




2

[New Life+]

Young Again in Another World

Mine

Illustrator:
Kabocha



He cleared his mind.
Soon after, a tiny
green light the size
of his little finger tip
flared up in the
middle of the ball.

"GREEN, HUH.
THAT MEANS HIS
APTITUDE IS
WIND, RIGHT?"

[New Life+] 2
Young Again In Another World



"I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO PREPARE. NOT MY BEST WORK."

"YOU KNOW YOUR WAY AROUND THE KITCHEN, DON'T YOU, RENYA?"

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN? THIS IS PRACTICALLY A FEAST."

Shion
Femme-Fatale

She is an apprentice swordsman who is attacked by fellow adventurers in the forest but is saved by Renya. She is a tad naive.

Renya Kunugi

After a peaceful death, he is transported to another world at the request of God. As a result of his previous life being perhaps a bit more exciting than is entirely appropriate, his physical capabilities are abnormally high.

Rona Chevalier

She is a priest who accompanies Shion. She weaponizes her good looks against Renya, but she might harbor a hidden motive...



"I CAN
MAKE
SOME
SPLENDID
WORKS
BY USING
YOU AS A
BASE."

"TOO BAD
YOU WON'T
GET TO."

The blade flashed
again and sliced
through two more
bodies from side to
side. Two tops
parted ways with
two bottoms.

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Prologue: The First Interlude, or So It Was Told

The Vice-Branchmaster of Merchant City Kukrika's Adventurers Guild, Fritz, sat idly in a guild room designated for his personal use. He was waiting for someone.

"Excuse me."

The door opened softly, revealing a figure who quickly but respectfully bowed before entering. Fritz got up and approached the visitor. A gentle warmth radiated from his cordial smile. Those who knew him well would have found it a rare sight; that malicious, calculating gaze they had come to expect from him was simply not there. It was as if he was sincerely welcoming his guest. The number of people in this city whom the Vice-Branchmaster would greet with such an expression could be counted on one hand.

"It's a wonderful pleasure to have you here. Now, pardon my bluntness, but may I inquire as to the outcome of the proceedings?" he asked as he politely showed the visitor to the seat he'd prepared in advance. There was no bite to his words, no edge to his voice.

Rona walked over to the seat she was offered and sat down. Across from her, Fritz did the same. The two traded glances. While her smile was the same as when she was here with Shion, her expression was much softer — almost jarringly so. The man before her, however, showed no sign of surprise at her gentler countenance and patiently waited for her reply.

"It wasn't easy, but I got him to say yes," she answered. There was a sense of relief to her words that brightened Fritz's expression as well.

"Most splendid. I do hope this lessens your burden somewhat. Still, I must question the heavy-handedness of your approach." Fritz had disapproved of the plan when he first heard about it. The conduct described therein was not at all acceptable for someone of reasonable standing, and was even less acceptable for a woman. However, faced with the fact that it was proposed by Rona herself, he was unable to voice any strong dissent.

Rona gently shook her head at Fritz's words of concern.

"It's my assignment. There's no burden to doing one's duty," she said. She paused for a moment to think before continuing. "But it certainly wouldn't hurt for things to be a little easier."

A short giggle escaped Rona. Fritz's face, on the contrary, remained a mask of concern. He looked noticeably anxious, which spoke to the degree to which the situation weighed on his conscience. Had Shion seen the expression on his face, she would surely have stared at Rona, eyes wide with surprise, wondering what kind of magic she was working. As far as Shion knew, the Vice-Branchmaster was arrogant, dismissive of others, and brimming with malice — an absolutely unbearable man. At present, however, his tone was overflowing with sincere apology.

"I'm terribly sorry..."

He rose from his chair and began to lower his head before Rona stopped him.

"You're just doing your job, too. I'm well aware of that."

"I know it's Her Majesty's orders, but they're just throwing us one headache after another..."

The reason for Shion's abhorrence for Fritz stemmed from the fact that ever since she registered as an adventurer, the Vice-Branchmaster had seemingly made it his personal mission to give her a hard time. Again and again, he would force her to do annoying missions nobody else would take up, and even when she completed them, he would pick out flaws and try to lower her compensation or penalize her. Rona, however, had just stated that he was under orders. That implied a mutual understanding between the two in the room that Fritz *was* actively trying to make Shion's life hard, and that he was not doing so of his own volition, but rather at the command of someone else.

"I fully understand. It's not easy being the bad guy."

Rona lowered her head, which caused Fritz to shake his hands frantically.

"Please! Don't! One such as myself is unworthy of..."

"Guilds normally don't help with things like these. You're bending the rules

enough to offer your support. It would be unthinkable for me to have anything but the deepest gratitude for your efforts.”

“Your generous words are a weight off my shoulders. Then... with the Wanderer having joined your party, I assume that means...?” Fritz asked inquiringly.

“Yes.” Rona nodded. “We certainly were not expecting to make friends with a Wanderer, but we now have a reasonably trustworthy and competent ally at our side. After a month of experience, I’ve also yet to hear anything from Miss Shion that would imply she wants to quit being an adventurer. With things as they stand, I intend to report to Her Majesty that it’s fine to continue as is.”

“Will that apply to the guild’s meddling, as well?”

“Yes, I suspect that this will be the last time. You should expect to return to normal operation. Official notification will be delivered by Her Majesty later.”

“Wonderful. Then, shall you be returning to your original post, Lady Rona?”

“No, I will continue this assignment. I suspect it will remain this way.”

Rona’s smile was met with a frown from Fritz. The latter did not seem to approve of her words.

“As the Vice-Branchmaster of the Adventurers Guild, I fully recognize the irony of this statement, but a Chevalier should not be going about the business of adventuring. It’s simply not...”

Adventuring, to put it bluntly, was not an occupation for people who wanted to lead decent, honest lives. The work could get fairly violent, and people could get killed. Though it depended on the mission, there were also plenty of times when adventurers acted according to the creed of “it ain’t a crime unless you get caught.” Of course, no mission would ask for outright burglary or murder, but trespassing certainly came with the job. On many an occasion, adventurers would set foot into areas where entrance was prohibited by the local government or the Crown.

Rona smiled wryly. While she was aware that Fritz was worried about her, it took some mental effort to reconcile the Vice-Branchmaster’s words with his position. There was a bitter humor to a ringleader who deplored his enterprise.

“Now, now, if you think it’s not proper for me, then where does that leave Shion? Besides, I’m the oldest of my siblings. Even if I stayed home, I’d just get married off somewhere. All things considered, I don’t mind this life, to be honest.”

“B-But... Hnnngh...” groaned Fritz, his words failing him. The sight brought a smile to Rona’s lips.

“Moreover, I have a little sister, and she’s the clever one in the family. More so than me, anyway. If somebody had to get married, she’d probably do a much better job of it than I would,” laughed Rona.

Fritz opened his mouth, but no words came. He fell silent. Rona’s cheery countenance made it difficult for him to refute her outright, but approving of her statement would imply that he agreed that she was inferior to her sister. His resultant string of stuttering murmurs seemed to amuse her as she playfully observed his reaction. Eventually, she softly mentioned that she did not mean to put him on the spot and saved him from falling into an endless spiral of stress.

“Anyway, let’s return to the topic at hand. Could you handle the paperwork for adding Renya to Shion’s party?”

“Certainly. I’ll have it done right away.”

“I’ll go report to Her Majesty, and then I’ll head back to Miss Shion’s place. Oh, by the way,” said Rona, apparently remembering something, “if a stand-alone home with a workshop attached ever goes up for sale in the city, could you let me know?”

The Adventurers Guild was a nexus of information. It followed then that the Vice-Branchmaster would have a much easier time gathering large amounts of relevant information on real estate than Rona or Renya could on their own. Fritz, however, seemed to take Rona’s question to mean something else.

“Do you mean to... use it as a base of operations? If so, then I can arrange for a suitable location to be provided...”

He was about to propose that he scout out a few luxury spots close to the Central District when Rona cut him off.

“No, that won’t do. How would you even give it to Miss Shion? What would you tell her?”

“Well... as an apology for everything that has happened so far, I suppose...”

Seeing that he no longer needed to play the heel, Fritz was inclined to go for one big, dramatic apology to close everything out with no hard feelings, but he was shot down by Rona.

“I appreciate the thought, but I can’t allow that. Otherwise, it’d become immediately apparent that the guild was in on it. Even Miss Shion is not that much of an idiot. There are only so many people who can convince the guild to help them, and it won’t take her long to figure out it was Her Majesty’s doing.”

“...Your description of her seems a tad impolite.”

Fritz gave Rona a questioning look, but she brushed it off.

“It’s okay when I say it.”

“Ah...”

“As for the cost, we’ll figure out some way to pay for it ourselves. We only need information. If you could just keep an eye out for any availabilities, that would be greatly appreciated.”

“Understood.”

“Try to keep it a secret from Shion. Be careful around Renya, too. He’s sharper than you might think.” After cautioning Fritz and making sure that he understood, Rona stood up. “Now, then, I’ll be taking my leave. Keep me informed of any happenings, please.”

“I certainly will. And please, take care of yourself.”

Even Fritz’s parting words were mired with worry for her safety. In response to his concern, she showed him one final smile before making for the door.

Once she left the room, she turned her thoughts inward. There were times when Fritz’s concern bordered on annoying. She wondered if the good Vice-Branchmaster was perhaps being too much of a worrywart. However, the image of her charge soon resurfaced in her mind, and she found herself more inclined to forgive him for fretting like an old maid. Considering the fact that she had

been ordered to guard Shion, no amount of worry was too much.

“Honestly, where did I go wrong?” she mumbled as she eyed her extra tight-fitting priest robe. It was certainly lighter and easier to move in than the armor she wore before she took up this task, but in what way did this getup evoke even the slightest hint of priesthood? She had entertained the question on many occasions. To date, she still had no answer. However, she knew its purpose: to peel the eyes of onlookers away from the person beside her. Therefore, she had no choice but to simply deal with everything else.

“I’m not one to pity myself, but sometimes, I really have to ask... am I going to be stuck doing this forever?”

A part of Rona fervently wished it were not so. She waited for a moment. The Heavens did not, in fact, answer her call, and she was left with nothing but her own meandering thoughts. The silence of the hallway was broken only by the sound of a short but weighty sigh.

Chapter 1: Training Began, or So It Was Told

“Hiya. The name’s Caryl Valliere. People call me the finest mage in Kukrika. I’m inclined to agree.”

The young woman had pale blond hair that was tied back. She was draped in a soft green robe, the fabric of which was unclear. It was decorated by an assortment of gold and silver jewelry that hung from all over her body, making for an ostentatious sight. The “robe” itself was also not what Renya would normally associate with the word. Unlike regular robes that covered the wearer from head to toe, this one had a collar that parted deep down the chest, and large slits ran so far up the side of the legs that they allowed her exposed thighs to be freely crossed over one another. It was a most confounding piece of clothing — not liberal enough to be called a dress, yet too flashy to be called a robe. As he gazed upon this dazzling display of green and gold and silver, Renya could not help but feel he had seen something like this before. He waded through the murky depths of his memories for a long while until the answer finally came to him.

“I got it!” he exclaimed with a strike of his fist. “She’s like a walking Christmas tree!”

“What’s that supposed to be?”

His revelation went unappreciated. Sitting beside him was a puzzled Shion, to whom he could not muster the will to explain. Instead, he shrugged. Apparently, out of all those Wanderers who’d wandered their way into this world, not a single one decided to bring Christmas with them. He wondered why. Was it because preaching the concept of Christmas was simply so far down the list of priorities that no sane Wanderer would ever get around to it, or did most of them simply hail from places where the holiday did not exist?

His statement also seemed to go over the head of the woman named Caryl, who sat across from them with an ebony table in between. One of her eyebrows was raised as her hands met each other over the table and their digits

intertwined. Her fingers were lined with a truly bewildering array of gemmed rings. There were gems of all shapes and sizes, and even the rings themselves differed in material. White rays of light — the work of magecraft — reflected off the extensive display of ornamentation on her person, causing her to glitter brightly in the dim interiors of her store. It reminded him of sequins or gold yarn.

Their morning had begun with a discussion and ended with Shion dragging Renya by the arm, insisting that there was a place she had to take him. After making their way toward the center of the Commercial District, they ended up here. Upon entering they found that a single lamp, its white light produced by magecraft, was the sole source of illumination inside. It was not enough, and the store was still rather dark. Surrounding the ebony table in the middle of the room were all sorts of shelves and racks that held everything from books to trinkets. It gave the room a cluttered feeling.

Rona, as it happened, was absent. After announcing that she needed to report to the guild about Renya officially joining Shion's party, she departed and left the two of them on their own. For his part, Renya believed that she was off hatching some nefarious plot again, but he had no way of confirming his suspicions.

"So, I get that you want me to teach you some magecraft, but are you seriously telling me that an aspiring adventurer of your age doesn't even know a single basic spell?"

Renya shifted his attention back to the woman who spoke. For the record, she definitely fell under the "beautiful" category, but she was wearing way too much makeup. The combined effect of her thick makeup and her jangly mess of jewelry made her look gaudy. Age-wise, she was probably no more than two or three years their senior, but thanks to her cosmetics, she looked much older. It was a shame, really. Had she gone with a more natural style, she would have looked quite appealing. Of course, that was an opinion based entirely on his own personal tastes, so he held his tongue.

"Renya's a Wanderer," answered Shion in his place.

Caryl took another look at him, this time as though she were seeing some sort

of rare animal. It was an unpleasant feeling, and Renya frowned.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s fine. I don’t like it, but I don’t blame you.”

For people in this world, seeing a Wanderer probably felt the same as when people in his original world went to a particularly exotic zoo. With that said, understanding did not always translate to acceptance.

“I guess your world didn’t have magecraft, then?”

“Yeah, the closest thing we had were probably magicians. By which I mean performers who do tricks with their hands and such.”

Caryl gave a look of comprehension as she let out a breath.

“No wonder. Since Shion came to me about teaching somebody magecraft, I was totally expecting a kid to show up, you know? And then a piece of work like you walks in through the door and, well, you get what I mean?”

“I’ll reserve my opinions about being called a piece of work, but I see where you’re going. Still, is it really that rare? You said you were expecting a kid, but eighteen doesn’t seem that much older.”

“Aspiring adventurers tend to join the guild when they’re fourteen or fifteen. As soon as they earn some cash, they’re already knocking on my door to learn some basic magecraft. The ones who want to become mages probably apprentice themselves to a master even earlier,” explained Caryl. She leaned back in her chair, reached for a shelf behind her, and pulled out a bundle of paper scrolls.

Ever since setting foot in this world, there had been a number of things that surprised Renya. One of them was the existence of paper. He had been under the somewhat baseless impression that civilization here was about as advanced as the Middle Ages in his original world. That predated the technique of papermaking. Nevertheless, paper was extremely widespread in this world, and the people here were well aware of how to cook plants in water to draw out the fiber for pulp.

“Take a look. These are all the spells that I can teach you right now. The first

list is five silver each, and the second is fifty.”

Renya was about to question the sudden jump in price, but the reason became clear as soon as he read through the contents. The first list included spells such as Ignite and Hydrate. They were mostly things that made daily living more convenient. The second list was populated by far more aggressive-sounding spells such as Firebolt and Iceshard.

“You can have a good talk with your coin purse about which to learn later, but first, let’s take a look at your aptitude.”

“Hm?”

“Your aptitude. You know, like what kind of magecraft you’re most suited to. We’d be here all day if I tried to explain, so I’ll spare you the details. Suffice it to say, it’ll give us a general idea about which element of magecraft you’ll learn more quickly and how much potential for improvement there is.”

Caryl twisted her upper body and reached for the same shelf again. This time, she took out a crystal ball that was about the size of one’s fist. She tossed the clear orb onto the table and rolled it toward Renya, who placed it on his palm and peered at it with a look of intense curiosity.

“It’s nothing special. If you’ve got the right materials, you can have one made for yourself for about a gold or so. It’ll suffice for our purposes, though.”

“How do you use it?” asked Renya as he rolled it back and forth on his palm.

Caryl leaned across the table and grabbed the ball from his palm. She held it in front of him at eye level.

“It’s simple. Focus on the ball and tell it to glow. That’s it. I mean, technically, the process involves a bunch of stuff about how the mana flows, but trying to explain that to a Wanderer would be an exercise in frustration.”

She gestured at him, then the ball. He nodded and took it from her. Under the watchful gazes of Caryl and Shion, he took a deep breath to calm himself and focused his attention on the crystal ball. It occurred to him that he was going to look like a total idiot if he just kept doing this and nothing happened. However, stray thoughts like those might very well make things worse, so he cleared his mind. Soon after, a tiny green light the size of his little fingertip flared up in the

middle of the ball.

“Green, huh. That means his aptitude is wind, right?” asked Shion.

“Yeah.” Caryl nodded with a grimace. “But this is sort of...”

Before Renya had a chance to ask if something went wrong, Caryl snatched the crystal ball from his hand and tossed it carelessly over her shoulder. It landed somewhere in the back of the shelf with a heavy thud. He found himself more than a little concerned about the way she handled what was ostensibly a fragile object.

“Okay,” she continued, “first, we can say for sure that your aptitude is wind, and it’s one heck of a strong aptitude to boot.”

Renya recalled that he got a bunch of skills from the girl before he came to this world. One of them said something about wind aptitude, so it was probably thanks to that. He did not, however, expect what she said next.

“Thing is, your mana pool is *tiny*. Like, we’re talking less than half of what people normally have.”

“You can figure out that much from how the light looks?”

“The color of the light was impressive. It’s not every day you get to see such a pure shade of green. The size of the light was too small, though. Normally, however faint it is, it should at least light up the whole orb. For people with a gift for magecraft, it might get so bright you can’t look at it straight on. A hero might even cause it to explode in a blinding flash. That’s happened before, by the way.”

Armed with this new knowledge, Renya thought back to how the light looked for him. He had to admit that it did indeed seem very small. To his side, Shion was nodding as well.

“Yeah, I remember the whole thing glowing when I did it, too.”

“What color was it for you?” he asked out of curiosity.

“It was light green,” answered Shion, a hint of excitement in her voice. “The same as yours, Renya. We’re both wind.”

“Your mana pool does grow little by little as you use it, so there’s some room

for improvement. With that said, you've got a whole lot of catching up to do. Personally, I'd reconsider any career aspirations involving magecraft if I were you," said Caryl.

The news came as a bit of a shock to him, but he figured that he should have expected as much, considering he came from a world where the whole concept of magecraft did not even exist. If anything, it would have been much weirder to be told that he was carrying around a veritable ocean of mana. That would have raised the very pertinent question of what the heck happened to him in his previous life.

In addition, he was told that there was room for improvement. That was at the heart of the matter. He might not be flinging spells left and right, but maybe he could reach a point where it could at least be useful. With that slim hope in mind, he asked Caryl,

"Are there any efficient ways to train so I can make my mana pool bigger?"

Caryl said nothing. Instead, she put out her left palm. The gesture left him clueless until Shion stepped in.

"How much?"

"Seven silver."

The short exchange was followed by Shion dropping seven silver coins in the open left palm of Caryl, who then beckoned Renya with her right hand. He did as he was told, leaning forward over the table. As his face neared Caryl, she quickly pulled out a slip of paper from her chest and slapped it on his forehead.

"Impart Illuminate."

The paper melted into thin air. The effect resembled an ice cube being dropped into hot water.

《Notification: An external source has intervened to impart the non-elemental spell, Illuminate. Accepting will grant access to its usage. Would you like to accept?》

Without a second thought, Renya accepted the request.

"You cast it with the incantation, 'By my power, I command thee. Rays of

light, shine.’”

“Aha, so that’s how these work, huh. It’s a system where you impart the access privilege for its use. I’ve been told that they’re easy to use once you learn them, but it sure makes a lot more sense now.”

Caryl stared at him with a blank look of incomprehension, but lost in his own thoughts, he did not notice. It seemed to him that what just happened was the equivalent of someone who mastered a skill trying to teach someone who had not without going through all the theory and logic. It was focused on simply allowing the pupil to do the thing that was required. That explained why magecraft could only be learned from mages. A master could teach pupils, but pupils could not teach more pupils because they only knew how to use it; they did not understand why they could.

“...I’ve heard rumors before, but Wanderers really are something else, huh?”

There was some awe in Caryl’s voice as she came to realize what Renya had just figured out. Her reaction suggested that normal people did not know about the mechanism, and the truth of the matter was kept as a shared secret among mages, who likely valued the method as a source of income. After all, only a fool would divulge their trade secrets to outsiders. Meanwhile, Shion looked blankly at the two of them, completely lost as to what they were talking about.

“So, how exactly do I train with this?”

“I already told you. Just keep using it and you’ll get better. In other words, you train by casting a spell over and over again. It doesn’t matter what spell. As long as you keep using it, your mana pool will grow. For the purposes of training, we usually go with Illuminate.”

Other rudimentary spells involved creating things or moving things, all of which affected the surrounding environment. Illuminate, however, only created light. Using it in the daytime would not bother anyone, and it was fine to use at night, as well, because it simply replaced one’s normal light source.

“For the time being, just trust me and stick to this training method. Keep doing it for a while, and then come see me again.”

“Caryl... Um, what about other spells?” asked Shion timidly.

“Don’t even bother.” Caryl shook her head as she leaned back in her seat. “I can teach him, but he won’t be able to use any.”

“Hnngh, but...”

“Shion,” interrupted Renya, “it’s fine. At least I know how to train now. Once I get a little better at this, we can ask Caryl to teach me another spell. There’s no point learning any spells now if I’m not strong enough to use them.”

His efforts to appease her proved successful, albeit with some lingering disgruntlement.

“Fine. We’ll see you later, then, Caryl.”

“Sure. Just let me know when you’re ready. I’ll handle the rest.”

Seeing that matters were concluded, the two of them prepared to leave.

“By the way, Shion... what’s with the change of heart?” Caryl asked as Shion got up and turned to go. “It’s like you’re actually a normal adventurer, what with having a guy in your party and everything.”

“I *am* a normal adventurer!”

“You are? Wow. That’s news to me.”

Caryl’s dismissive tone seemed to irk Shion, and she replied somewhat resentfully.

“And it’s not like I didn’t ask you to join! But you turned me down!”

Figuring that their party needed a mage, Shion had gone to Rona. Under her friend’s advice, she then went to Caryl and asked her to join them, only to be immediately shot down. The reason she gave at the time was that she would much rather stay in town, sit back, and teach some Magecraft 101. It was less work for more pay.

“Who would have joined us, anyway? A party of three girls looks way too risky.”

“You... You’ve got a point, I guess. But that’s why I asked Renya to join us.”

“I see... Well, try your best. Once you’ve made some money, come see me again. I’ll be waiting.”

“Yeah, see you then.”

After seeing them off with a wave, Caryl crossed her hands behind her head and grinned, as though she just saw the most interesting thing. The teaching was done, but it remained to be seen how far his training would take him. That had to wait until next time.

“Took you long enough, huh, Rona? Nice to see that things are going your way.”

Softly, she whispered to herself, the face of her blond-haired friend vivid in her mind.

“We’re not going to accept any jobs for a while.”

Renya’s announcement surprised Shion and Rona, but neither of them opposed it. After learning some magecraft at Caryl’s store, the three of them met up at the inn. Shion immediately proposed that they should go find work, which led to this announcement. Rona then asked the very reasonable question of what in the world he was talking about, especially considering he was the one who’d declared that his goal of adventuring was to make money. He, in turn, offered a very reasonable answer.

“Because I haven’t yet grasped what I’m capable of.”

He was missing very crucial and very fundamental information about himself. He did not have a full understanding of what he could and could not do. Even for the things he could do, he was not aware of the degree to which he could perform them. Shion was puzzled by his statement, saying that it was strange that he did not know himself. He agreed, and then contemplated how much he should divulge.

“The fact of the matter is that most of my past memories disappeared when I came to this world. That’s why even I don’t know what I did in my original world.”

“You mean you have amnesia? You didn’t look very confused, though. When we first met, you also told us that you’re a Wanderer right away.”

He could not declare that he had met God with a capital G and was reincarnated in this world at her request. He did not have anything against telling the truth, but he doubted they would believe him. Being made fun of was one thing, but it would be problematic if they started assuming he had a few screws loose.

“I don’t know why either. It’s not like I’m a veteran world hopper or anything. As for saying I’m a Wanderer, I just vaguely recalled being given that information. I don’t remember who told me or anything.”

Fake it until you make it, or so the saying goes. As long as they could not verify his claims, whatever he said would become truth. After all, the only one who could testify was a young girl in a galaxy far, far away.

“I don’t really care too much about any of that. It is what it is. What I’m more concerned about is what I can do. It’d be a problem if we run into trouble and I have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“That’s true.”

Only an idiot would swing a sword around without knowing how well it cut. When he mentioned this, the metaphor seemed to strike a chord with Shion and she nodded firmly in agreement.

“So, I need some time to figure myself out. I can do some training along the way, too.”

“Okay, I understand. We’ve been paid for the last job, so we’ll be fine for a while, right, Ro?”

“Yes, but how long will you need?”

“Give me two days. I should have a decent grasp by then. I’ll keep up the training afterwards, of course. Now, here’s my question,” he said, taking a moment to ponder which of the two he should ask. The moment passed. He came up with nothing. In the end, he just decided to keep talking to Shion. “Is there some place near this city where I can swing stuff around without causing any trouble?”

He did not expect much. After all, he had asked Shion, who did not look like the type to know such things. In fact, she did not look like the type to know

much of *anything*, but she responded surprisingly quickly.

“Then the plains past the north gate are your best bet.”

According to her, the city was surrounded by flatlands on all sides, but the one past the north gate was the least dangerous. Not only were the monsters in the region weak, a few hours on foot would lead him to a rocky mountain range that contained the Hermit’s Grave. In other words, there was a whole lot of nothing out there.

Exiting the city by any other gate led to areas that either saw plenty of monsters or were used as farmland, neither of which were suitable for swinging stuff around without causing trouble. The land to the north, meanwhile, was somewhat barren and not used for agriculture. It was frequented by swordsmen and mages who went there to “train,” but to date, there had been no complaints about their extensive efforts of geographic vandalism.

“I’ve been there a good number of times, too, and there really is nothing there. It’s honestly a great place to practice your swings. Even Caryl heads there once in a while. She calls it “de-stressing” and leaves a bunch of craters all over the place.”

“And she still hasn’t gotten in any trouble for it, huh. Sounds like the right place for me.”

The next morning, with his mind made up, he got up much earlier than the girls and prepared to leave. He picked up the food he’d asked the inn’s owner to pack for him the day before, took a few bites of breakfast, reaffirmed that it tasted miserable, and left the inn. All his luggage, including the food he just picked up, had been thrown into the inventory, so he was empty-handed. As he made his way toward the north gate, bright light leaked out from his curled fists.

He began his magecraft training last night. As soon as he returned to the inn, he gave it a try. Unsurprisingly, especially after expert testimony pertaining to the hopelessly small size of his mana pool, a single orb of light was all he managed before his head started spinning. It didn’t take long to go away, but he figured that the dizziness was a sign of his mana pool running dry. This being reality and not a game, he had no way of seeing a numerical depiction of his

remaining mana. After a period of time during which he alternated between casting the spell and resting, he got the hang of how the Illuminate spell worked.

Firstly, he had no control over the brightness. “Say the words and a thing starts glowing” was the extent of his understanding of the spell. He had no idea how to adjust the brightness of the light, and despite his efforts to envision the blinding flash of burning magnesium as he chanted the words, he only produced dinky orbs that were about as bright as a flashlight. Distraught and out of ideas, he glanced off to the side, grumbling about how this would be a great time for that so-called Help Function to kick in.

It kicked in.

《Notification: Help Activated - Magecraft Spell Strength. The strength of a spell is determined by the first verse of the incantation. The order is as follows: By my power, I command thee -> By my power, I summon thee -> By my power, I empower thee -> By my power, I beseech thee. However, verses above the level of “I summon thee” are unavailable when used through imparted access. The strength of a spell also correlates with the amount of mana expended, but this method is likewise unavailable when used through imparted access.》

“Can I remove the access restriction?” asked Renya, noting that the function was indeed quite helpful.

《Notification: Help Activated — Removing the usage restriction of a spell requires committing the corresponding magecraft sign to memory. Currently, the usage restriction of Illuminate can be removed. Proceed?》

Slightly surprised that it was actually possible, he told the function to proceed. His forehead hurt a little as a pattern surfaced in his mind. It was pictorial and difficult to describe, resembling some sort of foreign character. Presumably, that was the sign to remove the restriction.

《Notification: Usage restriction of non-elemental magecraft has been removed. Applicable sign: Non-elemental Master Key.》

“Okay. I sure wasn’t expecting it to remove *all* the restrictions...”

Normally, mages needed to memorize a sign for each spell they wanted to use. By using the sign as a key, they could remove the usage restriction for the spell, which granted them access to higher-level incantations and strength adjustment based on mana input. The Help Function, however, just stamped a master key for all non-elemental magecraft onto his brain, saving him the effort of learning them one by one.

He now had a creeping suspicion that despite all the skills bestowed upon him, the most broken ability he had was probably the Help Function. Nevertheless, it did not seem to do anything bad, and he certainly saw no way of un-stamping the sign from his head, so he put it out of his mind.

The second issue was that he could not move the orbs of light he created. Specifically, he could cast the spell wherever he wanted, but once the orb was made, it was stuck there. This was a discovery he made after his disastrous attempt to try out the unrestricted “I summon thee” incantation, in which he ran out of mana, failed to cast the spell, and blacked out on the spot. Once he recovered, he stuck to using the spell once and then resting until its effect wore off. Ten cycles later, he noticed that he stopped feeling dizzy. Figuring that his mana pool had gotten a little bigger, he tried consecutively casting the spell twice, which brought the dizziness back. While he rested, he tried to move the orb floating in the middle of the room and finally happened upon the realization that he could not.

As he gained the ability to cast the spell multiple times in one go, he learned more about its traits. The orb of light itself produced no heat. It merely glowed with white light. In addition, once it was placed at a fixed point in space, it remained there until it eventually dissipated. This had the harmless but highly unsettling effect of turning his room into an ever-brightening light show. Following a period of trial-and-error, he happened upon some solutions. He could either keep casting the spell in the same place, or he could cast it on an object. In the latter case, moving the object would move the orb along with it.

Armed with this new knowledge, he began settling into a routine in which each onset of dizziness marked the end of a cycle. Like clockwork, he cast the spell over and over. For about three hours, he was a lean, mean, illuminating machine. In the end, he managed to put out eight orbs before getting dizzy.

At this point, the process of reciting the same incantation again and again was really starting to grate on his nerves. He needed a better method. After some thinking, an idea came to him. He had no clue if it would work, but figured there was no harm in trying.



“Quickcast Illuminate applying Simulcast eight times.”

A word flashed in view.

《Confirmed》

He barely caught a glimpse before eight equally-spaced light orbs appeared above his head. It occurred to him that he forgot to assign their positions beforehand, but either way, it worked. That brought a satisfied smile to his face. He’d just demonstrated that it was possible to combine his skills and use them like macros. One problem remained: it would be terribly annoying if he had to repeat that phrase every single time. Falling back into thought, he tweaked the instruction a little bit and gave it another try.

“Quickcast Illuminate applying Simulcast eight times. Repeat until my remaining mana drops below fifty percent. Restart after my mana fully recovers. Repeat until terminated. Assign location to the palm of my right hand.”

He would have preferred to keep it going until he ran out of mana but, unsure of the effects of an empty mana pool on his body, decided to keep things safe with a fifty percent margin. Fainting did not pose much of a problem if he did so in his room, but even so, it seemed unhealthy to go on fainting streaks.

Each light orb he created could last about ten minutes, and last ten minutes they did, because he had no idea how to cancel the spell. The reason he put them all on his palm was because he could hide them in his fist if the need arose.

His newly-implemented macro worked as intended, giving him access to a safe and convenient method of endlessly casting the spell. It also led him to harbor a misconception, albeit unwittingly. The onset of dizziness due to low mana was generally accepted to occur when one’s remainder dipped below ten percent or so, and recovering from such thorough exhaustion required almost a half day’s rest. This was common sense among mages.

Meanwhile, Renya, thanks to his Super Regen, recovered his mana at an absolutely ludicrous rate. What would normally be performed in half-day intervals, he repeated every half-minute. Furthermore, the combination of

Simulcast and High-Speed Recharge all but negated any sense of cast time or cool down, allowing him to hurl out eight-shot volleys in rapid fire.

Rounding off the package was Limit Break Leveling. When he first gained this skill, he assumed it removed any restrictions imposed on the effects of his training, allowing him to keep up a steady rate of improvement. In actuality, not only did it remove the limits to his growth, it also removed the limits to his growth *rate*. To put it simply, Renya's training regimen consisted of casting his spell an insane number of times at an insane speed and an insane rate of improvement with no hard limit to his stats. And he had no idea this was happening.

Rather, after being told by Caryl that his mana pool was hopelessly small, he felt compelled to push himself harder. From his perspective, the people in this world must have been practicing magecraft since a very young age and they were probably all miles ahead of him. Being a late starter, he had no choice but to train extra hard and extra fast if he wanted to stand a chance against his peers.

Since the only spell he could use was Illuminate, every time he noticed the macro was lasting longer than before, he modified its instructions. His last command was "Quickcast Illuminate at max strength applying Simulcast sixteen times. Repeat until my remaining mana drops below twenty percent. Restart after my mana fully recovers. Repeat until terminated. Assign location to the palm of my right hand."

Had Caryl witnessed this scene, her eyes would have popped out of their sockets. Even scarier was that Renya thought it still wasn't enough. Thus did a certain overpowered character, unbeknownst to the world, start using his overpowered skills to grind his soon-to-be-overpowered stats with the person in question being none the wiser.

At the north gate, Renya displayed his guild card to the guard, who asked him where he was going. He replied that he was going for a bit of a long jog as part of his training. The guard sent him off with a wave, telling him to be careful. He kept walking for a while and, after seeing that he was a good ways from the gate, slowly broke into a run.

The landscape past the north gate was just as Shion had described; a vast expanse of nothing stretched off into the distance. He had hoped to run into some weaker monsters, but even those were nowhere to be seen. His view consisted entirely of rough earth and the odd patch of short grass. While it was a good place to practice some swings, he felt like he needed a little more. Instead of simply going on a run, he decided he would keep jogging for as long as he could. It would be a test of his stamina, and there might be some monsters worth fighting farther away from the city.

At first, he went at the speed of a light jog, but gradually he sped up to the pace of a marathon runner, only to find he was not at all out of breath. Impressed by how light his body felt, he tried sprinting for a while. This made him breathe harder, but he felt no need to rest. It was actually a little creepy how well his own body functioned. Creepy, but convenient. There was nothing wrong with convenience, so he gave it no further thought.

After Renya had run for about an hour, alternating between various speeds, the flatlands gave way to stony ground. Rocky mountains overlooked him, hard and lifeless. He did a quick calculation. Shion said that it took several hours to get to these mountains on foot. Accounting for individual variation, the average walking speed was about 4 kilometers per hour. Since the people in this world, adventurers in particular, were in pretty good shape, that average should be closer to 5 kilometers per hour. Supposing several hours meant something like 5 or 6, 5 hours of walking meant this mountain range was at least 25 kilometers away from the city. He ran 25 kilometers in an hour, which was approximately equivalent to finishing the 100-meter dash in 14 seconds. It didn't seem all that fast to him.

He was wrong. *Very* wrong. Especially considering that record marathon runners took at least 2 hours to run a bit more than 42 kilometers.

“Well then, let's get started.”

Renya withdrew his recently-purchased longsword from his inventory and tested its grip. When he mentioned that only an idiot would swing a sword around without knowing how well it cut, he meant it as a metaphor for his capabilities. It was, of course, equally applicable in a more literal sense to his new weapon, of which he was not expecting much. Being mass produced and

sold as a commodity on the market, it was not even sharp enough to be called a blade, and was clearly intended to be used for chopping through things with brute force. This irked him to no end. He had held out hope for at least a reasonably sharp cutting edge, but that was dashed by reality. This was how weapons were here, and he would have to deal with it.

Once he found a comfortable grip, he tried a few quick swings. He knew nothing about how swordsmanship was practiced in this world. His memories, faint as they were, suggested to him that he was never taught how to handle such a weapon in his previous world, either. His swings, therefore, followed no form or stance, and he allowed them to flow as they pleased. Nevertheless, he was no beginner to combat, and as he chained together sequence after sequence of slashes and thrusts, it really did look like he knew what he was doing.

Had Renya devoted himself to kendo, he might have been able to fight reasonably well even with the sword he had right now. Unfortunately for him, he spent most of his previous life mastering a very different art — kenjutsu. Practitioners of kenjutsu employed the katana, which was the antithesis of the the longsword he held. Unlike the slam-chop-and-smash style of fighting exemplified by the weapons of this world, a katana must first touch, then be drawn across. Only then did it cut. Even the finest katana would break or bend when swung with the crude technique of a longsword. The different methods of cutting inevitably required the two to be handled differently. Every difference chipped away at his comfort, causing his motions to become stilted and awkward. It was an exercise in frustration.

Back when he was beating down goblins at the settlers' village, sheer adrenaline kept him swinging without a hitch, but if he had tried to calm down and fight normally, these discrepancies would have been a big problem. After practicing a couple of sequences, he sheathed the longsword and threw it back into his inventory with a sigh.

“Okay, nope. This is not going to work.”

Overall, it felt okay. But Renya was not the kind of person to be satisfied with okay. Shaking his head, he exhaled deeply and lowered himself onto a conveniently chair-sized rock nearby. Suddenly, a voice called to him from

behind.

“Is something troubling you?”

He shot to his feet, tension surging through him as he spun toward the direction of the voice. It put him face to face with a sloped cliff of rock. He peered upwards along the side of the cliff until he found a level overhang.

Squatting on the platform with her elbows on her knees was a young girl. She held her face in her hands and looked down at him. Black pigtails sprouted from either side of her head, and her red eyes were only half open, lending her an air of sleepiness. She wore a dull gray mantle over a plain brown shirt and plain brown pants, and a large pouch hung from her right hip. Judging from her appearance, she was traveling somewhere.

“Who are you?”

Renya did not recall having seen her before. The girl made no reply, instead choosing to stand up. Then she hopped down from the platform. Renya turned up the danger dial. He had to crane his neck to see the platform, which meant it must have been a fall of about three meters. Despite that, she landed gracefully before him. She hardly bent her legs, she did not stagger from the impact, and she barely made a sound. She simply *landed*.

“I’ll remind you that it’s common sense to introduce yourself first when you ask for someone else’s name. Or, I would, if it wasn’t for that fact that I spoke first. Therefore, allow me to introduce myself!”

She gave her mantle a quick flick, put her hands at her hips, stood up straight, and threw her head back. Renya doubted she could have looked more suspicious if she tried. He kept himself at a safe distance and readied himself to run if the need arose as he watched the girl proudly announce her name.

“I am the traveling merchant, Gi— erm, I mean, Kirie!”



“Am I supposed to be impressed?”

His lukewarm response seemed to suck the vigor right out of her, and she visibly wilted.

“I was just trying to build some hype.”

“Forget your hype. What does a traveling merchant want with me?”

He shot her a cautious glance. She had gotten his attention for a reason, and he wanted to know what it was. His overt wariness, however, earned him a resigned shrug.

“You don’t have to act so defensive...” she said with a smile.

“There was nobody around. I checked to make sure. And yet here you are. That’s reason enough for me to be on guard.”

Without the ability to use gracecraft like Rona, he could not say for certain, but he had scrutinized his surroundings and the place had been deserted as far as he could see. He had good reason to, as well. Him fumbling around with a sword was not something he wanted an audience for.

“Hey, you’re not giving us traveling merchants enough credit. We have to avoid being attacked by bandits and monsters as we make our way from town to town peddling our goods. Hiding our presence is a cinch,” announced the girl with another proud puff of her chest.

“Okay,” he continued, still unconvinced, “but for a traveling merchant, you’re sure carrying a whole lot of nothing. Where are these goods that you’re supposedly peddling?”

“I’m special, you see, because not only am I a traveling merchant, I’m a traveling merchant who has a voidbox!”

Renya nodded. That did explain her conspicuous lack of baggage.

“All right, then. What do you sell?”

“Anything sellable. Now, this is quite a place to cross paths, don’t you think? Fate must have conspired to bring us here. Why not treasure this opportunity and take a look at my goods?”

Not even waiting for him to answer, Kirie pulled from her waist pouch a rug far larger than what should have been possible to fit inside and spread it on the ground. Then, she began to produce all sorts of items from the same pouch, neatly arranging them on the rug for display.

It reminded him vaguely of a certain pocket from a certain anime. There were tiny tube-shaped jars filled with colorful liquids, jewelry made from precious metals adorned with gems, black leather-like gloves that exposed the fingers, and a few pairs of boots. As she pulled the final article from her pouch, Renya's eyes widened.

"That's..."

"Oh? Has this caught your eye? You certainly have good taste," she said, offering it to him with both hands for his perusal.

It was a katana.

The hilt was wrapped in matte leather, black and unobtrusive. Similarly unassuming was the guard, made of matte black metal. The blade hid inside a black metallic sheath, decorated by silver tendrils that coiled in arabesque patterns.

"Please, draw the blade and take a look."

He took the katana in his left hand, holding it by the sheath. With a small motion, he loosened the blade. It slid free of the sheath with a crisp sensation. Drawing the rest of it out, he flipped over the blade and held it up at eye level to be examined. A breath of awe escaped him.

The layered steel, known as jigane, showed fine wood-like ko-itame grains, and the complex interplay of light and shadow across its length was a feature of the irregular scattering of midare-utsuri. The blade pattern, or hamon, consisted of a smooth, rolling pattern of shallow waves that crested into uneven gunome-choji cloves. A rough measurement by eye put the length of the blade at a little longer than two foot four. He would have to take it apart and examine the inscription on the tang to be sure, but judging from the shallow curvature of the blade, it was probably a type of katana known as an uchigatana. He continued to look it over for some time. Eventually, he carefully returned it to its sheath and handed it back to Kirie.

“A fine piece of craftsmanship. It was a privilege to behold.”

“Oh? Are you not going to purchase it?” she asked in surprise.

“Of course not. I can’t possibly afford such a premium item,” he answered with a sigh.

“Well, actually, here’s the deal. Apparently, this weapon originally came from a Wanderer somewhere, and it really isn’t very popular in our world here.” Holding the katana in her right hand, she scratched her head with her left and gave an awkward smile. “It really is beautiful to look at, so I figured I might be able to sell it as a work of art. The problem is, no one can use it properly as a weapon. Even if they like how it looks, they might break it because they don’t know how to handle it. To be perfectly honest, I’m having a lot of trouble finding a taker.”

“Wow, that’s such a waste...”

Renya meant it. Kirie, however, seemed to take his sincerity as interest and dialed up her pitch.

“Right? At the end of the day, I think every tool longs to be used by someone who knows how to handle it. So, let’s cut to the chase. If you know how to use this, I’ll give you a deal. Twenty gold! It’s a steal!”

“I’m pretty sure I know that blade inside out, but I don’t have the money.”

Upon hearing the price, he immediately gave up any further consideration of purchase. Even with all his assets put together, including the money he’d brought with him to this world, his earnings from selling manastones, and the reward for killing goblins, he simply did not have enough cash. He also did not want it enough to go borrow money from somewhere.

The problem with the longsword was that he was trying to use it as a blade. If he just treated it like a hunk of metal, he might be fine in a fight. All he would need to do was bludgeon people.

Meanwhile, Kirie’s expression turned serious. Seeing that he was about to call off the deal, she doubled down on the offer. She seemed very unwilling to let him walk away, possibly because she figured it would be ages before she found another buyer.

“In that case, how about we barter? Item for item. I see that you were training with a weapon here. You’re an adventurer, I assume? If you have anything rare or exotic on you, I’d be happy to trade.”

“Sorry, but I only came to this world recently. I’ve got nothing on me that’s rare or exotic.”

“Hm? This world? Are you, perchance, one of those Wanderer people?” asked a surprised Kirie.

He had let his identity slip with his last remark, but he’d also been told there was no need to hide it, so he nodded.

“For real?” The girl’s eyes lit up. “In that case, did you bring anything from your world? If it doesn’t exist in this world, it’s sure to be valuable.”

“Yeah, but still...”

Normally, Wanderers arrived in another world through a process that can be summed up as tripping and falling, except they fell into a particularly deep and interdimensional hole. This meant they often brought whatever they had on them to their new world. In Renya’s case — assuming that girl was telling the truth — he’d already died. For obvious reasons, he ended up packing light for his trip.

A thought, however, crossed his mind, and he opened up his inventory. One item in there sort of fit the bill as having a foreign origin. Technically, the thing itself did not come from his original world, but other ones like it did. It had a lot of personal value to him, but even he grudgingly admitted that to the untrained eye, it was fairly indistinguishable from a stick. Regardless, having nothing else of worth, he took it out of his inventory.

“What might that be?”

“It’s called a shinai. Back where I’m from, it’s... well, technically a weapon.”

“Most intriguing. Could I... perhaps take a look?”

He handed her the bamboo sword and she took it, scratching her head. For a brief moment, he considered the possibility of her dashing off with it but soon dismissed the notion after remembering the pile of goods that still lay

unattended at her feet. With the katana still in her right hand, she held the shinai in her left and gave it a swing.

“It’s rather light.”

“Yeah, in my world, it’s mostly used as a practice weapon.”

She studied it, looking up and down its length. Then, she froze, as though she’d suddenly realized something.

“Hmm, hmm...” she murmured as she studied it with narrowed eyes. Then, she happened upon something that made her pause. “Oh? I see that it’s a class ten item.”

Her remark reminded him that the item did indeed come with a description like that when he first saw it in the inventory, and he found himself impressed by the traveling merchant’s astuteness. He nodded at her, wondering whether her keen eye just came with the job, or if she could use the Appraisal skill. In return, she began lightly striking the katana in her right hand against the shinai in her left, all the while cautiously glancing at him as if she was gauging his response. He had no idea what she meant to do, but after ten strikes, she slowly held out her right hand, katana included.

“What?”

“Let’s trade. I don’t know much about this shinai item, but there are plenty of connoisseurs out there with a thing for item classes, and this one’s a class ten! It’ll definitely sell!”

“Really? I mean, I realize I was the one who put it on the table, but are you sure about this?”

“Absolutely. This katana isn’t worth much to me since I can’t sell it. It’s class seven, too, which is a good deal lower.”

“Well, I’d certainly appreciate it if you’re willing to trade...”

In contrast to the uncertain look on Renya’s face, Kirie was all but beaming. She looked like she just got the bargain of the century.

“And I get to offload dead stock in exchange for fresh new goods. This is great for me, too.”

“I... guess? If you’re really okay with it, then sure.”

“Done! Good doing business with you.”

Renya could not shake the feeling that he just involuntarily scammed a poor merchant girl, but the girl in question happily pressed the katana to him and threw the shinai into her pouch-shaped voidbox.

“Is there anything else you want?” inquired the girl. “If not, I’ll start putting away my goods.”

“Yeah, go ahead. I don’t have much with me, anyway,” he answered, but his mind had already drifted to the katana in his hand, pondering such topics as how he was going to carry it. Being an uchigatana, the correct method was to wear it at the waist, but his current attire was not very katana-friendly.

“By the way,” said Kirie as she carelessly hurled item after item into her pouch, “since we’re here, would you mind indulging my curiosity and showing me what it’s like to use that thing properly?”

“Huh?”

“Here, I’ll give you a target to use.”

After she cleaned up her makeshift storefront, she reached into her pouch and pulled out a different object. It bore an unmistakable resemblance to the scarecrows he had seen in rice fields in his previous world. Made of straw and sticks in the shape of a human, it was wrapped in leather armor and looked fairly durable. A spike took the place of its legs, and she drove it into the ground, firmly planting the scarecrow in front of him. Then, she gestured to him to go ahead and took a few steps back.

Renya hesitated for a second, but something about their prior transaction left him feeling a little guilty. Seeing that she was not asking for much, he ultimately decided that it was only right for him to grant her request. He did, after all, claim to know how to use a katana properly. He owed her a demonstration.

Once he confirmed that she was far enough from the scarecrow, he bent his knees a little, held the katana at his left hip, and slowly wrapped his right hand around its grip. For the briefest moment, he was assaulted by a peculiar feeling of familiarity. It was as if he had been carrying it all his life, despite using it for

the first time now. He narrowed his eyes and focused his gaze on the scarecrow.

A space of two meters separated Renya from his target. Kirie tensed, her pulse quickening as she watched from the sidelines. There was an invisible pressure radiating from him that pressed against her chest. Finding it slightly hard to breathe, she gulped. That was when his right hand blurred.

Realizing that he'd drawn the blade, she looked for the swing, only to find that his body had returned to its original position. Slowly, as though savoring the lingering echo of a concluded melody, he slid the blade back into its sheath.

Words failed her. She did not blink once. Nevertheless, her eyes seemed to have failed to capture the moment when he took a step forward and cut through the scarecrow. A chilling sensation gripped her, and she stood transfixed, unable to look away. It was as if she was the scarecrow — as if the blade had sliced through her.

With one final flick, the blade returned fully into its sheath. At the same time, the scarecrow split right down the middle. Then, it broke again, this time across the chest, and fell to the ground in four pieces.

Renya let out a breath.

“Since this was a stationary batto — that is, I drew the sword right where I stood — the correct term for it is probably battojutsu,” he said as he looked over at a stunned Kirie. “It’s a different style of swordsmanship than kenjutsu.”

The girl remained frozen. He smiled.

“Have I satisfied your curiosity?”

In all likelihood, he meant well, but the smile shook Kirie to the core. At the mercy of her nerves, she found she could do little but nod along.

Chapter 2: A Mission Was Accepted, or So It Was Told

“I accepted a mission!”

Those were the first words out of an oddly excited Shion as she entered under the afternoon sun.

Two days had passed since Renya left for the mountains on his journey of self-discovery. That meant that for two days, he was nowhere to be found in town. Upon returning from his training regimen, he was showered by a barrage of grievances from the two girls, who did not appreciate his sudden and unannounced absence. Apparently, running off with nothing but a boxed lunch and not returning at night had made Shion and Rona worried that something had happened to him.

Renya’s plan had been to spend a whole two days training outside and getting used to his body, all the while sneaking in short naps and rationing his food. At the time, this seemed like a perfectly reasonable idea. In hindsight, he conceded that taking only a single meal’s worth of food would make people assume he intended to come back during the same day.

Nevertheless, he had told them beforehand that he was going to be gone for about two days, so he maintained the stance that he was not to blame. He maintained it secretly, of course, because Shion was currently in the midst of an emphatic lecture about how worried-sick-and-couldn’t-sleep-at-night they were, and arguing right now would be the equivalent of pouring oil on a fire. On the outside, he continued to apologize profusely. After all, it was true that he made them worry, and there was something refreshing about knowing someone was concerned for his safety. All in all, the process of repeatedly lowering his head and saying sorry was not entirely disagreeable.

At the moment, however, there were other matters to attend to, so he set those thoughts aside. Specifically, he felt a dire need to improve his living standards after slogging through yet another unappetizing lunch. The current

environment was unacceptable. He had asked the inn's master to boil some water and pour it into a lidded ceramic jar with a wide opening. While it cooled, he had purchased some apple-like fruits from a nearby stall, and he was currently in the process of cutting them into bite-sized pieces. He threw them into the thoroughly-cooled water, skin included, and closed the lid. All that remained was to let it sit for a few days, after which he would be able to use the mixture to produce what he needed — in theory, anyway. He only knew the steps on paper.

Rona stood at his side curiously observing his work, but he made no attempt to explain what he was doing. He doubted she would understand even if he did.

“Um... Renya?”

He had already asked the inn's owner to put it someplace in the kitchen where it would not get in the way. When he requested for it to be left alone for a few days, the owner raised an eyebrow and told him that he was going to come back to a pile of rotten mush. He shrugged and smiled awkwardly, no better response coming to mind. Trying to explain the difference between rotting and fermenting to someone from this world seemed like a tad too much agony for what it was worth, not to mention the fact that both technically referred to the same phenomenon. People just called the useful stuff fermenting and the nasty stuff rotting. To be honest, even Renya could not point to what the difference was.

“Hey, Renya...”

“I heard you the first time. You accepted a mission, right?” Realizing that Shion was starting to sound crabby, possibly because she thought she was being ignored, he finally said something. He actually was listening; he just did not hear anything that necessitated a reply. In his opinion, if she had something to say, she should just say it.

“What kind of mission is it?”

“Apparently, they discovered a new dungeon. It's about a day's travel from the south gate by wagon.”

Eighty kilometers away, more or less. Having no sense of distance, Renya could not tell if that was considered near or far, but it did seem odd for a

dungeon to have remained undiscovered all this time in a place like that. When he posed the question to Shion, he was treated to an explanation of how dungeons worked.

There were two types of dungeons. One consisted of ruins of structures or abandoned mines that, left standing, became home to monsters. The others were known as organic dungeons. These were created when an object called a dungeon core appeared somewhere and began reshaping its surroundings. It would also generate monsters, store treasure, and slaughter adventurers who came for its riches. Then it would suck the mana out of their dead bodies, growing ever more powerful. Much about the dungeon cores remained a mystery, including their formation and ability to generate monsters, and research into their nature was limited.

“The one they discovered this time is one of the bio types, and the mission is to eliminate it.”

“Even if it’s a new dungeon, are we seriously going in solo?”

“No, we’re doing a raid together with a bunch of parties.”

A raid referred to a concerted effort by a number of parties. According to Shion, raid parties were formed fairly frequently when the guild put out missions that were likely beyond the capabilities of a single party to complete. Everything about this sounded like a game to Renya, but Shion assured him that it was very much real, and very much not to be taken lightly.

When left alone, organic dungeons absorbed mana from their surroundings, meaning they would grow on their own. The larger they became, the more monsters they could generate, and the stronger those monsters would be. Eventually, this could lead to an outbreak of monsters with devastating consequences for nearby areas. It was therefore imperative whenever an organic dungeon was discovered to gather a large number of adventurers and destroy its core swiftly.

“How many parties are participating?”

“Four, including us. Nineteen people in total.”

Subtracting the three of them left sixteen others, which was about five people

per party. Since most parties consisted of four to six people, they were sitting right on the average. With no reference to compare against, however, he had no way of gauging their strength. He looked to Rona, seeking her opinion, but she shook her head.

“Information is always lacking for new dungeons, so in most cases, no one knows the appropriate raid party size,” she explained.

“Is it just me or does this not sound like the best job?”

“If it formed recently, then it’s likely to be on the smaller side. Clearing it should be fairly easy, as well. Also, since it’s unexplored, you can expect to find a good deal of raw materials and treasure. As a job, it’s actually pretty rewarding.”

“Renya,” said a scowling Shion, “how come you’re asking Rona instead of me?”

If he were to be honest, he would tell her it was because Rona obviously seemed more knowledgeable and experienced. Honesty, however, would not serve him well here. What he needed was tact. Though he did not know how the girls came to form a party, when Shion was present, Rona always played the part of the blithe priest-in-training. The reason was unclear to him, but so long as Rona refused to break character, he had to watch what he said. It would not do to break her cover. Painfully aware of Shion’s piercing glare, he hemmed and hawed as he tried to piece together an excuse.

“The two of you are about equal when it comes to knowledge and experience, right? With that in mind, I figured that asking Rona the Faithful might earn me some points with God. Never hurts to be in his good books.”

Judging by the young girl’s depiction of the Administrators, however, “God” here did not sound like the kind of person to go through the trouble of blessing all his priestly servants for their devotion. He was, of course, not actually expecting any benefit, but for an excuse he pulled out of his ass, he thought it was quite good.

“Hmph... If you put it that way, I guess you have a point,” said Shion.

“You’re the leader, right, Shion? Don’t worry. You’ll have the final say.

Whatever you decide, I'll follow," said Renya.

"Huh?!"

A synchronized sound of surprise escaped the pair. He looked at them, equally baffled by their response. Their conversation just slammed into a big, red question mark and ground to a halt.

"...Did I say something weird?"

"I totally thought you were going to be leader, Renya."

"Mmm, to be honest, I was under the same assumption."

"...Why, damn it? Why did you think that?"

Renya let out a breath, then grimaced. Leaders had to take responsibility for others. That sounded extremely unappealing. In fact, it sounded so unappealing that he had prepared a response in advance, just in case. He had a feeling he might need one. As it turned out, he was right.

"At the very least, I assume you understand why it's a bad idea to have a Wanderer, who by definition knows very little about this world, as your leader, right?" he asked, fully confident that the truth of his claim was self-evident.

It was not.

"I'm still of the opinion that a male leader is preferable. We'll have less trouble dealing with others."

"Agreed. Besides, you'll probably make better decisions than me."

Where is this baseless confidence in me coming from, damn it? And if you want me to be leader so much, why the hell are you the one who went and accepted the mission, huh?

He felt frustration welling up from within. It rose to his throat, threatening to burst forth and unleash his unfettered ire upon the two girls before him.

But then he saw their puppy eyes, and he promptly wilted.

With the most earnest of gazes, they assaulted his conscience, asking — imploring — him to take up the mantle. He looked down and sighed. Grudgingly, he surrendered with a nod.

“...Fine. Shion, the next time you want to accept a mission, say something to me first. Assuming I’m going to be leader, that is.”

“Hm, good point. I got ahead of myself. Sorry.”

She lowered her head in sincere apology. He waved it off.

“Moving on, then. What’s the reward and time commitment?”

“Six gold per party as necessary expenses. The back-and-forth is two days, and exploring the dungeon is another two days, so four days in total. It’s an elimination mission, so we’re to kill as many monsters inside as possible. A ten-gold bonus will be rewarded upon successful destruction of the dungeon core.”

“How are we getting there? Wagon? Or on foot?”

“By wagon. The guild will provide them. We depart tomorrow morning, but before that, there’s a meet-and-greet for the participating parties later tonight at a tavern near the guild called the Silver Stein Shelter.”

Shion finished answering with a proud look on her face. Presumably, Renya was supposed to feel impressed by how well-prepared she was. All he really felt was a headache.

If he had to pick out the most serious problem among the countless ones she just presented him, it was time, or rather, the lack thereof. The departure was too soon and the meeting even sooner. In fact, heading to the meeting would leave them with almost no time to prepare. The guild probably posted the mission a while ago, and Shion, who happened to see it in the nick of time, immediately dashed off to the guild to accept it before time was up.

What she did not understand about such missions, however, was that one did not simply walk into a dungeon. He looked to Rona. Her grimace told him that she saw the same problem.

“Shion... Next time, let’s try using our heads a little bit before accepting a mission, okay?”

“Huh? What?”

Their concern went straight over Shion’s head. Despite that, she seemed to clue in to the fact that she was in trouble. Panic crept into her features as she

looked back and forth between him and Rona. He considered giving her a good lecturing, but reconsidered when he saw her expression. In general, people improved more when praised than scolded. Assuming this still applied for this world, since Shion had already realized she made a mistake, what she needed now was not harsh words, but a pat on the back.

Renya nodded. The reasoning was sound. This was by no means him turning mellow at the sight of a flustered Shion. This was cold, hard logic. He turned to Rona. She gave him a pat on the shoulder and a look that said she understood.

“Well, there’s no use crying over spilled milk... Rona, can you go do some emergency shopping?”

“Yes, I suppose I’ll have to. Four days’ worth of food and water along with rope and torches, as well as medicine and bandages. Anything else?”

“What about stuff to sleep on? You two have some, but I don’t.”

“I’ll buy yours, too. If I remember anything else along the way, I’ll buy those, too.”

“Thanks. Can you pay for us? We can split the cost later.”

Rona nodded to him and rushed off. He watched her leave the inn, then turned to Shion to find her with her head down, looking rather disheartened. Presumably, the consequences of her actions had finally dawned on her.

“There’s... a lot of preparation to do, I guess...”

“Just keep that in mind for next time. Tell me something, though. This isn’t your first time accepting a mission, right? Did it slip your mind somehow?” he asked, being very careful to phrase it as a question and not an admonishment.

“Usually, Rona already finished doing everything by the time I get involved...” she replied, her face red with embarrassment.

Renya let out a deep sigh. Back when he first met the two of them, he thought Shion was the baby-sitter of the two. It was almost funny how wrong he was. Almost.

“I see... You should thank her later. As for the two of us, we should go show up for that meet-and-greet. It’s okay if we’re missing a member, right?”

“...Probably?”

It might not be okay.

Seeing that he was not going to get any reliable information out of Shion, he grit his teeth and decided that if anything went wrong, he would just have to take the fall and apologize.

“Anyway, let’s start heading to that Silver Stein Shelter place. If we run into any problems, we’ll just talk our way through them.”

He hoped that they were simply going to show up, say hi, make some small talk, and leave. His gut, however, told him that things were not going to go that smoothly. He hated his gut at that moment; it had the terribly inconvenient tendency to be right.

Located near the guildhall, the Silver Stein Shelter sounded like the kind of place that would be bustling with activity. Upon arrival, Renya was surprised to find the opposite to be true; from sunup to sundown and all through the night, the tavern was perpetually quiet.

Part of the reason was the owner being a moody sort who never made small talk. There was also a distinct lack of attractive staff. However, the most important reason was by far the fact that this tavern was under the direct management of the Adventurers Guild. Being in essence a guild tavern, it was naturally frequented by the guild’s members. Adventurers were, of course, a fairly heterogeneous lot. On average, though, they tended to not be the most upstanding of citizens, and where they gathered, normal people avoided. In fact, even guild members often preferred other places where there was an abundance of charming ladies on the staff roster. The guild’s population was, after all, primarily young and male.

The tavern was, however, the go-to location for adventurers to gather for discussion and debate. With its low traffic, it was easier to avoid being overheard when discussing more confidential topics. This was likely why the guild kept it running even though business was miserable. Still, there was a significant cost to operating a business, and the guild had attempted to pull in more customers by hiring cute waitresses and competent chefs. Their efforts

unfortunately ended in vain. Due to its reputation as a gathering spot for adventurers, traffic did not improve, and an exodus of the new staff soon followed.

Renya had learned all of that from Rona. Her knowledge impressed him.

The two of them pushed open the double doors of the tavern and entered. After adjusting to the dimmer ambiance inside, they found a counter, behind which stood a balding middle-aged man who definitely did not look like a good partner for conversation. He glared at them questioningly, violating the most basic rule of customer service. It seemed futile to point that out to the man, though, so Renya matched his dour attitude.

“We’re here for a guild mission. A meet-and-greet for clearing the dungeon to the south. Is it here?”

The man was likely the owner. Seeming to understand what Renya was talking about, he motioned with his chin toward a corner of the room, where a group of people were occupying a number of tables. At a glance, they seemed to be simply engaging in the kind of vacuous chitchat that such groups were wont to do.

Shion, however, noticed none of that. Her attention was focused on the faint but definitely-bulging vein at Renya’s temple. The owner’s chin tilt did not rub Renya the right way.

“R-Renya, it’s not good to make a scene here...”

“I know. This is this and that is that. I know how to handle myself.”

At Shion’s urging, he walked away from the counter and headed for the corner of the tavern. Rather, he would have, had the owner not spoken up.

“Hold on, tough guy.”

“...What?”

“You sit on my chair, you pay for a drink. It’s the rule here. What’ll it be?”

“Water.”

“My ass,” snapped the owner. “This is a tavern. We drink the good stuff here.

What's the problem, kid? You can't drink? And you're playing the adventurer game?" This time, it was the owner who was annoyed by Renya's terse reply. The two of them now had matching veins bulging on their temples.

From the man's perspective, some punk kid just strolled into his bar with a girl and stared at him like he had a bone to pick. Then, of all things, the kid ordered water. In a tavern. Was this a joke? Or was he just plain stupid? Either way, he was asking for it. Just as he was about to go teach the kid a lesson, the owner froze. It was as if a bucket of ice was just poured into his veins. The kid was looking — simply looking — at him. Nothing else. It was the same kid. That had not changed. What changed was the look itself — a reflection of how he appeared to the kid. At first, he was a man. Then, a disagreeable man. Now, it.

"U-Uhh... Water, right?"

"Yeah. Water. Can I have water?"

The kid's voice was calm and entirely devoid of emotion. The owner grabbed the water he used for cutting drinks, then quickly poured it into two glasses and set them on the counter, feeling as if he were speaking to a piece of winter itself.

"Are you okay with water, Shion?"

"What? Oh, sure. This isn't really the time or place for drinking alcohol, anyway."

"Okay. How much?" the kid said, turning to him.

"Huh?"

Seeing the blankness on his face, the kid spoke again in the same flat tone.

"For the water. I assume it's not free?"

"O-Oh. Right. One copper each."

The kid dropped the coins on the counter, picked up the glasses, handed one to Shion, and turned to leave. The relief from that alone was immense. He unwittingly let out a deep breath, feeling as though he fell into a demonic realm and just managed to safely return. As he watched the two of them approach

the group he'd pointed them to, he made a mental note to remember the face of that kid. It was a face to be avoided at all costs.

Renya, meanwhile, paid no attention to the concerns of the owner. In fact, he had already forgotten about the owner entirely. Despite that, he didn't feel much better, because now a good number of his soon-to-be allies were eying him with unpleasant smirks. They were probably sizing him up, and it was a thoroughly disagreeable experience. Suppressing the urge to leave right then and there, he sat down at a table. Walking away here might be considered a failure to complete a mission, and that was worse. Shion took a seat beside him, obeying the pattern of each party occupying their own table.

"It looks like everyone's here," said a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was solidly built and wore leather armor reinforced by metal plates. His golden hair was cropped short, and his piercing blue eyes were carefully scanning the room. Two longswords hung from his hips. They looked finely crafted, and both showed signs of extensive use.

"That's Harz Reisen. Their party is the Crimson Bearers and he's their leader. He's a skilled adventurer, rank B, and wields dual swords," whispered Shion. Apparently, she sat next to him just so she could offer such comments. For some reason, she had extensive knowledge of adventurers. This knowledge, he found after asking, came more from a strong interest in adventurers that bordered on worship than any tangible need. Gradually, this intense curiosity had caused her to become intimately familiar with the goings-on of the adventuring scene. It was, in a way, similar to the dynamic with idols.

Harz sat at a table with two women and two other men. The ongoing stream of mumbling commentary at his ear informed him that one woman was a mage, one was a thief, and the men were both warriors. Aside from Harz, everyone else was rank C.

"Everyone's here? Seriously? You're telling me *that's* the rest of them?" snarked a young brown-haired man whose table manners needed some work. He was leaning back in his chair and had both feet on the table in front of him.

"Zest Fatality, a rapier user and the leader of Sharpfang. He's rank C... but

that's actually because he has some behavior issues. In terms of pure skill, he's apparently rank B."

Zest's party consisted of him and five women. He was a warrior. As for his ladies, there were two rank-D thieves, two rank-D priests, and one rank-B mage. When Renya asked Shion why the mage wasn't the leader, she simply replied, "Because she's female." As she continued to explain, leaning in close to keep her voice low, Renya found himself impressed — and maybe a little dumbfounded — by how much she knew.

"Who exactly are you referring to by 'that?'" said a gaunt man in a low, subdued voice. He wore a gray robe and held a gnarly staff. His red hair fanned upwards and outwards.

"That's... the leader of the Inquirers, Azu Hound. He's famous for being a rare case of a mage who leads a party. He's rank D."

Four other men were in his party. They all wore thick plate armor. According to Shion, their primary tactic was to have the four men buy enough time for Azu to pummel their enemies with magecraft. Due to the fact that the four men only focused on shielding their leader, their ranks remained low at F.

As Shion rattled off detail after intimate detail about these parties, something occurred to Renya. On one hand, the fact that she knew so much was worthy of praise. On the other hand, she had to find all of this out from somewhere, and that raised some serious concerns about how adventurers handled sensitive information. Further attempts to contemplate the state of information security in the adventuring field, however, was disturbed by a loud bark of annoyance.

"Hey, you! We're talking about you!"

"...?"

Realizing that the statement was directed at him, he turned toward the person who spoke, eyebrow raised in curiosity. It was Zest. The man still sat like he was being swallowed by his seat. With one of his ladies under each arm, he shot Renya a dark look.

"Just two people? That's it? What, are you trying to leech off us?"

"No, we have a priest who's absent. She's currently doing some preparations

for the trip. I apologize for the misunderstanding. We mean no offense.”

As expected, trouble came knocking. Renya had suspected that somebody would try to stir things up, and to be honest, he really wanted to be proven wrong. Nevertheless, he did not let his annoyance show on his face, as that would only invite more trouble. Their party size was definitely on the smaller side, so it made sense for him to take the initiative and apologize. He stood up and lowered his head to Zest.

“Tch. This ain’t no game, you know? But whatever. If you die, I’ll just get a share of your reward. It’s all good by me.”

“Stop that, Zest,” said Harz. “We’re in this together. Nothing good will come of a fight between allies. The mission hasn’t even started yet.” His reproofing tone earned him an even darker glare from Zest.

“This is how I do things. What, you got a problem?”

“No. But there’s no point in feuding amongst ourselves, is there?”

“I’m sorry for causing trouble,” added Renya, “but we’ll pull our weight. I ask that you trust me on this.”

“Trust, huh? Trust’s a nice word. Thing is, we don’t know you. Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Renya was about to tell them his name and party when he happened upon a problem: he had no party. Not a named one, at least.

“We all became adventurers recently, so we don’t have a party name yet. I’m Renya Kunugi.”

“The hell?!” exclaimed Zest, sounding like he’d just heard the most outrageous thing in his life.

Renya was puzzled. Nothing he said seemed particularly strange.

“Is something the matter?”

“You’re telling me you’re all a bunch of nobodies who just started adventuring recently? Which means you’re rank F?”

“That’s right. What about it?”

“You messing with me, kid? Or are you just a bunch of leeches? ‘Pull our weight,’ my ass! What weight are three rank Fs gonna pull?!”

Renya smiled wryly and shook his head. He did not say anything back. Zest’s outrage was not entirely unwarranted; from his perspective, they probably did look like a bunch of freeloaders. Zest, however, seemed to have interpreted Renya’s smile as an affront, and rage began to boil out of his deathly glare.

“Th-The mission didn’t have any rank requirements. There was also no limit to the number of people. It should be fine for us to take part—”

“Shut up, kid! Get out of here!”

Shion, who couldn’t bear to hear any more, spoke up, but her interjection only served to redirect Zest’s fury toward herself. In his outburst, he hurled the glass in his hand at her, liquid still sloshing around inside. It flew toward her with a speed that was sure to cause harm on impact. She flinchingly took cover, but Renya happened to be in the way, so he intervened. In one smooth motion, he snatched the glass out of the air and set it down on a table. Half of its contents had already spilled during its flight, but when he placed it back down, the other half twirled around the brim before settling into the glass.

“You punk kid...”

This also seemed to offend Zest in some way. He motioned with his eyes at his thief girl, who abruptly flicked her wrist.

Four knives shot across the room directly at Renya.

As a warning shot, it seemed a little excessive. Nevertheless, since he was the cause of all this to begin with, Renya had no one to blame but himself. With a sigh, he reached out plucked them out of their flight, two in each hand. Their tips still pointed at him, but their bodies were locked firmly between his fingers. He drove them into the table around the glass, one on each side. The girl was presumably a skilled thrower who trusted her aim, so this might have had the effect of denting her self-confidence, as she looked completely stunned, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“So,” Renya continued in a thoroughly nonchalant manner, “I heard this was supposed to be a simple meet-and-greet. Doesn’t feel like that right now, does

it?”

“And whose fault do you think that is, punk?”

The display just now should have dispelled any doubts about his skill, but Zest sounded reluctant to back down. So Renya nodded and said,

“You’re right. It’s my fault. We’ll leave, then. We’ll do our job, of course... and we won’t need help.”

“Renya?!”

“We’ll do it our way,” he said as he calmed a bewildered Shion, “and you can do it your way. That’s probably for the best, I think?”

“It might very well be,” agreed Harz. “We’ll proceed on our own, as well. Otherwise, all the animosity will get in the way of work.”

“Can we wrap up this meeting, then?” asked Renya.

“Sure. Once we get there, we’ll see how things play out,” confirmed Harz with a grin.

“We... won’t need help, either. Less trouble that way,” muttered Azu.

Harz clapped his hands together.

“That’s three out of four parties. We have a majority.”

“Whatever. We don’t need a bunch of dead weights like you clowns, either!”

“Right. We’re leaving, then,” said Renya with a quick nod. He turned to Shion and, before she could protest, gave her a push on the back to usher her out with him. As he turned, Zest called out to them, his words dripping with bile.

“Hey, rookie, you’d better watch your back!”

“The same to you.” He did not look back. The flare of rage behind him was tangible. As he left the store, a loud clatter entered his ears. He paid it no mind. It was not hard to imagine what happened; Zest probably snapped, and a bunch of things snapped with him.

“Renya, I...”

“Okay, that’s enough. Listen, I was the one who ruined the meeting.”

On their way back to the inn, Renya heard the beginnings of what might be a long string of muttering, so he preemptively put a stop to them. Shock caused Shion to pause for a moment, but she soon attempted to open her mouth again. So he turned toward her, wrapped his hand around her forehead, and squeezed, giving her a small taste of his patented iron claw.

“O-Ow! Ow ow ow! Renya?! You’re going to grind through my skull!”

“I said don’t worry about it. So, don’t worry about it. If Rona complains, just tell her I snapped and caused a riot. Got it? Say yes if you got it. Otherwise, I’ll assume you haven’t, in which case I keep squeezing.”

“Keep squeezing?! B-But, the reason they looked down on us was me to begin — Gyaaaa!”

“Huh, I don’t hear an answer. More squeezing it is, then. By the way, Shion, would you believe me if I told you I can crush a goblin’s skull with one hand?”

“Th-That’s insane! There’s no way you can— Wait, can you?!”

“Remember how I was disposing of dead bodies at the settlers’ village? I gave it a try. They make a nice crispy sound when they crack.”

“I-I got it! I got it, so let me go already!”

As soon as he let go, Shion held her head in her hands and looked at him with tears in her eyes. He saw the slightest spark of resistance in those eyes, so he curled just the edges of his lips upwards and brandished his fingers at her. She did not protest further.

“Of course, from the very beginning, I had a feeling this was going to get messy.”

His gut, as it turned out, was right again. It needed to stop doing that so much. He looked at Shion, and she made no reply.

She was, after all, too busy running frantically away from him, lest his iron claw struck again.

“You did that on purpose.”

Renya glanced at the accuser, who swayed back and forth as the horse wagon tottered down the road.

Rona glared back. Her arms and legs were crossed, and her expression was crosser. Rather than her usual overly-tight attire, she wore a priest robe that actually fit her, supplemented by a chest guard. Arm guards protected her arms, and a one-handed mace hung from her waist. Her soft, fluffy hair no longer fluttered freely, having been tied neatly back. Only her large eyes remained unchanged, and even they lost their naive glow. There was the air of a warrior about her.



“Damn, it’s freaky how you can do that...” he said, marveling at what some clothes and a new hairdo could do. His remark, however, seemed to go right over her head. “Never mind. Anyway, what was that about doing something on purpose?”

It had been a long time since they’d left the city and began to endure the wagon’s jostling. The wagon was, very literally, a wagon. The human-friendly features of a carriage were nowhere to be found. It was just a cart and a horse and some rope in between.

Naturally there was no roof, and aside from the driver’s box, the only place to sit was on the seats embedded in the cart, whose wooden, cushionless surfaces promised plenty of soreness for the user’s rear end.

The Adventurers Guild had provided them with four wagons, which could either have been coincidence or a calculated decision after hearing about the events that transpired during the meetup. Regardless, it afforded them the luxury of not sharing a wagon with any other party.

In Renya’s party, Shion was the only one who knew how to handle a horse. Renya himself had no horse-riding experience, and Rona apparently always sat behind Shion, so she had never handled a horse herself. Naturally, this forced Shion into the driver’s box, which left him and Rona sitting in the cart facing each other.

“The meetup, Renya. I was talking about the meetup. And how you went out of your way to poke the hornet’s nest.”

Rona hadn’t attended the meetup, so she ended up leaving on this mission without learning of its details. She pieced it together, though, when she saw how the other parties looked at them when they were about to depart. At first, she thought it might have been Shion who fell for someone’s provocation. This was soon refuted by Renya, who told her it was his doing and led to her prior comment.

“I didn’t exactly go out of my way...”

“But you could have smoothed things over if you wished, yes?”

He sure could have. Seeing that he nodded, Rona continued.

“Let me guess. With relations already strained, you figured it’d be easier to break with them completely and fly solo.”

“Disregarding the veracity of that statement for a minute... Are we seriously going to discuss this here?”

“Is there a problem? The other parties can’t hear us.”

Rona was right. They could barely hear each other sitting face-to-face. The bumpy road combined with the creaky wagon made it impossible to hear anyone talk from some distance away. With their wagon being the last in a line of four, even the sharpest ears could not listen in on their conversation.

Unless, of course, those ears were located in their wagon.

Renya glanced meaningfully toward the driver’s box, but Rona shook her head.

“She has her hands full with the horse. She’s not listening.”

“You can’t know that—”

“Yes I can. Now, your answer, please?”

For a moment, Renya considered dodging the question. Rona claimed Shion wasn’t listening, but the driver’s box was almost within arm’s reach. Whether or not she could hear them was still up in the air. At the same time, even if she did hear, he had nothing to lose. In the end, he went with the honest answer.

“You’re right. Once I saw their faces and knew their ranks, my mind was set.”

“Would you like to explain why?”

“Sure. All of them have higher ranks, and there are more of them. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they’d look down on us. Especially someone with his ugly mug,” he explained as an image of Zest’s face flashed in his mind.

An adventurer’s rank was determined not only by skill, but also through other factors such as contribution to the guild. Therefore, a higher-ranked adventurer was not necessarily a better adventurer. Despite that, Zest had turned hostile as soon as he learned of their ranks.

“If I hate somebody’s guts, I’d rather be on my own than force myself to work

with them. It's more efficient that way, too. Besides, with this many people, it's not like we're going to frolic through the dungeon together as one big, happy family, right?"

"That... is true. Normally, we would split up into two groups or leave one party outside."

Trying to squeeze nineteen people into the narrow corridors of a dungeon all at the same time sounded like a recipe for disaster. Usually, as Rona just described, roles would be assigned before exploration began, during which one party would stay behind as the lifeline. This amounted to getting the short end of the stick, but it was nevertheless a vital role during raids with many participating members. In case those who ventured in did not return, the party that remained outside was responsible for returning to town to seek help.

"Huh. Doesn't sound like there's anything wrong with splitting up into four groups either, then."

"True, though I personally wouldn't recommend it."

While Renya's proposal was technically feasible, it also implied that they would be venturing into dangerous territory with no lifeline, which likely put it at odds with Rona's safety-first attitude.

"Trying to work with people you can't trust seems even more dangerous to me."

"Good point. I agree."

"In any case, here's my proposal: we take it easy and wait these couple of days out, doing the bare minimum of work to make us look like we're contributing."

"Now that's a plan I can get behind. You've got my vote, leader."

Seeing that his plan resonated with her safety-first philosophy — better interpreted as her Shion-first philosophy — Rona threw her full support behind him. Renya sighed and smiled a little, slightly impressed by the degree to which her concern for her friend dictated her behavior.

"So, what's the deal? Once we make our bumpy way to the dungeon, are we

going to dive in right away?” he asked.

“Of course not. It takes us a day to get there. We’ll set up camp near the entrance tonight. Clearing the dungeon will come tomorrow.”

“We’re camping out tonight, huh... Not much to look forward to in terms of food,” he grumbled. His miserable expression amused Rona, who broke out in a laugh. This in turn caused Shion to turn around and eye them with a sour look.

“You two seem to be having a lot of fun back there... Let me in on the conversation.”

“We’re just chatting. It’s nothing important. What *is* important, though, is that our horse stays on course, so keep your eyes on it.”

“But I’ve been doing this for so long... Someone switch with me already.”

Renya felt for Shion; her job as driver was important. Even though he had never handled a horse, it was not hard to imagine how tiring it must be to hold the reins and maintain constant control over the horse so it keeps going forward in a straight line. On top of that, she had no one to talk to.

“I’d switch with you if I knew the first thing about horses.”

“I’ll teach you, then. Come over and I’ll show you how I handle a beast... when it gets naughty, if you know what I mean,” Shion said, smirking at him.

“Whoa, whoa, watch your words, young woman!” exclaimed Renya. “Where’d you learn to say something like that? I’d love to know sometime. Also, quit it with the smirking.”

“You know, Renya,” said Rona, casting her gaze downwards and pretending to not hear what just transpired, “Shion’s probably feeling pretty bored right now.”

Ever since Rona had revealed that Shion was of noble blood, neither of them divulged any further details. To date, Renya still knew nothing else about Shion’s background. Assuming what Rona said was true, though, Shion would be what was commonly referred to as a “princess.” And said princess just cracked one heck of a dirty joke. This was apparently a very upsetting sight to behold for Rona.

“...Please, can you go entertain her before things get even worse?” sighed Rona, sensing that Shion might say something more outrageous if no one kept her company.

Personally, Renya was perfectly fine with raunchy jokes, but Rona was clearly not. He decided to oblige.

“Will do.” As he got up, noticing that Rona was quietly massaging her temples, he added, “Tough job, huh?”

Despite the swaying of the cart, Renya’s steps were steady as he made his way over to the driver’s box, sat down, and took the reins from Shion. A session of horse-handling lessons ensued, during which there was much hand-holding of the non-figurative sort. The somewhat overly intimate nature of her instruction aside, by the end of it, he at least managed to figure out how to keep the wagon going straight.

Next, as part of what was apparently a two-in-one deal, he was made to switch with Rona, who also received Shion’s contact-heavy coaching. The fact that Shion got a lot touchier with her second pupil did not escape his notice. Nor did it the riders of the wagon ahead, who watched the playful antics of the two girls with menace in their eyes.

Renya knew why the others were upset. In fact, he could probably make their case for them: the girls were too loud, they weren’t taking this seriously enough — they were being monster beacons. He knew this perfectly well, and he had no intention of doing anything about it. Instead, he sat back and idly gazed at the pair in the driver’s box, who were in the midst of a good-natured pushing contest.

Renya was of the opinion that witnessing the sight of two pretty girls having a good time with each other was in and of itself worth the price of admission. It was a delightful treat for the eyes. While there was the minor risk of such antics attracting trouble, it seemed a poor reason to be critical.

To be fair, there were times when such playfulness was unwarranted, such as in the middle of a flight through dark and dangerous woods. Currently, however, they were on an established path where there was a reasonable guarantee of safety. There were also nineteen of them. *Nineteen*. Were these

adventurers seriously so craven as to fume with nervous rage at the playful banter of two young women?

Renya thought back to the meetup, recalling the faces of the other raid members. Zest's party was all female except for him. That seemed like a recipe for plenty of commotion, but a glance over at Zest's wagon at the front revealed it to be strangely quiet. Zest sat with a short, silver-haired girl in his arms, his posture arrogant as always. His other party members, Renya noticed, were warring with their eyes. Presumably, the embraced girl was Zest's favorite, and the remaining girls were checking each other through mutual deterrence.

At a glance, Zest's party seemed like a harem-lover's dream come true. The undercurrents he observed, however, told a very different story. Their party atmosphere was probably terrible, but Zest did not seem even slightly bothered. Was that boundless confidence? Or was he just plain stupid? Renya thought about it a little.

Probably just plain stupid.

Next in line was Harz's wagon, which was hushed, moody, and altogether carried the atmosphere of a funeral. All the party members were focused on inspecting their equipment. Conversation was kept to a bare minimum, conveying only necessary information. No one made small talk. Even the presence of female members failed to impart any hint of liveliness or energy to the party. While this certainly could be interpreted as the cool composure of seasoned veterans, Renya found that he was getting depressed just looking at them, so he stopped.

He skipped right over the third wagon. He knew it belonged to Azu's party, and he never bothered looking at it. The reason was simple: its passengers consisted of the Fortress Four and one sullen mage. To his surprise, a quick glance at their wagon revealed that there was actually some conversation between the Fortress Four and Azu. Perhaps it was a testament to the bond that tended to form between shielders and the shielded. There was an element of trust that cultivated friendships.

Such thoughts occupied Renya's mind as the wagon made its bumpy way down the road. Just when he was getting fed up with the the hard wooden

seat's tireless attempt to grind away his tailbone, they reached their destination.

Chapter 3: At the Dungeon Entrance, or So It Was Told

When Renya had first heard of dungeons, he'd imagined a structure with a conspicuous entrance in the form of a gate, complete with unnecessarily elaborate doors. Upon asking Shion, he learned that some dungeons did indeed have entrances like that, but they were rare and tended to be ruins of old buildings. As for naturally-occurring dungeons...

"...This?" he asked, pointing at the entrance before them.

The two girls nodded. The ground in front of them rose up into a small hill. At the top of the hill, there was a hole. No gates, no elaborate designs. It was, literally, just a hole. The opening was barely big enough for one person to fit through. They were in the middle of a grass field slightly off the beaten path. A few groves of trees could be seen nearby. Nothing else.

Still reeling from the sheer discrepancy between expectation and reality, Renya stared blankly at what amounted to a glorified pit. Its only dungeon-like feature was the stairs inside that could be seen leading down into its depths.

"This is supposed to be... a naturally-occurring dungeon?"

"Yeah."

"Why are there stairs?"

"How are we supposed to get down otherwise?"

Shion looked at him as if he'd just asked a very stupid question. He scratched his head. Was he missing something? Something wasn't right. This seemed almost like they were being invited to go down. Or, perhaps, being lured.

"Allow me to explain," said Rona, stepping in to clear up his confusion. "In order for naturally-occurring dungeons to grow, they need to have living creatures enter them, then absorb their mana and vital energies. Sometimes, they even swallow dead bodies whole. Supposedly, that's why they amass

things such as rare metals and place them here and there as treasures.”

“So they’re putting out some bait and hoping to catch humans?”

“More or less.”

“They can generate monsters, yet they need external resources?”

“According to one theory, after a monster is generated, once some time passes, the dungeon can recycle it for its resources... but few people have looked into the matter, so we don’t know much,” Rona said.

“How come?”

“Younger dungeons are cleared almost immediately,” explained Shion, “which results in their core being destroyed. Mature dungeons tend to be far too dangerous to stroll through for research.”

Once their core was destroyed, dungeons slowly faded away. The destroyed core itself could be used as a high quality manastone and was worth a good sum of money. As a result, recently-formed dungeons, owing to their relatively sparse monster density and limited depth, were quickly conquered by profit-seeking adventurers. Those few dungeons that either eluded the hungry eyes of adventurers or, by some stroke of fortune, managed to repel their offenses would gradually mature. As they aged, they would deepen, gaining more levels, and begin to generate upper-class monsters, making them an extremely dangerous presence.

For adventurers, as long as they made money, they couldn’t care less about the how and why. This was problematic for researchers, because it made it excruciatingly difficult for them to acquire specimens — either they were already gone, or they were teeming with dangerous monsters.

“And that’s the gist of naturally-occurring dungeons,” concluded Shion.

“So to sum it up, they’re just one big question mark.”

“Well... yeah, I guess.”

Renya noted that the question mark was a very convenient tool for summarizing complicated phenomena.

“Tough luck for this dungeon, though,” said Shion as she scanned their

surroundings. They were standing on a low hill, but the sheer flatness of the open land around them allowed for an expansive view into the distance.

“Popping up here is like asking to be discovered.”

“Did the dungeon make this hill, too?”

“Yeah, probably. It probably propped up the land for the entrance and the stairs.”

If what Shion said was true, then this was a rather daft dungeon. With nothing to obstruct the view in the vicinity, even the slightest bulge in the terrain was bound to stand out. Its location didn't help, either. While it was some distance from the road, it was no more than a few hundred meters away. Were it in a forest or someplace with uneven terrain, it might have gotten away, but in its current state it stuck out like a sore thumb.

Renya found himself feeling a tinge of pity. Living creature or not, there was something tragic about a mere babe of a dungeon being destroyed for money so soon after its birth.

“Then again, you can't throw a rock without hitting a couple of tragedies these days. I guess this is just another example,” he said as he gazed at the foot of the hill. “The camp is so close. Are you sure that's safe?”

Being a rather puny hill, its foot was not very far away. Ten meters or so from the dungeon entrance, the other parties had parked their wagons and began setting up camp. Renya's wagon was also stopped nearby, fastened to a stake they hammered into the ground.

“This place is so open. Monsters won't come here. Animals will probably avoid us, too. We're probably okay,” said Shion.

“What are the chances they'll pop out of the dungeon?”

“Nah. Monsters generated by a dungeon usually stay inside it. Sometimes a big enough dungeon will undergo a phenomenon called Bursting and spit out its monsters, but we're talking about decades of growth before that happens.”

“By the way,” Rona said, wading into their conversation, “if the two of you have finished chatting, I propose we start setting up our camp as well.”

As the evening hours approached, their surroundings grew steadily dimmer. At Rona's urging, they descended the hill to ready their camp before the light of day faded for good. Once they reached their parked wagon, Renya reached into his inventory and began taking out the various items Rona had prepared for them.

The process deepened his appreciation for the inventory, or rather, voidbox. Having access to the skill meant they never needed to load any luggage onto their wagon. All the other parties had to suffer the fate of sharing their limited cart space with their numerous belongings, but the three of them, luxuriating in their excess of space, went so far as to lie down and take naps during the trip. In the end, however, the rocking of their vehicle proved too disruptive for any real sleep.

The first objects to appear from his inventory were a shovel and a wooden hammer, followed by a few dozen boards with triangular tips, each measuring 30 centimeters by 1 meter. Then, in the shadow of their wagon, Renya found a place that was shielded from the view of the other parties and dug a hole in the ground. Finally, he planted the boards in the ground around the hole to form a booth. DIY toilet, check.

A few steps away, he dug a second, shallower hole. By surrounding it with rocks, he turned it into a makeshift stove. Used in conjunction with a Y-shaped metal frame with a rod through the middle, he could hang a pot over it and do some cooking.

Renya had picked up the rocks around the outskirts of the city before they left. During the process, he discovered that each rock consumed one space in his inventory when he put it in, but throwing them all into a bag turned the whole thing into a "bag of rocks." In this case, the "bag of rocks" consumed only one space no matter how many rocks it contained, defying all notions of weight and mass. That said something: the ability was so broken, it broke *physics*.

Next came the tent. Renya put up the posts, draped a sheet over them, anchored the stakes, and fastened the cords. It was actually a simple process for anyone who got the hang of it. Before long, he had the tent up and ready for use. As he looked it up and down, admiring his own handiwork, he realized something.

The tent.

“Hey, you think we should put up another—”

“Nah, waste of time.” Shion shot him down mid-sentence.

When a party camped out, one person was always on patrol duty. Having two gender-specific tents would mean that one was guaranteed to be empty for some portion of the night, and Shion regarded that as a waste of time. He protested this opinion, raising various concerns about having men and women under the same canopy. Sadly his efforts were in vain, ruthlessly cast aside by Shion, who declared that it didn’t matter because they were all going to be in sleeping bags anyway, and that she was perfectly fine sleeping in the same tent as him, so that was what she was going to do.

“Is there a problem?”

Renya was pretty sure there was a problem, but he found no way to argue his case. An attempt to appeal to Rona for help was met with a helpless shrug.

“We’re friends, right? You’re just sleeping next to us. It’s not like we’re torturing you or anything.”

“In a way, you could say it’s torture.”

He doubted she understood what he meant. Nevertheless, he gave up trying to argue and reached into his inventory, producing a pot and a ceramic container filled with liquid. Before they left the inn, he had asked the owner to part with some of the inn’s broth, which he kept stored in the ceramic container. It was made by thoroughly boiling a number of vegetables with animal bones and tasted something like consommé.

Renya had also brought firewood, which he placed under the pot and promptly lit with a piece of flint, which earned him a string of grievances from Shion that he steadfastly ignored. Sure, he could have requested the assistance of her Ignite spell, but it was just faster to strike up a spark.

The ingredients were next, which he started preparing using his newly-purchased knife. Vegetables were peeled, cut into appropriate pieces, and thrown into the pot. During his grocery shopping, Renya had mostly picked things that looked like root vegetables, though he recognized none of them. He

simply asked for stuff that tasted good when boiled and left it up to the store owner's judgment. The choice of meats came as a surprise to him; in addition to livestock and game, there were also plenty of monster meats for sale. At the store's recommendation, he bought some horned rabbit meat. Supposedly it made a great stew, but he would only know for sure after he tasted it.

Once he cut up the meat into bite-sized pieces, he added them to the pot and proceeded to do a bit of stir-frying. Then, he dumped in the broth and added some water. When it came to a boil, he scooped out a bit of soup in a small dish and had a taste. He added a bit of salt and pepper, the latter of which was surprisingly prevalent in this world, and voila! A simple meat and veggie soup was complete. Add in the hard-as-rock bread they'd brought, and they had all the elements of a simple dinner. The bread was a bummer, but there was little he could do.

Renya also took out some fruits, because why not? A meal wasn't a meal without dessert. The fruit he chose was called a necta. It was round and pale pink, and under its soft, hand-peelable skin lay juicy white flesh. Its appearance reminded him of peaches, but a bite revealed a tartish sweetness. While not what he had expected, the tanginess was refreshing, and he took a liking to the fruit.

For tableware, he brought spoons, along with plates that resembled flat bowls. Their deeper base made it harder to spill, which was convenient when eating outside. It felt uncomfortable to eat on the ground, so he reached into his inventory once again and took out a small, waist-high table.

Once he finished arranging all the food and utensils on the table, Renya noticed that people were giving him weird looks. Shion's and Rona's expressions were a mix of shock and awe. The others glared awkwardly at him, amazement, anger, and envy all vying for space on their faces.

Renya glanced at the other parties. The cause of their displeasure was immediately apparent. All the other raid members were sitting directly on the ground. In one hand, they held something brownish — jerky, probably — and with the other, they lightly grilled the same stiff bread as his over their campfire. They stared at him bitterly as they crunched on their warmer but solid-as-ever bread, washing each bite down with a generous gulp of water, ale,

or wine.

“What?” he asked the stunned girls in his party.

“Um, I mean,” Shion said, still looking shocked, “I’m glad we have such a tasty-looking meal, but...”

“You know your way around the kitchen, don’t you, Renya?” Rona added.

“I didn’t have much time to prepare. Not my best work.”

He was lucky to have gotten the broth from the inn, but the lack of condiments left him rather dismayed. Had he the time, he would have preferred to look around and stock up on some vinegar and spices, along with sauces and herbs.

“I’ll be better prepared next time. Sorry, but you’ll have to make do with this for now. As for drinks... Damn, it’s only water or wine. I’ll have to fix that next time, too.”

“What do you mean, ‘make do?’” said a bewildered Shion. “This is practically a feast.”

Renya was aware that adventurers generally packed light when traveling. Carrying cookware was definitely out of the question. He, however, had the wonderful convenience of an inventory, and he would have been a fool to not make use of it. In fact, he’d even brought water to do the dishwashing afterwards, and it took no extra inventory space to boot. After all, “barrel” and “water-filled barrel” both occupied but a single space in the inventory.

“We’ve got chairs too, by the way. Let me know if you don’t want to stand and eat. I have three of them.”

At this point, the battle of emotions on the faces of the other raid members finally came to an end — jealousy won. Renya, meanwhile, simply began eating and paid no attention to his green-eyed compatriots. A short moment later, Shion and Rona sat down at the table, as well. They were not quite as candid in their demeanor, with the envious gazes of the other parties weighing on their conscience, but their reservations soon melted before the tantalizing aroma of their evening meal.

Renya chose to take the second patrol shift that night. Shion would go before him and Rona after. There was, in fact, a reason for this order. By the time they finished cleaning up after dinner and had a short break, there were about eight hours left before they had to get up the next morning. Assuming they went to bed soon, one person would be on patrol for two hours, and the remaining two would do three hours each. In order for Shion to do the two hours first, he had to take the second shift. By doing so, he allowed both Shion and Rona to have a relatively long period of undisturbed sleep. This was obviously because the second shift had the rather unenviable schedule of sleeping for two hours, waking up for three, then sleeping for three again. It was, in all honesty, pretty rough, and that was exactly why he couldn't leave it to the girls.

There was, however, a problem: this world had no clocks.

Despite having no clocks, the people here did keep proper track of time, and they did so using hourglasses. He had no idea why they had hourglasses but not clocks. That was simply the way of the world here. Most adventurers carried one that measured an hour. By keeping track of how many times they flipped it, they could figure out when to switch shifts. Flip by flip, the night slowly passed, and the faintest hint of light began to appear on the horizon.

That was when they had a *situation*.

After finishing his patrol shift and switching with Rona, Renya crawled into his sleeping bag. He covered his eyes and ears and tried to sleep. Just as he was on the verge of falling into a light slumber, a tightness in his chest caused him to wake.

Renya opened his eyes, and the first thing he noticed was that he couldn't move. It wasn't the sleeping bag; he knew being bundled up reduced his movement options to squirming around. The problem was that he could barely even squirm. On top of that, or rather, on top of him, he felt some sort of weight.

The thought of someone attacking him crossed his mind, but Renya quickly dismissed it. Were it Shion on patrol, that might have been possible, but the one outside right now was Rona. While her usual airiness did little to convince him, so long as she claimed to be a knight, she was likely a practiced warrior. It

seemed exceedingly unlikely that she would allow someone to sneak in unnoticed, which left only one possibility: this was the doing of someone who was in the tent to begin with.

“Okay, no way. I refuse to believe I’m living through a real-life cliché...”

The sleeping bag was effectively a human-sized drawstring purse. Its sides were padded with cotton for insulation, and cords sealed the bag near the neck to prevent the escape of air. What it lacked in comfort, it made up for in warmth. One might think that its function would make it a favorite among travelers, but on the contrary, it was extremely disliked by adventurers due to the fact that its enclosing design greatly hampered their ability to react to sudden danger.

When he had first seen them, he wished he could have made them easier to use. However, being pressed for time, he had no choice but to pack them as is, swearing to modify them on some later date. For now, he compromised by holding a knife with him as he slept so that he could carve his way out in an emergency. As a side note, the reason they were even using sleeping bags in the first place was because Renya vehemently objected to the standard adventurer sleeping protocol of simply throwing a light blanket over himself. He needed some weight on him to sleep well.

But not too much weight, which was definitely what he felt right now. Renya craned his neck forward to get a better look. There, on his chest, a head-shaped object was currently in the process of trying to dig through his rib cage, its black hair swaying to its motion. The hair, long and smooth, flowed gently down a pair of shoulders and fanned out across the back. It exuded a palpable femininity, further accentuated by the fact that it was normally tied high behind the head. Presumably, it was let down to allow for comfort during sleep. The contrast proved powerful, and Renya was shocked to discover its effeminate allure.

As for the offender’s face, the usual sharpness to its expression was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a sloppy grin. He could only wonder what kind of dreams were driving it to press itself against him and rub against his chest.

The rising wave of heat threatened to melt him from the inside out. Through

sheer force of will, he held onto the last vestiges of reason that remained in him and tried to make sense of the situation.

Somehow, Shion had managed to crawl out of her sleeping bag. To her credit, she was at least wearing a shirt and pants, which would have allowed her to respond immediately if there was trouble. Their thin fabric, however, likely provided little defense against the chill of night. The correct course of action for her, then, would have been to make her way back into her sleeping bag, but he supposed he couldn't expect that much of her when she was asleep. The action she took instead was to cling firmly to the bundle of warmth beside her.

Were said bundle Rona, everything would have been fine. Said bundle, of course, was not Rona; it was Renya. And he was in immediate danger of being seen. Things would get very thorny if Rona walked in on them right now, so he tried to get out of Shion's clutch. Unfortunately, she had all four limbs wrapped tightly around him while he could only employ the squirming motions of a bagworm. He couldn't even get his arms out, which made it impossible to pull her off.

To top it all off, he was getting all of the detriments of the cliché but none of the boons. Shion's head was at his chest, which meant none of that sweet fragrance of girlhood reached his nose. His sleeping bag was also stiff and thick, robbing him of the chance to feel that tender sensation of bodies entwined. All he experienced was the decidedly unenjoyable sensation of being under an anvil. It was not just any anvil, either. It was a cursed anvil that brought with it the risk of much misunderstanding and personal harm were he ever discovered with it. He looked at Shion, then his surroundings.

Yep, definitely an anvil. And definitely cursed.

"Hey, wake up... Shion?"

"Nuuu...?"

Her odd response caused him to fall silent. For a second, it looked as if she might wake up, but she soon returned to her sleep-digging.

"Mmmneh..."

"Stop it with those weird moans already. Come on, I'm serious! Get up! If

Rona sees us like this, I'm going to be in some deep sh—"

"Did... someone call me?" mumbled a slow, sleepy voice.

Renya's head snapped toward the tent entrance, where Rona had poked her head in. Her eyelids drooped heavily. Fearing that she was moments away from channeling the shock of misunderstanding into an ear-piercing scream, he broke into a vigorous frenzy, struggling desperately to either wake Shion or escape from her embrace.

After much squirming, however, he noticed that Rona showed no reaction. She still had only her head poked in, and she still seemed sleepy. There was something unsettling about the way she stared at them, her eyes unmoving. Sensing something was wrong, he cautiously spoke up.

"H-Hey, Rona?"

"...Yeaas?"

Something was definitely wrong. Despite having gotten at least five hours of sleep, her eyelids wavered constantly, as if they were on the verge of shutting completely at any second.

"...What's wrong?"

"What's wrong, indeed... For some reason, I feel very sleepy..."

"What? What're you ta—"

"Mmmm... so sleepy. Shion, you look like you're holding something nice."

Rona looked straight at him. He felt panic beginning to set in again.

"Wait. It was like this when I woke up... I didn't get any funny ideas or—"

"Yes... Shion's old habit of hugging things kicked in again, didn't it? I thought she grew out of it recently... Besides, even if you got any funny ideas... I doubt you can even pull your arm out, can you?"

He certainly could not. It was hard enough to move in the sleeping bag, and right now, Shion's arms were like a vise on his own. The option of cutting himself out with the knife remained, but this situation seemed to lack the direness that necessitated destroying a good sleeping bag. Those things weren't

cheap.

“Rona, I can’t move. Can you get Shion off—”

“Ahhh, I want a hug pillow, too...”

“Huh?”

Renya stared at her, unable to process what she just said. Smiling her usual smile, Rona got down onto her knees and slowly made her way into the tent. The way she moved was feline and feral. He tried to back away, only to remember that he couldn’t.

“I’m... so very sleepy.”

“Hold on a damn second. What happened to patrol duty?”

“It’s so safe here... No monsters, no bandits... No one will attack us.”

Rona stretched out on the ground beside him and, mirroring Shion, wrapped herself around him from the opposite direction.

“Good night, then...”

“No! Not a good night! Damn it, wait! None of this makes any sense!”

Clamped down from both sides, Renya lost the ability to even struggle. He watched helplessly as Rona rubbed her cheek against him and mumbled.

“Don’t mine feel so much better? Shion’s are so flat. Mine are so much fuller...”

She pressed herself against him, and even through the thick wall of the sleeping bag, he could feel their softness. As it turned out, size *did* matter. Gradually, it started seeming a little silly to resist. He could almost convince himself to just go with the flow.

Almost.

“Wait... Flat? Full? What are you even talking about? That’s not the problem here!”

One of the two pairs of arms tightened around him. He looked in their direction to see a disgruntled Shion. The pressure on his arms and chest increased, and they started making sounds that he was pretty sure they

shouldn't be making. Meanwhile Rona, her expression smug with victory, reached over and wrapped her arms around Shion's. Then, she pulled.

Renya's bones began to screech.

One of them was a swordsman. The other was a knight. The former was still an apprentice, and the latter was technically self-proclaimed, but both were in the business of swinging heavy things to hit other things. Their upper body strength was not to be underestimated. With two pairs of muscular arms clutching him harder and harder, pain flared up all over his body and he yelped.

"Ow! Ow! Quit it! You're going to break me! Let go, damn it!"

"Mmm... nah..."

"I told you already... I'm sleepy..."



As Renya grappled with the wild storm of thoughts and emotions swirling in his mind, he suddenly noticed another signal that his gut was trying to send him. It was an alert unrelated to his immediate discomfort. Something about this situation was very wrong. It was, of course, wrong enough to be stuck in the arms of two girls, but that wasn't the problem. Something else was going on here.

Rona was supposed to be on patrol duty. Instead, she seemed to be unable to stop herself from falling asleep. For someone who at least claimed to be a knight, she must have been subject to a reasonable amount of training. She was also supposed to be guarding Shion, who apparently was some sort of highborn. There was no way a bit of sleepiness would cause someone like her to abandon her post. And yet, there she lay, hugging his sleeping bag and drifting carelessly into slumber.

This was definitely not normal. He had to free himself, even at the cost of his sleeping bag. As he tightened his grip around the knife in his hand, something hit him.

It was not something physical, but rather, a bout of drowsiness. Alarms went off in the yet-functional parts of his mind, warning him that this was absurd. His sleep schedule for the night was admittedly a bit off-kilter, but he still got in a good few hours. He should be wide awake, especially considering the situation at hand, and yet he somehow felt an almost irresistible urge to drift off.

"Is this an attack from someone? Or... something?"

If Renya fell asleep right now, he was pretty sure he would be out cold for a long while. That would leave all three of them completely defenseless, and in turn, in severe danger. As he fought desperately to stay awake, there was a voice.

"Wanna kill 'em all off before we go?"

His eyes snapped open upon hearing the word "kill." It was as if a cold wind blew through his brain, sweeping away the haze of sleep.

"This is the only chance we're gonna get to kill that little shit and his buddies."

"Bad idea. It depends on how it hits, but the Sleep spell can be dispelled

pretty easily by loud noises and pain. Against one person, maybe, but if they're bunched up, I'd leave them alone."

"Tsk. Fine. I'll have to make do with enjoying the looks on their stupid faces later."

People were moving around outside the tent. Their voices sounded familiar. The foul-mouthed one was Zest, and the girl who held him back was probably the party mage. Renya managed to piece together that they had cast a spell that forced nearby creatures to sleep. What he couldn't figure out was why. In the meantime, there was a short burst of activity outside followed by a gradual return to silence.

Renya was left with nothing but questions.

Are they gone? What the heck is happening out there? Did I just hear a crack? Was that my ribs? Will I even make it out of this tent in one piece?

"They got us," said Harz with a grimace.

Zest's camp from last night had vanished and their whole party was gone without a trace. Unlike Harz, who looked significantly less cheerful than during their meeting at the Silver Stein Shelter, Azu wore the same stone-cold expression he always had.

As for Renya, he awkwardly scratched his left cheek, which still bore the reddened marks — fist or palm, it wasn't clear — of percussive impact. Intrigued by the curious sight, Harz was about to inquire when he noticed one of Renya's party members, Shion, staring at the ground while sitting stiffly with her legs under her. An intense blush made her whole face glow red. After a few moments, he took the hint: this was not the time to pry.

After Renya had shaken off that intense bout of drowsiness, he'd made a frantic and ultimately futile attempt to wake his two friends. Whether it was because of the spell, or they were simply terrible risers, they squirmed and writhed and tossed and turned but simply refused to open their eyes. Desperate times called for desperate measures, so as a last resort, he pressed his Shion-side hand against her body. Then he started groping around, trying to tickle her with his fingers. He wasn't exactly sure where his hand was, and fear

kept him from asking about it afterwards. Judging from how soft it felt, though, he had a feeling it might have been near her chest.

Renya's session of impromptu body massage had managed to wake Shion. With eyes still half-glazed, she raised her head and looked around, grumbling under her breath. When her sleep-addled brain managed to process the implications of their relative positions and what probably felt like a rather disturbing sensation of someone's hand on her body, a wave of color washed over her face, leaving everything red except for her now crystal-clear eyes.

Shion had raised her hand. As it curled into a fist, he remembered thinking, "It's not my fault."

It really wasn't his fault, but under the circumstances, he was aware that it was necessary for him to take one to the face. As the fist hung over him like a guillotine, he had quietly hoped that all his teeth and bones were going to survive the ordeal intact. Then, it dropped. At the same time, a sudden pull from Rona's side caused him to jerk away. He felt a light blow to his cheek before the momentum sent him rolling into the corner of the tent with Rona in tow.

The damage from a strike can be greatly lessened by propelling one's body in the same direction as the impact. This principle was employed by Rona, who had seen Shion's attack coming in the nick of time and pulled him away. While he owed her a good deal of thanks, he couldn't help but think that if she had seen it coming, she could have just stopped Shion instead. Then again, thanks to their rolling embrace, various parts of their bodies came into intimate contact, and some of those parts were *very* soft. After some consideration, he decided that he definitely needed to thank her later.

Once their in-tent situation got under control, Renya had finally managed to crawl out of his sleeping bag. He geared up and rushed outside, only to be met with a scene of similar carnage. Some people were sprawled on the ground while others had fallen limp against their tents. SnORES filled the air. A few stumbled out of their tents and shook their heads, trying to clear away the lingering drowsiness. All the other parties seemed to have been hit by the spell, as well. All except Zest's. He, his party, and even his tent were nowhere to be seen.

“A little cutthroat, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah, their knives, our throats,” answered Harz, matching Renya’s terseness. “It’s true that young dungeons are limited in both size and depth. They also tend to generate weak monsters. Still, it’s almost always advisable to be careful and tackle them with multiple parties...”

“They probably figured they can do it themselves.”

“Probably. I doubt the treasure this dungeon has managed to accumulate is worth much, so the only prize is the dungeon core. The guardian is probably weak, as well. They must have figured this was going to be first come, first served and decided to slow the rest of the parties down.”

“Huh. Cool,” Renya said with profound indifference. They had just been beaten to the punch, yet he seemed utterly unperturbed.

One of Harz’s eyebrows shot up. “Not very upset, are you?” he inquired curiously. “Though it depends on the size, even the core of a young dungeon like this might be worth a couple dozen gold. You don’t think that’s a pretty big loss?”

“Not really.”

The brevity of Renya’s response reflected the truth in his words.

“If they’re going to clear out the dungeon by themselves,” he continued, “then by all means, go ahead. That’s great news for me. I mean, it hurts a little to lose the core, but in return, I earn the mission reward for doing absolutely nothing.”

“Truer words have not been said.”

The voice of agreement came from Azu. Harz stared at him. The look on Harz’s face suggested he was shocked. The look on Azu’s face suggested he hadn’t the slightest idea what Harz found so shocking.

“We’re getting paid to not work,” said Azu. “If anything, we should be writing thank you letters to that nice young man with the brown hair.”

“Good idea. We can read them to him when he comes back out.”

“Wow, you two...”

Their casual bantering left Harz dumbfounded. No matter how young, there was a certain degree of street cred to be gained for conquering an entire dungeon, not to mention a dungeon core was worth many times the mission reward. All of that had been ruthlessly snatched away from under their noses, and they responded with a shrug and a chuckle. The sheer disparity in their attitudes caused Harz to seriously start questioning if he was starting to fall on the other side of the generation gap. Further introspection, however, seemed like it would only baffle him more, so he put the issue out of his mind.

“What happens if they fail?” he asked, pushing his thoughts away from the lingering sense of self-doubt.

“We’ll just do it again ourselves,” answered both Renya and Azu in sync.

It seemed a fair response, but Harz was not prepared to hear what Renya had to say after that.

“Even if they fail, they’ll have cleared out a path for us. We won’t have to deal with any small fry. The only thing we’ll have to be careful of is whatever wrecked our volunteer scouting party.”

“A remarkably efficient way of looking at things. Renya, was it? I both agree with and admire the way you think. It is most rational.”

“Wait, wait, are you two serious? Aren’t you going to try to help them?”

Seeing that the two of them were finding common ground in somewhat disturbing ways, Harz hastily tried to interrupt, but they simultaneously shot him a look that said, “What? Are *you* serious?” His next words died in his throat, and he fell silent, wondering if he was the one who had said something crazy.

“I am *not*,” said Renya with disgust in his voice, “going to clean up after them. If they run off by themselves and fail spectacularly, then they can wipe their own asses.”

Azu nodded along to every word, the contempt on his face every bit equal to Renya’s.

“Amen. They’d have some nerve to come back. If they’re going to run off by themselves, they should at least have the decency to get wiped out.”

“Preferably, they all get a good hit in before they bite the dust.”

“Indeed. That way, I might actually be inclined to put a flower or two on their graves.”

“Graves? ...Are you going to lug their corpses back? Because I sure won’t.”

“Good point... When the dungeon is destroyed, it’d be best if it took their corpses with it. Less trouble that way.”

“Seriously, you two...”

Nothing but sighs found their way to Harz’s lips as he shook his head at the sheer ridiculousness of the conversation. Meanwhile, a wholly unsympathetic Azu and Renya went to their respective parties to instruct them to start preparing breakfast, since they had plenty of time on their hands.

“Are you sure about this?” whispered Rona. Shion was still busy sitting and blushing, so Rona asked in her place.

Renya nodded confidently and said, “The dungeon’s not that big. I’d guess that by the time noon rolls around, for better or for worse, we’ll have a pretty good idea what happened to them.”

More importantly, he had some breakfast to prepare. Renya skillfully chopped the firewood into thin pieces before setting them aflame. Then he took out something that resembled a fry pan from his inventory and held it atop the fire. Some oil was used to ready the pan’s surface before two thick slices of bacon fell and started sizzling. After a luscious aroma began to waft from the meat, he picked up an egg. He didn’t know what it came from, but it was definitely an egg, so he cracked it into his fry pan.

Renya was of the opinion that bacon tasted better crispy, so he made sure to heat the egg and bacon thoroughly before moving them to a plate. Though he preferred soy sauce on his fried eggs, he had yet to discover a suitable replacement for soy sauce in this world. In its place, he spread some salty fish paste he found over the egg to complete the dish.

With a side of salad and some bread, it would have been a nice breakfast had the latter not possessed the texture of granite. There was little he could do about the state of breadmaking in this world, though, so he added some milk

and salt — both minor luxuries in this world — to the broth from the inn and heated it a little. Then, he broke apart the bread into small chunks and stirred them into the soup. As a final touch, he sprinkled in the kernels of some sort of corn-looking plant as well, hoping to recreate the effect of croutons in corn soup. He took a small sip. It proved to be sufficiently palatable. Breakfast was then served with a plate of his bootleg corn soup and some salad, which he seasoned with a simple dressing of salt, pepper, and vinegar.

“Wow, our breakfast is fit for a king,” remarked Shion, who had finally recovered and was regarding the contents on the table.

In Renya’s opinion, however, the meal hardly seemed extravagant. Were he more proficient, he could have whipped up something far more impressive with the ingredients he procured from the inn, but that was a problem only time could solve.

“Nothing wrong with good food, right? Come on, while it’s still hot, let’s...”

He was about to say “dig in” when he felt some eyes on him and turned to look. A few steps away, Azu’s party was staring at him, transfixed. More specifically, they were staring at his table which, after last night’s mouthwatering dinner, now held an equally tantalizing breakfast. Envy oozed from their eyes. Their hands, holding the same jerky and bread as the night before, hung awkwardly in the air, the task of bringing food to mouth ostensibly forgotten.

“Is it okay if I share some with our neighbors?” he asked.

“If you’re okay with it, sure,” answered Shion.

“Certainly. I don’t mind,” said Rona.

Once he obtained their consent, Renya turned to Azu.

“Okay, you can stop ogling my table like that. I’m fine with sharing. You want some?”

“Hm... Really? It smells delicious and looks delicious, so I’d love to have some, but will we all have a share?”

“I won’t leave anyone out. That’d just be cruel. Oh, and what about that guy...

Huh, where'd the other party go?"

He scanned his surroundings, but Harz's party was nowhere to be found.

"You mean Harz's? They went into the dungeon saying they'll try to catch up to Zest."

Whether that was out of compassion or greed, Renya had no idea. Either way, Harz's party had chosen not to watch Zest's party from the sidelines.

"A real diligent bunch, huh. Oh, I can lend you some utensils, but give them back after, okay? Also, you can have my soup, but don't expect seconds. As for bread, you'll have to eat your own."

"The soup alone is blessing enough. Thank you."

Renya had made plenty of soup to allow for seconds, but it certainly was not enough to be split among another five mouths, all of which belonged to grown men. In the process of adding stuff in to make more soup, he ran out of the broth from the inn, which ended up making it taste a bit too milky. However, Azu and his party members, who added in pieces of their bread and jerky, had nothing but praise for his soup. Renya found himself reminded of a fact of life: simple or not, nothing beat a warm, tasty meal.

"Maybe I'll make some pasta for lunch. I've got vegetables, meat, pepper, and cheese, plus there's that tomato-looking thing I picked up... Perfect, this'll work," he said, confident in the flavor of his recipe.

The premature end to their Silver Stein Shelter meeting had afforded him some extra time. The upside was that it allowed him to sample his raw ingredients beforehand while shopping at the market. The downside was that he had to suffer through the intense displeasure of Rona, who later showed up with four days' worth of bread and jerky.

"How are you going to find that much water?" asked Azu.

Water for cooking was a luxury on missions, and making pasta required a lot of it. Adventurers, as a rule of thumb, did not carry barrels of water with them.

"By carrying a barrel of water with me, of course. Did I mention I have a voidbox?"

Renya even had a deep cooking pot ready to go, purchased in advance for this very purpose.

“...I propose a deal. Hear me out?” asked Azu with a serious expression. Renya grinned.

“I love myself a good deal. Let’s hear it, then. What have you got to offer? Don’t worry, I play nice.”

Negotiations went quickly and smoothly. Azu offered to give Renya something in exchange for lunch.

“I’ll impart to you a spell. Some kind of basic offensive magecraft. How about it? It’s worth a good coin or two. You look like a swordsman, so I assume you haven’t learned any offensive magecraft.”

Azu seemed to have no intention of engaging in the usual back-and-forth in an attempt to wring every last bit of benefit out of the deal. Right off the bat, he put out his best offer. Even Renya found himself a little shocked at what was proposed. Assuming what he saw on Caryl’s price list accurately reflected market value, Azu effectively just dropped fifty silver coins on the table as his initial offer. That was the equivalent of 50,000 yen — an entirely unreasonable sum for five adults to eat lunch.

“That’s a generous offer.”

“I don’t hold back. Especially considering we get to enjoy a good meal in a place like this. I owe my party members a lot. They work hard for this party,” said Azu as he glanced at his faithful meat shields. As tanks, it was their job to buy time for Azu to cast his spells. Nevertheless, Azu seemed to honestly appreciate their efforts to protect him. While his expression was aloof as always, there was a sincerity to his voice. It was the kind of thing that struck a chord with Renya, and he would have just given them the lunch for free right then and there. However, it was them who proposed the deal in the first place. It felt inappropriate to call the whole thing off.

“With that said, there are people in town who do this for a living. It wouldn’t be fair to them if I gave you too much. I ask that you keep it to one spell.”

“Understood. We have ourselves a deal,” Renya concluded. He decided that

he would, perhaps, put a little extra effort into lunch.

“Let’s get this done, then. What do you want imparted?”

“Something with a lot of power in one shot... or something that’ll decrease the opponent’s mobility when I hit them with it...” he said contemplatively, recalling his exchange with Caryl. After being told that his mana pool was hopelessly small, he had undergone extensive training in an attempt to increase his total mana by repeatedly casting Illuminate. He did not, however, feel any discernible difference, and he doubted there was any meaningful improvement. While he preferred attack speed over damage, a severe restriction on the number of attacks he could perform forced him to either bet it all on one powerful hit or to ensure he could follow up with damage of a decidedly more physical nature.

When Renya explained his reasoning, Azu fell silent and thought about it for a minute.

“For power, Firebolt is probably best. To disable an opponent, there’s Iceshard, but if you’re not looking for damage, Windbind might work, too. There’s also the issue of your aptitude.”

“I had my aptitude checked by a mage called Caryl. I’m told it’s wind.”

“She checked you, huh. In that case, we can trust the result. Wind... That means it’s either Windblade or Windbind.”

Azu proceeded to explain that Windblade harnessed the power of wind to rend a target, whereas Windbind sent it swirling around an opponent to slow their movements. He also mentioned that Windbind seemed a better fit for Renya, and that he did not recommend Windblade.

“It’s far weaker than Firebolt. Our frontline shielders can shrug it off even without any defensive magecraft.”

Renya nodded. They were, after all, basic spells. Even the more powerful Firebolt could do little more than scald in the face of heavy armor.

“My recommendation remains Firebolt. It’s easy to use and works on most things.”

“I’ll defer to your expert advice, then. Let’s go with that.”

Once Renya decided, Azu dug through his belongings and took out a piece of paper. It was the same kind as the one Caryl used, and he promptly stuck it on Renya’s forehead.

“Impart Firebolt.”

The paper on Renya’s forehead disappeared, and a familiar message appeared in view. He accepted the request.

“The incantation is ‘By my power, I command thee. Bolts of fire, fly.’”

“Will I slowly gain more mana by using this over and over, as well?”

“I see you’ve been told about that method. Yes, you will. Total mana will naturally increase as you continue to cast spells. However, it’s generally understood that you won’t gain much more than what you were born with...”

Azu grimaced a little as he spoke. It was presumably out of consideration for Caryl’s declaration that Renya’s mana pool was tiny.

“Well, it is what it is. As long as I can fire off a shot, it’ll give me more options. I’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

“By the way,” asked Azu curiously, “what’s the max number of Illuminates you’ve managed to cast?”

“Let me think about that...” Having never counted, Renya did some mental math. His last incantation macro was a sixteen-fold simultaneous casting, but he never paid any attention to how many times it activated before stopping. “The Simulcast was sixteen times per cast, and it activated sixty times in an hour without draining all my mana, so...”

“...What?”

“Probably at least 960 times?”

As soon as Azu heard the number, his expression froze. The effect was compounded by his already-stiff countenance, making it seem as if he’d turned into a statue. Taken aback by the sudden petrification, Renya wondered if he had said something strange. Moments later, the answer came to him. He had been told that his mana pool was hopelessly small, so Azu must have been left

speechless by his sheer ineptitude, managing a mere 960 times even after training.

“What can I say? I guess I have no talent...” Renya said with a sigh. He figured that it was a waste, considering he had a strong aptitude for wind. Before he could speak again, however, he was cut off by Azu, who seized on his words with the intensity of a hungry predator.

“No talent? Do you even understand the words that are coming out of your mouth?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m just not cut out for this kind of thing, I guess.”

“Quit your yapping. Now, listen to me. What I’m about to tell you, you keep to yourself. Understand?”

Azu lowered his voice and leaned in, bringing his face close to Renya, who found the distance very unpleasant but nodded. The gravity of Azu’s look compelled him to do so.



“First, you mentioned Simulcast, right?”

“Uh, right. Yeah.”

“Simulcasting spells is something that I also happen to be able to do... except my limit is twice.”

“Hm?”

The professional mage just said he could only cast two spells at once. If that was true, what was the meaning of his sixteen-fold simultaneous activation?

“Then, there’s the number of activations. If I were to use Illuminate continuously without rest, I’d mostly run out of mana after a hundred casts.”

Renya gave Azu a good, hard look. Nothing suggested the mage was lying. At the same time, he found Azu’s words difficult to believe. It made no sense that he, whose lack of mana was Caryl-certified, would have almost ten times as much as Azu, who was a professional. And that ten-times figure was with plenty of leeway. However, he knew his own words to be true, as well.

“...What the heck is going on?” murmured Renya.

“Damned if I know,” said Azu with a shake of his head. “Normally I’d assume the assessment was wrong, but Caryl wouldn’t make a mistake.”

It was also not the fruits of his training, seeing as Azu just said that the returns from training were minimal. The only explanation that came to mind was the package of skills he got when he first came to this world. He did ask the girl to make it such that training would pay off for him. Upon remembering that, the pieces fell into place. Azu, of course, had no way of following his train of thought and remained puzzled.

“I can’t tell you how this happened,” said Azu as he retreated from Renya’s personal space, “but let’s assume it’s true. In that case, there’s going to be no end to your troubles if people find out about it.”

“Well, you know about it already. Aren’t you included in ‘people?’”

“I... have no interest in spreading gossip.”

There was a hint of movement at the corner of his stony profile, right where

the lips met. It occurred to Renya that the mage had just smiled.

“That’s good to know. Thanks for the word of caution.”

“No need for thanks... though I wouldn’t mind a more generous portion of pasta at lunch.”

“Consider it done.”

While his inventory was not overflowing with pasta, Renya had calculated the portions based on his own appetite. Now that he knew Shion and Rona to be fairly small eaters, he figured it would be okay to give Azu’s party a little more.

“I’m so bored...” mumbled Shion.

After concluding their deal and exchanging some information, the two parties found that they had nothing in particular to do. Neither Renya nor Azu showed the slightest interest in exploring the dungeon before having lunch, so a mandatory downtime befell the other members.

Azu, having informed his party of the outcome of their deal, had produced a mat from his belongings, along with a number of books. Currently, he was sitting on the mat and reading his books in silence. This was apparently standard fare for him, as his party members showed no particular surprise and went about their own activities, some basking in the sun while others napped.

As for Renya, he had run out of the broth from the inn and was currently in the process of replacing it. With his big pot of water set atop the campfire, he threw in some vegetables and meat and began the time-consuming process of simmering. He was going to prepare two sauces for lunch: one with the tomato-like vegetable, and the other with cheese and milk. Neither, however, was possible without a soup base. He didn’t need much, so he employed a slow boil with only a handful of ingredients, taking care to add more water from time to time so the soup would not boil down. While boiling down made for a thicker soup, it would also lose the finer points of its flavor. What was important, he told himself, was how well it drew out the taste of the meat and vegetables. Convinced by his own words, he continued his vigil of the soup.

Rona seemed intent on simply going with the flow. Currently, she was inside

the tent, having announced that she would be asleep until further notice.

Shion had been watching Renya work, but she soon lost interest.

“What do you want me to do? They already paid to have me cook lunch, and preparations are the most important part of cooking.”

“We... did come here to clear a dungeon, right?” asked Shion, who was growing increasingly suspicious of the picnic-like atmosphere.

“Relax. There’s no point getting all tense when you don’t need to,” said Renya as he skimmed the broth.

“There has to be *some* tension, hasn’t there?”

“Maybe.”

Maybe they were indeed a little too relaxed. That did not, however, mean he was going to divert any attention away from making lunch. After a good boil, the tomato substitute was peeled and pressed into a paste to be added to the soup, joining a vegetable paste that was already in the pot. Next came the herbs for seasoning, followed by some extra boiling down for a nice, thick texture. Thin strips of meat and a dab of salt were the final touch to bring his soup to completion.

The cheese sauce was made with a combination of milk and the soup. Once he tweaked the taste with salt and pepper, he threw in a big wad of cheese and warmed it until it was a molten pile of cheesy delight. Then, he diced up some vegetables to add in.

Renya had acquired noodle-shaped pasta for the trip, so he put those into his big pasta pot after the water inside had come to a boil. It was widely said that pasta should retain the firmness of a strand of hair, but he didn’t like it that way. Instead, he let it sit in the pot until it was soft and thoroughly boiled.

He took two deeper plates and put one sauce in each. A third, larger plate was used to hold the pasta. Then, he laid out the plates for the diners, and setup was finally done. All that remained was for each person to take a serving of pasta and apply their sauce of choice.

Of course, eight people’s worth of pasta could not be cooked in one go. He

had barely set the plate down and took a breath before finding it empty again. Resigning himself to being perpetual stirrer of the pasta pot, he glanced at the rapidly disappearing pile and decided that the thought of his cooking being enjoyed was reward enough.

Renya's stock of pasta quickly dwindled to less than half. That was to be expected, though. The amount of food he brought was meant for him, Shion, and Rona — a party of one guy and two girls. He had meant to account for unforeseen circumstances by bringing some extra, but feeding five extra men still proved difficult. If anything, as the person who purchased everything in the first place, he was surprised to find that he still had a little less than half remaining. Past-Renya definitely deserved a medal for foresight.

He kept himself busy washing all the utensils. Not only did the dishes need to be cleaned and dried, so did the pots and knives. Otherwise, with the general lack of hygiene in this world, they were practically asking for a bout of diarrhea. Nothing tasted good when one had diarrhea. Everything had to be washed, wiped, and fully dried. For Renya, such considerations were the commonest of common sense for someone who worked with food. Using a pristine cloth, he ran it up and down the length of each utensil as he idly gazed at his surroundings.

It was a satisfying sight.

Content diners lay strewn on the ground. Some were stretched out on a mat, while others slept on bare earth. All of them, however, were basking in the warm glow of the afternoon sun with rounded bellies. The scene was the very definition of peace.

Unfortunately, other matters kept him from joining in. Beside him, Azu seemed to be thinking of the same thing as he helped Renya wipe the dishes dry.

"They... don't seem to be coming back," he whispered, his volume inaudible to the others. There was no hint of concern in his voice. He was merely stating a fact.

"They sure don't." Renya nodded. He kept washing.

He was told that young dungeons were limited in size, but he had no reference with which to comprehend that fact. Was it normal, then, for parties

of reasonable rank to spend a couple of hours in what was supposedly a small dungeon and still not come out? There was no way for him to tell. How could he? Dungeons, after all, did not even exist in his previous world. A lack of knowledge left him with a lack of options. How could he go about fixing that? Simple. He would need to borrow knowledge from someone who had it.

“O Azu of the sagely mind, could you, dear master, perhaps lend me some of your wisdom?”

While he made it sound easy, Renya was essentially asking someone to provide information for free. To soften the blow, he tried his best to sugarcoat his approach. To his surprise, Azu did not bite.

“Cut that out. It’s creepy and you’re going to make me drop a plate. Not that I care, though, since it’s your plate,” protested Azu as he took a small step away. His mask of indifference was shattered, revealing an expression of pure disgust.

Technically, Renya meant to ask a serious question, but he decided that seeing such displeasure on Azu’s face was, while unexpected, actually slightly satisfying. He didn’t want to lose a plate, though.

“What do you want to know? And ask like a normal person.”

“Is it normal for two parties to spend several hours in a small dungeon?”

Renya couldn’t tell how long Harz’s party had been inside, since he didn’t know when they entered, but Zest’s party had definitely been gone for at least five hours. Azu, who seemed to have been pondering the same thing, responded swiftly.

“It’s not exactly normal, but not too strange either.”

As he spoke, Azu handed Renya a spotless plate and began wiping another one. The deftness with which he handled them attested to the fact that he was normally in charge of cooking and cleaning for his four armored protectors.

“It’s not uncommon for even a small dungeon to be time-consuming. You might, for example, run into a Guardian that’s not particularly powerful, but surprisingly resilient.”

“I see.”

“However, in that case, given that we have extra manpower here, they should be sending someone to call for reinforcements while the others hold the line. That’s not a difficult plan to come up with.”

No matter how tough an enemy is, it would fall more quickly with a large number of people all pummeling it together. Were they alone, they would have to deal with it themselves, but it would be absurd not to call for help when reinforcements were waiting right outside.

“Hm, I see.”

“It hurts me a little when I consider that the moron with the brown hair might actually be too stupid to figure that out, but there’s no way Harz would be that obtuse.”

“I see, I se— Wait, is it just me or did I just hear some venom in your words?”

Catching himself before the opportunity passed, Renya inserted a well-timed quip. It failed to garner a reaction from Azu, who ignored it without the slightest change in expression.

“In conclusion, I suspect that something might have happened,” he said, finishing both his train of thought and the wiping of a plate. He handed it to Renya, who inspected it to ensure it was fully dry before putting it away in his inventory.

“I have yet to figure out what our plan of action should be,” Azu continued.

“The two early bird parties are both higher-ranked than us, too.”

“I doubt we’ll be of much use even if we showed up, but the only other alternative is to continue our picnic here.”

“I’ve still got some food left.”

Back when Renya was preparing for the mission, he had spent most of his time acquiring food. His purchases of food and tools had cost him almost all of his money, including the proceeds from the sale of manastones. He was left with but three gold coins. A portion of that cost went to paying Rona back for buying things such as rope, a tinderbox, and a lantern.

“We do too, though it’s nothing but stiff bread and jerky.”

They tasted as bad as they sounded, but that was how the adventuring life usually was. With much more emphasis placed on equipment and tools, logic dictated that adventurers would choose foods that were light and compact. Meanwhile, Renya defied logic by prioritizing taste and bringing things like raw vegetables and milk, which were not only bulky, they also went bad very quickly.

“Not exactly optimal picnic food. I mean, you can keep using ours, but I’ve only got so much.”

“I’d love to, but I’d start running out of things to pay with, as well. Which means...”

“It’s time to get this over with,” said the two of them at the same time.

They stared at each other. Then, they looked away at the same time again.

“Hm, hm, I see. I think I can get used to this.”

“I was under the impression that you and that moron with the brown hair were the same sort, but I’m happy to be proven wrong. Indeed, it’s nice to be with someone who knows what’s going on.”

“What made you think I had anything in common with *that*?”

“The fact that you have nothing but women in your party?” said Azu, looking as if he just answered a very obvious question.

Renya gave a wry smile. It seemed that not all of the problems associated with an all-female party were solved by introducing a male member. However, an attempt to recruit another guy into their party would probably meet with fierce resistance from Rona. That was unlikely to succeed.

“We need to decide on objectives. I’m not a fan of barging in thoughtlessly.”

“We’ll be investigating the dungeon and confirming the status of the parties that preceded us. Conditions for retreat should be...”

“When we discover evidence that suggests survival of the preceding parties is exceedingly unlikely, or when we run into the cause of said unlikeliness.”

At the end of his sentence, Azu handed him the last plate. Renya looked it over. Not a drop of water remained; the man did good work.

“All right. Let’s do some work. I assume ‘We found the higher-ranked parties and they were all dead’ is a good enough reason to abandon the mission?” he asked, implicitly suggesting that he quite liked the thought of such a development.

“Definitely.” Azu nodded. “Asking us to do otherwise would be the same as ordering us to die.”

“It’s decided, then. Shion! Rona!”

Upon hearing their names called, the two of them quickly got up. Considering they were napping soundly moments before, the speed at which they reacted was impressive. It reminded him of the way a cat’s ears shot up when it heard its name.

“Start packing up. We’re heading into the dungeon.”

“You guys start preparing, too. We’re going in with Renya’s party.”

At Azu’s command, his fellow members began arming themselves. As tanks, their equipment consisted of metallic plate mail and massive shields. Despite all their heavy gear, what drew Renya’s eye was their weapons. They all carried small swords that were short and easy to wield.

“Surprised?” asked Azu, noticing the object of his fascination.

For a while Renya said nothing, his eyes fixated on the swords. Afterwards, he slowly shook his head.

“You put some thought into those.”

For obvious reasons, trying to kill someone in a suit of plate mail by beating on their armor with a sword would be an exercise in frustration. Only in the world of novels and manga did one see those devastating strikes that ripped through both man and armor alike. Normally, the only effective methods for fighting an opponent in plate mail were attacking the gaps in their armor or knocking them out with a strong impact. Knowing this, these four probably employed a battle formation in which each of them could use their defensive capabilities to stave off enemy attacks while counting on the others to stab the enemy with their nimble shortswords. If all four of them were forced to defend, Azu would provide the offensive power with his magecraft.

“We’re not knights. We don’t care about how we fight. Some of us slow them down while the others finish them off. As long as we can do this properly, we’ll be fine.”

Rona showed a brief scowl at the mention of knights, but Azu did not notice.

“Renya, we’re done,” said Shion.

She wore her usual shirt and bloomy pant-dress with a steel chestplate and headguard. Her boots and leather arm guards were reinforced with iron plates. On the whole, the way she dressed had a very Japanese feel — so much so that he started wondering who was actually more Japanese. Beside her stood Rona, donning the same battle-ready attire he’d seen on the horse wagon.

Both of them carried small backpacks that held medicine, bandages, water bottles, and light rations. Though Renya felt his own presence negated the need to carry such items, he conceded that unforeseen circumstances might cause them to become separated. If they put all their eggs in one void-basket and he wasn’t with them when trouble struck, they’d be sitting ducks.

After seeing that the two girls were ready, Renya took his own equipment out of his inventory. The copper-lined armor and arm guards, both made of leather, were simple ones from a store. He eschewed a helmet, finding that it obstructed his view. He wore boots like Shion and Rona, but unlike those of the girls’, his were plain and not fortified with plates. Metal was only used to protect the soles from being penetrated. His weapon was the katana obtained from the trade with Kirie. As soon as he pulled it from his inventory, it became the center of everyone’s attention.

“That’s... a curious shape for a weapon. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything like it before,” said Azu.

“The blade’s so slender... It’s got a beautiful form, but...” added Shion.

Renya wasn’t entirely sure what made the weapon so fascinating. Scratching his head at their comments, he wrapped the sword belt he picked up in town around his waist and hung the katana on it.

A metal fixture on the belt held the scabbard in place, and he could flick a clasp with his finger to quickly detach the scabbard in times of need. Based on

the kinds of weapons that were prevalent in this world, he wasn't expecting to see anything with this kind of intricate gimmick, but to his surprise, it took him little time to find one in a store. When he inquired, he was told that sword belts with such mechanisms were fairly prevalent due to the need to quickly remove weapons in situations such as when one fell into a large body of water. While it seemed to have been designed with a different reason in mind, it was more than sufficient for his purposes, so he bought it. With Rona's money. Because he was all but broke after his grocery spree. No one else needed to know about that, though.

"What are we going to do with the wagons?"

"The horses should be safe from monsters around here. As long as the wagons are tied down, we can leave them here. It should be fine if we're only gone for two or three hours."

"I see. All right, then. Is everyone ready?"

The two girls nodded. Renya noticed Azu's party members nodding, as well. He turned to look at Azu, only to find that even the mage was nodding at him.

"Uh... What?"

"What do you mean, 'what?' You're a swordsman. I'm a mage. It goes without saying that you're better suited to be the leader in this case."

"Why?"

"It goes without saying, so I'm not saying it," declared Azu with a look that dared Renya to challenge him.

Renya wasn't quite sure whether to take this as Azu expressing trust or evading responsibilities. He sighed. Might as well assume the glass was half full. Everyone was probably better off that way.

"Fine. I'll make the calls, then. Tell me if it ever becomes a problem."

"Sure. Are you guys okay with that, too?" asked Azu, turning to his party members for confirmation. Four full-faced helmets of steel tilted up and down in unison. None of them showed any signs of reservation.

"Good. We'll head off once we get the torches ready."

For the first time in his two lives, Renya was going on a dungeon raid. That seemed like not the best time to be put in charge of a whole operation. Nevertheless, it would not do to let that show. With a look of supreme confidence that belied the butterflies in his stomach, Renya ordered his seven raid members into action.

Interlude: The Second One, or So It Was Told

“Master, mission complete! I repeat, mission complete!”

A voice, decidedly unflattering in its portrayal of the speaker and her intelligence, assaulted my ears. I took my mind off of my work and directed my attention toward my surroundings. Beside me, I discovered a flat-chested girl with black pigtails bouncing up and down with a bamboo sword in her hands. Something about the way her pigtails wagged along to every hop annoyed me.

“Who’re you supposed to be?”

“Master?! It’s me! Girel!” protested the girl.

“Hmm?”

I opened my eyes wide and peered at her as I sifted through the threads of my memory. Now that she mentioned it, I did vaguely remember that I might have created an angel with a name like that at some point.

“I’m the one you assigned to be Renya’s guardian angel! And would you please stop forgetting things? No one likes to be around a prepubescent girl with the memory of a senile goldfish!”

“Who’re you calling a senile goldfish?!”

Infusing just a touch of power into my voice, I yelled at the girl. By the time the sound of her short shriek reached my ears, her form had already been sent flying into the distance. I found myself impressed. That was an angel with quite a bit of power. I hit her with the vocal sledgehammer intending to vaporize her, but she remained very much existent.

Wait, I totally don’t have time for this right now.

I had just received word that some idiot Admin somewhere reincarnated a human as a shapeless slime-like organism and sent it to another world. It baffled me to no end trying to imagine just what would have driven the damn Admin to attempt something so delightf— er, cruelly unethical. Honestly, I’d

love to take the fool's head apart and examine every last quark to see how it all worked.

Humans came in all sorts of flavors, but in order for them to function properly, they needed to be *humanoid*. That was how they retained a sense of self. For example I could understand, albeit barely, if a human was reincarnated as some sort of goblin or troll. After all, those were arguably humanoid. Even something like a dragon was still borderline safe. While dragons looked nothing like humans, they still had a head, a neck, a body, and legs. Stretch the definition a bit and you could say they had hands, too. At a glance, it was possible to claim that they roughly had all the major parts that constituted a human.

A slime, though. A slime was not going to work.

First of all, the way it felt things was completely different. Humans used sensory organs such as their skin, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth to experience stimuli from their surroundings as sensations. A slime was just one big sensory organ. Imagine, if you will, humans sensing smells with their eyes and tasting things with their nose. In addition, a slime had no hands or feet to speak of.

Allow me to digress for a moment.

Every once in a while, a world with a knack for scientific advancement would conduct research into plucking brains out of people and sticking them into mechanical bodies in an attempt to extend their lifespan. These experiments basically all ended in failure. People came up with all sorts of theories in attempts to explain why, but the real reason was a breakdown of the human psyche brought about by its inability to accept a machine as its body. You could simulate the bodily organs with replacement signals all day, and it still wouldn't work. The problem was simply on another level.

Now, try applying this concept to a slime, which didn't even *have* organs. Well, technically, it had one — its whole body; it hunted with its body, chewed with its body, and digested with its body. A human psyche implanted into something like that would, sooner or later, experience a breakdown. It was only a matter of when.

With that said, though, this particular psyche sure was taking an awfully long

time to break down...

Was it a personality thing? Maybe the guy never had a very strong sense of self. Or perhaps he had embraced the good old “eat, sleep, rinse and repeat” way of life when he was human, and being a slime turned out to be not very different from being a degenerate. In fact, this guy looked like he was gradually adapting to life as a slime... Oh, wait, never mind.

A quick fast-forward along the time axis revealed that while its sense of self was intact, fractures in its psyche were becoming evident. Despite its ex-human status, it was gobbling up its former brethren without batting an eye. At this point, it might as well just be another super dangerous man-eating menace. Rather, woman-eating, because for some reason, it seemed to be consuming nothing but females... Which was weird, because both genders would taste identical; male or female, they were both made out of the same clumps of protein.

The fact that they were called slimes, however, meant that most Administrators had a tendency to brush off these gelatinous creatures as simple, low-level organisms unworthy of their attention. They were wrong, of course. Slimes were *messed up*, and their lack of intelligence was the only thing keeping them from endangering the very worlds they set goopy membranes upon.

Think about it.

They possessed little to no instincts nor sense of self, and they behaved almost like machines, eating whatever was edible nearby. When their body volume expanded, they would divide and increase in number. They could survive in harsh environments, and it’s not even clear if the concept of lifespan applied to them.

...Wait, did it? I can’t remember the setting I used. It was so long ago, even I might have forgotten... Ugh, whatever. Too lazy to go check. Gonna ignore that part.

Anyway, so there we had an organism kept in check only by its lack of intelligence. What, then, might the consequences be if someone went and stuck a human psyche — half-broken, sure, but still functional — in it? In the worst

case, its instincts of survival and procreation would lead it to an endless munch-and-multiply cycle that buried the world in slimes. In fact, something to that effect had happened once, and the world in question went kaput. In order to prevent a repeat, I had sent out a strict warning telling everyone to refrain from such practices, but I guess there'll always be the odd Administrator who forgets a notice from a few millennia ago...

For the time being, I took our big goopy friend, who had grown large enough to swallow an entire kingdom whole now, and threw it into the incinerator. Then, I kicked the offending Administrator into another world. Which world? Well, remember that world with the slime apocalypse? Yeah, I never actually got rid of it, figuring it might come in handy someday. Surprisingly, the place didn't actually require much upkeep. It was covered in slimes, but they just kept eating each other and dividing, so left alone, their numbers stabilized into some sort of dynamic equilibrium.

Also, stupid or not, Admins were Admins. A bit of thorough bodily violation by slime wasn't going to kill them. I'll pull the idiot back out after a few centuries. If I remember to, anyway.

"Master, are you trying to kill me?!"

Pigtails finally returned. I had no idea how far she flew, but her clothes were nearly in tatters. With the satisfaction of a job well done, I greeted her with a radiant smile.

"Welcome back!"

"Welcome back?!" yelled Pigtails in disbelief. "You don't welcome someone back after you send them flying into the galactic beyond! I almost flew over the dimensional wall! Who knows where I would have ended up if I fell off!"

"If you fell off?" I shrugged. "Well, it's just the void out there. Like, literal nothing. You fall and you're gone. That's it."

"That's terrifying! Don't shrug and tell me I was this close to complete and total annihilation!"



“Okay, okay, calm down. So, who are you again?”

“Girieli, damn it! Didn’t I just tell you?!”

The name “Girieli” sounded vaguely like something I’d heard recently. Now, what was it again...?

“I’m the guardian angel you assigned! To Renya Kunugi! You know, the one you loaded up with Resources and reincarnated into a world that was experiencing a deficiency thanks to the stupid Administrators that you appointed? Ring any bells?”

“Ah, right. The explanation is appreciated.”

Her reminder effectively jogged my memory. The world in question was actually functioning pretty well, so it’d be a shame for it to implode. In addition, leaving all the hard work to a human gnawed at my conscience a little, so I’ve been relentlessly spamming the Administrators there with messages at a rate that would put most online stalkers to shame. Being the Admin of Admins — a Superadmin, if you will — my messages were mute-proof; mere Admins could not disable notifications from me. Of course they never replied, but we’ll see how long they last under the physical and mental duress of an endless stream of hate mail.

“So, what was this about? A mission or something?”

“I’ve successfully retrieved the bamboo sword from Renya.”

“Ah, good work. Did you hand him a replacement?”

“Yes, I made sure to give a Japanese sword!”

“A tachi? Or an uchigatana?”

“Huh?”

Seeing the clueless look that replaced her triumphant grin, I sighed.

“Tachi and uchigatana are used in completely different ways. Which one did you give him?”

“Um...” she mumbled, a drop of cold sweat rolling down her forehead as her eyes began to dart nervously from side to side.

“You can go look up the difference yourself,” I said, figuring I’d tormented her enough for now. “...Where’d you find the sword?”

“It was one of the articles he was buried with in his original world. I appropriated it from his grave.”

I was about to comment on how she’d just caused a grave robbing incident, but then decided against it; nothing wrong with a grave robbing incident now and then.

“Stuff he was buried with, huh... Not a bad idea, if I do say so myself.”

“Yes, it must be something that carried personal significance for him.”

When there was a connection between owner and item, the item was not only easier to use, it might also bless the owner with various benefits. In that sense, disregarding the ethical issue of defiling somebody’s grave, Girel made a good choice.

“This solves the appearance issue, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure, but more importantly, it’s probably a good thing that you handed him a proper weapon...”

I had a nagging sense that I was the one who brought up the whole appearance issue in the first place, but other problems of greater import had popped up, drawing a deep sigh from me. Somewhere off in the corner of my mind, a chain of help requests from a certain Admin who was doomed to slime hell were flashing. I ignored them. I didn’t get much of a kick out of busty blond angels being subject to slime torture. Just wasn’t my thing, really...

Wasn’t *my* thing, but I had a feeling a recording of this would sell. Immediately, I set about figuring out how to preserve it in video form. What methods... Which angles...

“Master?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, I was jus— Nevermind. So, there’s been some suspicious activities in the world where I sent Renya.”

“Suspicious activities?”

“Hm... Well, the Admins, you see...”

The fact that they were ignoring my messages was par for the course. Aside from that though, I had noticed some fishy behavior.

“Out of the five Admins, four of them seem to have begun interfering with their own races more heavily.”

“Who’s the fifth one?”

“The human Admin. But that one’s always getting the short end of the stick.”

“How come? Was that Admin given a bad luck attribute by you, Master?”

Who the hell would go through all the effort of making something like that and sticking it on the Administrator of a world?

I kept my rebuttal private because I had a feeling an attempt to say it out loud would be countered by some sort of comment about how I behaved badly on a regular basis and it was a reasonable presumption based on my past tendencies. No point stepping on a landmine when I knew it was there.

“Humans are in heat all year round, after all,” I said instead. “Every time you blink, there’s more of ’em.”

For the other four factions, a decrease in their numbers carried with it a very real threat of extinction. In comparison, humans were quite hardy and survivors would reproduce at dizzying speeds, so they were often chosen to be the initial casualties in turf wars. And right now, a turf war was brewing. I could *smell* it.

“That’s cold comfort for the actual victims, though, when they’re used as cannon fodder.”

“Which means Renya might be in danger. As his guardian angel, I can’t be sitting around here, then,” she said as she pressed the bamboo sword into my hands and turned around. “Duty calls!”

“Okay~ See you~ Try your best~”

I rattled off a number of perfunctory sendoffs as I watched the back of her form disappear into the distance. After loading Renya up with Resources, I certainly needed him to live a long life. With that girl as his guardian angel, though, there was probably little reason to be overly concerned. She had only been recently named, but I granted her a fair amount of power, along with the

same privileges as the Administrators of that world. I didn't mention any of this to her, though.

I looked at the bamboo sword. The Indestructible property was gone. It seemed that she did indeed transfer it to the sword she gave him. Renya now possessed an Artifact-class sword, a weapon of such immense power that it defied all conventional worldly logic. But would that one item be enough to see him safely through a world in which the gears of many behind-the-scenes machinations were beginning to turn?

“Ah, geez! How come the only things that ever grow are stress and work?!”

As a means of blowing off steam, the young girl firmly swore that she would drop a bunch of slime food into the world where she sent the aforementioned Admin and bolster their numbers. Never did it occur to her that this very process was only creating more work for herself.

Chapter 4: Something Seemed Off About the Inaugural Dungeon Campaign, or So It Was Told

Not all dungeons were made equal. At least, not in people's imaginations. In Renya's opinion, the word "dungeon" evoked very different images depending on who was talking about it. However, there was probably a rough consensus that consisted of rocky surfaces and earthen walls. In the case that they were made by men, passages were likely formed by stony blocks.

This opinion was upended by the term "naturally-occurring dungeons." Renya had no idea what to make of dungeons that matured on their own. They were not living creatures, yet they grew in size and scale over time. This seemed a phenomenon wholly incompatible with rigid walls of stone. It was for this reason that, until he actually went in, he suspected the interiors to resemble the insides of a living creature, all fleshy and organ-like. Were it so, the creepiness meter would have gone right off the screen, but it would have allowed him to understand how the thing could grow.

Upon entering the actual dungeon, though, Renya found his expectations to be completely inaccurate. After descending the "why are these even here" stairs and scanning surroundings, he uttered in an almost-disappointed tone.

"This is just, like, a cave. A regular old cave."

The walls were made of bare earth, but when he touched them, he found them to be surprisingly stiff. It was as if there were a coating on them, and hitting it with his fist failed to produce any damage. At a glance the cave, roughly three meters in diameter, seemed perfectly normal. It went on and on, farther than the light of the torch could reach.

"What were you expecting?" asked Shion.

She stood beside him, and the two of them formed the vanguard of their joint eight-person party with Azu's members. When he announced that he would of course take the front, Shion volunteered to do so as well, and the motion

passed with no objections. Rona was in charge of healing and Azu, firepower. The two of them, along with one guardsman, formed the three-person middle, and three more guardsmen brought up the rear. It was a 2-3-3 formation.

As Renya made his way down the cavernous tunnel, he took a moment to compose his thoughts before answering.

“Well, since you said it was a dungeon that grew, I figured it’d be more, you know... organic?”

“Who would even want to go into a dungeon like that?” said Shion with a grimace.

Her sentiment was understandable. Even if it was for money, he doubted there would be many people who would willingly walk through corridors that resembled the insides of a living creature.

“Parts of the passage crumble bit by bit,” mentioned Azu from behind, “and that’s how new passageways are born. Nobody’s digging tunnels or anything. They just lengthen on their own, gradually forming branching paths that eventually mature into a massive dungeon. As passages grow they turn into rooms, and those sometimes contain treasure.”

“Who’s putting the treasure there?”

“There are various theories. Some say the monsters put them there. Others claim they’re placed there somehow by the core. It’s also been said that maybe both are true.”

According to Azu, from the dungeon’s perspective, while it didn’t want people to just keep ransacking it for treasure willy-nilly, it would also be a problem if no one ever bothered to go in. In that regard, he believed the placement of treasure might reflect the will of the core.

“Mr. Azu and his encyclopedic knowledge,” joked Renya as he looked over his shoulder. “You should be a teacher.”

Azu glared at him.

“I don’t mind small talk, but keep your eyes open. We don’t have a thief in this party.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Renya said as he faced forward again. Behind him, Azu let out an exasperated sigh.

In truth, however, neither of them were expecting to encounter a situation that would require the presence of a thief. The first reason was that the dungeon was freshly born. The second was that two other parties had already gone in before them. The point of having a thief walk in front was to check the passageway for traps as they advanced. If there really were traps, though, it was likely that they had either been disabled by the parties ahead of them, or those parties had already tripped them without noticing.

“The dungeon grows, right? Isn’t it weird for there to be traps in its passages, then?”

“Do I look like a dungeon to you? Go ask the core if you’re so curious,” answered Azu in a deal-with-it tone.

Renya supposed he would have to put aside the logical absurdity of the issue and simply accept that they existed.

“Save it for later, you two. I can see a room up ahead.”

At Rona’s announcement, the party’s atmosphere shifted immediately. A sober tension permeated the air. Renya found himself impressed by the speed at which it happened. They weren’t professional adventurers for nothing. As he appraised his teammates, his manner appeared nonchalant, but his left hand remained firmly on the hilt of his katana.

“A room?”

“If a passage widens, it becomes a room, right? There’s no door, though,” said Shion.

“...And no presence of anything living either,” Renya added.

“You can tell?”

“Somewhat, yeah.”

The passage suddenly expanded into an open space. The two of them entered first and cautiously looked around. Shion had already drawn her weapon, but Renya kept his sheathed. Part of the reason was that the motion of drawing his

blade was part of the attack, but there also seemed to be some lingering residues in his mind of an idea that a katana should be drawn to cut, not be held while walking.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anyone here,” said Shion.

As Renya nodded in response, he discovered a spot on the ground that seemed to be stained. At the moment, the wavering light of the torch was insufficient for close examination, but the heat of the fire could change its appearance if he held the torch close. In a moment of realization, it dawned on him that this was the time for Illuminate to shine. He cast the spell, placing it near the stain.

“What is it?” asked Azu, noticing the stain on the ground below where the orb of light had suddenly appeared. On the barren soil of the ground, that spot alone was different in color.

“It’s pretty faint now, but maybe blood?”

“Probably. Either someone took down a monster here... or was wounded.”

While the stain was faint, it covered a sizable area — about two hands fully outstretched. For a wound to have bled enough to create such a large stain...

“This is a lot of bleeding if it came from a wound.”

“It’s been mostly absorbed by the dungeon. I can’t tell if it’s man or monster.”

Upon hearing something so decidedly unsettling, Renya stared at Azu, whose face was a mask of indifference.

“First time seeing it, I assume?”

“Yeah. So they absorb it like this and grow, huh...”

“That’s right. Blood, bodies, they’ll all disappear given enough time.”

Despite hearing about it before, seeing it with his own eyes still came as a shock. It was a firm reminder that he was, without a doubt, no longer in his original world. The other members, however, seemed to have misinterpreted his expression.

“Renya, do you want to head back for a while?” asked a concerned Shion.

Seeing him frozen in place, his eyes fixed on the stain, she placed her hand on his shoulder. “Now that I think about it, this is your first time, isn’t it? I can understand if the experience shook you. We can head back and maybe try again tomorrow...”

“Hm? Oh, I’m fine. It took me by surprise, but I’m not shaken or anything.”

Renya patted Shion’s shoulder and smiled at the other members who were observing his response to show that everything was fine. Meanwhile, in his mind, he was contemplating the tiresome nature of being a leader and how his every look and gesture affected the party’s atmosphere.

“Are... you sure? I guess it’s okay if you’re fine, but let us know if anything bothers you.”

“Thanks for your concern, Shion, but really, I’m fine,” he said, making sure to use his most sincere tone. He finally wrestled an okay out of Shion, who removed her hand from his shoulder with a hint of regret and returned to keeping watch on their surroundings, weapon at the ready.

The fact that there was blood on the ground, whether it was from man or monster, implied that something had happened where they stood. Furthermore, it was likely that the happening was some kind of battle.

“Looks like there’s definitely something here, huh.”

“Of course there is. It’s a dungeon,” replied Azu, whose wry smile suggested he felt he was stating the obvious.

“Well, let’s keep moving forward for now. This stain by itself isn’t quite enough reason to make a mad dash for the exit.”

“Most unfortunate. If only there had been a dead body. That would have been a perfect excuse.”

At this point, neither Renya nor Azu had any intention of clearing the dungeon. All they were looking for was something to use as proof for when they reported back and claimed it was impossible to complete the mission.

“This is the first time I’ve seen such an unmotivated dungeon party...” said Shion. She sounded tired. The rest of the party could only smile, their

expressions wry. Everyone was fully aware of how strong the parties ahead of them were. If those people had not returned, whatever lay ahead was nothing they could handle.

“Hey, Renya.” The voice belonged to Azu, who was holding a torch and examining the room’s exit by himself. “Up ahead... there’s a door.”

“What?”

“Right outside this room, there’s a door.”

Renya was waved over by Azu and looked toward the indicated direction. A short tunnel led out of their room, and at its end, the torch’s light was just bright enough to reveal a dark gray door. It had two door panels and took up almost all of the passage’s three-meter diameter. It was also in the most unlikely of places.

“Hey, is it normal for a young dungeon to have such an elaborate door?”

“In older dungeons, monsters might craft them in places... but definitely not in a dungeon as young as this one. First of all, the path has been a straight line so far and we’ve only been through one room. The second room in a dungeon like that shouldn’t have a door like this. Something is clearly wrong.”

“Would the other parties have considered that?”

“Harz’s party definitely would have... but I don’t know about the brown-hair’s.”

Renya was tempted to ask Azu if there was some kind of traumatic past between him and harem parties, but he withheld the quip. It was not the time for glibness. Instead, he gathered everyone at the entrance of the room.

“Let’s turn back.”

“What?”

His terse proposal was met with a unanimous expression of disbelief. Unperturbed, he continued.

“This is dangerous. Something is here. There’s a door right outside this room, and no matter how you look at it, it’s dangerous to open that door. My gut says so.”

He wished he had asked for an ability that would allow him to sense danger, but that ship had long sailed. There was also no one in their party who possessed a skill of similar effect.

“My gut is with you...” said Azu as he collected his thoughts, “but my head says no. I agree that something strange is going on, but ‘because there was a door’ isn’t going to fly when we explain ourselves to the guild.”

“Isn’t it possible that opening this will lead to the ultimate deathtrap?”

“The door is strange, but it would be even stranger for it to be powerful enough to spring such a deadly trap.”

“Renya, we can’t just head back empty-handed just because things felt weird. We haven’t even investigated. It’d defeat the point of accepting the mission, and the guild would have no choice but to penalize us heavily.”

Renya considered the arguments presented by Azu and Shion. In this case, whether or not they saw themselves as adventurers probably contributed to their difference in opinion. He, of course, did not give two hoots about how adventurers were supposed to behave. As a result, he cared little about what the guild would think, and now that they faced an unforeseen danger, he was immediately in favor of retreating. This proposal, however, was a tough one to stomach for Azu and Shion, who held themselves to certain standards of adventuring.

“I still think opening this door might be the last thing we do...”

“In that case, how about this?” Seeing his resistance, Azu stepped forward with a proposition. “We’ll go in first. Your party can back us up.”

“But that doesn’t really—”

“Whatever you say, Renya, the five of us are opening that door. Otherwise we can’t go back, no matter how much we want to. That’s what it means to be an adventurer. If you decline to back us up, then we’ll simply investigate on our own.”

“Hmm...”

“Renya, you’re the leader. We’ll do whatever you decide, but I really don’t

think we should leave Azu's party behind and go back by ourselves."

"Hnnngh..."

Renya grasped for words, but failed. It was true that one's work was only recognized when said work produced respectable results. What he was proposing was the equivalent of abandoning the entire endeavor. It was also true, however, that his instincts were screaming at him to avoid the door up ahead. It was bad news and he knew it. Letting Azu's party go first, then, would be knowingly sending his allies to their deaths. He couldn't let himself do that.

"Okay, fine. We'll push forward," he conceded, ultimately unable to find the words that would convince his fellow members. Realizing that he had no choice but to proceed, he gave a discouraged sigh. "But, I'm going to open that door. And I'm doing it alone. Shion and Rona, the two of you guard Azu. The remaining four, you're in charge of staying behind and watching our backs."

"Renya?!" shrieked Shion.

In a calming gesture, he made a calming gesture with his hand and smiled weakly.

"I still think we shouldn't keep going. But if I can't convince the rest of you, then I have to open that door and check if there's any danger. It's the only way we can do this."

"Renya, I've already said we'll go in first—"

"That's not an option," he refused flatly. "I think that whatever lies ahead is a risk to our lives. So long as I think so, I can't tell you guys to go in. Therefore, I'm the one who has to open that door. If you can't consent to that, then you'll have to agree to turn back." Making it clear that this was the one condition he was not going to back off on, he awaited their response.

A full-on argument broke out. Renya demanded that he go first, while Shion and Azu were adamant that they were not retreating, but they refused to let him go by himself as well. Neither side was willing to compromise, and the talks hit an impasse.

Technically, as a last resort, Azu could back out of the agreement to fight alongside Renya's party and push ahead with his own party. He had difficulty

forcing the issue, however, because he did not decline the offer of support from Rona and Shion, and Renya did not declare that he was turning back.

Azu had, of course, no intention of fighting with Renya. If anything, he would rather maintain an amicable relationship. Whether it was the allure of Renya's voidbox and the convenience it offered or the influence of Renya's near-religious devotion to food, Azu found that he very much preferred to remain on the young man's good side. Renya had him by the stomach, so to speak. In any case, he wished to avoid any deterioration in their relationship, but he also could not agree to a simple retreat. That meant he had to put forth an alternate solution.

"All right, let's say I'm okay with having you go first for now."

"What're you talking about, you shady asshole?! What? Just 'cause he's not in your party, you're gonna let him go?!" yelled Shion furiously, her vocabulary decidedly less genteel than usual. In fact, it more resembled how girls her age usually talked.

"Shion, words. Watch your words..." whispered Renya.

Azu glanced at Shion, who promptly covered her mouth with her hands, and tilted his head, wondering what it was about him that earned him the descriptors "shady" and, he supposed, "asshole." He conceded that the natural shape of his eyes often appeared hostile. He also had a gaunt face, was bad at smiling, and rarely showed any emotion. He nodded, deciding that "shady asshole" was indeed an objectively accurate description of him.

"Still," he continued, "I can't let you go alone. How about this? You and I, along with the two girls, will form the vanguard, but you can take the lead. The remaining four in my party will bring up the rear."

"Y-Yeah, Renya. That way, you're still going in first, and the rest of us can back you up right away. We'll also have our backs covered," added Shion frantically.

Renya wasn't fond of splitting the party in two, but he doubted that any further arguing would prove fruitful. There was also another concern that just arose, and it was making him anxious to conclude the debate. His new concern was shared by Rona, who seemed to have come to the same realization.

“Before we charge in, I’ll use as many protective graces on us as I can. With that said... we’ve made quite the scene in front of this door and nobody is coming out. Perhaps there’s nothing on the other side?”

There were two possibilities, and she knew it. Seeing that she purposefully chose to mention the more optimistic one made him laugh out loud.

“If it turns out that there really is nothing on the other side, then you can all have a good laugh about your wimpy leader who had the living daylights scared out of him by the door of an empty room.”

It would be no laughing matter, however, if the other possibility turned out to be true, because it implied that whatever lay beyond was so strong that it couldn’t even be bothered to pay any attention to the antics of some silly adventurers raising a ruckus outside its door. It was perfectly fine giving them all the time they needed to prepare, and it also didn’t mind if they ran away; it was so powerful that it simply didn’t care. Rona, for her part, chose to not show the fact that she was aware of the other possibility. Instead, she was going from party member to party member, using her graces on each in turn.

“There’s not much I can offer. Only Protection and Accelerated Recovery...”

“It’s good enough. I’ll open the door once you’re done with the last person. Rear guard, watch our backs.”

After seeing his whole party nod back, Renya placed his hands on the door. He began to push. For the briefest of moments, he wished it would prove to be locked. That way they would be able to call it off and head back. The door, however, slowly gave way. Immediately, someone groaned loudly.

“Ugh!”

A putrid odor, unnaturally intense, rushed out of the gap. The sheer stench was enough to turn stomachs. With his hands on the doors, he had no way of covering his face and took the brunt of the draft head-on. Behind him, Shion’s hand shot up to her mouth. Disgusted groans were even heard from the rear guard. Nevertheless, he continued to push the door open. This surprised even him. He knew perfectly well how bad the smell was, and the revulsion on the faces of fellow members was a testament to that fact. However, unlike them, who were forced to stop and cover their faces, Renya did not seem to mind.

Was he used to this?

With the question lingering in his mind, he stepped through the doorway. A moment later Shion followed, along with Azu and Rona who held torches in their hands. It was a wide space, significantly larger than the previous room. And it was bright, which allowed them to appreciate its size; torches alone would probably have been insufficient to illuminate its full expanse. The ceiling itself glowed faintly, filling the whole room with light. The surrounding walls, unlike those of the earthen corridor, shone white as if they bore a layer of plaster. In the center was a single ebony desk, and a seated form was hunched over it, busily scribbling something. The effect was almost comical.

A quick scan revealed no apparent sources of the putrid stench that assaulted them when the door opened. Regardless, Renya's internal danger meter had already breached its maximum value. A powerful aura emanated from the pen-toting form in the middle of the room. Carefully, his left hand tightened its grip around the sheath. He could feel the sweat in his palms.

"Who... or what... is that?" asked Azu from behind, his voice strained. He probably felt the danger, as well.

At that moment, the figure stopped writing and slowly looked in the direction of the room's entrance where they all stood, unmoving. It was a man, and to Renya, his appearance seemed remarkably strange. His light purple hair was neatly combed back, and his ears were long and slightly pointy. His skin was deep brown, and the eyes with which he gazed at Renya were decidedly unhuman, their pupils long and almond-shaped. The white garb that he wore, which resembled a lab coat, only made his strange appearance even more peculiar.



“Oh? Why, it appears that I have some rather rowdy guests. How odd. I don’t seem to remember inviting you,” said the man with a puzzled tilt of the head. His voice was high-pitched and grated on the ears.

“That’s... a demon...” gasped Rona after getting a good look at him from the front.

“A demon?”

Needless to say, this was the first time Renya had laid eyes on a demon. Before he came to this world, he had heard from the young girl that they lived in the central part of the continent. That, then, begged the question of why one of them was on the human side of the continent, and sitting in a dungeon to boot.

“Renya, you were right. This guy is bad news. We need to run,” urged Azu. The usual composure in his voice was gone, replaced by deep panic.

Shion alone seemed out of the loop, and she stared at their fear-marred faces, evidently confused. Then, she glanced back and forth between the demon and Renya, her sword brandished in front of her.

There was a chuckle.

“Now, now. I see no reason for you to make such a hasty exit.”

Both the man’s tone and his expression were soft and welcoming, but Renya could tell his emotions ran counter to his words. Those were emotions that should never be directed toward a human.

“Personally, I’d prefer to ask what I came here to ask and leave.”

“Oh? What have you come here to ask? Allow me to lend you an ear.”

“Two parties of adventurers came here before us, right?”

“Adventurers, you say? Have they? I’m not sure.” The demon crossed his arms before his chest as if contemplating something, then shook his head. “No, if memory serves, no such thing came here.”

“It was a straight path,” interrupted Azu as he took on a combative posture. “There’s no way they didn’t.”

The demon gave Azu a troubled look.

“So you say, but what didn’t come, didn’t come. How else would you have me answer?”

“Let’s change the question, then,” said Renya. After hearing the exchange between the demon and Azu, he realized that even if he had three more internal danger meters, it would still not be enough to correctly assess the risk they faced. The man before them was more dangerous than anything he ever imagined. “Did eleven toys or specimens find their way here?”

His whole party turned to look at him, their expressions baffled. Renya paid them no mind. Rather, he had no mind left to pay. All of his attention was focused on the demon, who stared back at him with the same unchanging look. After a short span, the demon grinned, uncrossed his arms, and rubbed his palms together. Something about the gesture reminded Renya of a fly, and he grimaced.

“You’re an interesting one, aren’t you?” said the demon, who lowered his hands and pushed himself out of his chair.

Standing up, he was not particularly tall and his build was slender. His unimposing stature, however, did not in any way make him feel less dangerous to Renya.

“Toys, you say? Toys. In that case, allow me to answer like this.”

The demon spread his hands and strolled leisurely from his desk to a wall, making not even the slightest attempt to keep his eyes on Renya’s party. With all the panache of a stage actor, he finished his walk with a twirling flourish before placing his hand on the white wall. A shallow depression appeared on what should have been a solid surface, and his hand began to sink in.

“By ‘toys’, were you referring to this?”

His hand was now completely immersed in the wall. Renya and his friends watched as the man rummaged about, clueless as to what he intended. Eventually, he seemed to find what he was looking for and pulled his hand out.

Something else came out with it.

“What is... Is that Harz?!”

His voice thick with terror, Azu took a step back. Shion’s sword began trembling in her hands, and Rona had her hands over her mouth, barely managing to suppress a scream. Renya almost drew his blade, but he held back.

“Nnnggh... Uuuooo... H-Hel... Help...”

Pulled along by his crop of short blond hair, Harz’s head appeared out of the wall. His eyes were glassy. His mouth hung half-open, barely managing to verbalize his cries for help. The right half of his head still bore a vague likeness of a human face, but the left half was grossly decayed, its very flesh melting off the frame and revealing sinews of muscle and white bone. The freakish sight caused Renya and his friends to freeze.

“For some reason, they just kept popping up here since morning, each one peppier than the last.”

Letting go of Harz’s hair, the demon plunged his hand into a different part of the wall. When it reappeared, it held what used to be a human head. A few strands of brown hair yet lingered on the bare white skull. It was probably Zest, but his visage was all but gone.

“These are truly excellent specimens. They’re great fun to play with, they’re reasonably sturdy, and every time you look away, there are more of them.”

One after another, human heads began to surface along the white wall. Like Harz and Zest, ulcerated flesh and crumbling tissue clung limply to their bony frames. While faint traces of human features could yet be seen on each of the eleven heads, no one allowed their gaze to linger for long on the macabre sight.

“We have our circumstances, too, you see,” continued the demon. “Research, specimen-gathering, and perhaps a dash of fancy... To that end, we tried creating a dungeon near where humans lived, and I must say, for a little fishing hole, it has been quite the haul.”

As the heads peeled away from the wall, their arms and hands slowly followed, strips of disintegrating skin dangling down in front of their skeletal legs that emerged next. It was the stuff of nightmares. Weaker-willed individuals might have seen their consciousness take leave of them right then

and there. While each member of Renya's party was shaken to different degrees by the ghastly sight, they all remained standing. At the same time, however, it was all they could manage to do.

"No need to be so scared. I'm very thorough. I'll make sure to extract every last bit of use out of each of your bodies, too," said the demon, still smiling. Behind him, things no longer human began to crawl out of the wall, their arms outstretched as if pleading for help. "Before that, though, I'll need you all to look like them. Shall we, then?"

He spoke with the lighthearted tone of someone who was pleasantly amused. There was no hint of malice to his voice. At the same time, the cadaverous bodies along the wall charged at Renya's party.

"Run!"

Renya was the first to react, his shrill command sending the four members of his rear guard into motion. He did not look back, but he heard the clangs of their plate armor as they rushed to make their escape. Soon after, he heard their screams as well.

This time he looked over his shoulder, only to find that the very walls of the previous room, stirring as if alive, had shifted over the room's entrance and closed it off. A strange red glow glimmered across the walls before pieces of rotten meat, foul and sludge-like, oozed out of its surface and plopped down. They gathered in fleshy piles on the ground. Then, slowly, they began to worm their way toward the four rear guards, who hastily propped up their shields and assumed a defensive formation.

The second round of screams came shortly after.

"My shield! It's... It's rotting?!"

Some of the rotten meat snaked toward the four men like tentacles. When they tried to defend themselves with their shields, the parts of the shield that made contact with the approaching carrion turned brown and began to crumble.

"What the hell are these things?! I've never heard of a monster like this!"

One could not fight what one did not know. Renya hurriedly activated the

Appraisal skill, and a message appeared.

《**Notification: Appraisal - Target Name: Rust Monster (Subspecies)**》

《**Notification: Help Activated - Rust Monsters are rodent-like creatures that feed primarily on rust. They have the ability to cause rusting of any metal for which rusting is possible. In comparison, their ability has no effect on objects made of leather or wood. Defeating these monsters is fairly easy once they are correctly identified. They display no interest in flesh or blood and have small manastones. No useful elements can be harvested from their bodies. As a result, adventurers frequently go to great lengths to avoid them, treating them as nothing more than sources of significant annoyance.**》

As Renya read over the explanation, which the Help Function was so considerate as to provide in such detail, he felt the rising urge to yell.

What part of that looks like a rodent to you, you stupid Help Function?!

Presumably, it assumed that “(Subspecies)” was sufficient to address any discrepancies. That must have been it. He convinced himself that it was.

“Aren’t they adorable? These monsters used to look like tiny rodents, but after I gave them a few tweaks, they’ve become the splendid creatures you see now. While they prefer consuming iron rust, the taste of blood is similar enough that they seem to have no qualms about using it as a replacement diet.”

“They’re practically another monster entirely now!” Renya snapped at the demon, who was gleefully providing background commentary.

Things did not look good. In fact, they were getting worse. The eleven things that came out of the wall matched the headcount of the first two parties exactly. Though their movements were slow, they had managed to surround Renya’s party. Now, little by little, they were closing in.

The stench of rot about their bodies was unbearable, but it was the grisly sight of them that kept his allies frozen where they stood. The best example might be one of those anatomical models so often found in science classrooms, but with dissolving remnants of tissue sloughing off as they dragged their guts behind them, leaving a trail of innards in their wake. Behind the sinew in their bodies, one could catch glimpses of something hard and white. The way it

peeked out along with their shambling movements was chilling to behold, stirring up terror and disgust in equal proportions.

As Renya's gaze passed over them, he was shocked by the message that popped up.

《**Notification: Appraisal - Target Name: Human**》

Are you freaking serious? They're still alive?

He bit his lip. Everything about them screamed "zombie," but the appraisal report showed they were still human. Alien hues of red, white, and yellow oozed out of their broken bodies. They, walking horrors of rot and decay, were still living humans. He didn't believe it. Didn't *want* to. But after a glance at the mouth of those human-shaped things, he had no choice; the bony remains of their fleshless lips were mouthing but a single word: "Help."

"These ones here are in the process of being turned into specimens... but, as you have probably so astutely perceived, they are still alive."

The demon's words elicited a gulp from Shion.

"With that said, though," he continued, "their breath already contains neurotoxins that cause paralysis, and so do their bodily fluids. If they get their hands on you, you'll likely find yourselves unable to move."

"Don't listen to his crap! Fall back and group up with the others!"

Seeing that his friends were frozen in place, Renya yelled at them and urged them to retreat. The figures approaching them, while alive, were definitely not normal humans. He decided that it would be better to group up as eight and deal with the chunks of meat behind them first. Just as Shion and the others moved to comply, however, the door to the room slammed shut with a loud thud.

"Did you really think I'd let you escape? Why not let the ones out there have their fun, and we'll have ours, hm?"

"Apply Simulcast eight times, by my power, I command thee! Bolts of fire, fly!"

The instant he realized they were separated, Renya changed his plan. He

swung his arm in a wide arc. Eight fist-sized fireballs materialized and shot toward the demon.

“By my power, I summon thee! Shield of mana, repel!”

The incantation created a barrier of mana in the form of an energy field. As the fireballs flew into it, they bounced off and dissipated. After repelling all eight bolts of fire, the barrier disappeared, revealing the grinning demon behind it.

“You’re quick to act, aren’t you? Also, an eight-fold simultaneous activation, was it? I had taken you for a swordsman with that getup, but are you actually a mage?”

Renya made no attempt to answer.

“Listen up! We’re going to take this guy down and then rendezvous with the rear guard! Those four are a terrible match for the monsters out there!”

The four men bringing up the rear relied on the defensive capabilities of their plate armor to overwhelm their opponent. Against monsters that chewed through metals by causing rust, they were effectively naked. Even worse, their short swords were probably equally useless; they were also metal, and therefore would also rust. With their weapons and armor gone, they were nothing more than prey awaiting a slow death at the jaws of their meaty predators. Were they able to group up with the rest of the party, Azu and Renya would make short work of the monsters with their magecraft. If only they could do something about the blocked passage; escape might be possible then.

“Yes, yes, do make sure to give me your best effort. The harder you try, the easier it is for me to learn about your capabilities,” said the demon. After blocking Renya’s spell, he did not make any attempt to move.

Renya, for his part, was confident that he could cut down the demon, but he needed to be within striking distance. Closing the gap, however, required him to go through eleven nasty obstacles between them.

“Renya, what should we...” asked Shion in a pleading tone.

Slowly but steadily, the humanoid forms advanced toward them. A few more steps, and their outstretched hands would touch Renya’s nose. One of them let

out a breath. His skin tingled. The stinging sensation kicked his brain into high gear.

Breath. Neurotoxins. He was out of time.

Realizing that he was already within range of their paralyzing poison, he hollered at the others.

“Cut them down! We can’t save them! Rona, can you cure poison?!”

“Y-Yes, I can use a basic level Antidote...”

“Azu, give me cover fire with your magecraft! Rona, focus on using Antidote and healing! Shion, keep the enemy away from those two!”

His command wiped the fear from Shion’s expression, soon replaced by a look of determination. She steadied her trembling hands and fixed her grip on the handle of her longsword. Taking a half step back to adjust her spacing, she raised her sword high, its blade almost resting on her right shoulder, and brought it down in a heavy swing that ripped through the shoulder of the humanoid form before her.

Were her opponent a regular human, the wound would surely have been fatal, but it proved insufficient to end the life of the shambling figure. The strike did cause it to flinch back a little, possibly from what remained of its ability to feel pain. Normally, a wound like that should be spewing out copious amounts of blood. Instead black sludge dripped nauseatingly out of its severed flesh. Disgusted, Shion pulled her blade from its body and kicked it in the stomach. The strike sent it reeling back a few steps. Then Azu’s fireball hit it square in the head. The humanoid form clutched its burning face and writhed in agony.

No matter its shape or form, so long as something lived, it needed to breathe. Having its head lit on fire robbed it of the ability to take in air, leaving it to suffer as the heat scorched its windpipe and lungs.

Shion swung again. Her blade sank into its head and parted it in two. The humanoid form stopped writhing and fell to the ground, flames licking at its unmoving corpse. Revulsion contorted her expression; the sensation of cutting and kicking decaying flesh was nothing pleasant. Nevertheless, she let out a shout.

“One down!”

Renya glanced at the others. Rona was prudently preparing a grace for use while Azu was already chanting an incantation for a spell as he searched for his next target. They looked like they could take care of themselves for a while. That left him with only one thing to do: cut that nameless demon down as quickly as possible.

The act of taking a step forward was equivalent to shifting one's attack range a step forward, and shifting one's attack range a step forward meant, in turn, having the target within striking distance. What, then, would having the target within striking distance imply? The answer was simple: cut it down.

With his left hand Renya pushed against the handle, unsheathing the blade slightly. Then, he rested his right hand on the hilt and let his body do the rest. There was no need to think. The blade burst from the sheath like a flash of white lightning, cutting a clean rift through the thick, festering air. It flashed again. And again. Three times in one breath. It met no resistance. It made no noise. It parted meat, and bone, and the very sound of its own motion. Renya took another step forward. Three heads hit the ground at the same time.

“I must say, you've impressed me again,” said the demon, marveling at the scene before him.

No matter how deformed they were, so long as they were fundamentally human, they could not live without their heads. A decapitated body crumpled to its knees before falling to the ground. Renya did not even spare it a glance. His eyes, showing no emotion, were fixed on the demon in front of him.

Another step forward.

The drawn blade remained unsheathed. It flipped in his hand and reversed its cutting edge before leaping upward. Then, it flipped again and dove back down. Two red lines appeared on two separate bodies, one rising, one falling. From groin to head, then head to groin, two wholes became four halves. Bodies toppled over and spilled their innards onto the ground amidst a widening pool of fluid too dark to be blood. Renya walked past them, his pace steady.

“Well, well. This is certainly unexpected. I might have happened upon a great find.” Seemingly unfazed by the fact that five of his humanoid forms were

dismantled in the blink of an eye, the demon was jubilant, his expression filled with the wonder of an exotic discovery. “I can make some splendid works by using you as a base.”

“Too bad you won’t get to.”

The blade in Renya’s hand remained unsheathed. A drawn katana existed to cut. The blade flashed again, a living embodiment of those words, and sliced through two more bodies from side to side. Two tops parted ways with two bottoms. One of the tops kept squirming after it landed on the ground. He rested his foot on its head, then stomped. It stopped squirming.

“That makes seven. Assuming the others take care of the remaining four... I believe there are exactly zero left to protect you?”

Despite his own statement, doubt lingered in Renya’s mind. The humanoid forms, aside from their freakish appearance, possessed no abilities of note. They were mere mannequins. Their outstretched arms and grasping hands were a simple plea for help. The paralyzing toxin in their breath, too, seemed to be of little threat until they were extremely close. Renya himself was a testament to that fact; he felt nothing wrong with his body. In addition, their half-decomposed state left them naked. Meanwhile, the katana’s purpose was to rend and slice. Before its honed edge, their exposed bodies and sluggish speed made them little more than slightly mobile scarecrows. Their value to the demon was doubtful to begin with.

Doubtful or not, though, he had no choice but to defeat the man standing in front of him. The path to his opponent was now clear. Without warning, he rushed forward to close the gap.

“By my power, I summon thee...”

In reaction, the demon began his incantation. Renya had no way of knowing what spell the demon would cast, but he braced himself and continued his dash. He was resolved to either dodge or take it head-on, no matter what the attack, or possibly even two or three attacks, turned out to be.

“Blades of wind, cleave!” commanded the demon, his hand raised.

Gusts of wind, razor-sharp, surged forth from his palm in rapid succession.

The number shattered Renya's expectations, and he was shocked to be staring down a total of twenty ethereal blades speeding toward him. It was too late to dodge. He knew almost nothing about magecraft and, therefore, had no way of gauging how powerful the spell was. Regardless, if he couldn't dodge, there was only one thing left to do.

"Simulcast twenty times! Firebolt!"

Maintaining the speed of his dash, he quickcast Firebolt against the blades of wind bearing down on him. Fire clashed with wind, each blade meeting a ball of flame. Though their numbers seemed equal at first glance, wind proved slightly superior, winning through raw power and bursting through. He held up his sword to intercept the incoming windblades.

"Fool! You think you can block a wind spell with a kata—"

Normally, this would be an impossible feat. A thick shield, perhaps, could have defended against a direct hit, but magecraft was almost never repelled by swinging a weapon at it. What the demon didn't know about, however, was the Indestructible property attached to Renya's katana. This property, which was never supposed to exist in this world, meant that it would unilaterally destroy anything destructible it came into contact with. This fact was not restricted to physical objects; magecraft met with the same fate.

The blades of wind not cancelled out by his firebolts had their spell composition systematically dismantled when they touched his blade. The demon's words died in his throat as he witnessed something impossible. For the first time, he was no longer grinning.

"Wha—"

Even if he didn't know why, Renya could tell the spell was gone. The shock of seeing an impossible sight delayed the demon's reaction by just a second. Renya did not pass that second up. After dispelling the blades of wind, his own blade reversed direction and lashed out again. It traced an arc straight through the demon's body. An outstretched right arm — the same one that unleashed the spell — soared through the air. One end was perfectly smooth, its cross section cut with surgical precision.

"G-Gyaa... Hnngh..."

It was commendable that the demon did not scream. The cut was so clean that the arm whirled through the air and landed on the ground before a fountain of blood erupted from its severed face. Clutching his wounded stump, the demon glared at Renya with hatred in his eyes.

Renya barely noticed. His mind was occupied with concern about what was happening to their separated rear guard. Seeing that his opponent shrank back a little from the attack, he was more than glad to take advantage of the opening. A swing at the demon's neck was barely evaded by a twist of his body, and a diagonal slash caught his chest, but the cut was shallow. Before Renya could follow up with another strike, the demon roared at him. The voice, not only loud but empowered by mana, hit Renya point-blank and caused him to stagger. In that moment, the demon quickly put some distance between them, backing away to the wall.

A faint hope flashed in Renya's mind. Maybe the demon, knowing that he lost in a clash of magecraft, was trying to escape. Renya was not sure how his katana had managed to dispel the wind spell, but this fact had shocked the demon enough to create an opening. In other words, it was not a calculated move on his part; he was simply fortunate enough to land a lucky hit. He tried to press his advantage, but his next two attacks were evaded.

Renya had, therefore, yet to land a single hit on his own merit. This spoke to the sheer strength of the demon and his physical capabilities. While the various surprises and doubts he had to contend with meant that he was not at peak performance either, for someone who had lost an arm, the demon was still proving to be a tough opponent. Renya honestly did not want to keep fighting him. The longer this battle took, the worse things would be for him. His gut told him so.

Fortunately, his one lucky hit took a whole appendage away from the demon. It would have been extra lucky if the demon was right-handed, but more importantly, his gaping wound was currently in the process of spewing out a steady stream of blood. Blood loss led directly to fatigue and a loss of concentration.

"D-Damn... you..." panted the demon in a pained voice. What followed, surprisingly, was not the routine cursing of a stereotypical villain. "S-Sure are

holding... something interesting... Where did you find that?"

The question almost went straight over his head before he realized it was referring to his magic-dispelling katana.

"Seriously? *That's* your concern? You don't think there's something else to worry about?" said Renya with mild amazement.

The demon weakly uttered a low, growling laugh. The "weakly" part was reassuring for Renya, because it implied the wound was definitely draining the demon of his stamina.

"You mean the arm? Forget about the arm. What matters right now is that weapon you're holding. Did it just destroy a spell? That should have been impossible."

"Don't ask me. I got this from a trade with a traveling merchant. Go find the merchant if you want to know where it came from," he said, though he doubted it was possible for a demon to wander through human lands looking for a traveling merchant.

Renya produced a piece of paper from his pants pocket and wiped off his katana. The bit of fat left on the blade by the humanoid forms had been bothering him. A good, fast swing often left the blade quite clean, but it was not guaranteed to prevent every drop blood and fat from sticking. Keeping his eyes on the demon, he cautiously cleaned his katana and casually threw the soiled paper onto the ground.

"So, you still want to go despite being wounded pretty badly?" he asked, hoping for the opposite answer, but the demon did not comply with his wishes.

"Of course. A cut like this doesn't count as a wound."

Renya frowned, considering whether the demon was bluffing. He soon stopped himself. Though he possessed almost no knowledge on demons, they were likely superior to humans in both intelligence and power. Even now, after suffering extensive blood loss, the demon did not look to be on the verge of collapse. His face was contorted with pain, but there was still a fire in his eyes, which were trained on Renya's katana.

"What a pain..." muttered Renya.

Meanwhile, the demon tried to pick up his severed arm. Before he could reach it, Renya sent another round of twenty quickcast firebolts at the limb. Despite the low-level spell, it was enough for the arm to burst into flames and turn into a charred black mess.

“How rude. That was my arm, you know?” complained the demon. He did not look particularly miffed.

“I’d rather not have you stick it back onto yourself.”

He had meant it as a joke, but the demon seemed to take it at face value.

“Oh? Perceptive, aren’t you? Now that it’s been burned, though, I suppose I’ll have to grow another one.”

Before the thought, *What the hell is this guy talking about?* even flashed in his mind, the demon flexed the stump at his shoulder. It stopped bleeding. Then, a bump formed on the severed plane that quickly lengthened and grew before his very eyes. Soon, the demon’s arm was good as new. After testing the regenerated limb by swinging it around, the demon smiled.

“Looks good.”

The regrown arm, though a little fainter in hue, was a carbon copy of the scorched original in appearance. Function-wise, it was probably the same as well.

“Geez, what are you? A flatworm? Or some sort of lizard?” groaned Renya, unwilling to believe what he just witnessed. Was this some sort of cruel joke? An opponent who could regenerate lost limbs at a moment’s notice was undoubtedly a swordsman’s worst nightmare. The demon’s stamina probably took a hit from the blood loss, but the fight definitely would have been easier if he only had one arm. This meant that dismemberment was meaningless; only a lethal strike would finish the job.

Renya considered his next move as he sheathed his katana. A halfhearted strike was not going to do.

“Actually, no. That’d be an insult to lizards,” he said, hoping the taunt stung the demon. The less composed his opponent was, the more likely his next attack would work. Conversely, if too much blood got to the man’s head and he

turned into a raging monster, that would lower the chance of success. He needed the demon just angry enough to tunnel-vision.

A flick of his hand undid the clutch on his belt and released the sheath. Turning so that his right side faced the demon, Renya lowered his stance a little. With the sheath in his left hand and the hilt in his right, he turned his body leftward as if winding up for a swing.

“This time, I’ll cut you down permanently... so stay where you are.”

At his last word, he kicked the ground with his left leg. Charging forward with his posture fixed, he was ready to draw at any second. The demon made no attempt to run. Presumably, he judged Renya’s attacks to be dodgeable based on their previous exchange.

Renya agreed. With his current speed, a normal slash was guaranteed to miss. What he needed, then, was a slash that wasn’t normal. He took a large step forward with his right foot and drew in his left. Usually, his left foot would then kick the ground again to close the gap.

This time, however, he took the momentum of drawing in his left foot and put it directly into a kick. Of course, he was not yet within range. The demon watched, perplexed, as he threw out an empty kick. Then, from the demon’s perspective, Renya’s form disappeared behind the piece of paper he’d used to wipe his blade which had been sitting on the ground moments before.

“A feint? You impertinent whelp!” roared the demon as he flicked the twirling paper aside with his right arm.

Even if he lost sight of Renya for a split second, he should still have been perfectly able to dodge an attack like the one before. What came from beyond the paper, however, was not an attack like the one before. As the paper cleared from his vision, he discovered Renya standing with his back to him. Baffled by Renya’s defenseless state, the demon was again a beat too late in his reaction.

After kicking up the paper with his left leg, Renya had rotated 180 degrees around his right leg to put his back to the demon. The move simultaneously surprised his opponent and led into his next attack. Leaping off his right leg, he backed into the demon and jammed the sheath in his left hand into the demon’s gut. No matter the species, so long as the demon was a living creature

who drew breath, he would be winded by a sudden blow to the gut. A winded target was an unmoving target. Renya had his opening.

The dull impact he felt with his left hand told him the sheath had hit home. He spun around and drew his blade. It ripped into the demon from his right shoulder and exited through his left hip. The momentum built up from the sheath strike and the spin was concentrated into a single slash that parted the demon in two, cutting through clothes, meat, muscle, and bone. Half a body — head and left arm still attached — plopped onto the ground. Ignoring the remainder of the demon's body, which was violently discharging blood, he approached the half that had the head attached, and immediately made it headless. Finally, he drove his katana into the decapitated head between its raised brows. It still wore a bewildered expression. Only after confirming that every last body part had ceased moving did Renya allow the air in his lungs to escape through his lips.

Chapter 5: Something Something Ill Weeds, Something Something Grow Apace, or So It Was Told

I really want to sit down for a bit.

Resisting the urge to drop onto the ground right then and there, Renya looked over to see how Shion and the others were doing against the humanoid forms.

Shion had managed to cut down two, Azu had roasted two more, and the last one's head was gone, having exploded when Rona drove her mace into it with a full-body swing. Eradication was complete. He was relieved to find that his friends were fine. With that said, he'd be very worried if they actually had trouble against what were effectively a bunch of walking mannequins.

"Renya, looks like you're done too, huh... You sure do have a weird way of using that sword, though," said Shion as she approached him, her eyes brimming with curiosity. Apparently, she had been watching during a part of his fight, and found herself intrigued by his techniques of striking with the sheath and purposefully showing his back to his opponent in the heat of battle. While he was ostensibly leaving himself open, his pivots were also generating momentum for his next attack. It was a style of fighting that Shion and the others had never heard of.

"Yeah, I'd give you some lessons if we weren't pressed for time right now."

"Hm?"

"You do remember that there are a bunch of monsters trying to gobble up Azu's party members in the other room, right? We need to get out of here and go help them, pronto..."

"Oh, right. Of course."

Her cheeks colored slightly. Presumably, she had been so focused on the battle that she forgot about the preceding events. With quick steps, she made her way over to the entrance of the room. Despite the fact that the demon had been defeated, the door remained shut. She hit it with her fist and was

rewarded with nothing more than a dull thud. Then, she tried swinging her sword at it. There was a shrill, grating sound. She looked at Renya with watery eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re numb...”

Her hands had gone numb from the impact of slamming her sword into a stiff object. The sword itself fared worse, having lost a chunk of its tip, and was rendered unusable as a weapon.

“I’ll try. Get back,” said Azu as he moved Shion out of the way and began an incantation. “By my power, I summon thee. Missiles of mana, strike!”

Employing a two-fold simulcast, Azu sent two mana missiles at the locked door, only to have them lamely dissipate upon touching its surface. The sight made Azu furrow his brows and glare at the resilient obstacle.

“This door has been imbued with magecraft. And it’s still alive.”

“You mean this,” Renya said as he pointed at the cusp of his katana where the demon’s head was still stuck, “is still alive?”

Azu shook his head.

“No, there’s no way it’s still alive in a state like that.”

“Then whose magecraft is it?”

“I don’t know. But, at this rate... Damn it!”

Azu gave the door a frustrated kick. He probably realized how ill-matched his friends were against the monsters that attacked them. His distress was, therefore, understandable, but a door that shrugged off a full-body swing of Shion’s sword was not going to budge because a mage kicked it.

“Renya, can’t you do something with that blade of yours?! Cut it open, maybe?!” asked Azu, pointing a finger at the door. His voice carried the strain of someone desperately trying to suppress their panic.

Renya wasn’t sure how to answer. A visual inspection told him nothing about what the door was made of. A certain frame of mind was necessary when

cutting something, and it varied depending on the target. Parting flesh required a different technique than parting wood. There was a limit to what a blade could slice through with a haphazard swing. In addition, if the door was made of metal, it would be far too thick to cut through. If Renya had been thoroughly informed about the properties of his katana, he would have known that it could chew through even a gate of reinforced steel. He wasn't thoroughly informed, though, and no one was currently capable of making him so.

"Um... Renya?" said Rona, who had been standing behind them during their repeated attempts to abuse the door.

"Rona? What? We're in a bit of a fix right now."

"Well, make that two fixes, then."

He spun around. Something about the way she said it compelled him to do so.

"What's wrong?"

"The bodies... are gone."

Renya looked around. She was right. Altogether, there should have been eleven bodies, plus the two halves of the demon's corpse.

Instead, there was nothing. They had all disappeared.

Something occurred to him. He quickly glanced at the tip of his blade. The demon's head was still there.

Okay, so the whole thing where I took down that demon wasn't a dream.

"What... in the world is going on?" said Rona.

"Everyone! Heads up! Something's wrong!"

Renya didn't even confirm that everyone obeyed his order before starting to carefully scan his surroundings, intensely scrutinizing every detail. Maimed and charred as they were, the corpses of what were once Zest's and Harz's parties should have been lying on the ground. Pieces of the demon's body should also have been present. The fact that they weren't meant someone or something — in this very room, nonetheless — got rid of them without being seen by Renya or any of his three friends.

The ground looked the same as before. The ebony desk still sat abandoned in the same place. Stiffened by some sort of coating, the earthen walls looked cold and hard.

“Wait, earthen walls?”

A discrepancy leapt out at him: why could he see earth on the walls? When they came into the room, the walls were white. Right now, he was staring at the same exposed earth on the walls as the ones in the passage that led here.

“What about the wall—”

Azu never got to finish his sentence. He went flying away from the door and crashed into the ebony desk, shattering it. He continued to tumble along the ground until finally coming to a stop against the far wall. A shocked Shion barely managed to get her wits about her and turn around before she was sent flying in a similar fashion and smashing into a wall. Her longsword, having been used to blunt the impact, snapped in two. Moments after, the hilt clanked onto the ground from her limp hand.

“Shion?!” cried Rona as she made to rush to her friend’s side.

Renya tried to stop her, but it was too late. Something that resembled a whip wrapped itself around Rona’s leg as she was about to run and dragged her down. Then, it picked her up and hurled her toward the wall. As she was thrown, he heard a sickening snap from her ensnared leg. She hurtled through the air, unable to even brace herself before colliding back-first with the wall at a breakneck speed.

In the blink of an eye, three people were out of commission. Renya had barely even moved. He turned toward the figure standing in front of the door to the room and narrowed his eyes.

“Hey... Didn’t I chop you up already?”

“I do believe so, indeed. A real good slicing and dicing you gave me,” came the lighthearted answer.

The one who had just slammed three people into the wall grinned at Renya, his hands held behind his back. Deep brown skin. Light purple hair. Slightly pointy ears. Almond-shaped pupils. A lab coat draped casually over his

shoulders. It was him: the demon whom Renya had supposedly just sliced to death moments before.

Without losing sight of the demon, Renya glanced at the cusp of his katana. The demon's head was still there, but it blanched and melted like butter before his very eyes. It dripped down onto the ground, collecting in a pulpy mess that flowed toward the demon's foot. When it touched the tip, it disappeared, assimilating itself into his body.

"What the hell are you... A slime or something?" spat Renya, mentioning the first thing that came to mind. It drew a sigh from the demon.

"Just what would make you assume I'm one of those lowly mucous creatures?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because you're literally acting like one of them?"

"Well, I suppose that's one way to look at it," laughed the demon, who seemed terrifically amused as he glanced at Renya's now-nogginless katana.

While keeping his guard up at the chuckling man, Renya took a look at his three friends lying at the foot of the wall. None of them were moving. He hoped they were only unconscious.

"I didn't expect that white stuff on the wall to be your actual body."

"Technically, I also covered the ceiling. The point is, what you fought was simply a sliver of my whole self."

If he was telling the truth, that would imply he was also the one who had been lighting up the room. Renya couldn't help but entertain the rather out-of-place thought that this demon was a real stickler for efficiency, getting a replicant of himself to do the actual work while he himself handled the room's interior design.

"So, all this time, we've been playing into your hands. Or in this case, into you literally, I guess. Man, that's gross. Are all demons like that?" asked Renya, keeping the banter going as he considered his next move. If what he just defeated was only a portion of the man, the main body should be much stronger, which was attested by the fact that he was entirely unable to see what had hit Azu and Shion. On top of that, Renya had already shown his hand

with his surprise attack, so those techniques were off the table, too. He needed a plan of action, and he couldn't think of one.

"Were we all like this, the remaining races on this continent would be extinct by now."

"What the hell are you supposed to be, then?"

"Emil Raja, demon researcher. Pleased to make your acquaintance, short-lived though it's sure to be."

Renya gleaned two pieces of information from the demon's self-introduction. One, he confirmed that demons did, in fact, have names. Stating the obvious, perhaps, but it was nice to know. Two, the demon in question seemed to have no intention of letting any of them leave alive.

"My field of study is known as bioengineering. I research how to fuse one thing with another to create a more powerful organism."

Highly doubtful that actual biotechnology existed in this world, Renya figured the demon was referring to a branch of some form of academic study like magecraft or alchemy. Whatever the academic study, though, one thing was for certain.

"Can't say I think very highly of you or your field, considering it's an offense to all living things."

Emil was doubtlessly referring to techniques that involved toying with the very existence of his subjects without their consent and turning them into different beings altogether. It was biological, and it was engineering in a sense, but it definitely wasn't the bioengineering he was familiar with.

"A difference of perspectives, then. The way I see it, my research is a noble pursuit in which I elevate life to higher and higher stages—"

"Then use yourself as a test subject first," hissed Renya.

"What are you talking about?" asked Emil in return, as though he couldn't understand Renya's question.

Renya's eyes widened a little. The implications of Emil's bafflement occurred to him, and he paled visibly.

“Of course I’d use myself as a test subject,” answered Emil, not disturbed in the slightest by what he was saying. Every other researcher in the world would probably fervently disagree with his opinion, but he simply appeared perplexed as to why he needed to state the obvious. “My body has been constructed using flexible cells that can greatly change their morphology. It’s one of the fruits of my research.”

“...I was expecting you to have a few screws loose, but man. I guess it wasn’t just a few.”

“Research. It’s all about the research. So long as it’s necessary, we’ll use whatever we need, whether it’s ourselves or others. That’s what it means to be a researcher, no?” asked Emil as his arms stretched themselves out and touched the ground. Long, thin, and whip-like, they were clearly the tentacles that had knocked Shion and Azu into the wall and hurled Rona through the air.

“You said something about this dungeon being your fishing hole and that you made it, right?” If the talking stopped, the battle would begin. Since Renya had yet to figure out a plan of action, a battle would be overwhelmingly in the demon’s favor. He racked his brains for ways to keep the conversation going while he continued to observe Emil. “That means this dungeon has no core, then?”

“Correct. You could, in a way, say I’m the core.”

Emil flicked his right arm lightly. Its supple end disappeared from view. At the same time, an impact to Renya’s left shoulder caused him to stagger, tearing his shirt and causing a welt to form on his skin. His muscle and bone, however, remained unharmed.

“Tell me now. Could you see it? You couldn’t see it, could you?” asked a positively jubilant Emil. He laughed, and then continued, “Now, then. Have you said your prayers? Though it was a replicant, you killed something that took my form. Expect suffering — much suffering indeed — before I turn you all into specimens for my research.”

Renya was of the opinion that a whipping was very much unappealing to watch when it was a man on the receiving end. He would have voiced this opinion, too, had he been in less dire straits. At the moment, he kept his mouth

shut and braced himself with his blade in hand.

“All right... Ready? Here I come,” whispered the demon, his eyes narrowing like those of a predator marking prey. As soon as he spoke, the room’s lights went out.

Everything went black. All of a sudden, Renya couldn’t even see the tip of his nose. He did not panic. Instead, he curled his tongue. A loud click echoed in the darkness. His katana flashed. It grazed something; he felt it through the hilt. By the time his mind registered the sensation, his body was already in motion, withdrawing the blade and quickly stepping away. Moments later, there was a crack — the sound of a whip hitting the ground. He slashed in the direction of the noise. Score again; he felt a slight resistance at the cusp of his blade.

“Hm, I find it quite hard to believe, but... tell me now. Do you actually see me?”

Renya spun toward the direction of the voice and thrust out his blade, but the third time was not the charm; it caught nothing but empty air. While constantly changing his position through small, zigzagging steps, he answered into the darkness.

“You do realize human eyeballs need light to function, right? Do you see any light around here?”

“Well, for someone who is allegedly blind...”

Renya leaned away a little. Something whisked through the space in front of him, missing him by a hair. Before it could be retracted, he swung his katana upwards in a scooping motion. This time, the blade’s bite was firmer, and there was a small groan of pain. It was, however, little reason to rejoice; he figured it had done as much damage as nicking someone’s little finger.

“Your attacks — counterattacks, rather — are vexingly accurate.”

“Luck must be on my side, then. Maybe it’s because I’ve been a good boy all this time, and you look like you’ve been a very very bad one.”

The demon probably assumed there was no possible way for Renya to see him. As a result, his attacks were linear and predictable.

Renya, for his part, continued to dodge attacks he shouldn't be able to see. Each step he took made an audible tap. At times, he clicked his tongue.

"Ah. I see," Emil whispered after a few cycles of striking and dodging. "The sound."

This time, the noise that Renya made with his tongue was closer to a tsk than a click. He made a sharp lunge in the direction of the voice and swung. His blade touched nothing. Realizing he had missed once more, he quickly turned around. At the same time, the ceiling began to emit its soft light again, and his vision returned. Directly in front of him stood Emil, whose expression was brimming with curiosity. Small, shallow cuts dotted his body.

"The sound of your tongue clicks. And your footsteps. You used their echoes to examine your environment. I must say, that's a most intriguing technique you employed."

"I see the whole 'researcher' bit wasn't all talk, huh? You figured out my trick pretty quickly."

Renya spoke in a bitter tone, but he had expected the demon to see through what he was doing. What he hadn't expected was how little time the demon took.

"If you're able to react like that in the darkness, then there's not much point to hampering your vision."

"So, that's why you turned the lights back on?"

"It makes for easier observation."

A slit appeared in each of Emil's tentacle arms, growing outwards until they both split into two. He wriggled what were now effectively four tentacles and laughed gleefully.

"In the next experiment, we shall test your reaction speed. Come on, keep up now. Let's see how fast you can go."

White whips shot toward Renya. Unlike those employed by human hands, these required no windup, which made them feel unusually fast. He swiped them aside with his blade. If anything, Emil was the one hurting after these

exchanges; it was his fleshy tentacles against Renya's very metal, very sharp blade. Despite his increasing number of wounds, however, Emil showed no signs of letting up on his attacks. One after another, his four whips kept up a relentless series of attacks that kept Renya firmly on the defensive.

Nevertheless, Renya slowly edged toward Emil. The flurry of attacks raining down on him grew more intense with each step forward, but he had no choice but to keep pressing on until he was at least close enough to strike back. Emil, clearly aware of his intentions, matched each of his steps forward with a step back.

Unable to close the gap, Renya grit his teeth and kept a cool head. He was well aware that there was a world of pain waiting for him if he let frustration get the better of him and rushed ahead.

"Truly remarkable. It seems that so long as you have access to your sight, you're quite capable of brushing off attacks of this level," said Emil before chuckling. "How curious, then, for me to have landed that first hit on you."

"You talk too much. Quit yapping and let me cut you already."

Despite his best efforts to keep his composure, Renya found himself growing hasty. The four guys brawling against those meat chunks in the next room was cause enough for concern, but he also had three downed friends in the current room whose condition worried him to no end.

The way Azu was sent flying, in particular, looked pretty brutal. Rona, too, almost certainly had her leg broken after being thrown by it. Even Shion, who had at least managed to get her sword in the way, was hit by an attack that snapped the thing in half. He badly wanted to get them some medical attention as soon as possible, but it would take them a day by wagon to reach a town with a doctor. And that was assuming he managed to get them out of this dungeon right away.

The realization that he was running out of time further stressed his already-frayed nerves. As he continued to defend himself, grinding his teeth harder after warding off each lash, he desperately told himself to calm down. Though his eyes were gradually becoming used to following the motion of the attacks, a single missed parry would leave him down for the count. If he was down for the

count, then their whole party would be incapacitated, and if the whole party was incapacitated — a party wipe — then no help could come. The only thing left to do after that would be to hope they were blessed with a quick death.

“Full points for endurance, as well. The ability to continue fending off attacks of this speed is an extraordinary display of stamina.”

Renya remained silent, lacking the spare focus to venture a response. Seeing that his comment fell on deaf ears, Emil grinned widely as though he just thought of something terribly amusing.

“Here’s a thought. Tell me now. What would happen if, in your current state,” he quipped at a wordless Renya, “you were to go blind again?”

His four tentacles that had been striking Renya one after another suddenly lined up and lashed out in sync. At the same time, he snuffed out the lights.

“—Huh?”

Renya deftly slipped past the four-pronged attack and dashed up, hoisting his katana high.

Emil watched, dumbfounded, as the blade’s sharp edge came swinging down at his head. Even so, his survival instincts kicked in and he reflexively twisted his body to evade. He barely dodged the strike, but the blade still bit into his left collar, severing his entire left arm clean at the shoulder, before snapping back and tearing a shallow gash through his abdomen.



The demon did not scream, possibly due to some kind of blockade of his pain sensation. In order to avoid any further attacks, Emil wildly swung his right tentacle at Renya while rolling away to safety. Renya tried to give chase, but was forced to leap back to avoid the long appendage's furious thrashing.

"What... is the meaning of this..." panted Emil. He stared at the ceiling as dark-red blood spilled from his dismembered left shoulder. The lights that he supposedly snuffed out remained as bright as ever, illuminating their surroundings. The sight of the still-visible room had given him the slightest of pauses, but that brief opening allowed Renya to deliver an absolutely devastating strike.

"I figured you'd look for a chance to put them out again," said Renya as he glanced at the tentacle on the ground. It was wriggling like a severed lizard tail. He kicked the appendage into the air, where it was battered by a rather excessive number of quickcast Firebolts and turned into crisp demon bacon. Then, he turned to look at Emil, who was pushing himself up with his right tentacle, and said, "So I threw my own up there over yours. Real handy technique, this quickcast thing."

The smile had vanished from Emil's face. His eyes were wide with shock. Renya wasn't sure why the demon looked so astonished, but before he had a chance to ponder, Emil spoke.

"Who are you? No... *What* are you?"

"I'm a regular person, thank you very much. Well, technically, a Wanderer. Renya Kunugi, average everyday adventurer. Pleased to make your acquaintance, short-lived though it'll probably be."

After returning the favor with his witty retort, Renya rushed forward with his blade brandished. This time, Emil was forced to go on the defensive. Though the demon did not seem to feel the pain of losing his left arm, his breaths were definitely coming in shorter, harder gasps.

"Unbelievable. Tell me now. How is it that I, a demon, am running out of breath first?"

"Don't ask me. You're the researcher here. Go do some researching."

The ever-dulling movements of Emil's remaining tentacle failed to guard against Renya's attacks. After chopping off the tentacle's tip, Renya began to weave his slashes through the disabled appendage. Gash after gash appeared on the demon's body. Eventually, his right arm went flying as well, entirely separated from his shoulder.

An exhausted Emil toppled backwards and landed on his rear. Renya raised his blade, preparing to deliver the finishing blow. Just as he began his downward swing, the demon spoke again.

"Let me cut you a deal," he said. His expression was serious; his tone, devoid of his usual flippancy.

Renya let the demon speak. Then, he resumed his downward swing. He was not interested in a deal. Rather, he thought he wasn't, but the demon's next words forced him to reconsider.

"Those three friends of yours... You do realize that at this rate, a few of them are heading straight for the morgue?"

"What?" Renya's katana paused mid-swing.

"Say what you want about demons, but I'll remind you that I'm a researcher, and my research concerns the study of life. I'm versed in the practice of medicine as well. I'm well aware of the graveness of their injuries. After all, I caused them."

Renya did not speak, but his gaze commanded the demon to keep talking. The armless Emil sat up, crossed his legs, and lifted his head to look up at Renya.

"The girl with the sword... the one who seemed a bit dense, she'll be fine. The problem is the other two, that dour-looking mage and the lewd missus with those great honking—"

"You might want to rephrase that," cautioned Renya. In the back of his mind, though, he wondered why the demon was so dead-on with his depictions. Was it that obvious? At the same time, he couldn't help but feel a bit of pity toward Rona, who was described by even a demon to be "lewd."

"I apologize if you took offense. The point stands, though. The mage and the missus are in bad shape. If you don't get them to a doctor soon, you might as

well get them a pair of coffins. Even if they survive, they'll be heavily crippled for life."

"So? What are you trying to say?"

"What I'm trying to say... is that there's a doctor right here."

The lack of arms limited his ability to gesture, but the context of his words seemed to suggest that he was referring to himself. Renya scoffed at the demon.

"All right. Let's pretend you are a doctor for now. What do you intend on doing, then, with those zero arms of yours?"

"Wait a while and they'll regrow. Let me go, and I'll treat those two."

Being obtuse in the ways of this world, Renya had no idea whether there would be any consequences in letting the demon go. It was quite possible that the act would be similar to knowingly allowing a criminal to escape in his previous world. Ethics aside, however, the fact that his two severely-injured friends would receive medical attention made it an undeniably appealing proposal.

"I can't trust you."

Appealing though the proposal was, he couldn't blindly trust Emil when they had literally been at each other's throats mere moments before. He thrust his blade at the seated demon as he spoke, hiding the rising tide of doubt inside.

Emil's words were convincing. Even a complete medical amateur like him could tell that Azu and Rona were likely in critical condition. The former took the full impact of a hit head-on, and the latter was completely unprepared when she was slammed into a wall. He was worried about Shion as well, but seeing that she had managed to put up some sort of defense, he could believe that her life wasn't in danger. He could put Azu and Rona, both of whom were in dangerous condition, onto the wagon and make a mad dash for the city. It would take him a day. In the end, though, would they be saved? He wasn't sure. And he had no way to be.



“Remember now. I said I’m cutting you a deal. While I cannot speak for other demons, I am first and foremost a researcher; research is my absolute priority. Allow me to submit, though, that when it comes to other matters, I endeavor to be reasonably trustworthy. In fact, I’ll also free the four in the other room from their struggle,” Emil said before adding with a chuckle, “After all, I can’t experiment on them if they’re dead.”

“Then they’re still alive?” confirmed Renya. He wasn’t interested in having four lifeless bodies returned to him.

“Yes.” Emil nodded. “I guarantee you they are.”

“...You know, it’s at this point that I can’t help but recall that there were eleven other lives you—”

“Were those lives important to you?”

Good question. Upsettingly good, almost. There was a period of silence before Renya spoke again.

“I don’t see the need to answer that.”

“Fair enough. Well then, what shall it be?”

Two fresh arms slithered quickly out of Emil’s severed stumps. Renya tensed warily, but the demon simply shook his hands at him.

“These are just regular arms. The weaponized ones take longer to regrow.”

“...What’s the probability that both of them will recover?”

“Right now? One hundred percent. If you leave them to me, I promise to patch them up so they’re good as new. How about it?” asked Emil. The katana that was pointed at his forehead slowly retracted. Seeing that Renya had returned his blade to its sheath, Emil pushed himself up with a lively grunt of effort. He met no resistance from Renya.

“Shall I take this as confirmation that a deal has been made?”

“I’ve got a creeping feeling I’ll come to regret this someday, though. Anyway, once you finish treating them, I expect you to make yourself scarce, got it? My explanation to my friends is going to be that you managed to get away at the

last minute.”

“I’ll make sure you won’t come to regret it. You have my word,” Emil said as he gave his chest a quick thump. His smile had returned, every bit as tenacious as before. “And I’m one to keep my word, if I do say so myself.”

Renya tilted his head back and sighed at the unseeable sky, wondering just how much trust he could place on a demon’s word.

The ceramic container was still sitting on the counter at the inn. Renya picked it up, his expression clouded with worry. *Did it work?* Slowly, he removed the lid.

Bubbles greeted him, popping one after another along the surface of the liquid. A fruity aroma filled his nose, mildly tinged with the scent of alcohol. A smile spread across his lips.

Looks like it did.

This was, for most intents and purposes, a smashing success.

Had he been assaulted by a sharp stinging odor, it would have implied failure — that the contents of the container were overwhelmed by the bacterial onslaught. A few more whiffs of the gaseous emissions, however, convinced him that his worry was misplaced.

Though it seemed a waste, Renya discarded the meat of the fruits. They had done their duty; the remaining liquid was what mattered. Once he strained it through a clean cloth, he would have what he was after: yeast water. This was to be mixed with wheat flour at room temperature, followed by letting it sit in a cool, dark place. Yet more yeast water and wheat flour would then be added, and the whole process would be repeated three times. At the end of all this, he would finally acquire that sublime prize he so desperately craved: bread starter. This meant a world of difference when baking bread. Mixing bread starter into the dough would not only impart to the final product a soft fluffiness to its texture, but also embellish its aroma with a hint of its fruity origins.

Sure, what passed for bread here had its advantages, but Renya didn’t care. He didn’t care that it kept well for long periods of time. He didn’t care that it

was cheap. He simply *refused* to take another bite of that stiff, crusty garbage. Bread had to be soft and the tiniest bit sweet. Otherwise, it just wasn't bread.

Of course, ingredients alone did not good bread make; he still needed to secure a location where he could actually bake the thing. He figured, however, that that was a problem he could solve by throwing money at it. As he idly pondered such thoughts, his mind drifted to the unreasonably exhausting events of the past two or three days, and he lost himself in his memories.

"In any case, hold on to this for now," said Emil after handing Renya a clear-red stone the size of a chicken egg.

The two of them had moved Azu and Rona away from the dungeon walls and laid them out on the ground. The demon had then proceeded to examine their still-unconscious bodies before initiating his treatment, which involved potions, spells, and some sort of chiropractic manipulation that produced a whole lot noises one should probably never hear from a human body. At the end of it all, he had produced the stone.

When they were first set down on the ground, both Azu and Rona were bleeding in various places and their faces were pale. After the treatment, color returned to their faces and their breathing calmed. Considering the terribly unnerving noises Renya had just heard, the fact that they were lying there so peacefully now was jarring — so much so that he seriously questioned whether Emil had done something weird. Emil, for his part, vehemently denied Renya's accusation.

Shion, who had been laid on the ground alongside the other two, also remained unconscious. Her wounds, however, consisted of only some bruising. After a simple examination by Emil, she was doused from head to toe with potions and left alone. It seemed to Renya that even if her injuries were healed, she would end up catching a cold like that, but he decided to leave her be. Emil said she would be fine, after all, and he was the medically-versed one among them, albeit self-proclaimed. Plus, catching a cold as the worst-case scenario wasn't that bad. She could just put up with it.

"What's this?" asked Renya, holding the stone in his palm.

“A manastone. Hefty, isn’t it? You’d need one of this size at the very least to claim it was a dungeon core,” replied Emil. He poked the manastone with his finger. That was all it took for a crack to shoot through the stone from where he touched it and split it in two.

“There you go. One fake dungeon core, ready for use.”

“Can people tell it’s fake if they take a good look?”

Renya held the manastone in front of his eyes and stared at it. It was in two halves, but they were still two very big halves. He could certainly sell it for good sum of money, but he knew nothing about the differences between dungeon cores and manastones, and he didn’t want anybody calling him out after taking a look and realizing it wasn’t a core.

“Not a chance. Besides, you’re showing it to humans; they don’t even know what to look for.”

“You think?”

“I do indeed. After all, humans aren’t even aware that dungeon cores are ‘intelligent’ objects.”

“They’re what?”

More terms that Renya had never heard before. He almost consulted the Help Function again, but decided that now was probably not the time.

“It gets complicated, so I’ll spare you the details for now. We’ll discuss it next time. You’ve got three bodies to lug out of here and four more in the next room. I’d recommend getting that done quickly. Here, I’ll even help you.”

The four who were attacked by rust monsters had almost all of their armor destroyed by rust. They also lost quite a lot of blood, but were not in any danger of dying. When they were rescued, they were merely unconscious. Being swallowed by sentient chunks of meat, however, was not without its consequences; on top of suffering multiple bone fractures, various parts of their bodies were missing. Emil treated the fractures but threw his hands up when it came to the second issue, claiming he couldn’t heal what wasn’t there.

“This is, of course, my fault.... Does the sight of this, perhaps, affect your

willingness to let me go?”

“No. They’re still alive. You kept your end of the bargain, so I’ll keep mine.”

Being adventurers, they should have already considered the fact that they would be risking life and, in this case, limb. Emil gave him a shrugging look that said, “If you say so,” and hoisted two bodies, carrying one with each arm. The fact that each of the demon’s arms could hold the weight of a human adult served as a stark reminder of the difference in capabilities between the two races.

“I’ll carry the men, so you can handle the ladies, all right?”

“What, you have something against ladies?”

“Human females are a pain, after all. Besides...” Emil grinned. “Isn’t this your chance to grope to your heart’s content?”

“What’s the point? They don’t move. It’d be like playing with puppets.”

The demon looked at Renya in surprise, not expecting to be met with disinterest. Soon, though, he smirked.

“A shame. And such beauties, too. It won’t hurt you to enjoy yourself a little, you know?”

“If you’ve got the time to be flapping your trap, then start carrying them out already,” snapped Renya as he gave Emil a kick to the rear. It was both to hurry him up and shut him up. Otherwise, the demon seemed liable to make even more preposterous remarks.

Renya proceeded to pick up the two girls and carry them to the wagon, all the while insisting to no one in particular that his choice of carrying technique — princess-style — was definitely not influenced by any prior suggestions. Outside, he was subject to another round of teasing by Emil, who had already hauled Azu and his four guards onto the wagon. He answered back with a full-power roundhouse kick to the demon’s head. Emil, however, was entirely unfazed.

“For the record, I’m quite grateful to you, you know? You’re a... lifesaver to me, I suppose? Excuse me if the term is inaccurate. I’m no linguist, so the

nuances of such terms are lost on me.”

There were too many people for a single wagon, so they chained multiple ones together and modified them to be pulled by two horses. Once they had everyone loaded, they let Zest’s and Harz’s horses go free. Finally, after they burned all the unusable luggage, Emil turned to Renya with a serious expression.

“It’s common sense amongst demons that when there’s a serious conflict between two sides, only one walks away breathing. That’s why, being the one who started this, I’m lucky to be alive. I owe you a debt for letting me go, and it is a debt I shall not forget.”

Renya was under the impression that letting Emil go was part of the deal they made, so he was not expecting to receive any gratitude from the demon. With that said, if Emil insisted on feeling indebted, he certainly wasn’t going to go out of his way to change Emil’s mind. There was, however, something he wanted Emil to change his mind on. Hope was slim, but he had to try.

“It’s fine. I don’t care about that. What I do care about, though, is that you stop doing human experiments.”

“That is an impossible request.”

The response came immediately. He knew it would, but that didn’t stop him from letting out a deep sigh.

“Then cut back a little, would you?”

“That is impossible as well. Allow me to give you this, though,” Emil said as he handed Renya a small metal rod. It had a pointed end that was not sharp, but rounded, resembling that of a ballpoint pen. Touching it revealed no further insight as to what it was made out of, so Renya used Appraisal.

《**Notification: Marking Pen**》

“...What is this?”

“Could you try using that to write a symbol on your palm for me? A symbol I’ll be able to recognize in the future, please.”

Renya did as he was told, writing the character for “Ren” in his native

language on his left palm. Nothing happened. It didn't even make a mark on his hand. Did the demon just pull a fast one on him? He shot a suspicious glare at Emil, who, with the expression of one who was genuinely hurt by the visual accusation, walked over and touched his left hand. Immediately, the character "Ren" appeared on his palm, glowing purple.

"Behold, the power of the mana craft — marking pen. By writing this character on someone's body, I'll be able to tell that they're your acquaintance. Pick some place that's easy to see. So long as they are marked, I promise to keep my hands off them."

"Huh. So if I go around scribbling this on everyone..."

"You can only mark up to four people per day. I'd advise you to be a tad more selective."

Renya scowled. Clearly, Emil saw his idea coming from a mile away.

"I'm not being spiteful, by the way. That's how the mana craft works, so don't blame me."

"Let's just say that's the case for now... I'll hold on to it, then."

He stowed the pen in his inventory, figuring it was a matter of perspective; this way, he could at least save four people a day. Four was better than nothing. It did seem like the kind of thing he'd put away and forget about, though, so he first drew his mark on Shion, Rona, and Azu. Conveniently, all three were still unconscious.

"Now then. I shall be returning to my beloved homeland in the demon territories. I look forward to our next reunion, my dear Renya."

"I sure don't. I don't feel like I can win the rematch. Make sure you plug up the dungeon before you go, okay?"

Renya was of the opinion that his victory hinged on Emil not making full use of the capabilities of his body from the start. Little by little, the demon had tried one thing after another while observing Renya's responses, but the progressive approach resulted in him making a mistake that cost him the fight. He did, after all, hit Renya's left shoulder with his tentacle. At the time, dodging was an impossible task for Renya, whose eyes couldn't follow the attacks yet. Had Emil

begun the fight swinging both arms as hard as he could, aiming for a vital spot, chances were that Renya would not be standing right now. Maybe that was what separated a researcher from an occupational fighter.

“Perhaps you won’t. But either way, while we may cross paths again, we won’t be crossing swords. You’re a most intriguing individual, and the fact that you’re a Wanderer has piqued my interest.”

“Please no. That sounds like such a nuisance...”

“Does it now? Allow me to remind you that maintaining a good relationship with me comes with many perks, my dear Renya.”

Afterwards, the two of them went their separate ways, and Renya drove the wagons back to town by himself with seven unconscious bodies in tow. During the journey, he found himself immensely thankful that he got a crash course from Shion on how to handle horse wagons.

It turned out to be a solitary trip, and his companions only began to wake up after he reached their destination. He was almost certain that Emil had a hand in the timing, but at the same time, he was almost equally certain that the demon didn’t do anything else to them. Also, the return of their consciousness was not accompanied by a simultaneous recovery of stamina, and the fatigue associated with blood loss and injuries yet remained. As a result, when he reached town, the first thing he did was ask the gate guard for directions to a skilled doctor. Then, he forcibly hospitalized all his companions.

Once he finished dealing with all the paperwork, he went to the guild and reported that both Zest’s and Harz’s parties were wiped out, and that the dungeon core was destroyed. Upon completing his report, he was abducted by Fritz and taken to another room.

“I trust you’ll fill me in as to what the hell happened out there.”

“It was a small dungeon, but there was a demon. He annihilated two parties. That’s all.”

“If what you say is true, then this is no laughing matter. We will need to verify your statement through the usage of the Judge grace. I assume we will have your full cooperation?”

“Sure, as long as you pay me. I’m not running a charity here.”

A priest who could use Judge was promptly summoned, and Renya’s questioning session began.

“Is it true that there was a demon in a dungeon so close to town?”

“It’s true.”

“And you say Harz and Zest were killed by that demon?”

“That is indeed what I say.”

“What happened to the demon?”

“We fought, but I didn’t finish him off. He escaped.”

According to the gracecraft, everything Renya said was true. This caused no small amount of commotion in the guild, which Renya discovered after he was released from his questioning. Scratching his head at what everyone was getting so worked up about, he grabbed one of the guild staff who was running around for some quick questioning. He learned that the appearance of a demon posed a significant risk to humans who lived nearby. If things went badly, it was entirely possible for a town or two to be wiped off the map. In other words, it was a pretty big deal.

As he idly gazed at the guild staff, who were gradually working themselves into a frenzy assembling new investigation teams and putting out missions to rearrange city defenses, he considered the value of the Judge grace. Or rather, the lack thereof; used improperly, it seemed entirely pointless.

When Harz and Zest were captured by Emil, they were in terrible shape, but still alive. The person who actually killed the two of them was probably one of the four people — Renya and his three friends — who fought the humanoid forms. He had a feeling that some of the bodies he had cut down bore a vague resemblance to the two, but it wasn’t like he went around memorizing the face of every head he sent flying. Had he claimed that Harz and Zest were killed by the demon, the gracecraft should have judged him to be lying. However, his answer was “That is indeed what I say,” which was judged to be true.

Renya wasn’t lying; he was just answering a slightly different question. After

all, regardless of who actually killed them, he definitely was *saying* the demon did. Not a single false word was uttered from his lips. As for his subsequent statement, technically, it should be “We fought, but as a result of the deal we struck, I didn’t finish him off. He escaped.” Again, it was a tad misleading owing to the neglecting of some extra information, but it wasn’t a lie.

In actuality, even if they had figured out he was lying, he had intended to claim that answering would put his life in danger and forcibly keep his silence, but his concerns proved to be comically unnecessary — so much so that it left him feeling almost a little upset. He did come away from the experience with a valuable lesson, though: if he was ever in a situation where Rona was using Judge, he was going to pay a whole lot of attention to the wording of each question.

All in all, the news of a demon appearing was probably so great a shock to the guild’s staff that they completely forgot to examine what he actually said.

As the guild descended ever further into chaos, Renya strolled through its halls in an extremely that’s-none-of-my-business manner. At the counter, he reported the mission’s completion, presented evidence of the dungeon core’s destruction, claimed the mission reward of 24 gold — four parties’ worth — along with 10 gold for the core’s destruction. The core was purchased from him for another 60 gold, and he was given 6 more gold in return for his assistance to the guild. Finally, he stepped out of the door and left the guild, a whole 100 gold richer than when he entered.

Epilogue: The Aftermath, or So It Was Told

“So, what are you guys going to do, Azu?” asked Renya as he replaced the lid on the ceramic container that held the bread starter he made. The mage in question sat beside him, reading a book.

They were in the inn where Renya was staying. It was early afternoon, and traffic was slow. Most of the tables were empty. Seated at the same table were Shion, Rona, and Azu. Azu, in particular, was a painful sight to behold, sitting weakly in his seat and leaning against the back for support. He had changed his gray robe to a new one, but much of the skin that showed at its fringes was wrapped in white bandages. The medicinal odor emanating from those bandages stung Renya’s nose, but he kept quiet; no point complaining about it to the injured.

In comparison, while Rona was also wearing her usual priest robe, she showed no signs of being bandaged, nor did she smell of drugs. She did, however, look very, very tired, and was currently hunched wearily over the table. Renya thought she should just go rest if she felt so exhausted, but there was probably some reason behind her insistence on being present.



According to the doctor in town who treated the two of them, the severity of their injuries was approximately on par. He had no idea which of them was actually in worse shape, but he did remember thinking that their conditions looked similar. What probably happened was that in the process of healing them, their dear demon researcher figured it was sufficient to simply keep them from dying and stopped both their treatments at about the same stage. After they woke up, Rona had used her own gracecraft to heal her wounds, while Azu opted to rub some prescription medications all over himself. This was the source of the discrepancy in their current conditions.

The graces commonly employed for restorative purposes worked by expending the user's stamina to heal wounds. For this reason, a heavy bout of healing came with an equally heavy toll in vitality, as evidenced by the profound fatigue that currently plagued Rona.

"What do you mean?"

Azu looked up from his book. Being entirely unconfident in his own stamina, he had declined Rona's offer to heal him through gracecraft and instead chose the slow and steady option. While he physically looked like a mess, his expression showed none of the bone-deep weariness exhibited by Rona. Whatever ointment he applied also seemed to numb the pain to some degree, so he turned out to be better off than Renya initially thought.

"Your party members quit adventuring altogether, didn't they?"

While they all returned with their lives fully intact, the same could not be said for their bodies. On top of that, after being swallowed whole by a massive chunk of meat, they had been thoroughly violated within its innards. Some took it harder than others, but none escaped unscathed; the experience left them all traumatized.

Deciding that their lives alone were reward enough, all four of Azu's guards had declared that they were retiring from the adventuring life and heading back to their hometown with their share of the bounty. Apparently, before they became adventurers, all of them were brought up on a farm in a village somewhere, and they intended to head back to the village and help out with the family business. Hearing that, Azu had taken his share of the mission reward

and given almost all of it to his four friends as thanks for everything they had done for him, mentioning with a laugh that while it didn't come out to much after being split among four people, it should at least give them a head start if they were starting a farming business.

"Yeah. My party has disbanded."

Azu did not sound particularly upset, but the three listeners' expressions clouded nonetheless. Everything he had done, he had done with that party; they had gone through thick and thin together. And now, they were gone. There was no way he felt nothing about it. The fact that it didn't show on his face was either a sign of resignation to reality — no point worrying over a situation if nothing could be done — or a thoughtful attempt to avoid troubling Renya and the two girls with his own issues.

"It might sound perfunctory, but do you want to come with us?"

Had Azu agreed, Renya would have tried his hardest to convince Shion and Rona.

"It's a generous offer, but..." said Azu with a wry smile before shaking his head.

"Did you receive an invitation from another party?"

"Actually, there is a place where I can find some work. I don't plan to quit adventuring, but I intend to stay there for a while."

"Oh, yeah? Where is it?"

"The school."

Azu explained that Kukrika was home to a school that trained adventurers, and they had offered him a temporary teaching position some time ago. He had originally declined, since he was focused on his work as an adventurer, but they kept the offer on the table so they could discuss it again when he had more time. Now that the opportunity had presented itself, he figured he would take them up on it. Reasonably competent mages with real combat experience rarely deign to serve as teachers, so the process of seeking prospective solicitees was a daily and ongoing endeavor for the school.

“A school for bringing up adventurers, huh... So, you’re going to teach them how to, like, what? Adventure?” asked Renya, his tone slightly incredulous. “Sounds like a pretty sketchy place to me.”

“Not quite. Just so you know, those unfortunate enough to be born in noble families with neither the right to be heir nor the prospect of marriage often become adventurers.”

According to Azu, as a rule, the two eldest sons stayed home. The first-born son succeeded the father as head of the family, and the second son served as both a counselor and a substitute in case the eldest son met an untimely end. The third son and onwards, however, were often seen as trouble by the first two due to their tendency to get tangled up in fights over succession if they stayed home, so they were often kicked out of the family once they reached a certain age. Some even chose to leave on their own. Among these forcibly-exiled progeny, those who were reasonably competent might, through their own hard work, find themselves a position in the government. Those who strove for more, or could only manage less, were then funneled into adventuring.

Daughters were usually married off into other families, but the exceptions often found themselves becoming adventurers. These exceptions included those whose personalities scared off all suitors, those whose features evoked the wrong kind of awe from onlookers, and those who simply refused to let their parents decide their marriage and ran away from home.

“With that said, the school also functions as a place of education for the older sons until they can succeed the family, so you’ll see some of them enrolled as well,” said Azu, adding a mention of the fact that the school also taught more traditional subjects. “You don’t want idiots becoming adventurers, after all. It doesn’t end well.”

“Dealing with a bunch of nobles, huh... I’m getting depressed just thinking about it.”

Renya quickly looked at Rona and waited a bit until she noticed his glance. At first, she seemed confused. Then, after a moment’s contemplation, she grudgingly shook her head. Apparently, the “female nobility who hated the

thought of their marriage became adventurers” bit didn’t apply to them.

In hindsight, though, his question was unnecessary. Shion was, on the outside at least, a beautiful young woman. Sure, she destroyed the illusion whenever she opened her mouth, what with her somewhat crude language and birdbrained tendencies, but that didn’t change the fact that she was still the daughter of a noble family. The number of requests asking for her hand in marriage must have been too numerous to count. Even if she managed to run away from her suitors, it was easy to imagine that there should have been — and still would be — tons of people hunting her down to bring her back.

“The fostering of young talent is an important job. It’ll probably be tough, but I’m rooting for you,” said Shion.

She was probably the least injured of the three. Renya had suspected as much based on the perfunctory treatment Emil had performed on her, and indeed, she was the first to be discharged by the doctor in town. A quick examination by Rona confirmed that no restorative gracecraft was needed. His concern about her catching a cold also proved to be unnecessary. She turned out to be one tough cookie. Although, whether said toughness spoke to her mettle as a swordsman — minimizing the damage of Emil’s strike through pure skill — or simply an unreasonably sturdy constitution, he could not say. She did, however, seem to feel ashamed to have been so powerless against the demon, and ever since returning to town, she had spent every day at the guild’s training area, swinging her sword until either mind or body gave out.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can help with. I’ll be happy to. As long as it’s within my capabilities, that is,” said Renya.

“I’ll gladly ask for your help when the time comes, then. Thanks. Come to think of it, though this job has left me none the richer, I’ve come away with a new friend. I’d say getting to know you is a reward in itself,” concluded Azu as he closed the book he was reading and placed it down on the table. There was a smile on his face. It was a good smile, the kind that was leagues removed from his prior image of a gloomy mage. And the kind that turned the corners of Renya’s lip upward, as well.

“Well, enough about me,” Azu said. “What about you three? I assume you all

plan to keep adventuring?”

“Yeah. I mean, the whole reason we got into this was to make enough money to have a more permanent place to stay. A base of operations, you know?”

“The reward... this time... wasn’t bad, but... still... not enough...”

Rona could barely manage three words without a labored gasp. The other three at the table all looked at her, somewhat worried that she was about to keel over and die on them right there.

“A place to stay... A home, then. A tantalizing thought indeed, even for adventurers.”

“It wasn’t some grand plan, by the way. It was mostly just going with the flow. Anyway, we’re going to need a fairly big place since we plan to fit all of us in there.”

“Do you? Well, aren’t you a real Casanova of our times. Sharing a roof with two young ladies, huh?” Azu chuckled. There was a silent jibe embedded in the laugh: have fun with that. It earned him a scowl from Renya.

But man, this sure was one dangerous job.

Leaning back against his seat, Renya looked up at the ceiling and withdrew into his thoughts. A single mistake, one wrong step, and Emil would have had eight extra specimens to play around with. That was no exaggeration. In fact, had it been not a whimsical researcher, but a true fighter they ran into, they’d all have been killed. Make no mistake — these were deadly jobs, and they were putting their lives on the line.

Of course, so long as they needed to make money, they had to take risks. Renya was aware of that. But the whole experience left him earnestly wishing he could have been eased into all this, perhaps with a slightly easier mission to start with. This was, after all, his first official job from the guild.

Its results: the death of half the crew and a mutual acquaintance with a demon. Luck had not been on his side.

“He who entrusts himself to Lady Luck is a fool, but he who spurns her is just as stupid. I’d much rather take the middle road. As they say, everything in

moderation. I'm fine with living in a way that allows me to keep my promise to that girl, but man, sometimes, I really have to ask... can't life be just a little easier?"

With the faintest of whispers, Renya directed his question up at the distant sky, where it faded into the empty air, unheeded, unnoticed, and ultimately unheard.

Chapter 1: There *Were* Swords and Sorcery, or So It Was Told

Renya's first ever dungeon excursion had included an unexpected encounter with a demon that had quickly devolved into a battle. Though he somehow managed to defeat the demon and survive, dealing with the fallout kept him occupied for a good while. Finally, after all the dust had settled and a semblance of normalcy had returned to his life, this next story began.

How? How did this happen?

That question was the first thing to leap into Renya's mind. His breaths came in faster and faster gasps. He slapped one hand over his mouth in an effort to calm his own breathing. His chest tightened, and his heart leapt to his throat. In a panic, his other hand clutched at his chest, where it felt not the comfortable firmness of a slab of muscle, but the curious softness of something entirely unknown.

Well, not entirely unknown. Technically, he knew this feeling. Except it existed within the bosoms of women. And Renya was undoubtedly a man.

Nevertheless, one morning, when he had woken up in his room at the inn, something about his body felt strange. He had sat up on his bed and, his head still heavy with sleep, touched his own chest. There, he had discovered two generous bulges.

The sleepiness vanished in an instant.

His hand shot down past his lower abdomen.

This time, nothing was there. Something should have been, but it was gone.

Reeling from these two new realities, Renya's nerves quickly began to get the better of him. His breaths were coming in gasps. His heart had leapt to his throat. He pressed his hands to his mouth and chest, trying to halt his descent into utter panic, and willed himself to calm down. It didn't help him to make

sense of any of this, but in a display of what was almost autohypnosis, his breathing slowed and the pounding in his chest waned.

“What... What the hell is going on?”

The soft whisper that escaped his lips, higher-pitched than what he was used to, would easily have passed for a husky female voice. It sent him into another bout of panic, followed by more autohypnosis. After an extensive session of reassuring himself, he managed to avert a nervous breakdown. Deciding that he couldn't afford another descent into madness, he tried to sort out the mess of thoughts in his head and get a grasp on the situation.

Up until he went to bed and closed his eyes last night, Renya was definitely male. The memory was fresh in his mind, so he was certain that he wasn't dealing with a “turns out, I've actually been a woman all this time” situation. He considered the possibility that his gender was somehow switched when he was sleeping, but he soon dismissed the thought. Someone would have to have opened the door, entered his room, and done something to him. There was no way he could have slept through all that, especially when they had to tinker with his gender; he wasn't sleeping *that* heavily. In that case, it was natural to assume the cause lay in something that had happened before he got into bed last night. A sequential review of his memories of the previous day, however, produced no particular events that stood out.

He then contemplated another possibility: was this some sort of side effect of crossing a world boundary? Some Wanderer-specific syndrome? But if so, then that self-proclaimed God would have told him about it before sending him here. She wouldn't forget something like that.

...She'd better not have, or there was going to be some epic deity abuse when he saw her again. Not if — when.

With that said, it still seemed very unlikely. She was the one who had asked him to come here. You don't ask someone for a favor and then forget to mention the possibility that his freaking gender might change. The problem was that ruling her out meant he was back to square one; he was no closer to figuring out what caused this.

“Renya, are you in there?”

As though fulfilling the age-old adage, “when it rains, it pours,” Shion’s voice sounded at the door, further stressing his already-frayed nerves. He hadn’t even gotten his own thoughts in order; he did not need more on his plate right now.

For a short instant, Renya considered pretending he wasn’t there, but soon reconsidered. A vagrant soul in an alien land, he had no other friends to speak of and no family to see. It would be absurd for him to leave his room without letting Shion and Rona know. If he gave them the impression that he had disappeared, not only would it cause a lot of commotion, he’d also have a hard time convincing anyone afterwards that he actually was Renya. So, he got off the bed and opened the door.

“Oh, Renya, I almost thought you weren’t there,” Shion said as she made to enter his room. “It’s almost time for breakfast. Do you want to go... together...”

Her voice faltered. Speechless, she stared at Renya with the wide eyes of one who had just seen a ghost. Shock, horror, and disbelief vied for dominance in her expression. With the awkwardly stiff motions of a rusty machine, she slowly looked from his face to his chest, and finally down at his feet. Then, she did the same in reverse, except this time at half the speed. After thoroughly ogling him, she opened her mouth.

Was she going to scream? Or demand to know who he was? Either way, she was about to cause a scene. He lowered his head and sighed. What Shion said next, however, took him completely by surprise.

“Big Sis...”

“Wha—?”

“I-I mean, um... What a beauty! Wait, no, that’s not... it’s just, they’re so big, and...”

“Huuuh? Okay, how about you calm down first? Come on, deep breaths.”

Shion’s face grew redder and redder as she nervously fluttered her hands up and down. Seeing that she was on track to have a nervous breakdown right in the middle of the hallway, he placed his palm on her left shoulder and gave her

a reassuring squeeze. Pacified by the warmth of his hand, Shion's erratic movements waned and her eyes refocused themselves on his face.

Finally. Geez, if anyone should be having a nervous breakdown right now, it's me.

His calming gesture, however, had the concurrent effect of eliciting a breath of awe from her, who was gazing at him with starry eyes.

"Big Sis..."

"...All right, Shion. Time for you to snap out of it," he said as he firmly wedged her head between his fists. Then, he began to grind at her temples with his knuckles. Immediately, his victim yelped in pain.

Shion's cry soon brought an alarmed Rona dashing toward them, but before she could aid her abused friend, she took one look at the scene and froze.

"...Huh? Wh-Who... might this be?"

The sight of a lady, whose features probably seemed strangely familiar, trying to reshape the contour of Shion's skull with her fists defied all attempts at comprehension, and Rona found herself at a complete loss as to how to respond. Had it been a complete stranger who tried to do harm — or whatever it was she was trying — to Shion, she would have smashed the attacker's face in immediately, but something about that face made her feel like she'd seen it before, and the odd feeling stayed her hand.

"Yeah, I guess that's the normal reaction one would have..." muttered Renya as he continued his manual excavation of his victim's temples. Shion kept struggling under the bone-crushing pressure of his fists, but her attempts to escape proved futile.

"N-No way... Is that you, Renya?! What in the world..."

Despite his feminized attributes, Rona managed to deduce his identity through his tone of voice and manner of speech. The girl really was very perceptive. He found his respect for her grow a little.

"Good question. I'm dying to know, too."

"L-Let's get you inside first," urged Rona as she hurried the three of them into

the room. “If somebody sees you out here like this, it’ll be...” Her words trailed off as she considered their situation. “Huh, not actually much of a problem, I suppose.” The people who knew Renya, she could count on one finger. To anyone else, he and Shion would seem like nothing more than two girls having a bit of fun at the door to their room. “In any case,” she said, deciding there was no need for concern, “you can keep doing what you’re doing, but let’s have you do it inside the room.”

“Huh? Wait, Rona?! You’re not going to help— Ow ow ow!”

Renya clamped down harder on her, his fists grinding viciously at the sides of her head.

“You sure are taking this in stride,” he said casually as he felt Rona place her hands on his shoulders and push him through the doorway with a struggling Shion in tow.

“If even I lost my cool,” said Rona, “then this situation would spiral downwards very rapidly.”

“Hm?”

“You’re quite flustered, aren’t you, Renya?”

He thought he was doing a decent job at keeping calm, but he seemed to have been ruffled on some deeper level. Whatever latent turmoil lay within him must have shown in his expression. Releasing Shion from his death grip, he touched one hand to his cheek, surprised by how Rona managed to see right through him.

“Wow, you’ve got a keen eye.”

“I get plenty of practice,” she answered, glancing at her friend, who was splayed across the floor. Renya’s assault on Shion’s temples had taken its toll, and as soon as he released her from his grip, her eyes had rolled back in their sockets as she fell. With the nonchalance of someone who had done this a hundred times, Rona picked Shion up, carried her to the bed, and gently set her down.

Renya walked over and looked down. In the back of his mind, he thought, *this is technically my bed*. Of course, it would have been terribly inappropriate to

demand that Shion's unconscious body be dumped on the floor, so he lowered himself onto an unoccupied space at the edge of his bed.

"Well? Would you mind explaining what in the world happened?" demanded Rona.

Had she also taken a seat on the bed, it would have resulted in the slightly questionable situation of having three girls intimately close to each other on the same bed. Instead, she pulled the only chair in the room in front of Renya and sat down facing him.

"I'm waiting for an explanation myself... Does this world have some sort of disease or phenomenon that would cause this?"

"I'm no sage so I can't say for sure, but speaking from my own limited experience, I've never heard of such a thing."

Renya nodded with a hum as he leaned back a little with his hands on the bed, crossing his legs out of habit. The gesture caused Rona's expression to stiffen. He noticed the change but raised his eyebrow, unsure of what was bothering her. Meanwhile, she was motionless, her gaze fixed squarely on his legs and waist.

"Rona?" he asked perplexedly, but Rona did not respond.

(Wow, such slender ankles... And what is with that narrow waist? Not to mention that firm leanness around the stomach, now that's just cheating... Judging from the way the shirt bulges, there's probably plenty of volume there, too... What is it with this girl's body? It's got the contours of a church bell! Her figure might be better than mine! Absolutely nothing on her sags... And she's got such seductive curves... Wha— No way... Look at it jiggle! And she barely even moved! Wow... Just, wow... Then there's her chin. So sharp... Same with the look in her eyes. They just scream "big sister." She has the same hairstyle as when she was male, but something about that mismatched style is alluring, as well...)

"Uh... Rona?"

"Yes, you're making my mouth water."

The words just slipped out of her lips. A split second later, she realized. Her

hands shot to her mouth and her eyes widened, but it was too late. Renya had already scurried across the bed, retreating into a corner that put the most space between the two of them.

“Um, you see, that was...” Rona started to say.

“You monster! Where do you even draw the line?”

“L-L-Let’s move on to other matters, shall we?”

Rona had a feeling that any further discussion would only lead to her digging her own grave, so she forcefully proposed a change of topic. Renya, who was concerned by what a desperate Rona might do once she dug her own grave, was more than happy to agree.

“What’s important right now is how exactly this delici— I mean mysterious situation came about.”

“That’s right. Also, I’m pretty sure I just heard something that I definitely shouldn’t have heard, but I’ll let it slide for now.”

“You were fine all the way up to last night, so whatever it was, it must have happened sometime between last night and this morning. Does anything come to mind?”

Renya sifted through his memories, recalling his actions and his surroundings during that timespan, but nothing stood out.

“Anything?” Rona probed. “Even if it’s, say... you ate something funny?”

“Funny, huh...”

At Rona’s prompting, something came to mind.

“Now that you mention it, you know the tea they brought out after dinner last night? I do remember that tasting particularly bad.”

“Huh? That tea? Wasn’t that yours, Renya?” asked a third voice. It came from the horizontal figure beside them. Apparently, Shion had woken up at some point.

“That tea? What do you mean?”

“When we were eating dinner, there were tea leaves on Renya’s table, so I

figured it was his and dropped them in the teapot...”

“Who the hell would just leave a bunch of tea leaves lying on a table?”

Renya narrowed his eyes and glared at Shion, whose face twitched in fear. She hurriedly turned her back to him and pretended to be unconscious again. She fooled no one, of course, and he would have to have some harsh words with her, but that would wait until later. For now, he had more important issues to deal with.

“Have you heard of any drugs or poison that might do this?”

He doubted it was either of those, though, because one of the skills he had received from the girl god when he came to this world was Healthy Body. If his current condition was due to some sort of poison, that skill should be negating its effects. Rona’s answer, however, was not what he expected.

“There’s no poison like that, but drugs, maybe... Shion might have picked up a magic drug of some sort.”

“Magic drug?”

Something occurred to him: the girl god had told him that this was a world of sword and sorcery. Sorcery meant magic. However, he still had yet to see any magic in this world. Everything that resembled it was called magecraft here. That was strange. If magic existed in this world, so should wizards; someone had to wield the magic. Despite that, he had only ever seen mages and magecraft.

“Magic drugs, in a nutshell, are drugs that cause all sorts of crazy effects. While drugs used in magecraft have well-defined purposes such as healing wounds or curing poison, the effects of magic drugs are completely unknown. The only way to find out is to swallow some and see what happens. And what happens tends to be pretty ridiculous. Their potency is on another level entirely. They can flip genders, resurrect the dead, turn things into gold...”

A moment of silence ensued as Rona composed her thoughts. Then, a muffled voice was heard.

“But we drank the same tea...” Shion said into the bed. She still had her back turned, presumably because she was scared to make eye contact with Renya.

“I can only assume it was a gender-switching drug that only worked on males,” answered Rona.

“What? Can you just pick up one of these things anywhere?”

While he displeased with his current condition, based on what Rona just said, Renya was starting to believe that maybe things weren't as bad as he thought. At least there was minimal harm to him. After all, if he had swallowed one of those drugs that turned things into gold, not only was he not sure if he'd survive the experience, but even if he did, he'd have to deal with the problem of having a literal golden body. In that sense, perhaps he should consider himself lucky to have gotten off with a gender switch. At the same time, it now made sense why his Healthy Body skill didn't activate. Currently, his body was perfectly healthy; it was just female instead of male. He wasn't harmed, so it didn't trigger his skill.

“Normally, magic drugs are very rare and found only in ruins and mazes. And even there, you have to be lucky. They're not even traded on the market, so you can be sure one won't be just lying around for you to pick up.”

“Well...”

“The thing is... sometimes, magic drugs are discarded without ever being identified as one. In fact, they're often thrown away even if people realize they're magic drugs.”

“Why? If they're so rare, they should be worth a fortune.”

Renya was pretty sure that the correlation between rarity and value was a universal truth, especially if the thing in question was so rare that few people in the world had ever gotten a glimpse at it. There were doubtlessly people — connoisseurs, one might call them — who would leap at the opportunity to acquire one.

“That's because on top of having unknown effects, magic drugs come in all shapes and sizes. There's no way to identify them by appearance. They're dangerous substances that always come with the risk of causing something terrible to happen. According to legend, the purchase of a magic drug that was falsely claimed to resurrect the dead once led to the collapse of an entire kingdom.”

“They’re just too dangerous to handle, huh...”

“Yes, but it’s not common for someone to simply leave one on a table...” Rona glanced at Shion, who still had her back turned, and sighed before continuing. “And, of course, it’s even less common for someone to then pick it up and eat it without a second thought.”

“I mean, it was just lying there on the table. We can’t really blame her for thinking it was edible... though it wouldn’t have hurt to ask beforehand.”

He tapped Shion on the foot, and she timidly turned a little, glancing at him across her shoulder.

“Are you mad at me?” Her voice was meek.

“I might have lost some hope in you... but I’m not mad.”

Rona took a moment to ponder which of those was actually worse. Shion, however, did not seem to share Rona’s concern. Once Renya said he wasn’t mad, she sprung up on the bed and turned to face him.

“Really? You’re really not mad at me?”

“I’m not. We know the cause now, and turns out, it’s not really worth making a fuss over. Besides, I have a feeling this effect won’t last too long.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but he was already aware of a method to revert the change to his body. The Healthy Body skill was normally triggered automatically by abnormalities that harmed his health. During their conversation, however, he also realized that it could be triggered in response to something the user had deemed abnormal. More specifically, he learned of this fact when the Help Function conveniently kicked in and he saw rows of scrolling text out of the corner of his eye.

In summary, Renya had deemed the gender-switching drug to be a foreign substance, and the detoxification process had already started. Being a magic drug, however, it seemed fairly resilient, and the process seemed like it would take some time, which led to his prior comment about the effect not lasting too long.

“Is that so? That’s good to hear. In any case, I suppose we’ll simply have to

wait and see,” said Rona. “There’s nothing we can do right now, anyway.”

In response, Shion made a fist and brought her face close to Renya’s.

“Just so you know, I’m okay with both male Renya and female Renya!” she said emphatically.

“Uh... Okay, sure. Thanks?”

“If anything, being the same gender makes skinship easier!”

“Hmm?”

He had to admit that he felt a little glad to be told by Shion that she was fine with him being whichever gender. Presumably, that was a sign that she welcomed him as a friend, and their bond went beyond simple gender. Her next words, though, turned a tad ominous.

“All right, it’s skinship time! With the usual barriers gone, we can touch to our hearts’ content!”

“HmMMM?”

“After that, we can all go shop for underwear together!”

“Uh, I don’t think that’ll be necessary. It’s not like I’m going to be like this forever.”

“What are you talking about, Renya? Underwear is important. Wearing ones that don’t fit you will mess up your curves.”

Shion was coming on rather strong, and it was upsetting him a little. He took temporary refuge in his thoughts as he pondered whether shaping underwear existed in this world. The changes to his body still left him somewhat flustered, and he was having trouble keeping up with Shion’s sudden burst of energy.

“Once we’ve done that, we can all go bathe together and wash each other! What do you think, Big Sis?”

“Wait. Hold on just a damn minute. I’m a guy. Who’re you calling Big Sis?”

“Do you see anyone else in the vicinity whom she might be referring to?”

He froze. Rona continued.

“Face it, Renya, you’re one hundred percent Big Sis material right now. Honestly, you’re such a beauty that I’m having trouble coming to terms with it myself.”

“Huh? But that’s...”

Having not seen his own face, Renya was under the impression that he was a walking abomination — a man’s body with a woman’s breasts attached. Being formerly male, his attention was entirely focused on his chest. And, of course, down there. But what he failed to notice were the other changes: his delicate ankles, his slender fingers. The gears in his brain ground to a halt. Voices seemed to be coming from afar. Vaguely, he heard Rona sigh.

“Both Shion and I are the eldest daughters in our families. All our sisters are younger than us. I’m sure you can understand if the hearts of two young maidens yearn at times to seek comfort in the arms of an older sister,” said Rona as she inched closer.

Renya distinctly remembered having been in a situation like this before, except the danger to his person felt far more significant this time. He flinched backward, only to feel a light impact on his back. Before he could even see what it was, one of Shion’s hands had slipped under his right arm wrapped around his breasts. Her other hand snaked its way around his waist, slithering past his thigh and threatening to advance into even more intimate areas. Tense with shock, he tried to jerk away, but found his route of escape cut off by Rona, who was approaching him from the front. He was trapped.

“Big Sis...” they said, whispering in harmony.

That was the last thing he remembered. From then on, his memory was fuzzy. Someone might have screamed, and someone might have unleashed an elbow strike backward, and someone might also have viciously headbutted an oncoming figure. He thought he threw out some pretty serious attacks, but his opponents quickly recovered, clinging to him with the tenacity of zombies. He remembered being terrified.

At the end of his long stretch of hazy memories, he found himself waking up to the red-tinged sunlight streaming in through the window. He looked himself over. His body was, once again, that of a man. It was also in a state of significant

undress. His shirt was gone, his pants had slid down considerably, and his belt was undone. It was one heck of a close call.

On the bed lay a bundle of... something, wrapped up in a blanket. Tied together at the top, the blanket formed a pouch, and was just about big enough to hold two people. He had no idea what was inside, but it squirmed and writhed in a most upsetting manner.

Once he made himself presentable again, he inhaled deeply, and then breathed out until he had emptied every last wisp of air in his lungs. Only then did he begin to speak.

“Okay, listen up... Nothing happened today.” The bundle stopped moving. “Nothing happened today. I did nothing. I saw nothing. I heard nothing.”

With a hint of command in his voice, Renya spoke slowly and deliberately, his words seemingly meant for himself. Then, he stood up and, his steps weary, made his way to the door.

“If you feel like something happened, then it was a dream. And what happens in dreams stays in dreams. Unless someone wants to bring it into reality, in which case... There will be consequences.”

He glanced behind him to make sure he was understood. The upper half of the bundle of blankets dipped down in a nod.

“My head hurts. I’m going to get some water. When I’m back... I’d better be pleased with what I see.”

With that, he left the room. There was a clamor behind him. It sounded like a bundle of something hitting the ground. For a moment, he wondered what it was. Then he shook his head. It was a bad dream. No need to dwell on it. He was going to get a cup of water. That was all. With that thought in mind, he headed for the dining hall.

Renya was not mad.

Some girls had been fooling around, and he had gotten caught up in their antics. Thinking of it like that, it seemed foolish to even feel angry.

“Man... am I ever tired...”

Today was a day to be forgotten. Even if it was a fleeting dream, it needed to be forgotten. The sooner, the better. With both heart and body heavy with fatigue, he dragged his exhausted self toward the dining hall.

On a certain day, at a certain place.

“Master, about that drug. I made it so Renya would drink it down, but what was the point of it?”

“Well, you know how I told Renya that he’d be going to a world of sword and sorcery? And sorcery means magic, right? But then I remembered that world actually has almost no magic. It’s mostly magecraft there.”

“Huh? So?”

“It wouldn’t do for God to have lied, now would it? That’s why I needed to show him definitive proof that magic does exist there.”

“The whole ordeal was just for that? What are you going to do if he finds out? Won’t he hack you to bits?”

“Yeah, I really don’t want to be cut up by that sword of his, but hey, looks like they’ve decided to go with the “it was all a dream” thing. No harm done, right? It’ll be fine. Probably.”

In a place that was nowhere in particular, there may or may not have been a conversation like that. Was there? Wasn’t there?

Well, God only knows.

Afterword

Those of you who are new, it's a pleasure to meet you.

My name is Mine, and I write this story. It is serialized on the site Syosetsu. Though I have but nicked a tiny piece with the tip of my finger off the very edge of the surface of being a writer, this book you currently hold in your hands is actually the second volume of a series. It would be my greatest honor if you would allow it to share space at the cashier counter with the first volume of this series.

Those of you who are not new, long time no see.

Through a combination of various strokes of luck, the second volume of [New Life+] Young Again in Another World has been published. Allow me to first extend my endless thanks to those of you who read and supported the first volume.

Now, let it be known that I have released a second volume unto this world. Please shower me with your praises.

Just kidding. No, seriously. That was a joke. Please don't send a flurry of insults, curses, hate mail, and physical rocks hurtling at the author.

I was told to keep this short, so here we go.

To the editors at Hobby Japan, as well as the proofreaders, sales staff, and designers. To Kabocha, who provided this work with a second round of wonderful artwork. And to project manager K, who patiently suffered much griping from me over the phone.

Thank you very much.

Also to those who read this series on Syosetsu, and those of you who provide me with a steady stream of comments and typo corrections. To a certain

streamer, whose stream I always invite myself into when I'm feeling strangely high-strung during my editing or writing sessions, as well as viewers of said stream.

And finally, to every reader who purchased and read this work.

I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Mine

Bonus Short Story

Guys' Night Out

As the light of day faded, so did the hustle and bustle of the lively city of Kukrika. Few people could be seen on the streets, and only the taverns and brothels were busy, with their bright lights attracting a great many customers seeking their nightly pleasure. Renya found the food in this world to be rather unsatisfactory, so he wasn't particularly fond of eating out. Why was he currently seated a bar counter then? Well, tonight, things were a little different. He'd been asked out.

The tavern was quiet, which was a nice way of saying it probably didn't see much business. Beside him was the robed figure of Azu, spiked red hair at odds with his gloomy disposition. He and the mage sat side by side, calmly relishing the quiet atmosphere of the infrequently-visited tavern. To an observer, the two of them must have seemed like a remarkably ill-fitting pair, but neither of them appeared to care.

Renya was holding a stiff chunk of meat, the identity of which was unknown to him. He ripped off a strip and threw it in his mouth, then sipped on some wine as he chewed. Azu, meanwhile, was gulping down strong spirits with a side of rock salt. *Rock salt*. The man was a monster.

"So... I've been meaning to ask you something since that job we did." Mild inebriation loosened the tongue, and Renya found that even he was no exception. The fact that they were both men didn't hurt either; fewer things to consider made for easier talk. "Do you have something against women?"

When the two of them first met each other for their job, Azu had promptly assumed that Renya's party was the equivalent of another whose members all ended up dead. The reason he gave was that both parties were filled with women, and Renya was itching to inquire further. Azu continued emptying cups at the same pace, but slipped in a sigh between gulps.

“I guess so. It doesn’t mean I like men though. Just saying.”

“A bad experience in the past?” asked Renya, slightly concerned that he was prying too much.

Azu, however, didn’t seem to mind and smiled wryly.

“Yeah, I’ve been through some stuff. Not that much, mind you, considering this mug of mine,” he said as he ran his hand down his face.

Renya nodded, fully aware of the rudeness of his agreement. A generous opinion, he thought, would describe it as unattractive. Even Shion had called it sinister-looking. There was no way it would be popular with the girls.

“With a face like that, though, how’d you even get the chance? I can’t imagine women were lining up to talk to you.”

“Okay, now that’s going too far. Just so you know, I have every right to take offense to that comment.”

Contrary to his words, Azu didn’t seem to mind the quip. Nevertheless, it occurred to Renya that he might have had a bit too much to drink, and he regretted his momentary lapse in prudence. Had it been anyone else, he might be lying on the ground with a fist-shaped bruise on his face right now.

“Anyway,” continued Azu, “sorry to burst your bubble, but until very recently, even I enjoyed the advances of women. Of course, they weren’t after me, but rather the advantages I offered.”

“Huh. And that’s how you became Azu the Womenless?”

“...Is it just me or are your comments becoming *more* offensive, you intoxicated bastard?” Azu said as he narrowed his eyes — half-squint, half-glare — and turned to Renya. “How much have you had to drink?”

Renya looked to his other side, where a pile of bottles were strewn across the counter surface. He didn’t remember drinking them. They sure looked empty though.

A lot, apparently.

This was the first time he could freely speak his mind with someone in this world, and the sense of liberation increased the flow of both words and alcohol.

“Whatever. Some nice girls will come running along. One day. Probably.”

Moments after, Renya realized that his response lacked both context and coherence. Along with that came the second realization that he definitely had too much to drink.

“A harem of my own. Now doesn’t that sound nice,” replied Azu with a chuckle. “In the meantime, though, I’ll amuse myself by watching you suffer with yours.”

The mage had probably meant it as a clever retort, but for Renya, it struck a little too close to home. He gaped at Azu, only to elicit a good-natured laugh. At this time, neither of them knew, nor could they know, the profound providence of their words.

The night didn’t know either. And the night didn’t care. It simply beheld them and their idle chatter as it awaited the break of a new day.

Bonus Column

Special Column 2

Thank you very much for picking up the second volume of [New Life+] Young Again in Another World. I received a request from Melonbooks to write something about this series. After mulling over what that “something” might be, I decided to go with writing a few short blurbs about the secondary characters.

If the previous paragraph sounds familiar to you, then you must surely have purchased Volume 1 already, in which case I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

First up, our nameless creator, the young girl god.

She was the one who sent this story’s protagonist, Renya, to another world. Does that make her the one and only? The ultimate being, absolute in her

existence? Not exactly. She is imperfect, but she does happen to be a transcendental being who has an unfathomably long lifespan and the ability to create an infinite number of worlds. She also looks like a little girl.

The little girl appearance is, of course, just a front. Her true appearance is not revealed in this story. She chose to show up in front of Renya as a young girl because she figured it'd earn her some sympathy points. "Tease the old paternalistic instincts," as she'd put it. It was calculating and very much unbecoming of a deity, but she did it. And it all blew up in her face anyway.

Furthermore, every time something bad happens to her, she has to contend with a round of cheers and applause from the angels around her as they silently root for whoever caused her misfortune. As a result, she endeavors to make their lives unpleasant as well, often throwing frustratingly impossible tasks their way. In this story, her foremost complainant is Girel, but Renya also counts as one of her victims. It's just that for Renya, the pros probably outweigh the cons in the end.

It could be said that she gave birth to all things, but she sometimes tags a disability or two to her creations, so the jury is still out on whether she's a good parent.

Secondly, we have Girel, servant to and victim number two of the girl god (Renya crossed the world boundary first in the story, so he has the honor of being victim number one).

Originally, she was a generic angel with blond hair and blue eyes, but after being assigned to Renya as his guardian angel, her hair was made black and her proportions more modest. The reason, according to the girl god, was that based on her understanding, Renya didn't have a thing for blondes and couldn't care less about size. The meaning of the latter part of her statement is unclear. The fact that she does this kind of thing all the time might be why her angels hate her so much.

The origin of her name is a secret. It might get mentioned somewhere at some point.

She wields enormous power thanks to some direct tinkering by the girl god,

but it seems unlikely that she will ever get to use it to its fullest.

Number three, Azu Hound, who accomplished quite a bit in the second volume. With a gloomy air and sinister face, along with his drab attire and weird-looking staff, he sounds like a stereotypical bad guy on paper. That or #random person A. As it turns out, however, he's actually an exceptional mage who thinks very rationally. In a world where parties of adventurers are usually led by #warrior types, the fact that he opts to break custom by leading four warriors himself is a testament to his skill. When he was first introduced in the web novel, the author baselessly assumed that he was the type of character to be immediately forgotten by the readers. Instead, he turned out to be strangely popular. In addition, he has the honor(?) of being the character who required the most re-draws by the artist.

As a side note, in this world, Azu is depicted as someone who finished his training, was recognized as a professional, and has a good deal of experience under his belt as an adventurer. Normally, he should seem like quite the exceptional individual, but he perhaps had the misfortune of running into a person whose circumstances were simply too irregular.

So, for the second time 'round, I've covered the secondary characters. No one but God knows whether there will be a third time, so for now, I thank you for picking up [New Life+] Young Again in Another World: Volume 2. I hope you will keep supporting the series, and may we meet again next time.

Mine



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[New Life+] Young Again in Another World: Volume 2

by Mine

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