san glared at me.

“What need would you have for such a place, cretin?”

“I just wanna go home,” I admitted. “I’m looking for a place I can use my teleportation magic.”

The regal woman stroked her chin. “Teleportation...? Thou mayst be no enemy of Ours, but thou art too dangerous to allow free rein.”

Great. That’s reassuring.

At that point, however, a third figure jumped down from the surrounding trees to take a knee in front of the regal woman.

“Your Excellency.”

“What is it? Speak.”

The newcomer was dressed in plain black clothes, similar to Origa-chan’s ninja robes but with a distinct design. They were probably some kind of scout or ninja. Their face was covered in black fabric excluding the area right around their eyes. I couldn’t even tell if they were a man or a woman. I could glean that info from Analysis, sure, but I didn’t want to risk seeming any more suspicious than I already had.

“The insurgents march on the imperial capital once more,” the scout announced calmly.

The regal woman cursed. “Why now, of all times? Very well. We shall return posthaste.”

“As you will!” scout and knight alike replied.

By this point in the conversation, I was feeling totally left out. I was starting to get bored, even, when the scout glanced at me.

“By the way, Your Excellency, what do you intend to do with the stranger?”

“Leave him. We have no time.” She turned to leave but stopped at the edge of the tree line. “No, wait.” She looked back at me. “We cannot risk him as an enemy nor as an interloper.”

She looked at the nearest tree and exhaled deeply. As she did so, its branches began to glow with soft flame. The fire flickered and swayed, pulsing like a heartbeat.

“Stop him from pursuing us.”

With that, she and her aides left.

...

“Huh? W-Wait up! Take me with you!”

As soon as I said that, though, the flaming tree began to move. Its branches swayed, and it pulled itself up by the roots, perching on them nimbly as if they were long, squirming legs. It planted itself directly between me and the path the regal woman had taken.

“Huh? The tree’s moving?!”

I used Analysis on it, but it didn’t seem to be a monster, since I couldn’t see any name or level pop up. It was clearly moving, however.

Uh... Should I beat it up or not? I’ve gotta get out of here somehow if I want to get out of this place.

I wasn’t left thinking for long, though.

“Could you kindly listen to what I have to say?” the tree asked.

“Uh, OK. I... Wait, what?”

I narrowed my eyes at it. Sure enough, it had eyes and a mouth now.

...

“This tree can *talk*?!”

My cry echoed far and wide throughout the woods.

Chapter 9: Talking Trees and Hardening Resolve

I blinked again at the tree in front of me. Sure enough, it'd spontaneously grown a face, complete with a nose.

There's no way this is a Universal Language Comprehension thing! I mean, look at that mouth move! I don't know where to begin!

Before I could gather my thoughts, the tree began to talk again.

"I'd rather not stand around all day while we chat, if that's all right with you. Please take a seat."

"Uh, OK."

That response came out normal enough, but I can't say I've ever had a tree ask me to sit down before.

I obeyed readily enough, though, which only made it clear that I'd gotten used to all this nonsense.

God, why? I wish my life were normal.

The tree pursed its "lips" apologetically. "Oh, I'm sorry... If I'm going to keep you here, I should really pour you some tea, at least. You could say I'm sorely lacking in hospitali-tree. Hehehe!"

"Why're you laughing at your own pun?!"

This is just plain weird. I bet the other trees would be more normal if they could talk... Not that I can tell one way or another.

"Now for that tea... Oh, but I don't have a cup for you. Shall I carve one out of my body? Take your pick of which part you'd like."

"No way! Why would I do that?!"

Jeez, that goes right past weird and into disturbing! Wouldn't that hurt a lot? Even if it didn't, there's no way I could do that.

“I suppose I’ll use another tree, then.”

“Shouldn’t you have suggested that first?”

It ignored me, grabbing a piece of nearby wood and adeptly carving it into a cup, but even as I watched, I had no idea how it did it. My head was starting to spin.

The tree reached up to its head, grabbed a fistful of leaves, and pulled.

“Gyagh?! Hahh, hahh... ugh...”

Still moaning like it was on the brink of death, it tore up the leaves and stuffed them into the bottom of the cup. Then, it leaned over the cup and grimaced.

“Gwebblegh!”

Some kind of fluid, with the viscosity of drool, poured out of its mouth to fill the cup. Then it held the mixture out to me.

“Please, help yourself.”

“You’re fucking kidding, right?”

Why would I drink that? It’s hair and saliva, and that’s being charitable. Why would anyone want to drink that? Maybe it’s common for trees to be into this stuff?

“What a pity,” the tree sighed, resting the cup nearby. “I’ll have to drink it myself later. Now, on to the main topic.”

That’s all I wanted from the beginning, but I remained quiet to avoid derailing the conversation again.

“Now,” it continued seriously, “allow me to start with what I am.”

“That’d be nice. Most trees don’t start talking and moving out of nowhere.”

That fancy lady only breathed on it, right? What’s with that?

“I am an imitation of life, produced by Her Excellency.”

“A... what? That Leyll-san woman kept calling that lady ‘Your Excellency’ too... Is she important or something?”

The tree nodded. "So, she didn't introduce herself? Well, as you've about surmised, she is the Empress."

"Oh."

I really messed up, didn't I? I'm surprised she didn't have me executed for peeping on her!

"But enough of that," the tree said.

"I could get killed over it!"

"You'll be fine, I'm sure. You'll defini-tree find some way to survive."

"That joke's even less funny the second time!"

"You're no fun... but let us refocus. I was given life through Her Excellency's power."

"Power, as in a Skill or magic? That seems more like a god thing, not something you could learn."

"Her power is no Skill nor is it magical."

"Huh?"

How's that work, then? And wasn't Destora talking about something similar earlier?

"I cannot name Her Excellency's power, but she has the ability to give anything inanimate an approximation of life," the tree explained. "Said 'life' is similar to what you humans experience, and that's what has given me the ability to move and talk like this."

"OK... But aren't all trees alive? It's just made it so you can walk and talk."

"Indeed, you're correct."

Still, that's some crazy power.

"There's gotta be some kind of limit on it," I wondered aloud.

"Perhaps. It wears on her mind and depletes her mana with each use, but such things can be replenished through rest. I believe there is no hard limitation on her power."

“So, she could make a whole army of trees like you?”

“Exactly. She uses that very power to keep her enemies at bay.”

“Huh?”

Its posture stiffened somewhat as it looked me dead in the eye. “Seiichi-sama, I beg of you. Lend her your power.”

“Uh... why?”

“Her Excellency’s power is incredible and versatile, yes, but her enemies are powerful and numerous. She cannot fight them all alone.”

“How do *you* know all that?”

“I was born from her and her powers, so I have some limited knowledge of her capabilities and present situation both.”

“OK. So, who’re these enemies of hers?”

She’d let me off the hook for walking in on her bathing if I lent a hand. And I wanted to help her—though it wasn’t exactly like I owed her one. Rather, if I didn’t get in her good graces, I was afraid she’d change her mind and try to have me killed after all.

The tree shook its head. “Sadly, I cannot say. I do not know any of the specifics of her enemies.”

“Oh.”

Of course it doesn’t know the most important part... Not that it’d affect my decision either way.

I slapped my knees. “OK, new question. Where are we?”

“Where? Could you be a tad more specific?”

“I was somewhere else before this, see, but I wound up here by accident. I don’t know anything about where I am or even what country this is.”

“Ah, so you’re lost.”

“I... I guess you could say that.”

“Unfortunately, I do not have the answers you seek. I know of Her Excellency and that she is an empress, but not the regions of her domain.”

“So, you know almost nothing I need to know.” I sighed heavily. “Great. You’re so helpful.”

“I’m not sure what you expected of a literal tree.”

“I don’t get it either!”

Why did I decide to talk to a tree at all? Hell, why am I still talking to it?

I wished there was someone human I could talk to, but I had yet to leave a good impression on anyone here. I was totally out of luck.

“Please compose yourself. I may not know of Her Excellency’s empire, but I have some basic knowledge of this forest.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. I sprouted and grew here, so it makes sense I would be familiar with it.”

“I guess you’re right about that.”

It’s only been able to think for less than an hour, though, so I’m not sure how much sense that makes.

“This forest has long been referred to by Her Excellency and her companions as the Sealed Woods.”

“The Sealed Woods?”

“Yes. As you’ve no doubt discovered, no magic is possible in this place, simply because there exists no mana in the environment whatsoever.”

“No mana? What does that have to do with no casting? I thought I used my own mana to cast, not the stuff in the air or whatever.”

“The phenomenon is especially well-known within Her Excellency’s borders, but it is impossible to cast magic with your internal mana alone.”

“Wait, really?!”

That book I read back in Terbelle had nothing to say on that...

I never used magic with any of the mechanics behind it in mind, though, so it made sense that there were things I didn't know.

"You need internal magic to begin casting," the tree continued, "but after that the ambient mana becomes critical. Your internal mana conveys the 'instructions' of magic to the outside magic, which then enacts your spell. Think of it as sound—it requires air to transmit. Should there be no air, there will also be no sound. The principle is fundamentally the same."

"I... think I get it?"

"Casting magic here is therefore impossible... though the laws of nature hardly apply to you, do they?"

"Th-They do! Honest!"

It's not like I'm trying to have beef with the world... I think. I'm more or less behaving (maybe less).

"I'm in this whole mess because I can't cast anything," I pressed. "It doesn't work for me either, promise."

"Perhaps the world is attempting to be considerate by limiting you so?"

"The *world* is? You lost me."

Lulune said something like that a while ago, but that can't be true. Why would it bend over backward to cater to me? Can't it stand up for itself?

The tree's reasoning didn't even make sense. It could be like the time I went to the Underworld, though—and that would mean there was something critically important I had to do here.

"Allow me to put us back on track," the tree suggested. "Due to the unusual environment here, the ecosystem has evolved in an unusual manner."

I nodded. "That'd explain you."

"Me? Oh, no, I'm perfectly normal."

"Yeah, right!"

Maybe I'm not one to talk, though...

“In place of magical proficiency, most monsters in these woods have a wealth of Skills, and some have undefinable powers similar to Her Excellency’s own ability. They likewise possess exceptional physical prowess, and as they are Skill- and magic-resistant, this land’s equivalent of Rank C monsters would qualify as Rank S elsewhere.”

“So, you’re saying this is a perfect place to train?”

“Please, you have no need for such a thing.”

“That’s not true! I still fight like a noob, and I can’t hold back for shit, so this place could do a lot of good for me.”

“I suppose... Now, do you think it’s been long enough?”

“Long enough for what?”

“For my diversion, of course.”

I stared blankly at it for an extended moment. “W-Wait... So, you’ve just been buying time?”

“Don’t look at me so reproachfully. Weren’t you aware? You saw Her Excellency order me to slow you down yourself.”

“Yeah, but... Wait, I could’ve just avoided you and ran after the Empress herself! That would’ve been so much better! Why’d I let you stop me, you stupid tree?!”

“You should’ve considered that possibili-tree from the beginning.”

“Shut up, already!”

This is so damn familiar... It’s Sheep-san all over again!

“Does it truly matter?” it asked. “I would not have stopped you to chat if not for that order. I’m incredibly busy, after all.”

“Busy? You’re a tree! You literally stand around doing nothing all day!”

“Not true. My days are packed with photosynthesizing and sleep—” it paused, a look of horror coming over its face. “Good Gods, I have no life.”

“I’m sick and tired of this fucking tree.”

What a surprise. Just like that sheep, I literally can't get along with this thing. I guess that's partially my fault for humoring it for so long.

"Try not to be too hard on me," the tree implored. "I consider learning about you to be a wholly positive experience. I could not have stopped you with violence, so I believed conversation to be the only means I had of slowing you down."

"You were right. I'm a gullible idiot, lucky for you." I frowned, but it was then that something occurred to me. "So, what's gonna happen to you once your job's done?"

"Me? I suppose that at the completion of my duty, I shall return to being an ordinary tree, like any other. I have no life outside of Her Excellency's mission. I'm afraid I never had a say in the matter."

"Oh... Makes sense, I guess."

I almost felt guilty. The tree was shitty company, but I could understand that since it was born just to mess with me, and it'd "die" as soon as I left. It didn't feel fair at all.

"You're OK with that?" I asked. "You can walk and talk now. Won't you miss that?"

"I'll be fine. Without Her Excellency's power, I would have lived out my entire life as a mere plant. This experience has been beyond valuable, something I can call truly and uniquely mine, that which cannot be claimed by any other of my kind."

"I guess..."

It was a fair way to look at it, but I couldn't agree. If it had never woken up, it wouldn't have had to disappear like this.

The tree pulled itself out of the ground so it was standing on its roots. "That is why, at the end of it all, I shall move of my own volition."

"Huh?"

"I shall see you safely to Her Excellency's capital."

I blinked in surprise. “You’d do that for me? Doesn’t that kind of go against your orders?”

“Yes, but you would arrive on your own initiative in due time regardless. I would rather you hasten to Her Excellency’s aid. This will be my first and only decision.”

“Wow, um... Thanks.”

It nimbly wriggled its roots around to look at me. “Follow me, Seiichi-sama. I shall be your dutiful guide to the end.”

With that, I found myself being led through the forest by a tree.

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“Stay together! Let them isolate you, and you’re dead!”

“Medic! We’ve got wounded over here!”

“Dammit... When’ll they give in?!”

While the tree was keeping Seiichi occupied, an enemy force was already deep inside his country of destination.

“What the hell... How dare these wimps defy us Transcendants?!”

“They’re weaklings from a puny country. Stop dallying and stamp them out!”

“Eat this! Scatter, scatter like the pathetic vermin you are!”

The armor-clad soldiers pushed forward, their flags proudly displaying the Kaizell Empire’s colors. They were the invaders of the country within the Sealed Woods, and through special means they had all been made Transcendants. The defenders had no means of opposing them through Status alone. There was only one reason the defensive line still held strong.

“Go, Our pawns.”

The woman at the defenders’ rear, clad in a black-and-red military uniform, spurred the very trees and the rocks of the earth into motion. The simulacra numbered in the hundreds, each at least the size of a human.

“Protect Our men!” commanded the Empress of Varcia, Amelia frem Varcia.

The inhuman army crashed into the Kaizellian invaders like a great wave.

“Shit, there’s more of them!”

“How’re we supposed to get at their soldiers now?!”

“Fuck these freaks!”

Not even the Transcendants’ renewed assault could break the line, and it was all they could do to avoid getting pushed back.

Behind her golems, the Empress fell to one knee. “Gh...”

“Your Excellency!”

Such power commanded a toll. Her breathing grew rough and ragged, even as Leyll tried desperately to support her.

“Your Excellency, you must stop!” Leyll urged. “Allow us to finish them off.”

“No! If We do not exercise Our power, you will all pay the price!”

Amelia struggled to stand. It took her moment to realize that a familiar black-clad figure had appeared at her feet.

“Leyll, I bring glad news. We have succeeded in baiting the local monsters upon the enemy forces. We may now begin to push them back.”

The knight’s expression brightened. “Excellent work, Swinn! Your Excellency, allow me to escort you back to your palace.”

Amelia could only whimper weakly in agreement. Leyll and Swinn took to her shoulders to help her retreat, but the Empress had already lost consciousness. Together, they succeeded in their careful retreat to the safety of their stronghold.



The palace was buzzing with activity, as soldiers hurried to and fro, and the injured were tended to in makeshift infirmaries. The maids rushed out to meet the three of them, ensuring Amelia was laid to rest in her room.

Now that Leyll and Swinn were finally alone, the knight let out a heavy sigh.

“So, Swinn... how goes the front?”

“Not well. The strength of their men is too great. I’ve not the faintest idea how all of them are Transcendants.”

Leyll cursed. “How did they manage to produce so many of them?”

“Rest assured, the monsters’ assault has forced them to retreat for the time being. You had best rest for now.”

“For now, certainly. This calm won’t last.”

The Kaizellian army was in retreat, pulling out of the forest entirely so they could regroup. Despite being Transcendants, their Stats were the only thing about them that had improved, and they struggled even with weaker monsters. They were still human as well, and the fight had drained them such that a proper rest was in order.

“We can’t keep on like this,” Leyll muttered. “Her Excellency is the sole reason we’ve managed to hold them back so long, but even she is at her limit. Where are our allies?”

Swinn frowned. “We can’t expect aid. The Kaizell Empire has conquered nearly every country on the continent except for the Kingdom of Windberg, which is far too distant to lend its aid. The Eastlands are likewise an entire ocean away—even if we could send word to them, I doubt they would humor our request.”

“Our hands are tied, then.”

“I’m afraid so. Even if we shared a border with Windberg, the Kaizellians have the Sealed Woods surrounded. They wouldn’t allow anyone through.”

“Dammit! Why us?!”

Leyll punched the wall in frustration, but Swinn simply looked on with a grave frown.

“Wait.” Swinn paused. “What of that man we met in the woods?”

“Him? Who knows? I would’ve cut him down where he stood for his sin of perversion against Her Excellency, but she stopped me for reasons I cannot comprehend.”

“But he was not Kaizellian, was he?”

“No. He wasn’t an agent of the Cult of the Wicked One either.”

Swinn sighed, brow furrowing. “Right... I’d nearly forgotten we need to address them too.”

“I still wish I knew why they’re targeting us,” Leyll grumbled. “We keep to ourselves, don’t we? We just want to live in peace, but it’s just been one thing after another... First, the Transcendant army, then those insane cultists, and through it all the monsters are still causing problem after problem. It’s unfair is what it is.”

“Her Excellency would agree, no doubt, but what use will complaining do us now?”

“... Fine, you have a point.”

Swinn smiled sadly and looked up at the ceiling. “This will be the end, won’t it? I wish I’d taken the chance to fall in love, just once, like an ordinary girl.”

Leyll snorted. “You, in love? That’d end with you crying into my chest, and you know it.”

“What?! You’re one to talk! I haven’t heard one whisper of your romantic endeavors!”

“I have no need for love. My duty is Her Excellency’s safety, no more and no less.”

“Well, I have my spy work to attend to! I don’t have time for a man!”

They locked eyes for only a moment before breaking into smiles. The girl that had left both their lives several years ago naturally came to mind.

“I wonder how she’s doing?” Leyll wondered aloud.

“Mm... She left with such confidence, saying she’d master magic and come back so much stronger.”

“She was always a hothead—reminds me of Her Excellency, in a way.”

“That’s disrespectful.” Swinn paused. “They *do* share half their blood, though.”

“Fair enough. Perhaps that’s for the best... If she were still here, she’d blow right past us and try to take on the invaders herself.”

“Her Excellency would never admit it, but I’d imagine she’s grateful that girl has left too. She’d be glad her blood lives on in some way.”

“Hold your tongue. Speaking like that is bad luck.”

“You’re one to talk. You were implying the same thing.”

“Oh? Was I, now?”

They exchanged smiles for a moment before becoming grim once more.

“I swear on my blade, we will not go easily into the night.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Even then, however, the cruel unfairness of their situation pressed ever-closer upon them.

Chapter 10: A Violent Border Crossing

“Hm? Seiichi-sama...”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

After a while of the tree leading me onward, I picked up on something alive ahead of us. I didn’t care too much what it was as long as it wasn’t more caterpillars, but I could tell it was an unusual find. Sure enough, I could hear human voices.

“Stay together...!”

“Medic...!”

“Dammit...?!”

They had to be fighting monsters. I glanced up at the tree.

“Hey, uh, sounds like they’re getting beat pretty bad.”

“Those are not Her Excellency’s men,” the tree mused. “They must be her enemy. We can leave them, then, especially as they seem to be in no imminent danger.”

The tree was right. Most of the shouting sounded more angry than panicked or pained. If anything, they seemed irritated, which was a sure sign they would be fine.

“If you say so.” I shrugged. “If they’re enemy soldiers, though, shouldn’t we see how strong they are or something?”

“That may be wise, yes, but I would much prefer to hurry to Her Excellency’s side.”

“Huh... and to think, she was the one who told you to slow me down.”

I bet the Empress would be shocked to see her own creation acting out like this. No way she’d want a rando like me waltzing around her domain.

“I may also mention,” the tree added, “that this monster attack is likely not random chance.”

“Huh?”

“This may be part of a strategic maneuver. Listen closely and you’ll find they are steadily growing more distant from us, so I imagine the soldiers are in retreat. We had best not linger, of course. Let us hurry.”

I had no reason to argue, so I followed behind it.

We walked in silence for a while, until finally the tree stopped.

“There,” it announced.

“Whoa...!”

Finally, we’d arrived. It was a city in the middle of the woods, just like the tree had said. Similar to Terbelle, a large wall surrounded it. Guards ran around on the top of the barricade, and behind them I could spot a massive palace. If Terbelle’s palace were a classic fairy-tale castle, then this one was like the Taj Mahal. That said, the city was a little more... hectic than I had been anticipating.

“Is it just me, or does the whole place feel on edge?” I asked.

The entire city was buzzing, though I suppose that was to be expected with a war on their hands. Even from where we stood, I could see soldiers bustling about urgently, carrying supplies or the wounded.

“So, uh... What now?” I asked. “We probably can’t just walk in the front gates.”

The tree gave me a quizzical look. “Why not? What’s stopping us?”

“Are you crazy?”

Yeah, of course they’d let any rando in, especially in wartime.

The tree chuckled. “Why do you think I accompanied you here, Seiichi-sama? With me at your side, they’ll naturally open the gates.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense. The Empress herself made you and all.”

“Precisely. Besides, there’s no other avenue of entrance. Let us make haste.”

The tree pointed out one of the gates, and we approached it together. When we got closer, however, I found myself staring.

“Hey... Am I seeing things, or does the gate have a face?”

“Of course. It was given life in the same way I was. It prevents any unlawful entry or any criminal from passing through. It has no need to sleep and operates on its own, making it the perfect guard.”

“Whoa...”

That all makes sense.

As we approached, several of the guards atop of the wall noticed me.

“Look, down there!”

“I see him!”

“Excuse me!” I shouted up at them. “My name is—”

I was cut off by a volley of arrows.

“Holy what the hell?!”

Just like with the dungeon traps, I twisted uncomfortably out of their path.

“Hey, tree-san! This isn’t what you said would happen! I thought I’d be OK with you?!”

Meanwhile, the guards on the wall, realizing I’d survived their first attack, were getting even more riled up.

“He’s still alive down there!”

“Keep firing!”

“Don’t let him get any closer to the city!”

“Die, die, die!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh?!”

Fat chance they’ll let me in now!

As I dodged the arrows, however, I noticed they were starting to steer clear of me on their own.

Huh? Didn't something similar happen back when I fought Zakia-san and his men?

The guards on the wall seemed to notice their arrows were misbehaving as well.

"Hey, nothing's hitting him!"

"Where are you idiots even aiming?!"

"Right at him, jackass!"

"What?! He must be doing this, then. I don't know how his trick works, but he can't keep it up forever! Keep shooting!"

Should they really be wasting all these arrows on me? Aren't they at war?!

I started gathering up as many of the fired arrows as I could, but there were so many of them that I was beginning to get overwhelmed.

"Hey, tree! Convince them to leave me alone or something!"

"Seiichi-sama, please do not talk to me. If they think I'm with you, they'll no doubt start attacking me as well. I'm a tree, an ordinary non-talking tree. Understand?"

"I'll chop you into fucking firewood!"

I told it too! I knew they'd never let me in!

Finally, it sighed. "I suppose I'd best talk to them."

"You should've started with that!"

It ambled over to the gate on its root-legs. "Please let us in. I'm an ordinary and perfectly harmless tree!"

"Ordinary?" I muttered under my breath.

"Wait," called a guard. "All the trees Her Excellency's been using in the war have a special marking on them. This one's unmarked!"

"Oh dear." The tree shifted a step back.

"Kill the tree! Kill them both!"

"I fucking knew it!" I wailed.

Ordinary tree, my ass! You have a human face!

The waves of arrows from the wall grew even greater, and my fears that they'd run out of arrows altogether increased alongside it. Finally, the gate's eyes widened.

"Hm? Hmmm?! Cease fire! The tree moves with the same power that I do!"

"What?!" shouted back the guard captain in astonishment.

"You're saying Her Excellency used her power out in the forest without us knowing?"

The hail of arrows stopped, meaning that I could finally breathe again. I shot the tree a dark look.

"I knew they wouldn't just let us in."

"How odd... I was quite popular in the woods. All these poor souls must be horribly out of the loop."

"Who the hell do you think you even are?!"

Trees are poplar, not popular! God, my head hurts!

I managed to bundle up all the arrows they'd shot, even though there was more than I could carry in both hands. When a squad of guards emerged from the gate a minute later to investigate, there was a tower of the projectiles taller than I was.

"Hey, those arrows..."

"You should have them back," I said. "They were intended for whoever you're at war with, not me. I tried not to break any, but I'm afraid not all of them made it."

They stared at me, speechless.

Wait, do they not need these arrows back or something?

Their leader finally regained his senses, turning to the tree. "Where'd you come from?"

I scratched my head. "Jeez, how do I put this... I accidentally ran into a lady I think was your empress in the woods. She thought I was suspicious, so she

woke this tree up to keep me away.”

The tree puffed out its chest with pride. “An excellent choice on Her Excellency’s part, I must admit. I was the only one capable of stopping his pursuit, no doubt.”

“I hate that I can’t argue with that,” I grumbled.

The guards seemed more confused now than before, but after exchanging glances with each other, they led us forward, even though it felt like we were getting arrested. We stopped just before the gate, at which point one guard broke off to talk with another soldier. I watched as the soldier nodded and ran off. I got the impression he was going to fetch one of his superiors.

The guards had plenty of questions for us while we waited. They asked what country I was with, what I was doing here, and anything else they could think of to help them piece together who I was. I answered everything truthfully, but I could tell from their growing irritation that I wasn’t giving them the answers they were seeking. When I mentioned the crystal I’d taken from Destora to get here, their expressions became grave, and they sent off a second messenger on the spot. The questioning ended before their superior arrived, so we had to awkwardly wait outside the wall.

“I thought you said I could go right in if you were with me?” I whispered at the tree.

“Of course.”

“How do you explain all this, then?”

“What are you referring to? I would’ve had no difficulty. It’s your own fault for being so suspicious.”

“Fair, I guess... but I don’t think they’d let a whole-ass tree walk on in.”

“Of course they would.” It turned to the closest guard. “Isn’t that right?”

He scoffed. “No way.”

“What?!”

I knew it, this had no chance of working from the very beginning... At least we’ll get in eventually this way.

We chatted with the guards a while, but the peace was broken by a barking shout from behind the gate.

“It’s you!”

“Huh?”

I turned to find a familiar lady in armor, Leyll-san, glaring furiously at me. Not only that, but they must’ve also been extra wary of me, as I could feel someone standing behind me now, being very careful to avoid attention. It was probably the spy they’d met up with before.

“Tell me why you’re here,” Leyll-san demanded. “Or are you simply here to meet your death?”

“What? No, of course not! I don’t wanna die at all! I’m just here because the tree thought I could help your empr—er, Her Excellency.” I glanced at the tree. “Right?”

The tree dropped its gaze in silence.

“Uh... hello?”

“Don’t talk to me,” the tree whispered. “Now that I think of it, I defied my orders. I’ll be yelled at, for sure. Please pretend I’m ordinary vegetation.”

“I tried to tell you that before, y’know.”

They wouldn’t believe that a tree would suddenly grow so close to the walls, anyways.

Leyll-san stuck her nose in the air. “Verily, I can sense Her Excellency’s power in that tree. I have no doubt it was the one told to hold you back. Speak, tree, why did you bring the stranger here?”

“I’ve been discovered!” The tree began to quiver.

“Did you really think that’d work?”

I don’t know if it’s smart and annoying on purpose or just incredibly stupid... Not that I’m one to talk. I went along with its harebrained scheme.

Its guise broken, the tree looked right at Leyll-san. “I was born of Her Excellency’s power, and my will remains one with her own. I was convinced that

only Seiichi-sama could save you all, so I escorted him here posthaste.”

“What? This cretin, save us? Inconceivable. No one man can change this war. We’re already lost.”

I could see the pain on her face, but when she turned back to me, she was all anger again.

“So? Identify yourself! I heard tell you’re an adventurer.”

“Well...”

I explained everything that had happened to me so far in the Sealed Woods.

When I finished, she nodded slowly. “You claim to be here because of an Apostle of the Cult of the Wicked One, then?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“So, you’re their ally?”

“Definitely not. No way I’d team up with a bunch of sadistic freaks like that.”

I mean it, I’m beginning to hate this Wicked One or whatever by association.

“Are you Kaizellian, then?” she asked bluntly.

“Kaizellian... as in, from the Kaizell Empire? I don’t know where you got that from, but... no?”

Leyll-san glanced at whoever was behind me, and I could sense the air lighten significantly.

“You certainly seem to be unaffiliated.”

“Huh?”

“Very well. Come with me.” She looked back at me only briefly as she began to lead me onward. “I’ve no idea what that tree sees in you, but I shall make it clear that you cannot help us, if nothing else.”

The gates opened, and finally I was allowed within.

Chapter 11: All Seiichi Can Do

“Hey, outa the way! I have injured here!”

“Where are the healing potions?”

“We’re almost out!”

“The Chamber of Healing’s full! We can’t take anyone else!”

When I passed through the gates, I was struck speechless by what I saw. As far as the eye could see, there were injured soldiers, lying bloody and beaten. Civilians, even children were walking among them, carrying supplies or assisting medics however they could. Each and every one of them was trying desperately to survive.

Leyll-san noticed I’d stopped to stare and snorted in derision. Our route was a little more roundabout after that, as if trying to prove there was nothing I could do for them at all.

“Understand now?” She stopped in the town square after finishing my tour, crossing her arms haughtily. “There’s naught you can do for us.”

I didn’t say anything at first as I looked about me. Then—

“I’m glad I can be of use to you.”

“... What?” Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, but she recomposed herself enough to glare at me a moment later. “Are you blind? What can one man do in the face of such despair, such violence? Look at the wounded. We have no potions left for them and no infirmary to hold them. Even now our enemies plot their next raid. There’s no time to let them rec—”

“Would this many healing potions be enough?”

I pulled all the potions out of my Item Box and laid them out for her to see. She went pale at the sight.

These Ultimate Healing Potions required Special Medicinal Herb that I hadn't seen since the Forest of Endless Heartbreak, but I was able to cultivate them in my Instant Farm alongside my Fruit of Evolution. I didn't have any reason for doing so, other than it felt like a waste to create a whole new kind of magic and only grow one thing with it. As an aside, said Fruit of Evolution was growing great, and I'd harvested so many already I doubted I'd ever find a use for them all. As for the potions themselves, I'd made them in bulk since I was totally new to compounding remedies, and I figured the practice couldn't hurt.

I'm glad that's paying off now.

Leyll-san stared for a long moment before slowly shaking her head. "I-I must be seeing things... How do you have so many so suddenly? Ultimate Healing Potions, no less, the stuff of legends...?"

"Oh, do you need more? I have plenty of reagents, so I can make more if you need. It'll take me about three seconds per potion, though."

Her jaw dropped so far I was afraid it'd dislocate. "Three seconds?!"

I took out the grasses and the equipment I needed, then activated my Skill and got to work.

Done! That wasn't even a full three seconds.

"Just like that. Oh, but I don't have anything to put it in, so can I borrow a bottle or something?"

Leyll-san grabbed me roughly by the shoulders, shaking me back and forth. "Who *are* you?!" My head was spinning so hard I couldn't think, but she didn't seem to even care. "You have this many potions and can make more so effortlessly... Are you a god? You're a god, aren't you?!"

"IIIIIIII'mmmmmm nooooooooooooooot!" I insisted through her shaking.

"Speak clearly, man! Tell me!"

"Thiiiiiiiis iiiiisn't faaaaaaaaaaaaaair!"

How's she expect me to reply like this?!

Beside me, I heard the tree chuckle.

“Heeeeeeeey, treeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Stooooooooop heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!”

“What? I couldn’t possibly. I’m just ordinary foliage, and I’m rather interested in what will happen to you next... You could say my curiosi-tree is getting the best of me.”

“Screeeeeeeeeeew youuuuuuuuuuuuu!!!”

I was starting to feel severely sick at that point. Luckily, the spy who’d been following us hurriedly emerged.

“Leyll, stop that! You’ll make him vomit!”

“What?” Leyll-san froze for a moment before casting me roughly to the ground. “How filthy!”

“C’mon, this isn’t fair!”

My head was still spinning so hard I couldn’t stand, so I had to sit there with my hands on the ground for a while.

Damn, that was close... I was just about to pull a tree and start filling teacups.

When my vision finally stopped swimming, I saw that Leyll-san was talking with the same black-cloaked figure—or rather, woman—I’d seen with her earlier in the woods.

A girl? I couldn’t tell back then at all. Is there some kind of Skill that makes your gender appear ambiguous or something?

Eventually, the woman in black noticed I was staring and offered me a hand up, smiling awkwardly. I let her help me to my feet, and she immediately dipped her head in apology.

“Sorry about that. Leyll didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

The knight snorted. “Why should I show consideration for such a suspicious individual?”

“These potions are his, aren’t they? You could stand to not antagonize him.” The black-robed figure turned back to me. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Swinn, and I work in espionage.”

I nodded awkwardly. “Uh... Nice to meet you. I’m Seiichi Hiiragi.”

“Great! It’s a pleasure, Seiichi-kun.” She turned back. “Leyll! Get over here and introduce yourself!”

“Fine. I’m Leyll,” she sighed, a tinge of guilt in her voice. “My apologies for losing my composure.”

Swinn-san nodded. “Great. Now that we know each other, can we ask for those potions now?”

“Of course, that’s what I brought them out for. I already told Leyll-san this, but I can always make more if you need them.”

“Great, thank you so much! One question, though... Can you use healing magic?”

“Yeah, sure I can.”

“Really? That’s enough potions, then. Can you come with me instead?”

“Swinn!” Leyll-san’s eyes widened with horror. “Where are you taking him?!”

“What choice do we have? Besides, if his potions are this good, his magic might be just as impressive.”

“That is hardly any reason to take him *there*. The potions will more than suffice.”

“That would take way too long. We can’t just wait around for everyone to take a sip; a spell could hit everyone in a single go.”

“But... but still!”

I sheepishly raised my hand. “Um... What do you want me to do, exactly?”

Swinn’s eyes widened. “Oh, right, sorry! I’d better explain everything. See, we want you to come to the Chamber of Healing and cast some healing magic.”

“Huh? But I thought magic doesn’t work here?”

“Yep. It’s the trees, they absorb all the mana right out of the air.”

I glared at the tree. “So, it was your fault all along!”

“Please, that’s no reason to yell at me. What good would yelling at nature do?”

“Stop making so much goddamn sense!”

Of course, yelling at trees won't make them change. They're trees, it's like getting angry at someone for breathing.

“Uh... Can I continue?” Swinn asked.

“Right, sorry.”

“No, it's OK! Basically, there's one place in the whole kingdom you can use magic normally, and that's inside the Chamber of Healing.”

“So, you can use whatever magic you want there?”

“Not quite, the mechanics of it are a little more complicated than that. Basically, you can only use healing magic there. That's why the only mages we have here are healers.”

“That'd make sense, yeah.”

That's some special place, then. I'm glad the only kind of casting there is useful, at least, and not something like offensive magic.

There was something more pressing in my mind, though.

“But are you sure about letting me in there?” I wondered aloud. “I'd be the first to admit I'm *really* suspicious.”

The tree looked at me in shock, as if surprised I knew that.

I'm not half as sus as you are.

Leyll-san frowned in consternation, but Swinn-san just laughed.

“I'm not worried! Believe it or not, I've been listening in on your conversation with Leyll-san since you were at the gates.”

I knew that, but since I didn't want to make things harder than they already were, I kept my mouth shut.

“Besides, I have a Skill called Eyes of Truth. I'd be able to tell instantly if you tried to lie to me, and so far you haven't even tried once. You're not our enemy, and you don't want to harm us, do you?”

“Of course not! The last thing I want is to hurt you.”

As I said that, Swinn's eyes lit up. She must've used her Eyes of Truth.

"Yep, you're not lying," she reported with a nod. "Since you're not against us, and we're so low on manpower, we could really use your help. That's OK with you, right?"

"I mean... if you're sure you trust me, then sure."

"That was the truth too, I see. C'mon, right this way."

With that, Swinn-san led me off to the Chamber of Healing. A few guards with lighter injuries came to take the potions I'd offered, carrying them away with extreme care as we passed out of sight. I took stock of the place again as we walked, and it became clear from how busy everyone was that they were on their last legs.

"By the way, I never got to hear it from your Empress last time I saw her... Where are we?"

"You mean this country?" Swinn-san asked. "We're in—"

"Swinn." Leyll-san cut her off sharply. "If Her Excellency elected not to answer, we must not do so in her stead."

"Uh, so it sounds like I can't answer your question. Sorry about that."

I sighed heavily. "Nah, it's OK."

So many secrets... I don't get the point.

"Can I ask something else? This place is your capital city, right?"

"That's right."

"If the capital's in this shape then I hope your other cities and villages are OK."

"Oh, no worries there. There's only one way to get there without going right through us here and that's by sea."

"The sea?" I blinked in surprise. "So, you're telling me there's an ocean just outside the Sealed Woods?"

"That's right. The waters near here are full of reefs and strong currents too, so sailing isn't really an option. That's why trading is so hard for us. We're almost totally cut off here, so we need to provide for ourselves."

Wow... This place is even more special than I gave it credit for.

I was relieved the other towns were safe, even if that meant they couldn't rely on outside reinforcements.

As we walked, I noticed where we were heading.

"Um, Swinn-san? Where is the Chamber of Healing, exactly?"

"You noticed, huh? It's right inside the jewel of our land, Karnya Castle."

Leyll-san huffed moodily. "That's *precisely* why I wanted him away from the Chamber."

She had a point, to be fair—in comparison, I'd been literally forced to go to the palace back in Terbelle.

Upon arriving at the gate, Swinn-san spoke to the gatekeeper.

The tree rustled its leaves to get my attention. "Seiichi-sama, if I may, I will be awaiting you in the courtyard."

"Huh? You're not coming?"

"I haven't the faintest notion of your expectations of me, but I am naught but a simple tree. It's high time I photosynthesized and took a nice, refreshing nap."

"Shit, you're right... I almost forgot you'd need that."

It's so unlike a normal tree, after all, what with all the talking and the moving. Maybe I'm crazier than I thought.

The tree had technically finished its obligation to me already, since it had already taken me to the capital in the first place.

"Wait... Does that mean you're going back to normal?" I asked.

"Who knows? Should it strike my fancy, perhaps."

"Your 'fancy'?!"

I thought it had a special job or something! Not that it matters, I guess... this whole exchange has been nothing but exhausting.

I watched as it casually lumbered into the courtyard and stretched out its branches blissfully in the sun. It was startlingly relaxed, honestly, given that its

creator was in such distress—though perhaps I was wrongfully forcing human values onto it. My guides exchanged troubled glances at the sight but said nothing. The tree wasn't who they needed, though, so they let it go and continued leading me onward.

The general layout and operation of the place was very similar to Terbelle's palace, but with enough style and decorative differences that I could tell we were in a foreign land. I couldn't get enough of it. I'd never even left Japan before this whole other-world situation, so I couldn't help but get excited, just like when I'd visited the palace in Terbelle.

Leyll-san narrowed her eyes at me aggressively. "Foul cretin... You're looking far too closely. What evil are you plotting?!"

"N-Nothing, I swear!"

Swinn-san chuckled. "You're getting paranoid, Leyll. He wasn't lying just now, so I'm pretty convinced he's harmless to us. C'mon, the Chamber's just over here."

Leyll-san said nothing but didn't stop watching me as we approached a set of heavy metal double doors. There was a guard here, too, and one quick word from Swinn-san was all it took to gain us entry. As we stepped inside, my heart sunk.

"Ugh... ah..."

"It hurts... Goddammit, it huuurts..."

"I can't see... Why can't I see...?"

"Aghhhhhh...!"

The room was full to bursting with injured, to the point that the makeshift hospitals outside looked tame. A small number of figures with white coats over their black military uniforms were frantically casting magic on everyone they saw—but there were too many injured, and the magic barely seemed to be working at all.

Swinn-san took in the sight with a pained frown. "This is where all the critically injured folks are. Not even healing magic's perfect, though... A lost limb

is lost for good. Each and every one of these men are heroes who fought and suffered for our sakes. Please, Seiichi-kun. I don't know how good your healing magic is, but if there's anything you can do, anything at all—"

"Saint's Restoration!"

I fired off an Ultimate-tier Light healing spell right then and there. The magic obediently took effect just as Swinn-san said it would, and mana flooded the room—and swept outward, even, enveloping what must've been the entire city in its warmth, despite such a thing normally being impossible. It bent the world smoothly to my will, which was to heal all of this country's soldiers while leaving their enemies totally unaided. I hadn't held back, either, due to the sheer number of injured and the severity of their wounds. Hopefully, it would be enough to reach everyone. I felt a little bad since that meant the healing potions I'd given them would be useless, but replenishing their stores a little couldn't hurt.

Everyone in the Chamber of Healing, mages and patients alike, stopped and stared at the might of my magic for a long moment. Then the whole room came alive at once.

"H-Hey, buddy, your wounds are gone!"

"I-I can move it... I can move my hand again!"

"I can see! I can see clear as day! I never thought that would be possible!"

"Holy shit, even my old scars are disappearing!"

"It's a miracle... He must be a miracle worker!"

"I can't believe it... Wahhhh!"

Everywhere I looked there were teary eyes, smiles, and celebrations.

This is so much better than all that doom and gloom a moment ago. Man, I love it when people smile.

With my task done, I turned to face Swinn-san and Leyll-san.

"Is that good enough, Swinn-san?"

They both only stared at me.

“Oh, and I managed to heal the soldiers outside here too. You probably won’t need the potions now, but please keep them for your medicine stores. They never go bad, so you can store them as long as you want or need.”

God, it feels good to do good!

I’d done nothing but fight lately, the world itself was catering to me, and I was getting more absurd by the minute. I was due for a little treat, and nobody would complain about me helping them. It was the perfect plot.

I finally noticed that Swinn-san and Leyll-san were silent, so I leaned in a little to get a closer look and make sure they were OK.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!” they cried in unison.

“Whoa! What’s wrong?!”

Leyll-san snatched me by the shoulders again, shaking me even more violently than before.

“Who in blazes are you?! You’re a god, no doubt! You must be! Tell me it’s so!”

“If I aaaaaaaaaaaaam, then why are you shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaking meeeeeeeeeeeeeee?!”

I’m not a god, of course, but if I was, she definitely shouldn’t be shaking me... Ugh, I’m gonna barf for real this time.

She let me go with disgust, like she was dropping a piece of shit, but I didn’t have time to relax as Swinn-san grabbed me a heartbeat later.

“S-S-S-S-S-Seiichi-kun?! What in the world was that?! How did you regrow all those people’s limbs?!”

“Swiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinn-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!
Stoooooooooooooooooooooooooop!!!”

What the hell, Evolution?! Why the fuck aren’t you adapting me to this?! I’m about to spew chunks, and then my social life here will be totally ruined!

>Skill: Evolution has been activated. Now adapting your body.

“So now you activate?!”

I wasn't expecting that to work, but sure enough all my queasiness disappeared in a flash. Swinn-san was still shaking me like a rag doll, though.

"I-I didn't want to have to heal everyone individually, so I decided to do it all at once."

"How? *How* did you do that?!"

I literally can't phrase it any more directly than that.

I didn't know the mechanics of how it happened, but that could probably be chalked up to the world bending the laws of nature for me again.

I can't believe that's something I can say that's true.

"Oh, one more thing," I added. "I think I healed everyone's scars, too, so I hope I didn't heal any that were left on purpose. I was in such a rush to make everyone better, I didn't even consider that."

"You're strange... *Incredibly* irregular," Leyll-san muttered through her frown. "What's happening? Who is this man? W-We could've been in grave danger earlier... and there's no reason to believe we aren't in danger still."

"C-Calm down, Leyll." Swinn patted the knight on the back, still shell-shocked herself. "How am I so calm? That really did work, somehow, though how I can't begin to imagine... Seriously, who is he?"

"How should I know?!" Leyll-san snapped before whipping back to me. "Answer me, maggot! How is this possible?!"

"I think you're both overreacting!"

I can't explain it, they saw everything that happened with their own eyes. If I had to add anything...

"I guess I don't know what normal's supposed to be anymore."

"What does that even mean?!"

Hell if I know! What'd I do to lose track of normalcy this bad? Is it scared of me? Is this some kind of hide-and-seek? I don't care if I win, I just wanna be normal again!

Leyll-san fixed me with a grave look. “Listen well. First, the potions. Ultimate Healing Potions are far from the norm. Most potions are simple, capable of closing wounds once imbibed. Yours, however, can instantly heal any injury in the blink of an eye.”

“Yeah. That’s why I got so many of the Ultimate ones.”

“Granted, we appreciate that. But now we reach the matter of your magic. You managed complete regeneration and on a citywide level, no less. Words cannot begin to describe what you’ve accomplished. One can do naught but laugh.”

“Uh... OK.”

Why isn’t she laughing, then?

“One thing alone is clear. You are an abnormality, an aberration of the natural fabric of the universe itself.”

“WHYYYYYYYYYYY?!”

What’s wrong now?! Just when I was convinced this was fine too!

“Yes, an oddity in the supreme,” she continued in a troubled murmur. “Common sense would dictate one market-variety potion would heal several if rationed, and one mage may heal three at most at any time. Even then, they could only relieve pain, not heal.”

Swinn-san nodded. “Couldn’t put it better myself. I’m not about to complain about how abnormal you are, though. You’re the reason everyone’s OK now.”

“Well, excuse me for being a freak!”

Fine! If reducing myself to tears can help everyone else, I’ll do it as many fucking times as it takes!

The tears were still streaming down my face when a familiar face appeared at the entrance to the Chamber of Healing.

“Seiichi-sama, I take it you’ve finished? You’re done, no doubt, as I could feel your magic from where I was sunbathing. You’re quite the abnormality, aren’t you? So thoroughly unbalanced. It’s quite the responsibility.”

“Can you at least say hello before you rip my heart out?!”

It was the tree, of course, there to finish me off.

What does it mean, “responsibility”?! I’m not that “unbalanced,” am I?! That’s the last thing I want to be known as! God, I bet I’m the only person in the world who gets this shitty-ass treatment!

“What’re you even doing here?” I asked it. “I thought you were waiting outside.”

“I was bored.”

“You literally spent your whole life until now doing that!”

Isn’t photosynthesis all a tree’s supposed to do?

“Now,” it continued, “with the most pressing issue out of the way, I suggest we proceed to the next item on our agenda.”

“Wait, next?!”

It wants me to do more? What’s there even to do?

The tree furrowed its leafy brow. “Of course. There is one more pressing matter to attend—”

“—What commotion is unfolding in Our halls?”

Everyone dropped everything to look at the speaker. There, standing in the chamber’s doorway, was the woman they called the Empress.

Chapter 12: The Great Varcia Empire Team Up

“Leyll, Swinn, answer Us. What is the meaning of this?”

“Uh...”

“Y-Your Excellency, it’s rather complicated...”

Everyone in the Chamber of Healing, from the recovered soldiers to Swinn-san and Leyll-san, exchanged baffled glances. None of them knew where to start, it seemed. I felt someone staring at me, and I turned to find the Empress regard the tree and me with suspicion.

“You... What are *you* doing here? We breathed life into yonder tree and commanded it to cease your advance—no, what is the tree doing here? Does Our will have no import upon you?”

The tree clamped its eyes shut and muttered to itself, “I’m a tree, I’m a tree, I’m a tree, I’m a tree, I’m a tree...”

“Who gave life to you?!” the Empress demanded. “We can hear your every utterance!”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

I wasn’t surprised its attempt to play dead failed, but its scream was more than a little jarring.

Rest in peace, buddy.

“And you!” She fixed her gaze on me next. “Do not think you have escaped Our notice. We demand to know what you did.”

I could tell she wasn’t going to leave me alone until I gave her an answer she was satisfied with. I didn’t have anything to hide in the first place, though.

“Uh... Basically I was brought here, saw all the hurt people, and I didn’t like that, so I healed everyone.”

“You healed... *everyone?!?*” She looked around the chamber at the soldiers, studying each in turn. All the composure left her face and she started muttering to herself, “What the fuck? How did... This place was like hell last I checked. What, is this heaven or something? Did I fall asleep and end up in heaven?”

“Oh, and I gave the guys outside a bunch of Ultimate Healing Potions,” I added. “I bet everyone’s all healed by now.”

“OK, seriously, what is your damn deal?!”

Swinn-san’s brow furrowed with worry. “Your Excellency? Language?”

The Empress’s eyes flew open, and she cleared her throat before continuing, “Ahem... To think that such a miracle could have transpired while We slumbered. Come to think of it, most of Our exhaustion from the use of Our power has already faded...”

“Um... Your Excellency?” Swinn-san sheepishly stepped forward. “I should mention that when Seiichi-kun here cast that spell, it affected the whole capital. I think that’s probably why.”

“God, what the hell *are* you?!”

Tears welled in the Empress’s eyes as she shouted. I didn’t know how to reply to that.

Honestly, I’ve been wondering that myself. Was “human” even applicable to me at this point?

Seeing its chance, the tree prostrated itself before its liege. “Your Excellency! I was the one who led Seiichi-sama here! So, was I useful to you?”

She only raised an eyebrow. “This doesn’t change that you did exactly what I told you not to.”

The tree slumped sadly. “Oh.”

I swear, this thing’s getting more and more human...

“Seriously, though, what’s going on here?” the Empress continued. “I’ve been running myself ragged trying to prevent everyone from dying to the Kaizell Empire, but I take a nap and everything’s just... fixed?! That’s sus as hell!”

Leyll-san bowed her head and sighed. “I must agree, Your Excellency.”

“Why’s everyone ganging up on me?!” I cried.

Not that I care, as long as nobody’s hurt anymore.

The Empress shook her head with disbelief before turning to me again. She seemed significantly less angry now.

“It seems We owe you an apology. We request that you—er, can you just tell me your name?”

“Uh... You dropped your pompous manner of speaking again.”

I’d introduced myself back in the Sealed Woods, but given that she and Leyll-san had both been at my throat, I wasn’t surprised she didn’t remember it. The least I could do was repeat myself.

“I’m Seiichi Hiiragi, an adventurer. I explained my circumstances to Leyll-san and Swinn-san already, but basically, I was exploring a dungeon that appeared just outside Terbelle in the Kingdom of Windberg. We ran into an Apostle guy from the Cult of the Wicked One, and after beating him, I went through his things and found this weird crystal. It broke, and the next thing I knew, I was in those woods.”

“Wow... that was both more intense and less helpful than I was— Ahem. We are Amelia from Varcia, Empress of the Varcia Empire.”

“Huh? The Varcia Empire?”

Isn’t that where Helen’s from? She said she needed to get stronger so she could come back here, and that’s the only reason we were in that dungeon in the first place... What are the odds?

Amelia-sama gave me an inquisitive look. “Is something the matter?”

“N-No, I must be overthinking. Everything’s good.”

There was no point mulling over reasons and connections when there was work to be done.

“Allow Us to thank you, Seiichi,” Amelia-sama intoned. “We cannot offer you proper gratitude now, so We hope you will be content to wait... assuming she

returns home safely, of course.”

“Uh... what’s that supposed to mean?”

Her brow knitted with defeat. “You are surely aware that Our empire is under siege. There are two forces intent on claiming Our lands for their own. The first is the Kaizell Empire—but the latter and more worrying is the Cult of the Wicked One.”

“Wait, there are two enemies?!”

What’d these poor people do to make such nasty enemies?! They’re both the worst!

“We gather you have personal motives for opposing the Cult?”

“Something like that... More like they bother me everywhere I go.”

I would give those asshats a wide berth if I could, honest. I don’t know who their evil god is, and I don’t see why I should care.

“Those are the two foes we now face.”

“So, all the wounded soldiers around are from that?”

“No, the bulk of the blame lies with the Kaizell Empire. They have made all their men Transcendants through means unknown and number at least a thousand strong.”

“Whoa... I’m surprised you’ve held out so long.”

“The Sealed Woods have served well as Our shield. Their attacking force possesses no means of ravaging great numbers without magic, and the darkness and gnarled roots of the forest floor impede their every step. Furthermore, while the native monsters are normally a source of great frustration, We have succeeded several times in baiting them to Our foes.”

“Oooh, that’s smart!”

“The issue, however, is the Cult of the Wicked One. They perceive this war as nothing but a tool for their own selfish ends. They have routinely used odd magics and medicines on the monsters, making them far larger and more violent than usual. The culprit thus remains beyond Our reach.”

“Wait, so how do you know the Cult’s behind it? Sure, it’s their style, but that’s not proof.”

“To put it simply, they have long crept in the shadows of Our realm, causing many such dilemmas over the years. We have sought after them time and time again to no avail. Their motive is reputedly the gathering of negative emotions, though We know not how or why. We believe they are using the war to gather such energy and have thus reemerged after a lengthy period of inactivity. Loathe as We are to admit it, Our lands are now rife with such negativity.”

“Your Excellency...”

Leyll-san and Swinn-san looked on with worry when Amelia-sama choked out those words. As soon as the Empress noticed, however, she swiftly recomposed herself.

“Nevertheless, We will hold strong. Forget what you saw.”

“Uh... Sure.”

I didn’t know what the problem was, but I’d forget it if she insisted—or rather, I’d try not to think about it.

“Now, We must return to the matter at hand... We were talking of a proper display of gratitude, were We not?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Despite your efforts with your potions and healing magic, Varcia’s situation remains dire.”

“That’s not true, Your Excellency!” shouted one of the recently healed soldiers.

“We can still fight!” echoed a second, to rising cheers.

“Yeah! We’ll rout those Kaizellians for sure this time!”

“We’re still going strong! We haven’t given up yet!”

Amelia-sama firmly shook her head. “Impossible. Even with Our strength, We lack the manpower for victory.”

“But that’s—”

“Can you truly claim it to be possible? We have no allies, yet the Kaizellians possess endless legions of reinforcements. Should they choose to attack with greater numbers, crashing upon Us through the trees as a wave of humanity, We would lose with absolute certainty.”

“Still—”

“Still what? They have the resources of endless fallen domains. Their lands encompass every known country, save Our own Varcia Empire, the Kingdom of Windberg, and the distant Eastlands. Our supplies dwindle with every skirmish, but they possess endless amounts of anything they could need.”

With that, even the most defiant soldiers were silenced by Amelia-sama’s words.

“Consider the strength of their men as well,” she continued. “We did not realize the disparity before now. We had believed in Our victory when We rejected their offer of Our surrender. Our country possessed so much power, including the elite soldiers under Our command. We were conceited, believing no invader could breach Our walls... but We were fatally mistaken.” She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before addressing her men again. “We must apologize, friends. Our foolishness has commanded a mighty toll. The weight of what must be done is Ours alone to shoulder.”

“What must be done...?” Leyll-san’s eyes widened with horror. “Your Excellency, you mustn’t!”

Amelia-sama shook her head firmly. “Our decision has been made. The Varcia Empire—no, Amelia from Varcia will surrender to the Kaizell Empire.”

The Chamber of Healing was enveloped in an almost deafening silence for a long moment. Then— “Y-You mustn’t, Your Excellency!”

“We can still fight!”

“This is our fault, if anything! Please don’t blame yourself!”

“Please reconsider!”

Leyll-san and the soldiers all pleaded and clamored to convince her otherwise. Swinn-san kept watching her in silence from the sidelines, a conflicted look in

her eyes.

“We cannot allow anyone else to suffer.”

“But, Your Excellency!” Leyll-san pleaded.

“All will be well, We guarantee it. Besides, Our bloodline will not end with—” She stopped, staring off into the distance for a long moment with a ghost of a smile before going stone-faced again. “We will make for the Kaizellian war camp on the morrow with the intent to surrender. Rest assured, Our life will ensure your safety.”

Again, silence. Nobody could tell her otherwise... or so I thought.

“No... No, Your Excellency, I refuse!”

Amelia-sama blinked in shock at the dissenter. “Leyll?!”

The knight had tears in her eyes, and her lips were narrowed into a thin, determined line.

“Leyll, We have ordered you to—”

“I refuse to listen! This alone is an order I cannot abide by!” Tears poured down her face as she shouted, “I’ll be by your side, Your Excellency, until death takes me! You cannot simply cast me aside to fight alone!”

Swinn-san nodded. “You’ll have me as well, Your Excellency.”

“Leyll... Swinn...”

The soldiers began to holler behind them.

“You aren’t in this alone, Your Excellency!”

“We are your sword, Your Excellency! Your shield!”

“We’ll follow you to the grave! I’ll swear my fealty to you again if I have to!”

“Please, Your Excellency!”

“Your Excellency!!!”

The soldiers dropped to one knee. None remained standing. The sight drove Amelia-sama to tears.

“Idiots... You’re all so, so stupid. You could all be saved. I might be the only one who has to die...”



All the Empress's imperial regality was gone, and she was left as just an ordinary girl.

Swinn-san smiled at her. "Your manner of speech is off again, Your Excellency."

"Sh-Shut up! Whose fault do you think that is?!" She frantically wiped her tears away to hide them. When she'd composed herself again, she had a look of fierce determination instead of defeat. "We must thank you all... We appreciate your faith in Us greatly. We shall fight until Our last breath, this We swear!"

"YEAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!"

Their cry shook not only the Chamber of Healing but the entire palace. Each raised their weapons above their heads, and Amelia-sama watched over like them like a victorious general.

"This country's really something," I whispered to the tree.

"I would expect nothing less from my master's domain!" it boasted back.

I watched the scene warmly for a while until Amelia-sama walked over to us.

"You... no, Seiichi-dono."

"Huh?"

"What will you do now?"

"Uh... Could you be a little more specific?"

"You have sworn no allegiance to Us and hold no fealty to Our banner. Your very presence in these lands is unintentional. You have no obligation to fight alongside Us."

"I guess..."

She's totally right there.

"Besides, you have already aided Us greatly with your potions and magic. You may be content in leaving the remainder of this fight to Us."

Swinn-san nodded. "The Kaizellians have pulled back, too, so you should be able to slip out if you're careful. I heard you even rendered the guards' arrows

harmless at the gates, so you'll probably be fine even if they find you."

"Yeah, probably."

"You have no doubt left people behind in coming here," Amelia-sama added. "You would be wise to hasten to their side."

Her words made me think of Saria and the others.

"No..." I shook my head. "No, the tree here brought me here because it thought you needed help."

"What?"

"That's not all either. I know that when we first met, I kind of... A-Anyhow, I owe you a proper apology for that, so I'm staying."

She looked at me blankly for a long moment. The second she remembered what I was alluding to, however, she went beet red.

"F-Forget that! Forget everything you saw! Forget that happened at all! If you don't, I *will* have you put down!"

"Uh... I'll try to."

"Don't just try to, just do it! I'll make you forget by force if I have to!"

"P-Please don't."

What does she mean, "by force"? She's talking as though she'll rip my head clean off...

"Whatever!" She let out a huff of frustration. "If you're staying, I'll lend you a room. It's almost night, and I'm pretty sure the Kaizellians think we're on our last legs. They've been pretty keen on their war of attrition so far, so I seriously doubt they'll risk attacking us tonight. I don't know how well any of us will sleep, though."

I was sure night raids were always a worry in wartime, but I trusted her if she said there probably wouldn't be one. In fact, those sick bastards probably enjoyed tormenting the Varcians.

"Oh, and the Cult of the Wicked One's never attacked us directly, so I wouldn't worry about that either," she added. "Get all the sleep you can. Don't

worry, we still have guards on watch, and I'll have you beaten awake if we need you that bad."

"I-Is that supposed to help me relax somehow?"

I bet that'd knock the memories right out of my head. More importantly, though...

"Amelia-sama? I noticed you're talking casually right now..."

"Screw that! I'm officially giving up on that imperial shit around you. I don't care! You don't have to be so stiff either. Quit all that honorific nonsense. We're close enough to the same age, so just Amelia's fine."

Leyll-san's eyes bulged in horror. "Y-Your Excellency?!"

Amelia snorted back at her. "I don't have time for that nonsense, and I'm not going to get picky when he's risking life and limb for us. This isn't even a formal talk, is it?"

"I-I suppose not, Your Excellency..."

"We might as well, right? No harm no foul."

"Er... As you will," the knight mumbled weakly.

Amelia nodded assertively. "Good. Now, Swinn, get Seiichi to a room."

"As you will, Your Excellency."

With that, Swinn-san led me off into the palace's endless corridors.

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"... So basically, I'll be sticking it out for a little while. Someone's gotta help the Varcians fight off the Kaizell Empire."

"Can you just lead a normal life for one day?! Goddammit, Seiichi!!!"

I was using the Necklace to contact Saria and Al now that I was finally alone in my room, but Al was already shouting at me.

"You'd do the same in my shoes, right? These people are basically marching to their deaths. If there's anything I can do to help them, if I can save even one

life, I've gotta do it."

"Well, sure... Sure, I'd do what I could, but..."

"Trust me, I don't want to go to war. That's terrifying."

I'd been in plenty of sparring matches and fights with the Cult of the Wicked One, but fighting scared me, period. I didn't like getting attacked.

I could hear Al sigh on the other side of the Necklace. *"Fair enough. If you've decided, I ain't about to stop you. Just promise you'll come home OK."*

"Don't worry, I'm positive I will."

"Y'know, that'd sound fake from anyone except you."

"But we trust you!" Saria chimed in. *"Be careful out there!"*

I smiled. "Yeah, thanks."

I continued to tell them all I could about where I was and what was going on, but I remembered something was still eating at me.

"By the way, what happened to Destora?"

"We handed him right over to Landze-san!" Saria replied.

"Even the king's got a migraine over your bullshit," Al added. *"He said he doesn't get how any of this even happened."*

"No worries, I don't get it either."

Seriously, I'm getting sick and tired of dealing with crises no matter where I go.

"If Landze-san has him, we shouldn't have to worry. Besides, I bet Destora can't hurt anyone now with his power changed, even if he wanted to."

"Yeah, both His Majesty and I are still confused as hell about that."

"By the way, is Helen around? She still with you?"

I knew Helen wanted to get stronger to save someone in the Varcia Empire, so I was hoping to update her on the situation here.

"Yeah... 'bout that. The second we left the dungeon, she started hikin' for the Varcia Empire on her lonesome."

“She... what?”

“We tried to stop her!” Saria told me. “She said she’d already done what she was here for, though.”

I didn’t know whether to admire her initiative or lament her independent streak. If the people she cared for most were here, though, I wasn’t going to blame her.

“Dammit... I was hoping to fill her in on the situation here.”

“Fair ‘nough. Honestly, the second I knew you were there, I was sure all her work wouldn’t mean shit.”

“What are you trying to say?!”

That’s a horrible thing to say.

“Whatever... The battle’s probably gonna be tomorrow, so I’d better get to bed.”

“Yeah... you do that.”

“You’ll be OK, right, Seiichi?”

“Promise. G’night, you two.”

As soon as I broke off the connection, I slumped onto my bed, head buzzing with thoughts.

If we fight normally tomorrow, people are gonna get hurt—killed, even.

My spell Judgment would be able to take out all the enemy soldiers without having to worry at all, but since magic still wasn’t an option, I needed to think of some other way.

The tree said there had to be some personal reason my magic wasn’t working, right? Lulune said the world had its reasons and I have mine... or something. That seems impossible, though. I can talk to magic, sure, but I can’t talk with—I got a sinking feeling as I realized I had, in fact, talked to the world before.

I’m going to drop that whole line of thinking.

More importantly, I had to focus on the impending battle. I needed some way of incapacitating the whole enemy army, ideally without even hurting any of

them.

An idea hit me, an awful, gut-wrenching, impossible idea.

“Nononono... There’s no way.”

It was ridiculous, and I couldn’t imagine it working—but the worst part was that I could *feel* it was possible for me and without even pushing myself too hard.

I mean... can I really do it? The more I think about it, the surer I am. Do I feel ready for it? No, of course I don’t.

I stood up, slapping my cheeks a few times to psych myself up.

“After all the bitching I’ve done about missing normalcy, my own head’s getting away from me... Fine, then! I’ll show the world what a real human—whatever the hell that means—can do!”

With that, I crawled under my covers to prepare for the next morning.

Chapter 13: Solving Problems the Seiichi Way

While Seiichi and his allies were resting, the invading Kaizellian army was setting up camp in the Sealed Woods. After each man had pitched up his own tent, they pulled out their booze and began to celebrate, even though the real battle had yet to be fought, and they were in enemy territory.

“Damn, Captain, these forest-dwelling freaks are tough.”

“Hmph, you can say that again.”

The Kaizellian invasion force was led by Orlius Fencer, Captain of the First Battalion. Unlike the Second Battalion, the first was comprised purely of nobility. They were all, of course, Transcendants.

“Zakia, that worthless pile of shit,” Orlius grumbled. “It’s all his damn fault we’re piddling around in these boonies in the first place.”

“Yeah, that’s why I hate commoners,” his subordinate agreed. “All talk and no results, that’s what I always say.”

“Peasants should stay in the dirt where they belong. The only thing I ever wanna see from mine are their taxes.”

There were eager nods of assent from the rest of the force.

“By the by, Captain, you sure we shouldn’t attack them tonight?”

“Hmm...” Orlius took another swig as he mulled it over. “Nah, too much hassle.”

“H-Hassle?”

“C’mon, we all know it. His Majesty’s gone and made us all Transcendants. We could crush ‘em in broad daylight if we wanted to.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Drop the worried act, OK? Watch this.” He stood and walked over to the nearest tree, placing a hand on it. “Hup!”

The second he squeezed, his fingers tore through the living wood like it was paper. It was an easy feat from there to rip the tree up by its roots.

“Look at this! Witness this *power!* Even the impossible has become possible to us now. So what, if these creepy-ass woods don’t let us use magic? We have all the strength we need and more. Tell me, is there any man here worried for our victory?! Watch this!”

Still carrying the tree in one hand, he leaped a short distance from the camp, stomping to a landing where he left a mighty crater in the ground.

“Ahahahahaha! Damn, we’re like gods! Nobody can oppose us! Right?!”

The subordinate swallowed hard. “Y-Yes, Captain, I was wrong.”

“Good. So long as you’ve learned something.” Orlius cast his tree aside and sneered. “Sides, those shrIMPY Varcians are already outa options. They can’t even call for help, ‘cause the whole rest of the world is ours! Why rush to finish ‘em off when we can take our time enjoying it, nice and slow?”

The thought was enough to get the whole battalion grinning.

“By the way,” one asked, “are we getting any bonuses for wiping out the Varcians?”

“No worries there. Helio-sama promised me himself that when the country is ours, we can do whatever we want to their commoners. We’ve got a lotta fun ahead of us!”

“Hell yeah! That’s Nightmare-sama for ya!”

“Man, I’m pumped for this!”

Each of them began to fantasize about what they’d do with their own licenses to kill.

“Kekeke, exciting, right?” Orlius’s grin widened. “And get this—their Empress’s supposed to be drop-dead gorgeous, and they say all her closest advisors are women too. We gotta show them some special Kaizellian hospitality.”

“You sure we should be going after their top brass like that, Captain? Didn’t Helio-sama say the commoners only?”

The captain snorted through his drink, his face growing a shade redder. “Dumbass! His Majesty and Helio-sama are always hoggin’ the queens and noblewomen. That’s exactly why we’re gonna kill the Empress and aides after we’ve had our fun. We just gotta lie and say they offed themselves. Sounds reasonable enough, right? They ain’t got anywhere else to go, and a body’s a body. Nobody’s gonna care if we have a little fun for our troubles, right?”

If any of his superiors had heard, not even a man of Orlus’s status would be spared from punishment. He outranked everyone else there, however, and his squad was of much the same ilk as him. They had no desire to reprimand him between their drunken stupor and their own rising lust. Each was instead preoccupied with their own fantasies of how they’d make the enemy commanders theirs.

“I wonder how long they’ll last?” Orlus wondered aloud, running his tongue over his lips. “They might even come out an’ try to surrender.”

The thought of the Empress pleading on her knees before him pleased him greatly. He and his men drank their fill, jesting and laughing about their coming victory.

None of them expected the Varcia Empire would launch an attack on them that night. They knew the Varcians lacked the forces for such an assault, but even more than that, Orlus had grown careless. They were the hunters playing with their prey. The thought that their roles would reverse, that something more monstrously powerful than they could ever conceive would arise, was well and far beyond them. Even had they been keen enough assault the capital, their fate had been sealed when night fell.

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“Those idiots... They’ll get themselves killed.”

The cloaked figure clicked his tongue at the sight of Orlus and his men, drunk and sprawled about their campfires.

“Drat!” the figure cursed, casting his gaze toward the capital. “The Varcia Empire was on the brink of utter chaos just yesterday, but I underestimated the leadership of their blasted Empress... No matter. My mission within the Varcia Empire may have failed, but I can make use of this war still. Should the Varcians fall to the Kaizellian assault, prime negative energy is sure to follow.”

On the back of the figure’s hand was an odd symbol—the Servant’s Mark, sign of the Cult of the Wicked one.

“The Varcian Empire is still on high alert for me, though these miserable Kaizellian fools have distracted them enough for me to remain hidden. I will keep it that way, strengthening the monsters and these drunkards alike. Let the Varcians divide their attention looking for me further! It will only hasten their demise.”

He was the very Servant who had been tormenting Amelia for ages and who Leyll and Swinn were on constant watch for. Even the Kaizellian Empire was on high alert for the Cult.

“Of course, if they dare forget me, they’ll die in an instant.”

Losing focus even for an instant would provide a potentially fatal opening, one that the Servant would never miss.

He scaled a nearby tree before sitting to watch the camp.

“Come to think of it, Destora-sama was supposed to be here, wasn’t he? I wouldn’t need to skulk about like a rat if he were here...”

Destora was one of the strongest people in the entire Cult of the Wicked One, and his absence was odd.

“I suppose he must be a busy man... He must have received a missive from another Apostle. I’d best raise as much hell as I can on the off chance he arrives later.”

The hooded man decided to rest for his campaign the following morning. He wasn’t aware that the same excessive power would descend on him every bit as strongly as the Kaizellian invasion force.

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“All right, guess I’d better get to it!”

Early the next morning, I left the capital’s main gate to do a few quick warm-ups and to ready myself with the Rapier of Festering Hatred I’d dubbed Black. The Varcian soldiers had already begun preparations for the coming battle, and they shot me curious glances as they worked.

I guess I’m going behind Amelia’s back, so that’s fair enough.

“Right, I think the tree said something about a new request... I wonder what it was talking about?”

It had only led me to the Varcia Empire in the first place because it had wanted my help, and after I healed all the soldiers, it had sounded like there was something new it desired of me. I had no idea what it was referring to, so I made a mental note to ask it after I was done.

I ignored everyone who was watching me and got to work, leaping into the air high above the Sealed Woods’ canopy.

“Let’s see, where’s the Kaizell Empire’s camp? Oh, there!”

It didn’t take long to spot a big group of men in metal armor, not far from the capital’s gates. I figured it had to be them. I used Clairvoyance to scan the whole area, just in case there was anyone I missed. The soldiers were all together, just as I’d thought, but I picked up a very different reading from a single person. I checked their Status and confirmed they were the Servant who had been lurking about. He was close to the Kaizellian army, so it’d be light work to clean them all up at once.

I let myself fall from there, though I noticed the Varcian soldiers were staring up at me in shock, jaws on the ground.

If this shocked them, they’ll be totally floored by what I’m about to do now... Anyhow.

“Let’s get this over with!”

I tightened my grip on Black, kicking off the air to put myself behind the Kaizellians. The men didn’t even notice me, either due to my speed or the dense canopy between us. I double-checked where they were before I swung

Black a good deal clear of them. The attack manifested in a massive shock-wave slash, which smashed into the earth behind them and left a gaping chasm, leading slightly downward into the ground.

The force of the impact was enough to send the enemy force scrambling. None of them were able to predict where my attack had come from, however, as they looked in nearly every direction except up. I didn't want them scattering too much, though, so I hurried to finish my work.

"Hah! Hah! Hahhh!"

My remaining three strikes followed a similar pattern to the first but formed a perfect square around the Kaizellians and Servant both, trapping them. After alighting on the forest floor, I grabbed the section of the ground that had been isolated by the interconnected chasms. If I'd done it right, it would be free of the rest of the forest now.

"I hope I can actually do this..."

Still doubtful, I tried to lift—and the whole chunk of earth came up in my hands.

"Whoa... Holy shit."

Who'd have thought I could actually do it?

My plan was, in short, to cut out the swathe of ground the bad guys were on and safely carry them somewhere else. It was a ridiculous plan that only I could make possible.

As I hoisted the chunk of ground above my head, I got a good sight of the massive hole I'd left in the middle of the Sealed Woods. Luckily, my estimates were correct, and it was only a few dozen meters to the bottom at its deepest point.

"Um... Why doesn't this feel at all heavy?"

I could easily hold it in one hand, and I could barely feel its weight at all. It was even more worrying that the feeling didn't change when I let all the weight fall on one finger.

Jeez... When did I get this strong?

I felt I was being watched and turned to find the Varcian soldiers staring at me in a mix of awe and horror.

Same, guys, same!

I didn't want to stay handling that chunk of land forever, so I shouted back at the guards at the gate.

"Excuse me! I heard there's an ocean around here! Where is it?"

One of them hesitantly pointed. "Th-That way."

"Thank you!"

With that, I started carrying my payload toward the sea. I was toppling trees left and right with the sheer size of it—but I could worry about that when I got back.

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The Varcian guards could only watch as Seiichi walked off with a large chunk of the Sealed Woods in hand. None of them could comprehend what they had witnessed. Even after the adventurer had passed out of sight, the chunk of wooded earth was still visible over the tops of the trees, moving steadily onward.

It took a long moment for one of the guards to come to his senses. Fortunately, he was also their captain, and he hastened to issue orders.

"S-Snap out of it! You, run to the castle! Inform Leyll-sama... no, Her Excellency immediately!"

"Inform them? Wh-What do I tell them?!"

"I... I don't know!"

"What?!"

"Do you have any ideas? How would you begin to explain all this?!"

"Why don't you go tell her yourself, Captain?!"

“Impossible! What, do I tell them our guest flew off, cut giant gashes in the ground, and walked off with a huge section of the forest?! Even I don’t know what that means! Enough, men, back to bed! This is out of our jurisdiction!”

“W-We can’t just sleep! The Kaizellians are—”

“The entire Kaizellian assault force was on that land.”

The guard subordinates were silent. They looked in the direction Seiichi had gone, then back to their captain.

“Good night, sir!”

“Rest well, men!”

They all felt better, knowing the matter was well out of their hands. A few of them lingered behind to ensure the gates were watched, but the rest were far too mentally taxed by what they’d witnessed to do anything but return home to their beds. Only a single soldier, a little more composed and dutiful than the others, made for the castle to inform their leadership—though what he would tell them when he arrived, he had no idea.

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“Whoa, they were right! The ocean!”

I nodded in satisfaction at the endless expanse of blue before me, having left the Sealed Woods with no issues.

“I guess I just need to take this thing out into open water, so it doesn’t drift back, and leave it there.”

I activated my Garuda Boots and began walking over the sea toward the horizon. Soon realizing how long it’d take to get there and back that way, I broke into a run just slow enough that I didn’t jostle the forest too badly. Even that was an impressive pace, with everything around me whizzing by, and when I turned around a moment later, I couldn’t even see the continent.

No point getting surprised at that.

Just to be sure, I kept running until the sea below me was roiling and spinning. There were colossal whirlpools everywhere, and there was heavy rain and roaring thunderclaps. There was only one patch of open water that wasn't in absolute chaos. It was perfectly sized for the chunk of land I had, and the surface was almost perfectly still.

"Guess that's as good a place as any."

It was practically begging to be filled, like it existed for this purpose alone. I knew the chances of that being true were slim to none, but I figured it couldn't hurt to try. I slowly lowered the section of the Sealed Woods there to find that it fit like a jigsaw piece.

"Whoa."

I took one last look around at the ocean, just to be sure. Within one of the whirlpools, something like the tail of a massive dragon caught my eye. Elsewhere, I could see the faintest shadows of massive fish, nearly rivalling the new island's size.

"Looks good. Time to go home!"

I didn't know how they'd get home from here, but they were Transcendants, so I knew they'd figure something out. There was enough wood for a few boats or something, if they felt like it.

"I bet I could use magic out here..."

It would be easy enough to teleport back to Saria and Al, since I didn't have the Sealed Woods' anti-magic effect to worry about.

"I guess I should at least say goodbye to Amelia... That and I've gotta do something about that big hole I left in the middle of everything."

I decided to head back to the Varcia Empire. I figured I'd give the guards a heart attack if I just teleported right in, so I decided to aim for the stretch of sea just off the coast of the Sealed Woods. I could walk from there.

With that, I teleported back, arriving just where I could see the Sealed Woods on the horizon.

Chapter 14: An Unfair End

It came out of nowhere.

“Wh-What the hell was that?!”

Captain Orlius Fencer’s eyes snapped open at the impact, and he sprung to his feet. He and his men had gotten incredibly drunk and had slept like the dead, but this sensation was greater than any earthquake. The thunderous impacts repeated one, two, three more times, and were capped off with a much smaller rumble.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Orlius shouted over the din of his clamoring camp.

“Where’s the enemy?!”

“Cowards, attacking us while we slept!”

They fought desperately against their hangovers to gather information on this new attack, but the resulting chaos only scattered and confused them further.

“Calm the fuck down!” Orlius barked. “Shut the fuck up and follow orders!”

That was finally enough to bring his men under control, and soon they were assembled before him.

“I still don’t know what the hell those tremors were, but we all felt ‘em, right? We can’t advance on the enemy unless we figure this shit out. Squads One through Three, you check east. Four through Six go west, and I want Seven through Nine north. The rest of you go south. Find out whatever you can and report back here in two hours’ time, got it?!”

“Yes, sir!”

Their response was professional even if everything else about them was not, and they split up as per Orlius’s commands. Their movements were still scattered and amateurish, but Orlius barely noticed.

“Even if this is some weird-ass attack from the Varcians, we’re strong enough to beat ‘em all down. Those cocksuckers would struggle against even one Transcendant, and we’ve got a lot more than that. We just gotta figure out what’s goin’ —”

He didn’t get to finish. The ground itself wavered and shook beneath them, as if being lifted aloft. Though it was brief, it knocked Orlius clean off his feet.

“Fucking ass! What the hell was that?!”

He braced himself against the ground, waiting for further tremors but none came. Even looking around, he could find no signs of disturbance.

“Shit... Where are all these gods-damned tremors coming from? What’s going on here?!”

He stood and checked his surroundings once more, but again he came up empty.

“The fuck?” he grumbled.

Orlius’s complaint was almost instantly met with a torrential downpour. The sky, despite being clear seconds before, was covered with a thick blanket of clouds. Ceaseless thunder rumbled all around him.

“What the hell is going on heeeeeeeeeeeeeere?!”

He hurried to pitch his field tent, hoping to take shelter from the severe weather, but the ground was already slick with mud, and the sheer volume of rain made it impossible to see clearly.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck! Why’s all this shit happening to me?!”

His next step sent him sprawling face-first into the mud where his armor firmly found itself stuck. Eventually he pried himself out of the sludge and discarded his underclothes immediately after, trying to avoid the clinging chill they bore with them.

“G-Guh... C-C-Cold...”

The freezing rain had already soaked down to his bones, and his shivering grew with each passing second.

At this point, Seiichi had since placed the island into the middle of the stormy sea, and with it both Orlus's battalion and the unwitting Servant. What he hadn't realized, however, was that the air there was freezing. Drenched as he was, Orlus was far worse for wear.

"Wh-Why me... why me..."

He attempted to start a fire, but the wood was soaked through, and there was no remaining cover for it regardless. There were no other means of keeping warm, either, given the mana-leaching trees of the Sealed Woods still surrounded him. He was powerless to do anything but wait for his men to return.

Finally, one man broke through the trees, terror on his face. "C-Captain!!!"

"What did you find? Why is this happening?!"

"W-Well..." Whatever horror the messenger knew, it was enough to keep him from feeling the same chill as his captain. "I don't know how, but... we're somehow on the open ocean."

"We're... what?" Orlus replayed the man's words several times in his head. "The ocean?! Get your motherfucking eyes checked! We're on the doorstep of the Varcia Empire, in the Sealed Woods! We have to be, I still can't use my magic!"

"Th-There's nothing but water past the tree line, sir! Nothing but water and impossibly large whirlpools!"

"There's what?!"

Orlus was sure now, the messenger had lost his mind. Nothing he said could be trusted. He only had to wait for someone saner to return with the correct report.

"Captain!"

It was another messenger, who'd arrived from a different direction and a different squad, though he was equally soaked.

"Your report, soldier! Now!"

"I-It's the sea! We're somehow out to sea!"

“What the hell is going on here?!”

It should’ve taken any of them several hours to make it to shore, let alone into sea proper. To make the journey and return so soon was unthinkable. There were two reports now, however, of having spotted the ocean in less than two hours. None of it made sense.

“What the fuck is wrong with this place? What’re they doing to us?!”

Even as the others returned, however, Orlius received nothing but reports of ocean and whirlpools in all directions. His temper quickly reached its limit.

“Fuck this! Men, we’re falling back! Break camp immediately!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

The returned soldiers gathered their things, and by the time all the squads had returned, everything was loaded and prepared for the journey back.

“We’re going home,” Orlius muttered to himself, panic rising. “Home... Home’s safe. I’ll handle everything when we’re home...”

The cold was too much for his mind to bear, and his men had to half drag him back the way they’d come. It wasn’t long before their hearts sank.

“N-No...” Orlius fell to his knees. “This can’t be...”

There was nothing there but water. No shore, no path, only the endless freezing ocean. He looked in horror at the whirlpool that had replaced their route home, but the worst news was yet to come.

“Captain, look! O-Over there!”

“Huh?”

Orlius looked in the direction his subordinate was pointing to see a massive monster rising from the vortex. It was a serpentine dragon, its pale body easily long enough to envelop their whole forest.

“A-Ahh...”

Before he could even scream, more of them began to rise from the water.

“Grerererererrrr...”

“Gyaaaaaarh!”

“Gwoooooohhh!”

Draconic faces and tails rose out of the sea every which way. It was all Orlus could do to use Analysis on the first of them.

>SEA-DRAGON KING: Level 1,332

None of the soldiers could blink, let alone cry out. Their immense strength was meaningless before such a threat. They were scarcely over Level 500, and not only was the monster before them more than double that, there was a whole pack of them. Given the harsh rapids of the whirlpools, sailing off the island was impossible even without the dragons, not to even to mention swimming. Their one last hope, teleportation magic, was sealed from them by the accursed woods.

“Agh... Aaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

In the face of such impossible, overwhelming odds, Orlus followed his men into madness and despair.

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“No... this can’t be right! What in blazes is happening here?!”

While the Kaizellian military was investigating the source of the tremors, the Servant was in a similar panic.

“Why? What could’ve happened to put me in the middle of the ocean?! I was nowhere close before!”

He was positive he’d been traveling in the opposite direction of the sea, but for some reason he found the ocean in front of him.

“Drat! I didn’t bring a Teleportation Orb with me... Teleportation magic won’t work here either...”

He had been certain that Destora would arrive to deliver the killing blow to the Varcia Empire and hadn’t thought to bring any means of leaving the country himself.

“No... I can’t rely on Destora-sama to free me from this hell.”

He had no idea how, but they were somewhere far removed from the Varcia Empire. If Destora tried to teleport there, he’d find himself where the trees used to be, not in the middle of the ocean.

“Fine. If I cannot rely on items or outside aid, I’ll secure my freedom myself.”

The rain was coming down more heavily now, making it nearly impossible to see. He had no magic, and no teleportation Skills under these circumstances. The Servant’s options were to swim or to create a boat, somehow.

“Those whirlpools will be trouble, but if I can get past them, then—”

“Gweaaaaaaaaaargh!!!”

The hunting cry of a pack of Sea-Dragon Kings snapped him out of his thoughts. There were many of them, too many to count at once, all crying after their leader. The Servant couldn’t bring himself to move.

“Huh? Wh-What on... What are those monsters? How are there so many of them? How?!”

The sight before him was impossible. He had to be seeing things.

“I-I must be dreaming... Yes, I’m still asleep! That’s the only explanation for appearing in a sea of such titans. Haha, hahahahahahaha!”

The Servant laughed and laughed, shutting his eyes to the impossibility of his new reality.

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“Oooh, there’s the gates!”

After dropping that piece of the Sealed Woods into the ocean, I had an uneventful jog back to the Varcia Empire.

“Wow... I really took a chunk outa this place, didn’t I?”

I scratched my head at the massive hole of dirt in the middle of the woods.

“Yeah, I’d really better fix this somehow... There’s still a bunch of trees here, though, so I don’t know if there’s enough mana to cast anything.”

It was just an idle thought, but the mechanical voice in my head readily gave me the answer.

>Enough residual mana is in this area that casting should be possible.

“Oh, nice. I’ll just do that.”

Content with that answer and no longer bothered by talking to the voice in my head, I continued my stroll to the front gate. As soon as I arrived, however, Amelia ran out and grabbed me by the front of my robes.

“What in the world happened here?!”

“Wh-What?” I stared blankly back at her.

She pointed at the hole. “Why! Is the forest! Suddenly gone?!”

“Uh... Long story.”

“Fine, don’t explain! My men saw everything! What gave you the idea to tear up a whole section of the forest? Why did you go through with it?!”

“I... did it because I could?”

“That’s it! That’s the problem! How are you even capable of that?!”

She was screaming, head in her hands, totally inconsolable.

Um. Sorry.

I was planning on having the forest back to normal by the time she’d woken up, but given all the noise and theatrics, I shouldn’t have been surprised someone had roused her. Behind her, Leyll-san and Swinn-san were staring into the hole with dead eyes.

“Swinn... I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

“What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing.”

“Did you hear? He carved it out and carried it off.”

“Yeah, I heard. That’s not normal, right?”

“It’s not. I would be hard-pressed to even think of such a thing.”

“He did it, though.”

“He’s impossible by every measure... No, I’m sure he’s a god. Yes, that must be it. Nothing else could reconcile this with common sense. I refuse to believe he’s a normal human being.”

“C’mon, that’s just rude!” I wailed at them.

Sure, I’ll give them all that stuff about this being weird as hell, but she refuses to believe I’m human?! It literally says Human in my Status!

Amelia grabbed hold of me again. “Why’d you do this?! The forest was the only thing keeping the Kaizellians at bay! What the hell, Seiichi?!”

“I didn’t dig up the forest just for fun, promise. The invaders and the guy from the Cult were both right there, so I thought it was a good chance to kill two birds with one stone. I just... took the whole chunk of land and chucked it into the ocean.”

“I’ll be honest with you. I didn’t understand a single word that just came out of your mouth.” She had the same dead look in her eyes as Leyll-san and Swinn-san now. “Did you seriously think that was possible, somehow?”

“Um... It was, I just did it.”

“But how?!”

Trust me, I wish I knew. Who thought it’d be OK to give me so much power? I know this was my idea, but I low-key hate that I pulled it off.

“This is strange,” she muttered. “I’m not strange, am I? Am I? Can anyone carry around pieces of forest like that? You know what, I think I could pull it off!”

She turned to leave, but Leyll-san leaped after her. “Your Excellency! Please, return to your senses! Such a feat is impossible for mere mortals, I swear!”

“Really?” Amelia’s brow furrowed, her eyes still blank. “Seiichi did it, though. I can do it too, right? Anyone can. We just choose not to.”

“Your Excellency, no!” Leyll-san spun about to glare at me. “You foul wretch! You’ve broken her! You’ve convinced her that your nonsensical antics are the norm!”

“Wh-What if they are, though?” I cautioned.

“They’re not!”

Yeah, I knew that.

While Leyll-san chewed me out, Swinn-san managed to bring Amelia to her senses.

The Empress shook her head. “Gods, just talking to you makes my head hurt like crazy... Wait. I didn’t realize because I was so busy with the how, but does this mean the Kaizell Empire and the Cult of the Wicked One are both out of our hair now?”

Leyll-san and Swinn-san exchanged looks. “Oh.”

The guards around us likewise froze up, staring at me blankly.

“Y-Yeah, that’s right,” I replied sheepishly.

Everyone was dead silent.

Did I mess up somehow?

A moment later, the tree came out through the front gate, guffawing.

“Ha, hahahahahahaha! Seiichi-sama, whatever could have possessed you to do this?”

“Uh... I was kinda tired of the Kaizell Empire and the Cult of the Wicked One... and the Sealed Woods, to be honest, so I just threw them all into the ocean.”

“Ahahahahahahahahaha!” It bent over, laughing hard. “I was about to ask to... And to think you found such an eccentric solution! M-My stomach hurts... It hurts, and I don’t even have a stomach!”

“That reminds me, I think there was something you wanted me to do yesterday. What was it?”

“What was it?! Hehe, I was going to ask you to deal with the Kaizell Empire and the Cult both!”

“Huh?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? Your efforts may have healed Her Excellency’s men, but the fundamental issue of the invasion force and the war remained. I was planning on asking for your intervention, but to think you’d do so of your own initiative... and in such a creative manner, no less! Ahahahahahaha!”

It threw itself into a new laughing fit, rolling around on the ground. It was a disturbingly human thing for a tree to do. I couldn’t deny its words, though, especially not when I’d found the most ridiculous solution to the issue imaginable.

Amelia smiled thinly. “We were ready to give our lives for our country and our freedom... All that for nothing...”

There was a murmur of assent from the soldiers.

“I told my lover I might not come back alive...”

“I got all my affairs in order... I even arranged my will.”

“Idiot. But at least... at least you have someone to worry about you.”

“Damn, way to bring down the mood.”

Swinn-san bowed to Amelia. “Your Excellency, I believe now is the time for celebration.”

“Huh?”

“Reasons and methods aside, we’ve secured victory over all our enemies without a single casualty—er, without fighting. Anyhow, our problems are solved, so I believe we should be glad.”

“Yeah... Yeah, you’re right!” Amelia nodded slowly, the life returning to her eyes. She turned to address her men. “Listen well, subjects, one and all! As of now, the war is over! We... We are victorious!!!”

“YEAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

The cheers were almost deafening. Some guards were crying, even, embracing each other in bliss. It was good to be alive.

“Seiichi-dono.” Amelia turned to look at me solemnly.

I looked away from the soldiers. “Yeah?”

“Without you, there could be no happy ending. I’m... Thank you so much for being here!”

She bowed her head to me deeply.

Leyll-san noticed, eyes bulging as she hurried to her ruler’s side. “Y-Your Excellency, you mustn’t! You should not bow so friv—”

“Leyll... If I don’t bow now, to the man who saved us all, when should I? There’s no point to surviving this ordeal if I don’t show my proper gratitude.”

“Well... I suppose...”

“Actually, you’ve been giving Seiichi a lot of shit the whole time he’s been here. You could stand to apologize.”

“Y-Yes.” The knight faced me, gaze dropped uncomfortably. “I... My apologies for being so harsh to you. You have saved us, Seiichi-dono, and for that I owe you my most sincere thanks.”

Swinn-san followed suit, dipping her head to me. “I should thank you too. The only reason we’re together now—Leyll and I, the soldiers, Her Excellency—is because of you. Thank you.”

“Seiichi-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

“Huh?!”

I turned to find that the soldiers were assembled, gratitude in their eyes.

“It’s all thanks to you we can see our families again!”

“I can see my lover again!”

“I can... go back to my empty house, I guess.”

“Seriously, cut it out with all the gloomy shit!”

That one guy aside, they seemed really happy, and they bowed deeply to me.

“Thank you, Seiichi-sama!” they called in unison.

I didn’t know how to reply. I saved them because I couldn’t bring myself to abandon them, not because I wanted gratitude. Seeing them all so happy, though, made my chest swell with pride. It felt good to make a difference.

Amelia, seeming to recall something, turned to face the hole.

“Now, about all this...”

“Oh.”

The mess in their front yard sobered their celebrations instantly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fix it,” I told them.

“Huh?”

“I can’t guarantee it’ll be the exact same as it was before, though.”

“What are you even saying?”

Instead of wasting time explaining, I decided to just do it. I used Earth magic to create a mass of soil equal to the amount I’d taken, let it spread, and then smoothed it out with another spell.

“OK, time for the plants.”

I used a bit more magic to grow a bunch of random vegetation, making sure it was all nicely covered.

I turned back to everyone. “Does that look OK?”

Everyone was staring blankly at me, mouths hanging wide open. Then—
“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!”

When their echoing cries died down, the only sound left was that of the tree’s amused cackling.

Chapter 15: Helen's Homecoming

"Hah, hah..."

After Seiichi was teleported to the Varcia Empire, the remaining party of Saria, Al, and Helen handed Destora over to King Landzelf, and then Helen fled Terbelle with desperate fervor. Carriages only carried customers around Windberg, with none leading abroad since the Kaizell Empire's conquests had made such travel perilous. The Varcia Empire campaign was only the latest conflict in a string of wars. With Helen's new Transcendant status, however, she could run faster than any carriage ever could.

"Hahhh... Hahhh... Gh!"

The distance was too great to cover in a day or two, but her progress was hastened by King Landzelf allowing her to teleport to the Varcian and Kaizellian border. Even if they couldn't leave her in the Sealed Woods, it had been a massive time-saver. The trip would've taken her nearly two weeks otherwise, and almost all of it was through the Kaizell Empire's lands.

Because of the Sealed Woods, there was no official border on the Varcian side, and trading was rare to nonexistent. The closest she could teleport from Windberg was five days' walk from the Woods, but Helen thought that it would take only a day if she ran the whole way.

Finally, she arrived at the forest's edge.

"Hahhh... hahhh..." She stopped to catch her breath, looking into the dense trees. "Oneechan..."

She started running again as soon as she was able, but there were monsters lurking behind every tree.

"Bumooooooooorh!"

"Griaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

"Hisssssss!"

Monkey, wolf, and snake monsters assailed her endlessly. While she would have struggled against them once, she blew through them all like nothing.

“Get outa my way!”

It took only one swift flash of Wind-God and Thunder-God, “gifts” from Destora, to end them.

I’m so much stronger now. I can save oneechan now!

She was so focused on running that she didn’t notice the forest around her change from the Sealed Woods’ dense thickets to more regular forest trees and shrubbery. Then, at last— “I made it!”

After clearing the trees, she found the familiar sight of the main gates and Karnya Castle beyond them.

“Just wait, I’m almost...”

She trailed off as she realized there was a crowd assembled outside the gates.

“No!”

Is the Kaizellian army already here?!

Heart swelling with unease, she ran toward the group. She soon realized, however, that her guess was off the mark.

“Wh-What...?”

The closer she got, the more familiar faces she spotted. They weren’t Kaizellian soldiers but her beloved sister and her closest aides.

“What’s going on here?”

They looked tired but happy, and none of them appeared to be injured. As she puzzled over what could be happening, one of the people in the crowd noticed her.

“Whoa, look over there!”

“Hm?”

“Oh!”

Her sister, Amelia, widened her eyes in surprise. “Helen?!”

Amelia wasn't who she was most surprised to see, though.

"S-Seiichi-sensei?!"

He waved casually to her. "Oh, Helen! Haven't seen you since the dungeon."

"Haven't seen— What the heck are you doing here?!"

Helen stormed toward him, but she was cut off by her sister.

"Helen! Why are you here?!"

"O-Oneechan!"

Seiichi did a double take. "Oneechan? You're sisters?!"

They ignored him, however, embracing each other tightly.

"Oneechan... You're not hurt, are you? Promise you aren't!"

"I'm fine, really. What are you doing here? You ran away out of nowhere, and I haven't heard from you since."

"Oh... About that..."

Leyll cleared her throat. "While I don't want to ruin your long-awaited reunion, could we take this inside? We may not have the threat of the Kaizellians or Cult anymore, but I must remind you there are still monsters about."

Amelia nodded. "Yes, we should."

"That's fine, I guess." Helen shot a hard look at Seiichi. "Seriously, though, what're you doing here?!"

He scratched his head and smiled. "Wish I could tell you,ahaha!"

She had no reply for that. Leyll was right, though, so she let the matter rest while everyone headed inside. Most of the soldiers went home, though Amelia and her advisors led Helen and Seiichi into the castle. While they walked, Seiichi explained what had happened after he'd disappeared from the dungeon.

Helen pursed her lips. "So that glass ball broke, and you somehow wound up here?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

“How do you even know Seiichi-dono?” Amelia asked her. “You called him ‘sensei,’ didn’t you?”

“Oh, um... he was a teacher at the magic school I went to.”

Seiichi nodded. “I was only a teacher for a little while, though.”

Leyll and Swinn nodded with appreciation.

“I must imagine any class led by Seiichi-dono would be quite the spectacle.”

“Yeah, I’m curious what that was like.”

Helen shot him a look. “Seriously, what did you do to them?”

“Why does this have to be my fault?!” he retorted.

By that time, they had reached the castle gates, and Amelia led them to her private chambers. Amelia and Helen went to sit on one side of a table while Seiichi took the other. Leyll and Swinn remained standing, at attention behind the Empress and her sister.

“So?” Helen prodded. “You’ll explain yourself properly, right?”

“Um... explain what exactly?”

“Everything! Starting from the beginning!”

“Oh, OK.” He hurriedly nodded, a little intimidated. “So, when I first got teleported, I figured out I couldn’t cast magic pretty quick, which sucked. I got attacked by a huge herd of caterpillars after that, and they chased me off a cliff.”

Helen started massaging her temples. “Abnormal stuff right from the start. Of course.”

“I could hear running water from where I fell, so I followed it. Turns out Amelia was having a bath in the river, though...”

“I told you to forget that!” the Empress snapped.

“Do you want me to explain everything or not?!”

Helen sighed heavily. “Why is it always out of the frying pan and into the fire with you?”

Leyll frowned. “My condolences, Helen-sama. You’ve had to put up with him for far longer than we have.”

“Wait, what’s with all the pitying looks?”

Helen’s brow furrowed at the aides’ expressions.

Seiichi continued to explain everything that had happened, including his talk with the tree and his encounter with the guards at the front gate. After that, he talked about how he’d handed over the potions and healed the whole country, even regenerating people’s lost limbs.

Helen nodded. “Yeah, you’re weird as hell, Seiichi-sensei.”

“How?! I was just trying to help people!”

Swinn grimaced slightly. “You were a big help, yeah—big enough that we still don’t know what to make of it.”

Helen narrowed her eyes at him. “You didn’t do anything else crazy, did you?”

“‘Anything else’? I haven’t done anything, honest!”

Her expression didn’t change. “Really.”

“You don’t have to look at me like that!”

Finally, Seiichi explained what had happened to the Kaizellian army and the Servant in the woods.

“So, uh... I knew there’d be a battle as long as the Kaizellians and the Servant were still there, and I was trying to think of what I could do to help. The Sealed Woods were also irritating, so I cut out a whole chunk of the forest with all the bad guys on it. Then I just... left them in the ocean.”

Helen shook her head. “None of what you just said makes sense.”

Seiichi’s thought process had been eccentric enough that none of them could understand why he’d done it. He couldn’t even explain where the idea had come from. It was so odd that it took Helen a few minutes to figure out what his intervention had achieved.

“Wait... so there isn’t anyone left who wants to take us over?”

Amelia nodded thoughtfully. “That sums it up.”

Helen froze, staring blankly into space.

“H-Helen?” her sister asked nervously.

“I... Why did I even bother...?” She slumped onto the table. “Do you have any idea how much I worried? How desperate I was to gain the strength I thought I needed?”

Seiichi’s expression grew somber. “Oh. Sorry.”

Amelia pursed her lips. “All this time, we were of the same mind.”

“The same?” Helen looked up. “You too?”

“Of course. You get it, right? All our men were beaten up and about to die, and they were all healed in a heartbeat. I thought we were still going to lose, so I was prepared to give my life in exchange for our people’s. They all insisted they’d fight for me to the end, though.”

“Oh... I had no idea.”

“Not that any of that mattered in the end. I wasn’t expecting the whole enemy army to get thrown into the ocean... Honestly, I’m still not sure how to react.”

“Seiichi-sensei...”

“I’m really sorry, honest.”

He bowed apologetically as the sisters sighed in disappointment.

“We shouldn’t be too angry at him for helping us, though,” Amelia added. “I’m more grateful than anything.”

Helen nodded. “I guess that makes sense. It sounds like I wouldn’t have been able to do much, even if I had been on time. Thank you for that, Seiichi-sensei.”

Seiichi shifted his weight in his seat. “Oh, uh... you’re welcome?”

At least there was no collateral damage this time.

“Helen,” Amelia suddenly said. “There’s something I forgot to say.”

“Huh?”

The Empress wrapped her arms around her little sister. “Welcome home, Helen.”

“I... I’m home, oneechan.”

She returned the hug, hands trembling with long-repressed emotion.



Extra 1: Helen and Amelia

I, Helen Rosa, was born into the imperial family of the Varcia Empire. My dad was the Emperor, but my mother was a commoner, so I was forced to take her last name. Being of commoner blood never really bothered me, though, because Amelia always treated me well. We had always been together, no matter what we did, and I'd assumed we always would.

Then father ran away.

I was too young to understand back then, but father was a cruel man, and the people often starved under his rule. Discontent was on the rise, revolution on the horizon. It never came, though—father wasn't a fool, and he knew he would have to pay the price for his tyranny eventually. He took advantage of the fact that none of the commoners knew his face and fled with his ill-gotten wealth. He took both my and Amelia's mothers with him, even.

With the Emperor suddenly gone, there was no target for the revolutionaries, and even the neighboring kingdoms were sure anarchy would ensue. Oneechan stepped in, though, filling the power vacuum completely. She was of pure noble blood and preceded me for the seat of Emperor, but that was not a burden a ten-year-old should have to shoulder. Even so, she never complained once, and she put everything she had into being a good leader. She brought the Varcia Empire back from the brink of destruction, overturned father's corrupt policies, and personally earned the trust of her people.

I was far too young to understand any of that, of course.

"Oneechan, why won't you play with me?"

"Sorry, Helen. We can't play together like we used to."

"Why not?! You said we'd always be together!"

"It's my responsibility to keep our country safe. I don't have that kind of freedom anymore."

The sight of my sister, that sad smile on her face, pissed me off. It was almost as bad as father stealing away mother, and I hated the Varcia Empire itself for becoming my sister's prison. Most of all, I hated myself for being so endlessly selfish.

Slowly, I grew apart from Amelia. I wasn't treated especially poorly by anyone in the castle, and I spent my days drifting through my studies. One day, however, I realized something in my self-defense classes.

"That's it... If I become stronger, I can keep oneechan safe!"

By that time, I had finally grasped the situation she was in, and how selfishly I'd been acting for years. She'd sacrificed so much to protect me, so I threw myself into my studies to return the favor. I focused on self-defense in particular so that I could fend for myself. My sister had had the time to study but not to learn how to fight, and she relied on her childhood companions Leyll and Swinn to defend her. She didn't need to become stronger, and she already had her ability to animate things that could cover for her if need be.

Still, I believed that my personal strength would benefit the Varcia Empire, so I dropped my self-defense courses to learn all manner of combat techniques instead. I tried all I could to learn magic as well, even though we couldn't cast it in our home country. The results of that were abysmal, of course, and I showed no aptitude at all. The Sealed Woods barred most kinds of magic, but I knew healing magic could be used in the Chamber of Healing, so I focused my studies there.

I could tell I was nearing the limit of what I could learn on my own, however, so I told oneechan about my plans to enroll in the renowned Barbodel Magic Academy. It was well away from the Sealed Woods, and I was confident I could learn magic other than healing to help our country. Her response, however, was swift.

"No, you can't," she told me softly.

"Why not?!" I demanded.

"You're a daughter of the Varcian imperial family, just like me. I can't let you go off alone."

“I-I’ll take bodyguards, then!”

“Bodyguards? Do you think we have the money or the manpower for that? I can’t spare even a single guard or else we may well be invaded. Father left this country in tatters. If you leave, that may be all the opening our enemies need to swallow us whole.”

“B-But what if I learn all kinds of magic? That’d be useful to us, right?!”

“That’s a big ‘if.’ I’ve never heard of a Varcian learning anything except healing magic. We’re too used to the land here, for all the generations we’ve spent in it. You couldn’t learn to cast even if you tried.”

“How do you know if I haven’t tried?!”

“I don’t, but now isn’t the time. I swear it’ll be the first thing I do once the Varcia Empire is on its feet again.”

“That means I can’t protect you until then.”

“Oh, I’ve never thought you needed to. If anything, I need to keep you safe. You’re my only family, and I could never bear to lose you.”

I had no reply for that. She’d proven that I was just as childish and selfish as ever. I couldn’t stem my need for power, though, not after having my first taste. My mind had been made up.

I slipped out of the castle that very night and made for the Barbodel Magic Academy alone. I didn’t know how much trouble that would cause my sister, but I refused to let her continue coddling me. Barbodel was my only chance. I’d master magic and return victorious—if I was lucky, I could leverage the multinationalism of the school to build important connections. I knew that was a long shot, though, since I was never a very social child.

I knew oneechan would be furious when I returned. Perhaps she would disown me outright. But I fled Varcia for her.

Luckily, nobody at the academy recognized my name as Varcian royalty, and I had enough skill in my non-magical studies to enroll. My inability to cast quickly proved to be an issue, however, and I found myself in a bottom-rung class full of other magicless students. I was always serious about my studies, and

Beatrice-sensei did all she could for me, but I never managed to cast a single spell.

That was when the panic began to creep in. I almost gave up several times. My other classmates had no luck in their studies, either, and it seemed it would always be that way. My studies had another twist in store, however.

Seiichi-sensei showed up out of nowhere one day, and not only was he the most suspicious man I'd ever seen, he was taking over homeroom from Beatrice-sensei. I remembered being against that. After all, she had fought for us and supported us long after the other teachers dismissed us as worthless. He broke us out of our shells, however, and turned our world on its head in more ways than one. I still couldn't understand why he did what he did, or how. It seemed almost impossibly easy for him to teach us magic, to the point that all my effort felt like wasted time. I almost hated him for that.

At the end of the day, however, Seiichi-sensei left us so speechless that we had to accept him and his methods. I stopped thinking too hard about his antics for my own sanity. Even through all that happened after that—the Cult of the Wicked Ones' attack, the Kaizellian occupation of the Academy, and any number of other disasters, he effortlessly led us through it all. We always wound up better for it.

The Kaizellian attack came with news of the siege on the Varcia Empire, however, and my need for power became greater than ever. I decided to go with Seiichi-sensei, unlike my classmates. I thought I'd be able to get stronger with him, though I doubted I could become a Transcendant—and again I was proven wrong. I knew the Kaizell Empire had some secret method for achieving that, but I somehow just matched them instead of cowering with the rest of the world. Their methods, while unknown, felt sinister, but I somehow managed it through perfectly mundane means.

The nonsense never seemed to end with Seiichi-sensei. Even the battle with one of the top echelons of the Cult of the Wicked One was unfair. That man had power enough to take on the world and win. "Suredeath"? The only thing I was sure of was that we stood no chance. What I hadn't expected was that Seiichi-sensei would be the one to secure an effortless win.

I was beginning to feel that “unbalanced” didn’t begin to describe Seiichi-sensei’s insanity. There had to be some kind of new word that could describe him, since nothing I could think of came close. I had no idea how he’d turned such a graphic, violent power into something harmless and beautiful. I was especially confused since death itself had no effect on him—he touched it, even. I still wondered if I had imagined that whole ordeal.

When he was investigating the man’s belongings, however, he somehow found something that sent him to the other side of the continent in the blink of an eye. Saria-san and Altria-sensei had means of contacting him, at least, but I had important business to attend to. I couldn’t spend time worrying about him. I had to get back to the Varcia Empire and save oneechan.

I left Saria-san and Altria-sensei to handle things in Windberg and hurried home to stop the Kaizellian invasion. It turned out Seiichi-sensei had solved the whole issue again. However, this left me with my hard-earned power and nothing to use it on. I didn’t know what I’d spent all that time and energy on, but—

“Welcome home, Helen.”

“I... I’m home, oneechan.”

As long as we’re both OK, I don’t mind.

Extra 2: Routier and the Demon Army

“Have you all been well?”

“Yes, Routier-sama!!!”

While Seiichi and his companions were delving into the dungeon’s depths, Routier was meeting with Lucius and the Demon Generals.

Lucius was currently living with Zeamos, Abel’s party, and Seiichi’s parents in a house rented by means unknown. They had since bought the dwelling, it seemed, and were all living together at the invitation of Seiichi’s father Makoto. The Demon Generals had a room there as well, where they lived while Lucius trained them. They were all so pleased to see Routier that they cried so hard she could barely recognize them.

When Lucius came out to see her, however, everything changed.

“Ah, welcome! I’ve been worried; there’s been an ill omen on the wind lately.”

At the first sound of his voice, all the Demon Generals snapped to attention, regaining their composure.

“Are you all right?” Routier asked them nervously.

The Generals’ faces grew a little paler, but none of them replied.

With one last worried glance at her subordinates, she turned to Lucius.

“Um... I have a reason for coming here today.”

“Is it about your father?”

She blinked in surprise. “H-Huh?!”

“Looks like I was right.”

“How did you know?”

“Call it a hunch, I guess. It felt like the time for it.”

“The time for it?”

“Yep. You’ve gotten so much stronger—Origa-chan and Lulune-chan too.” He turned to look at Zora. “I see you have an interesting new companion, as well.”

Origa bowed. “H-Hello.”

“Of course I’m stronger!” Lulune stuck out her chest. “I could hardly be Master’s knight otherwise!”

“I-I’m not that strong, though,” Zora muttered.

Her level was still low since she’d been sealed in her dungeon for ages, but her petrifying gaze was an invaluable weapon on its own.

Lulune looked around impatiently for the hundredth time. “Hey, Origa. You said there was delicious food waiting for us. Where is it?!”

“There isn’t any. I knew you’d come with me if you said that, though.”

“What?! No!” Weakly, Lulune fell to her knees. “There’s no lunch?”

“No.”

“Guh!”

Lulune collapsed lifelessly to the floor then and there.

Lucius grimaced. “That’s a rather glaring weakness for a knight... Oh, well.” He turned back to Routier. “Since you’re so strong now, I think it’s high time we wake up your old man.”

“Um... Lucius-sama? I simply came to see if you were free for the seal breaking. Do we need to be strong to awaken father?”

“Of course!” His expression turned a touch more serious. “I don’t know how much you know on the subject, but, well... there’s a good chance the Cult of the Wicked One controls where your dad’s sealed.”

“What?! Wh-Why is that?”

“Hard to tell. I’ve done a little digging, and all I can tell is that there’s a traitor among the demonkin. The monster herd that attacked here a while back and the Cult’s assault on the city the other day would both imply that they know where you are.”

“Th-That’s not...”

Routier’s legs felt weak beneath her, and Zora had to prop her up.

“A-Are you OK?” the Medusa asked nervously.

“Yes... thank you.”

“Oh, but none of the Generals here are with the enemy, I promise.” He glanced at them. “Right?”

“Sir, yes, sir!!!”

Routier’s brow furrowed in confusion. “S-Sir...?”

They had always been soldiers, but she’d never known them to be so obedient.

“Anyhow,” Lucius continued, “there’s a traitor in the Demon Army, and that person’s also barring us from your dad’s resting place. There’s all sorts of power stewing there, you understand, just side effects of a Demon King being sealed there. It’s the perfect place for potions or rituals to strengthen monsters, so I’d imagine it’s rife with them. Case in point, the last monsters to attack Terbelle had a different Demon King’s power clinging to them.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“I’m not. If I’m wrong, that’s good news all around. If I’m right, though, it’ll be a real pain to pry the site out of the Cult’s hands. There’s probably no end of extra traps and monster guards—I’d expect to see a Servant or two there too.”

Routier’s head spun with all the new threats. “But that’s... that’s...”

The very thought of having one of her own men betray her for the Cult of the Wicked One was horrifying. She had no idea how to approach the matter.

Lucius smiled. “It’ll be no trouble, though.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve trained your Generals so hard that nothing can stand against them. Isn’t that right?”

“Sir, yes, sir!!!”

“You can send them on home to protect your country. In the meantime, we’ll make for where your dad’s sealed. Then we just have to beat the stuffing out of them, and bang! Problem solved.”

“B-Bang...?”

Zora nervously raised a hand. “Um... I’m not following, really, but I don’t think it’ll be that easy...”

“Maaaybe. We’ll have you and your friends to help, though, won’t we?”

“O-Of course!”

Origa nodded. “Mm. Hungry and I will help too.”

“What right have you to order me around?!”

“I’ll make sure you get lunch.”

“Count me in.”

The catgirl frowned slightly. “That was... worryingly easy.”

Routier looked about at her allies, tears welling in her eyes.

“Really...? You’ll all help?”

Origa nodded. “Mm. I know Seiichi-oniichan will help too.”

Lucius chuckled. “If he’s there, we’ve all but won already! Good, very good.” He composed himself a little, clearing his throat. “I won’t be able to fight alongside you, sadly. I have work to do.”

“Huh?”

“Zeanos-kun and I will be at the Black Dragon God’s Labyrinth.”

Routier’s eyes widened. “You mean...!”

The old Demon King chuckled. “It’s been far too long. I owe him a visit, at least.”

“Yes... I suppose you do.”

Lucius nodded firmly, turning back to the Generals. “Well, then! How about I train you all a little, since we have time until Seiichi-kun comes back? I’d like Routier-chan to see your progress.”

“H-Huh?”

The Demon Generals went pale once more.

“What are you waiting for? Attack me! Or are you letting me go first?”

“H-Here we come!”

Routier could only watch wide-eyed as the Generals fled the house for the courtyard. She would soon witness the reason for that horror, however.

Extra 3: Landzelf's Worries

“So, uh... I guess he still doesn't have any normal hobbies.”

“I'd expect no less of Teacher.”

“Right, the hell am I doing complaining to you?”

King Landzelf of Windberg was sitting in his study, head in his hands as he heard of Seiichi's latest escapade. His knight and Seiichi's pupil, Lousse Palse, seemed vaguely pleased.

“Seriously, though... he wanders into a dungeon and comes home with one of the Cult of the Wicked One's top guys? Saria and Altria were saying something about how Seiichi changed the guy's powers, even... Does that track? Is that normal? Am I losing my mind?”

Lousse nodded. “Perfectly ordinary.”

“Like fuck it is!” He started massaging his temples harder. “It's great that we know more now and all, but it's just more shit to stress over, really.”

“The captive called himself an Apostle, correct?”

“Yeah... and here I thought it was only Servants, but nope, they've got a stronger version. I wish those asshats would keep it simple, stick to just one name for their creeps...” He sighed heavily. “The guy's power was what, Suredeath? That's some macabre shit right there, but they've got more like him? The hell is a small-time king like me supposed to do?!”

“Give it your best, perhaps?”

“How, though? That's the problem...”

If Seiichi hadn't bumped into the Suredeath, there was no telling what the death toll would've been by now. Despite Destora's ludicrous strength, it had meant nothing to the adventurer. Next time, they might not be so lucky.

Landze leaned back in his chair and tried not to think about how badly he needed a break.

“Please compose yourself, Highness,” Louisse intoned calmly. “I’m sure Teacher will deal with them.”

“Is it just me, or are you getting more blindly confident in him by the day?”

“Am I?”

“I just hope you’re right, is all.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Pardon?”

“You’re right, leavin’ everything to Seiichi would be quickest and easiest. Don’t forget he’s just one guy, though. He can’t be everywhere at once, and it’s not like he needs to save us if he doesn’t feel like it.”

Perhaps it would be smarter to try to bring Seiichi under his control, to make the adventurer keep them safe, but Landze wasn’t keen on that idea.

“I mean, we’ve got those Kaizell Empire pricks running unchecked, and the Cult won’t stop skulking around. We’ve got no breathing space here. Sure, we’ve got Zeanos-dono and Lucius-dono, and they’re good to keep around, but they don’t have any need to help Seiichi-kun either. I bet they’d still help him... but, wait, Seiichi’s behind them being here too. Dammit, the kid never stops, does he?”

“He truly doesn’t.”

“... Just make sure that faith in him doesn’t get weird, OK?” He sighed heavily. “I hate to say it, but I guess it’s time we double up on our military. I hope I can get Zeanos-dono or Lucius-dono to be generals or something...”

King Landzef continued to mull over ideas late into the night, intent on making sure his little country didn’t get consumed by the ever-growing evil in the world.

Back Matter

Author: Miku I love soba noodles, cats, and dogs, but I'm allergic to all three. I moved safely to Tokyo, and I'm managing here somehow. (February 2019)

Illustrator: Umiko/U35

I was born on November 17 in Shimane Prefecture. My favorite things are cooked potatoes and summer skies. (February 2019)

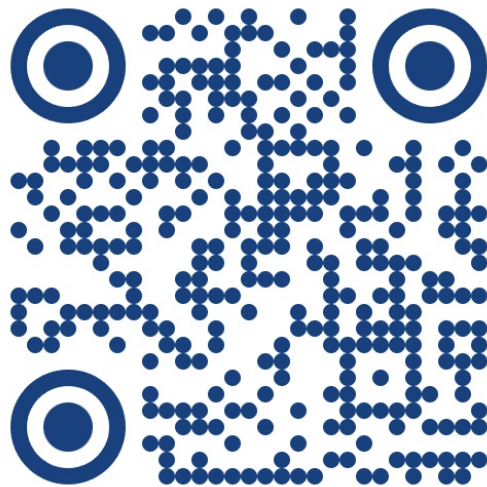
Thank you all

You have reached the end of The Fruit of Evolution Volume 10! Hopefully, you've had a good time and enjoyed the 10th adventure of the brave Seiichi Hiiragi and the lovely Saria. Your constant support means a lot to us!

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