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Monster Tamer &

The background of the cover is a full-page illustration. It depicts a young man with short, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue tunic with a gold belt. He is embracing a young woman with long, flowing red hair and yellow eyes, who is wearing a purple dress. They are both looking towards the viewer with gentle expressions. The background is a soft-focus landscape with a blue sky, white clouds, and a body of water reflecting light. There are some glowing blue and purple particles floating around them.

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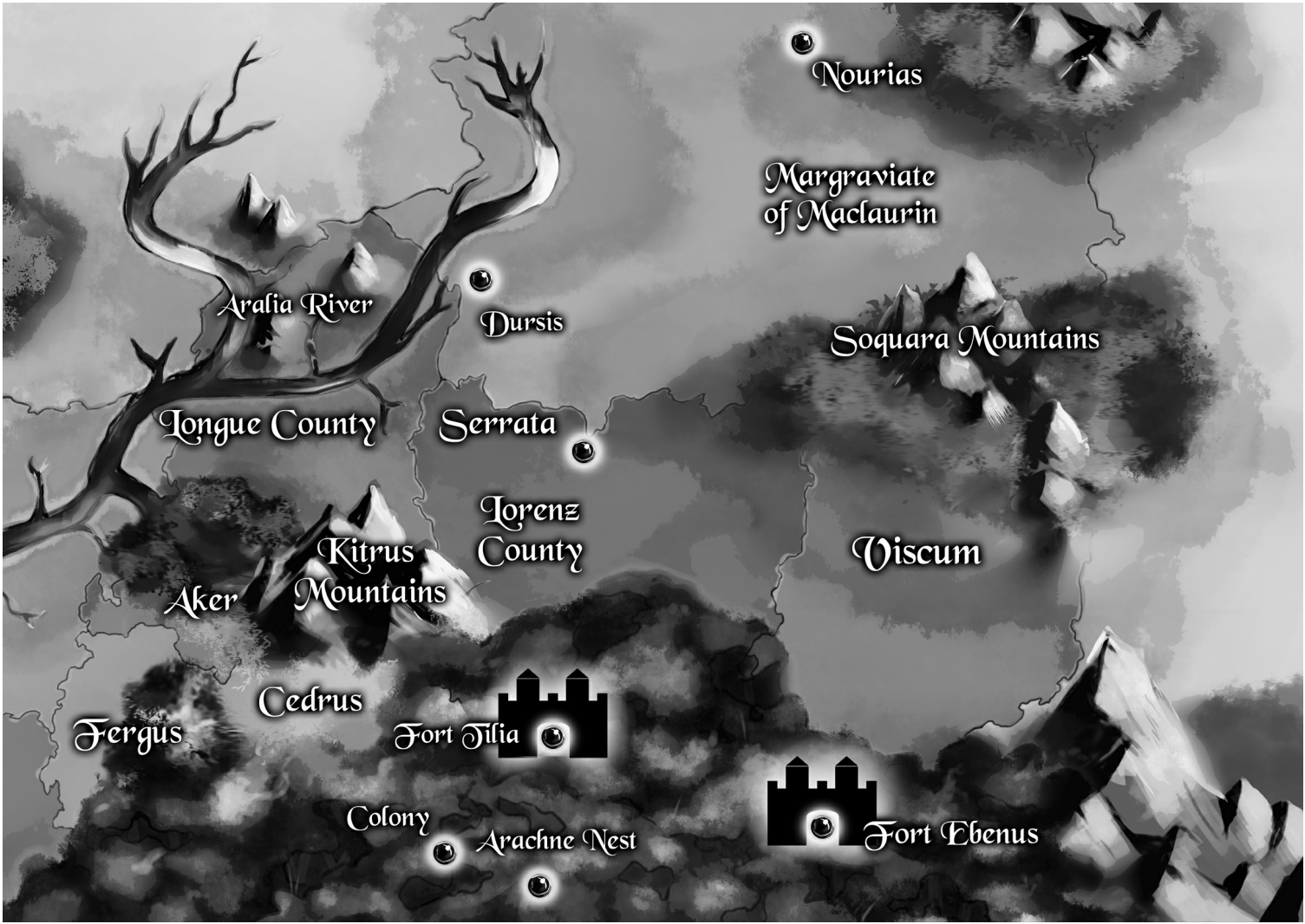


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Chapter 1: The Misty Lodge's Acquaintance

The town of Diospyro in Aker, one of the Five Northern Kingdoms, was a stopover on the way to Shiran and Kei's hometown. What awaited us on our second visit there had been another encounter with the visitor Fukatsu Aketora and his travel companion Thaddeus.

The encounter hadn't been a pleasant one. I'd managed to stop Fukatsu from hassling Shiran, but things had developed in a completely unexpected direction. Beneath the hand hiding Thaddeus's face was skin covered in scales and the eyeball of a lizard, both impossible features for a human.

"Could you please listen to what we have to say?" Thaddeus cheerfully asked after exposing his inhuman appearance.

As a monster tamer, it was hard for me to ignore him. I returned to the inn and found Katou and Kei waiting in front of our room. They were both terribly confused. That made sense, though, because I'd brought Fukatsu and Thaddeus with me, whom we'd just been quarreling with moments ago.

"Senpai..."

Katou rushed over to me. Her footsteps were unsteady, and her childish face was steeped in fear. She had androphobia, and though she was somewhat better now, she was nowhere close to overcoming it. It was severe enough that even when we walked through town, either Rose or I had to be by her side.

Despite this, she'd been so worried that she couldn't wait in the room and had come out into the hallway where someone else might show up. Now that I thought about it, I'd plunged headfirst into a quarrel with a cheater who wasn't friendly by any metric. Not only that, but Lily and Gerbera hadn't been with me. Although it had been brief, I'd spoken with Fukatsu once before, so I'd stepped in believing he wouldn't attack me in the middle of town. Katou didn't know that, however. I felt guilty for making her worry herself sick over it.

Katou walked up to me, almost close enough to plunge into my chest, and

staggered when she failed to come to a stop. I grabbed her shoulders to keep her from falling.

“Wh-Why are they with you...?” she asked.

“There’s something we need to talk with them about. You don’t need to worry, so can you go back to your room and wait with Kei?”

“N-No. Let me listen too,” she said, grabbing the hem of my clothes.

Her desperate gaze had enough strength to it that I gave up on convincing her otherwise.

“Fine... But don’t push yourself,” I said.

“Okay,” Katou answered with a nod.

I let go of her shoulders. Kei nestled up to Katou in my stead to support her.

“She’s going to be coming too. Do you mind?” I asked, turning back to Thaddeus.

“I don’t. I’m the one making the request here. We can do things however you see fit.”

He gave me a friendly smile and nodded. Seeing him like that, he looked no different from a gentle young man, but I now knew that this was only one facet of him. What exactly was he? I had an idea, and there were a few points I could understand, but some things still remained a mystery. I’d decided to hear him out so that I could get my facts straight.

I guided Thaddeus and Fukatsu into our room and sat down at a table across from them. Rose and Shiran stood behind me, while Katou and Kei sat side by side on a bed. I’d intended to let Shiran rest after the incident in the alley, but she’d insisted on accompanying us. Depending on the circumstances, there could be questions that only she could answer, so I was grateful for her obstinacy. Much like with Katou, I’d told her not to push herself, but I’d agreed to her taking part.

“So? You had something you wanted to tell us?” I started. “Fukatsu, I believe you told us earlier that you couldn’t give us any details.”

“If he’s okay with it, then I’m not gonna bitch and whine,” he replied, folding

his arms and staring at me with a strong glint in his eyes. “But just try and take advantage of Thaddeus. If you do...”

“Stop it, Aketora. I’m the one who wants them to hear me out.”

Fukatsu grudgingly held his tongue after Thaddeus reproached him. I’d been under the impression that Fukatsu, the visitor, was the one in charge, but that didn’t seem to be the case. His threat just now was out of concern for Thaddeus. Because of his quarrel with Shiran, I couldn’t help but think badly of him, but maybe it was better to view his overbearing behavior as the result of his consideration for his companion.

“Now then, I think we can cut right to the chase,” Thaddeus said. “Although, I’m not sure where to even start.”

He looked troubled, so I decided to throw him the most obvious question.

“Thaddeus, what exactly are you?”

“Straight to the point, I see.”

“We’re not getting anywhere until that gets cleared up.”

“A reasonable conclusion,” he replied, smiling slightly, but then his expression turned serious. “Then allow me to answer you. Just as you’ve guessed, I’m not human. I’m not a variant like an elf or the like either. I’m...” He stopped for a moment, took in a deep breath, then spoke clearly. “I’m a monster.”

The atmosphere froze over in an instant. Thaddeus and Fukatsu stared at me intently, weighing my reaction. Rose and Shiran stood at the ready for anything to happen. Fortunately for both sides, this was what I’d already expected.

“Allow me to confirm something,” I said calmly.

“Huh? S-Sure,” Thaddeus answered, looking a little let down by my unexpected reaction.

“Fukatsu is a monster tamer, and he’s your master... But that’s not right, is it?”

“Huh?”

I heard Kei’s bewildered voice behind me as Fukatsu looked at me dubiously.

“A monster tamer? The hell’s that?”

“You don’t know about cheaters with that kind of ability?” I asked.

“No...”

He didn’t look like he was playing dumb. It seemed he had no idea the ability existed at all.

“Huh? What? He isn’t? I totally thought that’s how it was...” Kei said, her eyes darting about in confusion.

“Senpai, how could you tell?” Katou asked next to her, her face a little stiff with tension.

“I just thought it might be the case. Back when we first met these guys, there were two things I found unusual,” I started, turning my attention to Thaddeus. “First, after a brief quarrel with us, Fukatsu left on his own. Thaddeus then said that he couldn’t leave him because Fukatsu didn’t have a translation runestone.”

“Now that you mention it...” Rose muttered behind me.

I’d talked with her about this before, so she remembered the incident.

“The day before, when we first met Fukatsu,” I continued, “Thaddeus was probably in their room, but Fukatsu talked with the innkeeper normally. We visitors need a translation runestone to speak with the locals. That means Fukatsu can use one himself. Yet when we saw him the next day, it wasn’t the visitor holding the runestone, but the native to this world. I found that strange.”

“A valid point,” Thaddeus said with a nod.

“But if Thaddeus is a monster and, much like us, can’t communicate with human locals, what then? In that case, they’re both in the same situation. It wouldn’t be weird for either of them to be carrying the translation runestone.”

“I see. It’s true that I can’t communicate with humans without a translation runestone... What was the other thing you found strange?”

“How you have a translation runestone in the first place. They were developed to be used once a century whenever a visitor appeared. Even though they’re very important, the demand is minimal. You can’t just get one out of the

blue simply because you need one.”

For example, it would be a different story if Fukatsu had been part of the first expeditionary force. The Empire had warmly welcomed them at Fort Ebenus, so there would’ve been an appropriate opportunity to acquire a translation runestone. However, they were supposed to be on their way to the Empire now, and if Fukatsu had left them, he couldn’t have arrived in Aker before us. In fact, Fukatsu had no knowledge of the information the Skanda Iino Yuna had brought back to Fort Ebenus regarding monster tamers. Therefore, I could conclude that he hadn’t been part of the first expeditionary force.

“That’s why I thought maybe Thaddeus is actually a monster who has lived among humans for a while now, before even meeting Fukatsu,” I said. “In that case, he would have obtained a translation runestone for his own use at the outset.”

Back then, I’d told Rose that Katou could now use a translation runestone, so it made sense that Fukatsu could also use one. Perhaps what I should have focused on at the time was the one who’d been using the translation runestone right next to me, the monster Rose. Thaddeus was a monster just like her; that was the reason he had one.

Of course, that conclusion just seemed the most natural, but I’d considered other possibilities. In the end, the definitive factor might’ve been the sense of distance between Thaddeus and Fukatsu. Their relationship wasn’t like the one I had with my servants, or like Kudou Riku had with his. It felt like they were more similar to Katou and Rose.

“However...” I added with a grimace. There was one thing I couldn’t make sense of. “Hey, Thaddeus? I’ve understood things up to this point, but...”

“What is it?”

“Are you really...*just* a monster?”

I had the ability to form a connection with monsters. It worked on rare monsters and beyond. In other words, I could connect the mental path to a monster with a will. Lily and Rose had almost lacked a will entirely, but Gerbera had already had the slightest ego. Then there was Salvia, who’d already had a firm ego to begin with. I’d managed to connect the mental path to all of them.

Be that as it may, I couldn't form any connection whatsoever with the monster in front of me. This was a first for me, excluding Kudou Riku's servants like Anton and Berta.

"This is...quite the surprise," Thaddeus said, his eyes widening ever so slightly. I was doubting his confession, in a sense, but he didn't seem particularly offended. "Your question is valid, Takahiro. Aah, that was quite a shock." On the contrary, he looked deeply moved. He chuckled amusedly, then shook his head. "But I didn't lie. I'm definitely a monster," he added, taking a look around the room. "I don't mind showing you my true form as proof...but it's a little cramped in here for that."

"You don't need to go that far. I'm not doubting your statement or anything."

That lizard eye he'd shown us was that of a monster, so he wasn't lying. Thaddeus really was a monster. He hadn't told us everything, though. He *couldn't* tell us everything. That was all. He was probably a monster with special circumstances that prevented me from connecting the mental path to him. Not that I had any idea what those could be.

"By the way, Thaddeus," I said, deciding to set that mystery aside for now and ask something else. "Are there maybe far more monsters than I thought hiding among human society like you are?"

"No, that's not the case. You can think of me as the exception. Rather, it's normally impossible for monsters to hide among human society."

"Well...you have a point there."

My reply was a little vague. That was because Thaddeus was one such monster, and because the two behind me, Rose and Shiran, were also monsters hiding among human society, even if their circumstances were different. That said, Thaddeus was right in saying monsters couldn't do so. That was why Gerbera and Ayame had to stay in the manamobile.

"To start with," Thaddeus added, "before even considering whether any of us are hiding in human society, monsters who possess a will like I do are practically nonexistent."

This also made sense. Even Gerbera hadn't been able to fully acquire a will on

her own. If I considered Shiran an exception, among all the monsters I'd met to date, the only one to independently gain an ego was Salvia, who'd wandered around this world for time immemorial. Thaddeus was now the second example. Or maybe he wasn't... I felt like it was wrong to group him with Salvia for some reason.

"At the very least, the only ones I know of like me are my clan," Thaddeus added as I continued to immerse myself in my thoughts. "All of them live secluded lives in the settlement, so I'm the only one who wanders around human society."

"Hang on a minute..." I said, cutting him off. "What do you mean by 'clan'?"

He'd mentioned it so casually, but that wasn't a word to ignore. Now that I thought of it, Thaddeus had also used that word during our conversation in the alley earlier.

"This is a treasure passed down in my clan, gifted to us by a certain great lady. It's a magic tool of the highest class."

That was what he'd said when he took out that mysterious jewel and asked whether I knew about the monster known as the Misty Lodge. And now he'd also used the word "settlement." There was only one thing this could mean.

"Are you telling me there's a whole settlement of monsters out there?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes. The one and only monster settlement in the world," Thaddeus answered. "It's called Draconia. It's a small hidden settlement that houses the members of my clan, not even a full twenty in number. It's a settlement of dragons."

"A settlement of dragons...?" I repeated. The image of Thaddeus's left eye naturally came to mind. "That means your true identity is..."

"Yes, you're correct."

Thaddeus didn't deny my conjecture. Who could possibly have imagined this? He looked like nothing more than a kind young man, but his real form was that of a powerful dragon.

“We’ve lived for a long time in hiding. We avoid conflict with humans. That was our elder’s decree. Only one is chosen to leave the settlement. Currently, that’s me,” Thaddeus said, then frowned. “However...a problem has come up recently.”

“What problem?”

“Someone has snuck out of the settlement... A stray dragon.” There was anguish in his voice now. “At this rate, it’s highly likely that human casualties will arise from the stray’s rampage. If that happens, the hidden settlement’s existence could come to light. My brethren are currently on the move to capture the stray... Shiran, was it?” Thaddeus looked up at Shiran. “I apologize for Aketora’s behavior earlier. However, everything he did was for my sake. If you want to blame someone, then please blame me. If you wish, I will atone for what was done.”

“H-Hey! Thaddeus!” Fukatsu yelled, but Thaddeus ignored him.

“I know full well how shameful it is to ask this of you, but could you please tell us? Is the monster suppression operation that’s currently being planned in this town...perhaps because of a dragon?”

Shiran seemed to have mixed feelings about his request. Unlike in the alley, his circumstances were clear now. His reasons were sincere, and we could understand them. However, that was only if he was speaking the truth.

After hesitating over it for a while, Shiran looked down at me. “Takahiro, what do you think of his story?”

“Hmm...” I thought it over for a bit, then turned to Thaddeus. “I have one question. Is this the reason you’re in Diospyro?”

He answered without hesitation. “Yes. I’m staying here in case the stray dragon attacks this town so that I can deal with the situation. Besides, if any neighboring villages are attacked, the information will probably come flying here first.”

We’d first met Fukatsu over two weeks ago. They’d been staying here for quite some time now, meaning they’d been here to protect this town all the while.

“One more question. You know of the Misty Lodge, right? How?”

“Aah. That’s because the Lady of the Misty Lodge is the benefactor of my entire clan, myself included, of course,” he answered, taking out the jewel he’d shown me earlier. “This is an extremely valuable magic tool that the Lady of the Misty Lodge gifted us. It’s because you had a reaction to it that I knew you were in some way related to her. In all likelihood, you are one in possession of her blessing, much like we are, right? If so, I decided you were trustworthy enough to open up to.”

“I see...”

I was starting to get a read on Thaddeus’s relationship to the Misty Lodge and maybe about his origins as a monster. If my conjecture was correct, I could even take a guess at why I couldn’t connect the mental path to him. Well, nothing would be certain until we could verify all of this, so instead of focusing on the details for now, I decided to check one thing first.

“Is this all true?” I asked with a sigh.

“You don’t believe me?” Thaddeus replied with a lonely smile.

I shook my head. “I wasn’t talking to you...”

“What?”

Thaddeus gave me a weird look, but he was sure to understand what I meant in the next instant.

“It’s true, my dear.”

That was because the correct person answered my question. A woman wearing loose clothing appeared out of thin air. She had her arms wrapped around me from behind, but I didn’t feel any weight on my shoulders. All there was to her motherly embrace was a gentle sensation.

“Sorry. It seems you’ve gotten involved in something troublesome because of me,” the woman—Salvia, the Misty Lodge—said. “But is this really all right with you? I came out because you asked me to, but won’t this expose your secret?”

“I called you out because I decided it’d be fine. Don’t worry about it.”

If Thaddeus was lying, Salvia wouldn’t have come out. He was a monster, a

dragon, and was linked to her by fate. That meant all of this was true. If so, there was no need to hide my identity from him.

“Th-That’s...?!”

I heard a trembling voice. I looked across the table, where Thaddeus’s eyes were wide open in shock.

“That’s...the Lady of the Misty Lodge? It can’t be... In the flesh?”

“I go by Salvia now. Long time no see, my cute little dragon. You’ve grown up rather splendidly.” Salvia giggled. She looked younger than Thaddeus, judging solely on appearance, but she acted like a much older woman. “Are you the current acting explorer?”

“Y-Yes. Seeing as you know that, you truly are the Lady of the Misty Lodge...”

There was some kind of secret jargon that convinced Thaddeus that she was who she claimed to be. He trembled, deeply moved by their reunion. This was a *little* more intense than I’d expected.

“Takahiro. I mean...*Lord* Takahiro, what on earth are you...?” he asked, turning his wide eyes toward me.

I ended up with some kind of title all of a sudden.

“Even if you make it sound all grand like that...all I did was form a contract with Salvia.” I frowned and gave Salvia a sidelong glance. “Hey, what’s going on here?”

“Ummm. I was involved in the establishment of their settlement, so...”

“The Lady of... I mean, Lady Salvia is the great benefactor of all those who live in Draconia.”

The Misty Lodge was of far greater importance to Thaddeus than I thought. His eyes were sparkling as he looked at me. Honestly, it was a little unnerving. Still, despite the unexpected reaction, I’d accomplished my goal by calling out Salvia.

“It’s just as you heard, Shiran,” I said, turning around in my seat. “Salvia can guarantee his background. If he’s moving to capture the stray dragon, it’s pretty good news for Diospyro. If there’s some kind of suppression operation in the

works, I think it should be fine to tell him about it.”

“You’re right. I’m of the same opinion,” Shiran said with a nod and looked at Thaddeus. “In answer to your question...”

“Y-Yes?” Thaddeus said, coming back to his senses, his face now tense.

“As you’ve predicted, the Royal Army stationed in Diospyro is putting together a plan to suppress the dragon that has been spotted near one of the remote villages.”

“So they really are...” Thaddeus muttered, nodding gravely. Even if he’d expected it, it was a harsh reality for him.

“Once the Order of National Defense arrives, I’m sure a force will be dispatched.”

“The knightly order composed of Aker’s elites... Meaning things are basically in motion already. How long will it be before they arrive? How much time do we have left?” Thaddeus asked.

“I’ve heard the Order plans to arrive in four days. They’ll likely take action a few days after that.”

“Four days...” he murmured bitterly.

“Say, Thaddeus. Does it look like you’ll capture the stray dragon?” Salvia asked.

“I’m ashamed to say I’ve yet to receive any such reports. We dragons possess great combat potential, and we can move at great speeds, but we’re not suited to tracking or investigation. It’d be a different story if we could rely on numbers like humans, but the search is taking a lot of time.”

Salvia nodded. “That makes sense.”

“In truth...after a certain amount of time, we managed to find the stray once, but they desperately resisted and got away. If only we’d managed to capture them back then.”

“You weren’t there, so there’s no point in blamin’ yourself for it,” Fukatsu suddenly added.

I watched the two of them, my brows knit. From what I'd heard, the situation wasn't good. At this rate, the suppression force would be dispatched, and the humans would find the stray dragon. If it came to battle, there were sure to be many casualties, ultimately ending with the stray's death. This would be tragic for humans and dragons alike. To avoid such a future, the dragons had to find the stray first. However, it was questionable whether this was possible. Even accounting for the suppression force's late start, it seemed somewhere around fifty-fifty. Life was too important to stake on a coin toss.

Things would be different if someone who specialized in tracking and investigation were to help them, of course. I gazed at everyone in the room. Besides Thaddeus and Fukatsu, everyone had a grasp of the situation. There was sincerity in Shiran and Kei's eyes. There was a chance to avoid a great number of casualties, so from the perspective of a knight and a squire, it was obvious they would want to take that chance. Rose and Katou were looking at me in all earnest. They were leaving the decision entirely to me. I could feel the weight of their trust. As for Salvia...

"Master..."

"I know."

I made eye contact with her and came to a decision.

"Thaddeus," I said, facing the dragon once more. "Could you tell me a little more? Just maybe, I'll be able to help you."



After I told Thaddeus that we had a means of tracking the stray dragon, he gratefully accepted our aid in shock. He told me that he expected nothing less of Lady Salvia's contractor. He seemed to be making some kind of misunderstanding, though. Lily and Ayame were going to track the stray dragon, not me. All I could do was ask them for help.

We discussed where Thaddeus believed the stray was and where it had previously been discovered. After that, Thaddeus and Fukatsu left the inn. Combining the information we got from them with what Shiran had heard from the army, it looked like we would be able to roughly estimate where the stray dragon was currently hiding.

Thaddeus and Fukatsu had arrangements to make, so they were planning to leave tomorrow. In the meantime, we were going to go ahead of them back to the manamobile and explain things to the others.

“Sorry for calling you out today,” I said to Salvia after they left the room. “I ended up making you use your mana. If only I could materialize you on my own...”

“Oh, dear. I don’t mind at all.”

She floated up and down in the air just like a spirit, spinning around with her knees cradled, then righted herself.

“It hasn’t even been a week since we formed a contract. It would be stranger if you were able to. You’re also learning at a good pace. As a matter of fact, you’re learning so fast that it would normally be unthinkable, you know? I’m happy to have such a talented master.”

Salvia giggled, her smile impish.

“Besides,” she added, “someone I can form a contract with has finally appeared after so long. I’d like to come out like this at least once every few days to take a look at my beloved master’s face.”

“That’s a bad joke...”

She giggled again. Besides the part about me being beloved or whatnot, she didn’t seem to be lying about this being fun.

“In any case, to be serious, I couldn’t possibly complain,” she said. “I mean, you got caught up in this matter because of my circumstances.”

“It’s not really your fault... Actually, I think it was good fortune that we met Thaddeus.”

“What do you mean?” Salvia asked, wide-eyed.

“One who knows the past.”

She stiffened for a moment.

“Isn’t he related to the monster you told me about?” I asked.

“I’m surprised you could tell...”

“I was half-guessing,” I said with a wry smile.

I was reminded of the last night we’d spent at the Misty Lodge. Salvia had suggested that I talk to the one who knew the past if I wished to learn about someone else who could communicate with a monster’s heart and about their fate. There weren’t all that many monsters with wills. Thaddeus was one such rare case, and he was acquainted with Salvia. It was natural to conclude that he had some sort of connection to the one who knew the past.

If Thaddeus had been the person in question, Salvia would’ve said something. That was why I’d determined he wasn’t. So who exactly was Thaddeus? After giving it some thought, I could vaguely guess why I couldn’t establish a connection to him with the mental path. And if I was right...I had to meet the one who knew the past and speak with them. I believed it was tremendously important for our future.

“Could I ask you one thing?” I said as something suddenly occurred to me. “What was your relationship to the visitor before me?”

“Hmm...” Salvia looked extremely serious. “I loved him, and I wanted to help... I wanted him to be happy.”

“I see...”

She didn’t say much on the subject, but that was enough for me to figure some things out. In all likelihood, his story had ended in tragedy. Also, Salvia really had loved him. That was the reason she was here now.

“No, not just any visitor. You, specifically, my dear. I’ve been searching for someone who can communicate with a monster’s heart.”

That was what she’d said when she formed a contract with me. By finding out about this person from the past and using his experience as encouragement, she hoped we could give meaning to his tragic fate.

“In that case, I definitely think it was good fortune that we met Thaddeus,” I repeated.

We hadn’t gotten involved in something troublesome because of Salvia. This was a necessary encounter for us.

Hearing me say that, Salvia gave me a smile from the very bottom of her heart.

“Thank you, Master.”

Chapter 2: The Dragon's Journey *Lily's POV*

When my master returned from the town of Diospyro, he informed us that our plans had changed and we would be shuffling our groups up. The reason for this was that he'd encountered Fukatsu Aketora and Thaddeus in town. I'd heard about them before from his last visit to Diospyro. Fukatsu was a visitor and a cheater. As for Thaddeus, astonishingly, he was a monster...a dragon, to be specific.

But even more surprising than this was that Thaddeus had told us about a hidden settlement of dragons—Draconia. Our new plan was to help with the search for a stray dragon that had run away from there.

"That's fine and all, Master," I said, cocking my head after he told me all of this in the manamobile, "but why did this stray dragon run away from the settlement in the first place? Was it to attack humans?"

I couldn't help but picture a bleak outcome. The dragon had gone into hiding, and if it had spent all its life living out of sight from humans, dark emotions could have welled up within it. And to refresh itself...

Well, that was my train of thought, but my master quietly shook his head.

"No, that doesn't seem to be the case. According to Thaddeus, this stray is a bit of a special being. It's the youngest among the clan and was the only one born without an ego."

"No ego? Then it's a normal monster?"

My master nodded. "That's the gist of it."

I didn't miss the little pause before his response. Something was probably bothering him about this, but perhaps because he didn't have anything to back it up, he didn't go further into detail.

"Well, even if it doesn't have a will, they still consider it their brethren. They made sure to keep the dragon inside the settlement so that it didn't harm any humans and get hunted down, but..."

In other words, it had all started with an accident rather than an incident.

“So, seeing as how they have no way of searching for the stray, we’re going to help them out,” I said. “The dragons of Thaddeus’s clan are all searching for it too, right? Are we going to be linking up with them?”

“Turns out there’s no way to contact them directly. Thaddeus has of course been in contact with the settlement, and the dragons out searching also keep in touch at fixed intervals, so we should be able to get a message to them like that, but it’ll take too long.”

“Now that you mention it, there are only around twenty dragons in this settlement, right? In that case, they can’t freely communicate with each other all that easily. It’d take away from what personnel they have out searching and all.”

Their scant numbers were an overwhelming impediment for them. I pinched my brow at the thought.

“If only this world had cell phones,” I muttered.

“Apparently, they do. There’s a handheld magic tool that can transfer information.”

“Huh? Really?”

“It’s a legendary-class item. The Holy Church is in charge of it, according to Salvia. I’d like to get our hands on it somehow and have Rose make an imitation...” Realizing we’d gone off track, my master reverted back to the original topic at hand. “Anyway, the dragons had just contacted the settlement two days ago, so unfortunately, their next regular communication won’t be for five days. If we wait that long, the suppression force will take the field. That’s why Thaddeus only plans on leaving a message for them.”

“So I guess it really is out of the question to join up with them and work together on the search.”

My master nodded, but his expression remained grim.

“The clan’s basic plan is simply to capture the stray. It has yet to attack any human settlements, after all. We don’t know how long this can go on, though.

There are also those who say it'll be too late if there are any casualties because it'll bring on human intervention. Those voices are calling to dispose of the stray, saying it's unavoidable."

"Hmm. My Lord, is that not overly cautious of them?" Gerbera asked, joining in on the conversation. "No matter the circumstances, killing one of their own is a little..."

"Well, they've gone as far as making a hidden settlement. I'm sure they're beyond cautious by nature."

"Is that so?"

Gerbera cocked her head. I also found this rather strange. The dragons were extremely wary of humans. As a matter of fact, it felt like they were *afraid* of humans.

"They're not going to do it because they want to," my master said. "It got away from them once already, so there's that to consider too."

"A bitter decision then?" Gerbera asked.

"Yeah. We need to do something before it gets too bad," my master said sincerely. It was as if he considered this his own problem. "There is, of course, the possibility that the dragons find the stray before we do. We need to hurry... At the same time, we have to make sure our preparations are perfect. Therefore, I had Katou and Kei stay in town. Rose will be their guard."

"Oh, so that's why you came back with just Shiran," I said, coming to an understanding.

"That's right," my master replied with a nod. "Well, it took some serious effort to convince them. Katou kept insisting that I should take Rose with me."

"Hmm. But Master? Doesn't she have a point? I'm pretty sure a stray dragon will be quite strong. Can we capture it on our own?"

Considering how fast we could move, leaving Katou and Kei behind was the right choice. Leaving Rose behind as their guard in a fundamentally safe town was just like my worrywart of a master. Rose was also the best choice for guard given Katou's condition. However, that meant our combat potential would fall. I

was concerned that this would become a problem.

“That’ll be fine. The stray dragon is definitely strong, but we’ll have Thaddeus with us, who is equal to or stronger than it, and Fukatsu is a cheater. What’s more, according to Salvia’s estimation, based on her familiarity with dragons, the stray couldn’t possibly be as strong as you or Gerbera.”

According to the plan, we were mainly helping with the search. The stray’s capture was more or less Thaddeus and Fukatsu’s job. They already had more than enough strength on their own, but if need be, we would help there too. With that many strong combatants at hand, I was satisfied with my master’s assessment.

“Besides, we also have Ayame, Asarina, and Salvia,” he added.

“And you too, Master. I heard about your progress. Seems like you’ll soon be able to get a hit in on Rose during your mock battles.”

“Say that after I get one...” he said with a bitter smile. “In any case, the main problem is finding the stray fast enough.”

“Right. When do we leave?”

“We’re going to meet up with the two of them tomorrow. Once we do, we’ll get moving right away.”

With that, everyone nodded in agreement.



The next day, Thaddeus and Fukatsu joined us. Thaddeus was terribly surprised by Gerbera’s existence.

“T-To have such a monster as your ally! Lord Takahiro, you truly are a grand master among spiritualists!”

“Please stop it with that,” I said.

It seemed Thaddeus had a strangely favorable impression of our master. It was giving our master a headache, but it made me see Thaddeus in a good light. It looked like we were going to get along well.

After that, we began moving through the remote wilderness. This lasted for

two days. To be precise, we moved out to a spot away from any human traffic, let Gerbera and Ayame off the manamobile, had Shiran leave the manamobile in a nearby village in the name of the Alliance Knights, and then went deep into a forest where nobody would ever tread. Once we confirmed we were entirely out of sight, we changed our mode of transportation.

“Very well. Please step back,” Thaddeus said, smoothly undoing his sash and pulling his arm out of his sleeve while crouching down.

“Gh... Grr... Grrrr... Graaaaah!”

His body swelled up in a single breath. Four sturdy limbs held up his massive body, and membraned wings spread wide with a thud. A tail grew out and smashed into some trees, mowing them down in the process.

“Grrr...”

An ocher-scaled dragon, somewhere around ten meters long, now stood before us. A rugged carapace covered the majority of its enormous body, looking as sturdy as armor. The end of its tail was a ball of spiked bones much like a mace, which was what had destroyed those trees with ease. It looked down at us, its eyeline about twice our height. The gentle manner in its gaze was the only thing left of Thaddeus’s features.

“Rather impressive,” Gerbera said cheerfully, glancing at the fallen trees and looking up at the dragon’s enormous body.

It looked like Gerbera was more attracted to his strength rather than his enormous build. In truth, he exuded an aura of strength that couldn’t even be compared to that of a normal monster. If there were twenty others like him, then Draconia had a tremendous fighting force.

All the same, their opponent was a single stray dragon. Just as my master had said, if the stray was something like this, capturing it wouldn’t be a problem. Gerbera could hold it down on her own, and the same probably applied to the cheater Fukatsu. Nevertheless, it was best not to be careless.

“Grrr...”

Thaddeus growled and lowered his body to the ground. It appeared that he couldn’t speak while in this form. Still, I could tell what he was implying.

“Okay then, let’s get on,” my master said, sounding a little nervous.

Yes, the reason Thaddeus had revealed his true nature was precisely so that he could become our new mode of transportation. We were going to take a trip through the skies on the back of a dragon. I didn’t know whether we could reach the speed of passenger planes in my master’s world, but just being able to avoid obstacles on the ground was a big deal.

There were risks to this approach, however. The cheater Fukatsu probably wouldn’t get shaken off, but it was possible our master might. Thaddeus had told us that we were worrying too much and that he would catch our master if he fell, but Gerbera and I wouldn’t yield, even if we seemed overprotective. It was better to take the utmost precaution.

To that end, we worked a little something out. First, I turned into a slime and clambered up onto Thaddeus’s back. Then my master got on and sat on top of me. I retained the mimicry of my upper body and held on to my master from behind. Ayame sat inside my body just like when we were at Fort Tilia.

We were wondering what to do about Berta’s large body, but she managed to use the tentacles at her waist to affix herself to me. This was probably enough, but we had to be doubly sure. Gerbera climbed atop Thaddeus, attached her threads to several spots on his back, and connected them to herself and our master. With all this, the only thing that would cause us to fall would be Thaddeus crashing to the ground.

Thanks to our precautions, Thaddeus’s back was all sticky and slimy, but there was no helping that. He let out a pitiful whine at the terrible spectacle, and Fukatsu comforted him from atop his head.

In any event, our preparations were complete. Thaddeus roared and flapped his enormous wings, blowing mana-charged wind violently at our surroundings. The updraft lifted his body off the ground, and each flap elevated him farther.

The vertical shaking was great enough that we were liable to bite off our tongues had we not clenched our teeth already. We endured this for a few seconds, feeling like our entire bodies were being dragged down toward the ground, and then rose up into the sky.

“Wow...” I muttered, looking at the scenery spreading out underneath me. At

the same time, I heard a stifled gulp. “Huh? Are you bad with heights, Master?”

“Not that bad...” he answered, a little pale. “That’s not the problem. This is kind of frightening, isn’t it?”

Humans were made to fear heights as a natural form of self-preservation. The amount of turbulence we experienced until we stabilized would never happen in any airplane, and there was no guarantee of safety. Riding a roller-coaster couldn’t even compare to the fear my master felt now.

“It’ll be fine,” I said, speaking right into his ear so that the wind wouldn’t snatch my words away. “Even if we crash, I’m pretty sure I can manage somehow with my wind magic and mimicry.”

I hugged him tightly against me, figuring it was fine to indulge in some slight side benefits. Some of the tension left his body, perhaps because my actions put him at ease.

I heard a quiet grunt from Thaddeus. His wings caught the wind, and he began gliding through the air.

Our journey through the sky went on in intervals to allow Thaddeus some rest. After an entire day, we arrived at a forested area in northern Aker. Continuing farther north would take us to the Dark Woods, which served as the national border, but we had no plans to go that far. Once we reached the point where the dragons had failed to catch the stray, we began our pursuit.

Chapter 3: The Demon King's Maneuvering *Kudou*

Riku's POV

The view stretched endlessly before me from the top of a cliff. A small river ran through a forest as if splitting it into two distinct regions. On the far side of the river, a dense forest expanded across the distance.

A profound darkness draped over the forest, making it difficult to see within its depths. A strong wind blew across the region, and all the trees swayed and rustled in unison. It looked like a wave running across the face of a mysterious creature, a being that possessed an ominous power to make humans feel fear from the very roots of their being.

It was also a beautiful scene. I'd felt that way especially after distancing myself from humanity. This vast tract of nature that I'd once fearfully wandered through all alone now brought me relief.



I narrowed my eyes and shifted my focus elsewhere. On the side of the river closer to me, the land had been partially cleared. Even from my vantage point, I could make out two small settlements where white smoke billowed from cooking fires. It was an idyllic scene, but all I felt was revulsion. That was the world of humanity I'd once wanted to return to so badly, but now I never even thought of drawing nearer.

"Are you not going to crush them, Kudou?" a voice suddenly said in my head. *"You probably have the power to do so."*

It was a strange sensation. I wasn't hearing a voice coming through my ears. It was as if words were popping up in my head like they were my own thoughts. If I hadn't been called out explicitly, I could have mistaken it for my own inner voice.

Maybe the voice had instigated others in this manner. For example, say it whispered "kill them" in a certain somebody's ears. If that person had never considered such a thing, they would probably find it strange. But if they heard this voice while thinking unpleasant thoughts about someone, what would happen? Now say that repeated itself over and over and over. That person might get the impression that these were their true colors.

The way they did things, the voice would be better described as the Serpent of Temptation, but the person in question had chosen a different name that didn't suit them at all.

"Is that you, Heaven's Voice?" I replied.

I was calm. There was no emotion in my response. It felt disgusting to have them in my head, but I didn't let that show. I also didn't care that there had been a mocking tone to their words. At any rate, I'd already decided that I would kill them one day.

This wasn't restricted just to Heaven's Voice either. *He* was the only exception. Everyone else was nothing more than an enemy I would kill at some point. I had no intention of building cordial or even antagonistic relations, so there was no meaning in conveying any emotion. My relationship with Heaven's Voice was cut-and-dried like that.

“It’s going to begin soon. Shouldn’t you be preparing?”

It seemed Heaven’s Voice had contacted me to pass on information. This wasn’t all that unusual.

“Is that so? Then I guess I will.”

Despite saying that, I wasn’t going to act immediately. I didn’t want to give away any information. Heaven’s Voice’s ability was, at most, a means of transferring information. Aside from what they willingly relayed, I knew nothing about them. Their verbiage made them sound like a boy, but that was presumably a front. There was nothing certain about them.

Still, this went both ways. They couldn’t glimpse my situation either. They wouldn’t know whether I took action. We’d had this same exchange multiple times now, and there’d been times I’d taken action, and times I hadn’t. Actually, I always answered noncommittally so that Heaven’s Voice couldn’t predict my movements. I could have one of Anton’s spawns verify the information they gave me, and if need be, I could take action after that, but on the whole, a large portion of their plans involving me went to waste.

I didn’t care about that, though. To me, Heaven’s Voice was like the news being broadcast on the streets. I’d hear them even if I left them alone, so I simply used whatever was useful to me. Neither of us were complicit in any way. Nobody really recognized the individuality of the people reading the news on the screen. Through and through, that was all Heaven’s Voice was to me.

After saying a few more words to each other, our short and fake conversation came to an end. The irritating presence vanished from my mind. I turned around, and a tall boy greeted me.

“My King, everything is in place.”

The doppelqueen Anton’s spawn, using the form of the late exploration team member Juumonji Tatsuya, gave me its report. Next to it was the girl-shaped shadow, the nightmare stalker Dora. The nameless Mad Beast—no, the beast I’d given the name Emil—was also here, and behind those three were many other monsters, completely still like robots waiting for their turn.

I looked down at the view below the cliff once more and addressed the world

spreading out before me.

“Then shall we begin? It’s time for the Demon King’s rampage.”

Chapter 4: The Slime and the Wolf's Evening *Lily's* *POV*

Before dawn, while I was practicing my partial mimicry—which I still hadn't properly mastered—I suddenly felt my concentration break. I looked around and saw everyone fast asleep.

My master was sleeping right by my side. I could feel his body heat seeping into me through his clothes. I tried touching his cheek, feeling a slightly rough texture beneath my fingers. The skin of a man, I thought. That obvious fact caused a slight pang in my heart, and there was a touch of heat to my breath.

I wanted him to look at me, and I also wanted to continue looking at his sleeping face forever. Even though I had no idea what to do with those feelings, time spent adoring him like this was one of my few diversions over the long nights.

I could hear Gerbera sleeping to our master's other side. Ayame was curled up in my lap, sound asleep with her nose twitching about. Across the campfire, Thaddeus and Fukatsu were lying on the ground. Among all this, what caught my eye was Salvia, a little farther away, playing around with Asarina.

"Masss—ter."

"Come now, you can't just spring out, okay?"

Salvia was very close to being a spirit. She floated in the air, her golden-brown hair and fluttery clothes swaying about as if underwater. Asarina, currently stretching out of our master's hand, wrapped around her voluptuous body, looking like she was truly attached to her. It was like a scene out of a painting.



“Looks like Asarina has really taken a liking to you, Salvia,” I said.

“We’re like roommates, after all,” Salvia replied with a giggle.

“Ssster!” Asarina added in agreement as Salvia stroked her head.

“It seems Asarina would like to learn glamor magic,” Salvia said. “She wants to be able to speak with our master.”

“Speak? Is that possible?” I asked, not quite getting how that would work.

“Yes. Using glamor magic, the caster can make someone see something that isn’t there and hear sounds that don’t exist. It’s an application of this technique.”

“Oh, I get it now. That’s true. Depending on its usage, it can be used for conversation, huh?”

“Right? She actually managed to speak with him in the world of the Misty Lodge. Asarina has an affinity for glamor magic, so she should be able to learn it relatively fast.”

“Hmm.”

Just then, Ayame suddenly got up. She must have heard us talking. She looked at Asarina with a shocked expression.

“K-Kuu...?”

It was hard to tell, but her face seemed to be implying, “I’ve been betrayed!” Her cute round eyes were perfect circles. And then she suddenly jumped off my lap and ran away.

“Kuuu!”

“H-Hey! Where are you going?!” I yelled, stretching out my hand.

Ayame’s tiny body vanished into the darkness of the forest as she wailed cutely. Seeing that she was no longer in sight, I lowered my hand.

“Jeez, that Ayame...”

“Shouldn’t you chase her?” Salvia asked.

I looked around. Ayame’s wailing had also woken up Gerbera, who was

looking my way.

“Nope. Ayame isn’t that careless,” I said. “In fact, it’s the norm for her to wander around close by. Besides, it doesn’t look like she was just blindly charging off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Berta went that way tonight. Looks like Ayame is going after her.”

Berta had left a while ago, but Ayame could easily track her by scent. I pointed at my own nose to imply this. Salvia now looked convinced, and Gerbera closed her eyes once more.

“You know your little sisters so well,” Salvia said with a laugh, putting her hand to her mouth. “Oh, right, Lily. This is a good opportunity, so allow me to thank you.”

“What for?”

“For putting together the plan to catch up to the stray dragon.”

Just as Salvia had said, over the last two days of searching, we’d managed to find a clue regarding the stray dragon. It appeared to be injured, and it was definitely in hiding and resting somewhere around this area. It was probably trying to remain unnoticed, but keeping still made it far easier for me to track it by smell. It wouldn’t take us long to find it.

“Thank you, Lily.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t really do anything worth thanking me for. You should be thanking our master instead.”

He was the one who’d decided to help Thaddeus. Dragons and humans alike wanted to avoid any tragedy, and our master had responded to Thaddeus, Shiran, and Kei’s strong feelings on the matter. He wasn’t the type to enjoy pointless bloodshed, and he wanted to respect his promise to Salvia. However, I felt like there was more to it.

“We need to do something before it gets too bad...”

I recalled his sincere expression when he muttered those words, as if this involved him directly. In my eyes, it looked like my master wanted to avoid

killing the stray dragon by any means necessary. Just maybe, he felt a special sense of empathy with Thaddeus's clan. That was what I believed, and if so, it was likely because of the clan's nature. In other words, they were a clan of dragons who possessed wills. They were related to the one who knew that past that Salvia had mentioned. They were also monsters with whom my master couldn't connect the mental path. I could largely guess their true identity myself. It would be nice if my hunch was right.

I could even say I had hope. Precisely because of that, I stowed that hope deep inside me. I couldn't start panicking. My master would fulfill his promise to Salvia in the not-too-distant future, after all.



After playing with Asarina for a while, Salvia withdrew once more into our master. Some time after that, I saw a two-headed wolf approach the campfire. I'd been spending my time as always, practicing partial mimicry and gazing at my master's sleeping face every now and then for a breather, so I was still awake.

"Oh, welcome back, Berta."

Kudou Riku's servant Berta was accompanying us on our journey as an escort. Now that I'd recovered, we didn't really need her as a guard, but since she had no other orders from her master, she continued to accompany us anyway. The reason for that was because she couldn't get in touch with Kudou right now. Kudou had told her beforehand that this could happen, though.

A situation where she couldn't contact her master... Did that mean Kudou was so busy with something that he couldn't deal with anything else? Thinking about what he could possibly be up to felt a little ominous. I'd tried asking Berta about it before, but she'd told me that she didn't know. She probably wouldn't have answered even if she had, but from what I could tell, she hadn't been lying.

When she first started traveling with us, I'd considered trying to get information on Kudou Riku's movements from her, but lately, I'd given up on the thought. Right now, Berta was nothing more than a kind travel companion.

"Sorry, Berta. Looks like Ayame's been bothering you."

The small fox was curled up on top of one of Berta's heads. Just as I'd expected, she'd run off straight to Berta.

"Huh? Doesn't Ayame look plumper than usual?" I asked. She didn't look like she'd sucked in air to inflate herself, but her body looked about three times its normal size.

Berta looked at Ayame with her other head, then let out a very human sigh of exasperation.

"She simply overate..." she said.

"Aah. That's why she got sleepy..."

She'd apparently been out stress eating. I wondered what had her so shocked that she felt a need to do so.

"We were eating a monster I hunted," Berta explained, "and then while she was grumbling about something, she suddenly fell asleep. It was quite the shock."

"Hah hah. She *is* just a child."

"For a moment, I thought she caught some sort of strange disease."

Berta sounded fed up, but she still walked carefully so as to not wake Ayame up. It was adorable to watch. She passed in front of me, then curled up on the ground a small distance away from everyone else. Berta was always like this.

"Hey, Berta?" I said, a gentle feeling in my heart.

"What?"

"Are you hiding something from me?"

"What's this about?"

There was the slightest shake in her voice. It was as I thought. Berta kept her distance from us. The only exception was Ayame, who'd closed the gap between them with her carefree manner.

Among all of us, Berta was the coldest to me. According to my master, after the incident with Takaya Jun, Berta had returned to Kudou for some time. When she came back, something about her had been strange. I guessed that

Kudou had figured out *something* related to me...or maybe to Mizushima Miho.

The fact that Berta couldn't keep this hidden was a sign of her honest personality. It was one of her virtues, but it was also a flaw since she couldn't keep secrets. In that sense, Kudou had made an error in judgment by sending Berta to us.

Thinking back on it, it was a little strange. Why had Kudou chosen Berta? Was there some kind of scheme behind it, or was it simple whimsy? It could also have been by process of elimination. Just the same, even if it was a mistake on Kudou's part, it was an opportunity for us.

"Hey, Berta?" I said once more. "Your master...Kudou Riku won't stop, will he?"

Berta had put herself on guard a little, perhaps thinking I was going to ask the same question as before, but then she opened her eyes slightly.

"Why does that concern you?" she asked.

"Hmm. He lent a hand in saving me from Takaya Jun, so there's that too... Well, I guess it's because he's similar to my master."

Kudou and my master were both mindful of each other, albeit for different reasons. Everyone around them knew it too. I also had a certain interest in Kudou.

"Kudou Riku is the Demon King born from the weak and unsightly side of humanity," I said. "In a sense, he's one way my master could have turned out. If Kudou can stop, I'd like him to. Above all else, that's what my master wishes for."

To add one other reason, I didn't hate this awkward and caring wolf. Berta was Kudou's servant and obeyed his commands absolutely; that was all. So far as I could tell from watching her take care of Ayame, she was very far from evil by nature. I didn't want her to be our enemy.

At present, I hadn't been able to get any information on what Kudou was up to, aside from this *something* that Berta had been keeping from me. Unfortunately, since information traveled very slowly in this world, it would be too late by the time we heard about an incident major enough for the news to

reach us. We didn't know how long this time of peace we had would last.

With those thoughts in mind, I chose my words carefully. "At this rate, Kudou Riku can't be saved. As such—"

"Leave it at that," Berta said, cutting me off. "You should know damn well. My king will never stop." She looked at me with tranquil eyes. "No. Maybe he can't stop. He can no longer live without something to hate."

Her voice was indifferent, but the emotions behind it weren't.

"If it were the evil in humanity that pained him back before he was a king, then things might have turned out better," she continued. "If so, he could live by hating evil. However, what wounded him was panicking humans. It was the weakness of people cornered by the fear of death. This is something all humans possess. Hating that is equivalent to hating humanity. This is the reason he became the Demon King."

The way Berta quietly told me this made me believe that she'd already given this exhaustive thought. I'd considered their master-servant relationship to be far more indifferent before this. Or maybe Berta was unique in this regard. What I knew for certain now was that Berta understood her master far more than I thought she did.

"My king has already started on his path. There is no means of stopping him. If he were going to be saved...then surely, it would have had to have been done before he'd started."

"Berta..."

"Slime, I heard about it. You saved the one who is falsely similar to my king, didn't you? If you had chanced upon my king instead, maybe things would've been different." Berta's gaze wandered through the air as her tail slowly waved about. "But you weren't there during my king's beginnings. Instead, it was..." A shadow fell over her, and Berta emptied her lungs in one long breath. "Or maybe...if I weren't Berta...if I were Anton, then maybe something would've changed."

I could feel a pronounced sense of powerlessness and regret in her, but I couldn't really understand the meaning behind her words.

“What does that mean?” I asked curiously.

“It’s nothing,” Berta answered curtly. Her tail plopped down on the ground. That motion indicated that all talks on this topic were over. “In any case, just keep your mind on your own companions. Don’t forget. I’m not your damn friend or anything of the like.”

Her tone was cold now, drawing a line between herself and everyone else as she always did. Her attitude built an invisible wall between us. Still, things had gone a little differently tonight. Maybe Berta thought that she’d said too much. Voicing her opinions about her master had left her considerably shaken. If not, she would never have said one last thing.

“Either way, if you have the leisure to analyze us, you’re better off minding the problems in your own damn group,” she said bitterly.

“My group’s problems?”

Berta fell silent. It was hard to read a wolf’s expression, but there was an air about her that implied she hadn’t meant to let that slip. I didn’t know what she meant, but I couldn’t let it pass. I opened my mouth to press her for answers, but then I sensed a presence approaching us. I immediately changed gears to fulfill my role as a guard and took a look around.

“I’ve returned, Lily,” Shiran said, striding quickly toward me.

“Welcome back, Shiran. Good work out there on patrol,” I said and then shifted my focus back to Berta.

All four of her eyes were already closed. What bad timing. I could wake her up, but Berta had surely prepared herself by now to fend off any questions. So long as she clearly expressed her intent to keep silent, it didn’t seem she would let anything slip.

I sighed, then suddenly sniffed at the air. “Hm? Shiran, did you find a monster?”

“Yes... I mean, I went on patrol to find it,” she said, her expression somewhat stiff. “Do I stink of blood?”

“Just a little. You don’t need to worry about it.”

When we were all together, Rose and Shiran handled nighttime security. Every few hours, Shiran would investigate the area for any abnormalities. During those times, it fell to Rose and me to protect everyone while they slept. If we were to encounter an enemy we couldn't deal with, we would wake up Gerbera and buy time until she could help us. Even with Rose, Katou, and Kei currently elsewhere, this process hadn't changed.

"Are you hurt? You could've called us," I said.

"I haven't weakened *that* much."

That made sense. Shiran was currently somewhere around Rose's level. Her physical abilities had deteriorated substantially, but her swordsmanship compensated for that. There weren't many enemies who could defeat her. One exception was that incident back in town...

As I thought of such things, I noticed Shiran's expression stiffen a little. Sensing a presence, I looked to where Fukatsu was getting up a short distance away from us. After smoothing down his slightly disheveled hair, he let out a yawn.

"Morning, Fukatsu. You're up early," I said, not particularly worked up or anything.

"Yo."

Our exchange was harmless and inoffensive, a totally commonplace greeting. My impression of Fukatsu wasn't as bad as what I'd heard from my master and Rose. In fact, I didn't have much of an impression of him at all. I'd heard that he'd blown a lid at our master, but ever since our journey together began, there'd been none of that. He pretty much never talked unless it was with Thaddeus. That was why I found it surprising when he struck up a conversation with me.

"Hey, Lily. I've got a question for you. You mind?"

"What is it?" I asked, wondering what he could possibly want.

After hesitating a little, he said, "You're...not Mizushima Miho, right?"

"Did you know her?"

We hadn't told Thaddeus and Fukatsu more about us than necessary. We'd never mentioned that my body was modeled after Miho. In other words, he'd known Miho before the Colony fell apart.

Miho, on the other hand, had no memories of him. Lately, she'd been shutting herself in completely—screaming sometimes when I got along with my master—but I could sense her curiosity inside me now. She wasn't acquainted with him.

"Um, I saw her with Katou before," he said.

"Aah... Are you maybe Katou's classmate or something?"

Now it made sense. My master and Fukatsu didn't poke their heads into each other's business. At most, they were cooperating with Thaddeus as an intermediary. Consequently, even if my master could tell that they weren't in the same grade and that Fukatsu was probably an underclassman, they didn't really know much about each other.

"So you're acquainted with Katou... Huh? But I don't remember her ever saying anything about you."

"Oh... No. I know Mitarai, Katou's friend."

"Oh. Mitarai."

The image of an energetic girl came to mind. I'd heard of her before. She was called the Stalwart Snow White. Since she was Katou's friend, Miho obviously knew her too.

"So, were you Mitarai's classmate? Hm, that can't be. In that case, you would've been in Katou's class and known her. So...the same club?"

"No, neither. We were both at the same event right after the entrance ceremony. That astronomy thing."

"Aah. The yearly stargazing event."

That was the event where my master and Miho first met. Well, they hadn't actually spoken to each other from then all the way up to getting teleported to this world. Yet Miho had spoken to my master precisely because she'd remembered that event, so perhaps it had been a relatively major incident.

At the mention of the exploration team's Stalwart Snow White, I remembered that the Skanda Iino Yuna's best friend, the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya, had also been at the event. Miho had met her there.

It had come up during our brief conversation with Iino at Fort Tilia. Miho and Iino had spoken to each other back in their world a few times too. That was because Miho had become acquainted with Todoroki during the stargazing event.

"Katou didn't participate in the event," Fukatsu said, "so I didn't know her back then, but I saw her a few times with Mitarai after that."

"Hmmm."

Fukatsu averted his eyes for some reason. It seemed he did this every time he mentioned Katou. *Huh? Is this maybe what I think it is?* That thought came to mind as he turned back to me.

"But seein' how you know about Mitarai and the stargazing event, that means you really are Mizushima Miho?"

"That's a tough question. I'm not Mizushima Miho, but you could say I am too. I'd have to tell you a whole lot to explain the details, but it's not like you're telling us everything either. It's a little troubling if I don't talk it out with my master first."

"I see... Right..."

He accepted this rather easily. Just guessing...maybe he really wanted to ask about Katou's circumstances. According to Miho's memories, Katou was rather popular with the boys. She was petite, around 150 centimeters tall, and really cute. Her personality...was quite different now, but I didn't feel it had changed much at its core.

Fukatsu had said that they weren't acquainted, and it didn't seem they'd ever spoken to each other, so his feelings probably weren't strong enough to be love, but it was likely that he had a crush on her. I suddenly felt like this was the real reason Fukatsu had formed such a terrible impression of my master when they first met.

"I owe you guys for helpin' Thaddeus. I can't keep actin' like an ass forever

just 'cause it's awkward."

Fukatsu wasn't a bad person, and the fewer enemies we had, the better. Maybe it would be a good idea to mediate between them when my master woke up.

I turned to my master, when suddenly...

"Wha?!"

My master jolted awake and away from me, causing me to yelp.

"Wh-What? Majima, you were awake?" Fukatsu said awkwardly, thinking my master had overheard us.

However, my master remained silent.

"Master? What's wrong?"

I immediately realized that something wasn't right. His attention was wholly preoccupied with something else, and he stared at a single point in the forest.

"I got through..." he muttered, but he wasn't replying to me. "I thought so... But..." he whispered as if tugging on the tiniest of threads. "This is bad..." His expression was suddenly tense. "Gerbera! Thaddeus! Get up!"

My master grabbed his nearby sword and the one piece of armor he'd removed, his bracers, and immediately stood up.

"We're setting out right now!" he shouted, already running at full sprint.

"M-Master?!"

Our bewildered voices didn't seem to reach him at all. He was going to disappear into the treeline any second. I had no idea what was going on, but I couldn't just sit idle. I got up in a fluster and gave chase as Gerbera followed behind me.

At the same time, I felt like I heard a grief-stricken cry begging for help.

Chapter 5: The Dragon's Rescue

I'd already considered the possibility. Thaddeus's clan was made up of special monsters who possessed wills. Because Thaddeus already had a will of his own, I couldn't form a connection with him through the mental path. In contrast, while the stray dragon was part of the same clan, it didn't have a will. In a sense, one could say that the stray was just a normal monster.

However, it wasn't quite normal either. Its strength could match Thaddeus's, after all. That meant the stray was what we would call a rare monster. As such, if it wasn't special in the sense that Thaddeus was, and was more akin to regular monsters, then maybe whatever was preventing me from forming a connection with their kind didn't exist in the stray.

That was what I meant when I'd said, "I got through," earlier. That was why I ran full speed through the forest. I'd taken off as soon as I woke up, which meant I was leaving the camp behind, but I had no intention of slowing down. I hadn't even had the time to compose myself and slowly explain the situation to my companions. Besides, that wasn't really a problem; I could sense Lily and Gerbera running behind me.

"My Lord! What's going on?!" Gerbera asked as she caught up.

"I found the stray dragon!" I said, keeping things brief, seeing as how we were talking on the move.

"What?"

Gerbera's red eyes widened, but she immediately grasped the situation. She grabbed my arm and pulled me in tight. I briefly felt like I was floating, but then I found myself under her arm.

"Hang on tight," she said as she accelerated.

Gerbera used her eight legs to move in three dimensions through the pathless forest. It reminded me of the time I'd spent alone with her exploring the Woodlands. To this day, the speed she could reach was far beyond what I was

capable of.

“Is this the right way?” she asked.

“Yeah. Keep going. I’ll tell you if you go off course.”

“Very well. I’m picking up the pace a little more.”

Gerbera sped up. In the past, she’d curbed her speed out of consideration for my body. Lily was starting to fall behind, but she had a sensitive nose. She could catch back up even if she lost sight of us. Speed was of the utmost importance right now.

“How did you find it?” Gerbera asked.

“It’s the opposite of when I met you,” I answered, being careful not to bite my tongue.

“Hrm?”

“Do you remember when we first met?”

My first encounter with Gerbera had been unforgettably intense. I remembered a firefang thwacking against a tree and bursting like a flower, and a white spider swooping down right on top of me.

“I found you.”

She’d said those words because she’d come looking for me. She’d sensed I was nearby, meaning we’d already been connected. In other words, the mental path had formed a connection before we’d even met.

“There’s no need to meet face-to-face for the mental path to connect. That’s why I thought I’d be able to do the same thing as you did, assuming the mental path could successfully connect to the stray dragon. Anyway, I kept focusing on the possibility, and now I can tell its location.”

“I see,” Gerbera said, then immediately grimaced. “Wait a moment. That means we’re hurrying because...?”

“Yeah,” I replied with a nod. “Just for a second, a scream for help came through the mental path.”

The stray dragon was begging for help. That had been the moment the mental

path successfully connected. My ability had first manifested because I strongly desired for someone to be with me, so it made sense that it worked best in these kinds of situations. Still, the connection really was just the thinnest of threads; we were too far away. The reason I'd been the only one to hear the scream was because it had come from the very limit of the mental path's effective range, meaning it only reached the root of the connection, namely me. It wasn't clear whether I'd make it in time to help, hence why I'd run off without a moment's hesitation.

"Meaning the stray dragon is currently in danger. But what could be happening?" Gerbera asked.

"I don't know. The mental path doesn't convey that much detail." I shook my head, then narrowed my eyes. "But I can guess..."

Just then, Gerbera's brow pricked up. "Is this...a dragon's cry?"

"You can hear it?"

"Mm. But...what is this?" she said in a puzzled tone. "There are too many for it to be the stray dragon."

"I see..." I quietly clicked my tongue. It seemed my guess was exactly right.

Gerbera leaped into the air, and suddenly, my field of vision opened up considerably and a sense of weightlessness enveloped me. After soaring over the unexpected downward slope and starting our free fall, my eyes shot open.

"There!"

Looking down over the open view, I spotted a group of dragons. They were still far away, but I could identify seven...no, eight of them. For just an instant, I could see the other seven surrounding the eighth dragon. My intuition was telling me that that was the stray dragon. The dragons around it were definitely Thaddeus's clan members from Draconia.

They'd found the stray dragon before us. Even though we'd hurried, or perhaps because we'd hurried, we reached the stray around the same time as the other dragons did. That tiny difference meant the battle had already started. I'd expected this, but I couldn't keep the bitter taste out of my mouth.

One of the gathered dragons had toppled over, probably due to the stray recklessly rampaging about. A shriek followed. I could tell right away that it came from the stray. I could feel its pain through the mental path, after all. It had suffered a counterattack, making it rampage even more. The situation was getting worse and worse.

There were those among the clan who thought that waiting to incur human intervention would be too late, leaving no choice but to dispose of the stray. Even if they didn't want to, dragons were killing each other. It was far too painful to behold. I felt the urge to vomit. I mean, that was as if our...

"Like hell I'll let you..." I mumbled, gritting my teeth and steeling myself. "Gerbera, throw me!"

"Fwah?!" she shrieked hysterically back at me.

"Throw me! I'll go ahead!" I repeated.

"Huh? Uh, right! Got it!"

When it came to battle, the Great White Spider caught on quickly. Gerbera's talons dug into the slope as she landed. She stooped down low, then leaped horizontally into the air.

"Shyaaah!"

Before she could lose her momentum, she hurled me out of her arms.

"Hngh!"

I groaned bitterly from the momentary burden on my body. That said, she'd held back some for me, so I was able to control my posture midair. Trees flowed beneath me as I soared through the sky like a bullet. The wind in my face felt like a wall pushing me back. The pressure slowed my speed, but it wasn't enough to stop my momentum in the right place.

"Asarina!"

"Ssster!"

Asarina shot out and wrapped around a passing tree. She tugged on my arm, and my speed dropped drastically. She'd already been wrapped around my arm, serving as an external exoskeleton, so my strengthened limb managed to

withstand the force. Asarina's viny body, on the other hand, snapped apart.

I now found myself flying above the dragons. Beneath me was a clearing in the trees, no doubt created by the dragons' battle, occupied by ten-meter-long dragons. Much like Thaddeus, their backs and limbs were covered in a sturdy carapace and scales. Each dragon was a different color.

One dragon in particular caught my attention. It was somewhat smaller, somewhere around two-thirds the size of the other dragons, and it was horribly wounded. Its auburn carapace was ripped to pieces here and there all over its body, and its left membranous wing was torn and bleeding. Smoke billowed from its entire body, probably an aftereffect of the other dragons bathing it in fire multiple times over. A large gash marked its left foreleg, and its tail wasn't moving, perhaps because it'd been broken. There was no mistaking it; this was the stray dragon.

There was no helping how things had turned out, considering the stray hadn't had an ego until moments ago, but it must've put up enough of a fight that the others had deemed it unmanageable. Glancing at the other dragons, I could see some had chunks of meat missing from their legs, as if something had bitten into them, blood flowing out of their wounds. They weren't hurting the stray because they wanted to; they simply had no choice but to use violence so that they could capture it.

Even now, the stray was flapping its wings into the face of the dragon trying to restrain it and kicking out its back feet to try and escape. Another dragon rammed into the stray from the side, then snapped down at the base of its torn wing as if to tear it off completely.

"Stooooop!"

The moment before it could, I forced my way among them. Nobody here had a translation runestone, so they didn't understand my words, but the simple act of yelling drew their attention.

The dragons all snapped their heads up at me as if they'd been struck. How shocking a scene was this to them? They couldn't even imagine a human in such a remote location to begin with, and here was one flying above their heads.

If these were senseless monsters, maybe they wouldn't have given any

thought to what they saw. Perhaps my servants, well-experienced in combat as they were now, could've dealt with such an unexpected event immediately. The dragons of Draconia were different, however. The incomprehensible situation froze them in place.

Using that single moment of stasis, I activated my newly acquired power.

“Misty Lodge!”

It was the one and only magic I could use, the power I'd acquired as a spiritualist by forming a contract with Salvia. With Shiran's guidance, I'd somehow managed to grasp the very beginnings of this power on the way here.

White mist poured out of my entire body. I could feel my mana rapidly draining as a thick fog enveloped the whole area. Visibility plummeted in less than a second, becoming no more than a few meters.

“Graaawr!”

The dragons quickly realized that this was a smokescreen. One of them immediately flapped its wings, unleashing a gale, but all this did was stir up the mist. This fog was a fragment of a high monster's power. It was magic mist tinged with mana. There was no way it would amount to a simple smokescreen. It wasn't so weak that a gentle breeze could disperse it.

Using that time, I landed on the ground. I tumbled about a few times to kill my momentum, when a dragon swung at me with its claw.

“Graaah!”

It had likely guessed my rough location based on the sound of my landing. The attack was haphazard, but the area of effect matched its enormous body. I was well within the trajectory of its claw as it gouged out the earth. If I took a direct hit from this, it'd be difficult for me to continue fighting. It'd be hard to spot the attack by sight in this thick fog, so there was no way I could have dodged such a huge claw after spotting it only a few meters away—normally, that is.

“Gh! Oooh!”

I used my mana-reinforced strength to kick off the ground and managed to evade the massive incoming claw by leaping high into the air. The trick here was

in the mist. The white fog covering a good fifty-square-meter area was part of the Misty Lodge. In other words, it was part of Salvia herself. She knew everything going on within her, so using the mental path, she'd informed me of what I needed to know.

Even with the claw just now, I'd known it was coming the moment the dragon raised its foreleg to strike. Despite the roughshod nature of the attack, I'd also been able to read the trajectory perfectly. The magic known as the Misty Lodge was no simple smokescreen. It was also a form of perception magic.

If I had to mention one drawback, it was that the thickness of the fog influenced both how badly it obstructed my enemy's vision and how effective the perception magic was. That, combined with the terribly high mana consumption rate, made maintaining such an effective fog feasible only for a short amount of time.

The mist started to disperse not even five seconds after it was activated. Still, that was more than enough for me to reach the stray dragon. I'd leapt into the turmoil on my own because I'd estimated this to be the case.

"Graaah!"

Unfortunately, the moment before I reached the stray—with the dragon who'd attacked me hot on my heels—I was caught completely off guard. Because of the poor visibility, the dragon's attack had thrown it off balance. It had decided that it wouldn't be able to catch up, and instead spewed fire from its mouth at me on the spur of the moment.

This attack was tenacious. I could sense a great hostility toward humans and even a hint of fear. But above all else, there was an unshakeable resolve behind it. This had overthrown my predictions.

Even without the mental path, even without the ability to communicate, I understood its feelings. This dragon simply wanted to protect its home. This was an unfortunate misunderstanding. Knowing that, I had to stop them.

I turned around and held my left hand out toward the incoming blaze. I was equipped with the Asarina Bracers that Rose had given me in Diospyro. Blue and yellow decorations ornamented the black bracer on my left hand, whereas red and green ones ornamented the one on my right.

I channeled mana into them, and immediately my left bracer shone with blue light. They weren't merely pieces of defensive equipment; they were a magic tool that Rose had specially made for me. She'd already succeeded in duplicating basic elemental-magic runestones, and the Asarina Bracers made use of them.

The primary use for the bracers was defense through offense. The runestones could only activate an attack of a fixed power and nature, so they weren't very versatile, but if I limited what I used them for, that wasn't much of a problem. One other flaw was that they consumed more mana compared to regular magic, but it also allowed someone who couldn't use magic to do so.

I activated grade 2 water magic in the form of a bullet. It was far too weak to inflict damage on a dragon, but I could use it to intercept an attack. Without waiting for the water bullet to meet the blaze, I channeled mana into my right bracer too. A green light shone, and I activated grade 2 wind magic.

"Oooh!"

My water magic lost to the vigor of the breath attack, so I slammed my wind-wreathed sword right into it.

"Gh!"

I managed to disperse a fair amount of the fire, but a dragon's breath was as fierce as one would expect. The remaining fire kept going and threatened to scorch my skin.

The instant before it could, a warm power wrapped around me. I was rather surprised by this phenomenon, but it all made sense when I remembered what I had stowed in my chest pocket—the Rosette Dagger I'd gotten together with these bracers.

Built for self-defense, the dagger dampened any mana-based attacks regardless of element. The dragon's breath, which should've inflicted some amount of damage, instead vanished in vain, leaving only light burns on my sword-wielding hand, which I'd thrust into the flame. Fortunately, it wasn't enough to hinder me.

Protected by the magic tools charged with the feelings of the girl who'd once

told me that she existed to protect me, I ran the remaining few meters to the stray. I touched its burned, scaly body. The sight was heartbreaking, but I couldn't do anything about the wounds right now.

"Calm down," I said to it. So long as we were connected by the mental path, the meaning behind my words would be conveyed.

I turned around, my back to the stray dragon. Seven other dragons stood before me. There was no way I could handle all of them as I was now. I'd lost the advantage of my preemptive attack, and I'd used most of my mana already, so I couldn't maintain the Misty Lodge's magic to an effective degree. The enhanced perception it had provided was pretty much gone, and visibility was practically back to normal. The mist actually had the effect of grade 1 glamor magic too, but that didn't do anything against opponents of this level.

About ten seconds had passed. Buying that paltry amount of time was all I was capable of... Or perhaps that wasn't the right way to put it. Considering my current strength, this was a good result. Normally, I would've used all of my precious magic tools to harden my defenses. I'd trained all this time focusing on evasion and counterattacking, so my fighting style leaned hard toward defense.

Because this was my field of expertise, I'd managed to hold out for ten whole seconds despite running headlong into the fray without thinking about what would happen next. I'd done what I was capable of. Moreover, this was largely the end result I'd expected. Having gotten this far, it was more than enough.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, My Lord."

In the next moment, a white spider descended between myself and the dragons, her talons thudding into the earth. The palpable bloodthirst she was unleashing froze them all in place.

"Now, then. I suppose it's my job from here on out."

Her red eyes lorded over the area, sending a wave of fear through the dragons. They had no choice but to realize that taking on this spider was sure to lead to deaths among them. Nevertheless, there were seven tenacious dragons here. If they charged head-on without heeding any casualties, they could possibly win. That was, of course, if the white spider was their only opponent.

“Thanks for waiting, Master.”

Lily arrived at the flank, her white skirt fluttering in the air. She looked like a dainty girl, seemingly unreliable against these massive dragons, but in truth, she was a monster whose power approached the strength of the Great White Spider of the Depths. She stretched out her empty left hand with a smile and exercised her power.

“Partial mimicry—Devil Arm Mode.”

Everything from her left elbow down transformed into the strong and bristly arm of a bear. Her fingers elongated, each taking on the shape of a praying mantis’s scythes. A venomous liquid dripped off the blades, scorching the ground. Her palm shifted into a gaping maw filled with craggy fangs.

After having conquered the fear that’d once dominated her, Lily no longer tried to hide her monster side. That was why she could fully manifest her new power. The reason she’d chosen the most fiendish-looking transformation was because this was meant to be a threat.

Faced with the sinister menace of a devil paired with the sweetness of a girl, the dragons could no longer move. They could sense that Lily and Gerbera matched or exceeded all seven of them put together. If it came to battle, it was clear that both sides would suffer horrendous damage. To be precise, the two girls had acted in a way to make this abundantly clear to the dragons.

As a result, we were now at a stalemate. Seeing that our goal was to stall them, this was a favorable development for us. From just a little farther away, we could hear Thaddeus’s roar.

Chapter 6: The Dragons' Mediator

With Thaddeus's arrival, the dragons stayed their fangs—for now, at least. The clan still didn't know about us, so we needed to inform them of everything from square one. We decided to leave this all to Thaddeus.

At the same time, we had Thaddeus ask the dragons to leave for the time being. The stray dragon had calmed down and was no longer rampaging about, but I could tell through the mental path that it was extremely frightened. It was like a trembling child. I had to put my hand against its body every now and then to keep it calm.

Considering how wounded it was, its reaction was perfectly normal. Conversely, the dragons who'd come to capture it had also suffered a severe counterattack. They hadn't intended to wound the stray, but the situation had developed to a point where they'd had no other choice. Since things had escalated so much, it was better for both sides to back down for now. Thaddeus was of the same opinion, so he'd immediately agreed with my request.

After Thaddeus gave them a quick explanation, the dragons pulled back with him and Fukatsu. Once they left, the stray calmed down. With that, we could finally begin treating it.

"All right, then. Lily, can you heal it?" I said.

"Okay," Lily replied with a nod.

She tried to approach the stray, but it bared its snarling fangs.

Lily gave me a troubled smile. "Master..."

The stray appeared to be fine with me by its side, so I plopped my hand on top of its large head.

"Calm down. Lily is my companion. You can tell that through the mental path, can't you?"

It turned its lizard-like eyes toward me, then let out a huff. It seemed

discontent. Given its earlier rampage, this wasn't much of a surprise, but the stray appeared to be rather rowdy by nature.

I once more started petting its head to comfort it. The stray let out a purr, put away its fangs, and quietly lay down. Lily approached once more, and though it clearly remained wary of her, it didn't snarl again. Lily deployed a white glyph of healing magic in her hand.

"Hmm, this is pretty awful," she muttered.

"Can you not heal these wounds?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I can. It's just that, unlike simple fractures and gashes from sharp cuts, wounds inflicted by bites and tears caused by claws are difficult to heal. The same goes for burns. These might leave scars."

In that sense, it was the same as natural healing. I still had burn marks on my arms too. Nothing could be done about this to a certain extent.

"Also, it looks like the wing will take a bit of time. Entire parts are missing and all. It wouldn't be much of a problem with Gerbera's recovery speed... Anyway, I don't want to stick things back together all weird, so I guess we have no choice but to take it nice and slow."

"So long as there are no long-term effects. We'll just have to compromise in that respect. Anyway, all that's left is to wait for Thaddeus and them to come back while we treat—"

"Wh-Whoa!"

Lily cut me off with a surprised yelp. The stray dragon had gotten up.

"Will you calm down already, you simpleton?" In no time at all, Gerbera grabbed the dragon by the scruff of the neck and forced it back to the ground. "You haven't healed yet. Be still."

The stray had tried to run away, but it couldn't react to Gerbera's speed. It wriggled about on the ground, no match for her physical strength. Were it capable of moving its long tail, it might've been able to resist, but that hadn't been healed yet.

"What has you so displeased, anyway?" Gerbera asked with a cock of her

head.

“Spider,” Berta said.

She’d brought Thaddeus and Fukatsu here by chasing our scent. After that, she’d lain down on the ground and remained a spectator.

“This is one of that dragon’s clan members, right?” she asked.

“Hrm?”

“It should have an ego now. You may simply ask it what’s wrong after you have it take on a human form like that man does.”

“Ooh, you have a point there.”

Seeing that Gerbera was convinced, Berta huffed and closed her eyes. Incidentally, Ayame was curled up around Berta’s stomach. She looked like she was feeling really down, like she could start whimpering at any time. That was because she’d gotten a late start earlier. I hadn’t had the composure to pay her much attention, but thinking back on it, Ayame had tried to leap into action with me when I ran off. I remembered seeing her at the edge of my vision, tumbling off Berta’s head when she’d woken up in a panic. Apparently, she’d eaten too much. I decided I would comfort her later.

“Very well. How about you take on this human form right away?” Gerbera said. The stray dragon turned its eyes toward her. “Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Grrr...”

“Say, My Lord. Is this fellow perhaps incapable of turning into a human?”

“Grr...” the dragon growled briefly, affirming her question.

“No, it should be possible,” I said, shaking my head.

With no ego, the stray had remained in this form all this time. I could understand why it believed it couldn’t take a human form, but that was a needless anxiety.

“If that’s a characteristic of a dragon as a monster, then anything Thaddeus can do should be possible for any other dragon.”

I was convinced. If my guess was right, it’d be stranger if the stray couldn’t do

it.

“Calm down and give it a try,” I said.

I knelt down and put my hand on the stray dragon’s head. I closed my eyes and reached out to it through the mental path.

“Grrr...”

The tension binding the dragon’s heart unraveled just a little. Then its mana began moving. In this world, there was a law that dictated that a specific mana flow would generate a predetermined phenomenon. Using that law, dragons could turn into humans. The enormous body of the stray shrank, and at the same time, it began changing shape. Its shattered carapace turned to skin, its fangs and claws retracted, and its silhouette turned more and more human. Red hair much like a burning flame grew out. The body that had once been seven meters long from head to tail was now about my size, but it kept shrinking. Then it was about the same size as Lily, then Katou, and then kept going until it was even smaller than Kei.

“Huh?”

Before us now was a little girl who looked to be about ten years old, with red hair as long as she was tall. Unhealed wounds still marked her scrawny body, and torn wings grew from her back. She had a long tail, its end covered in a mass of bones. Dragon scales were still visible here and there on her face and limbs. She didn’t seem to be as good at transforming into a human as Thaddeus was.

Despite the grumpy look in her eyes, she was a cute little girl. I was shocked. It was completely unexpected...but maybe it shouldn’t have been. Now that I thought about it, the stray dragon had appeared somewhat smaller than the others. It turned out she was still a child.

“Aaah?”

Her voice, still hard to distinguish as that of a boy or girl, had a bluntness to it. She looked down at her hands in a daze. They were no different from human hands, aside from the scales still visible here and there.

“No way... I really changed like everyone else...?” she said, her voice

trembling as she turned her chestnut eyes my way.

Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, but once she noticed my gaze, her eyes narrowed sharply. Her already grumpy-looking expression now had a fiendish air to it.

“The hell are you staring at?” she said, her choice of words about as curt as I’d expected.

“O-Oh. Sorry.”

Still, that was my fault. Even if she was just a child, she was a naked girl. It was rude to stare, so I averted my eyes.

“Ah...” the girl mumbled, a tinge of regret in her voice.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing...”

This puzzled me, but I didn’t turn to look at her again. In any case, we had to get her some clothes. We could talk after that.

“I think we’ve got some spare clothing in our luggage. Wait here a sec, I’ll go get something.”

Because we’d suddenly dashed away from our campsite, Fukatsu had brought us our luggage while Thaddeus was negotiating with the dragons.

“Ah. Hey!” Lily said in a panic as I began looking for clothes in our luggage.

I turned around because I sensed someone approaching me. The naked stray dragon was right behind me as Lily chased her, still in the middle of casting healing magic. The stray looked up at me with a sullen expression.

“What?” she asked bluntly.

“Umm, that’s my line.”

“It’s not like healing magic stops working if I move around.”

She had a point, but it wasn’t really a good reason to follow me around. Still, I felt it would worsen her mood even more if I pointed that out. I couldn’t understand children. I had a little brother, but he wasn’t that much younger than me, so the experience didn’t seem particularly useful for someone this

young. Although, seeing how she was a dragon, it didn't really matter how much experience I had with human children.

"Oh well," I muttered, seeing no reason to pay this any mind.

I went back to fishing through our stuff, when suddenly the stray reached into the luggage on her own.

"H-Hey."

"I'll take this," she said after grabbing something.

"That's mine. It's men's clothing."

"Whatever."

The dragon put on the shirt Gerbera had made for me, finally looking slightly satisfied. Because of her wings, she couldn't wear it properly, so her bony shoulders remained exposed. If Lily or the like were to dress like this, it would give them an erotic air, but that wasn't the case for a scrawny child.

"So? Why did you try to run away?" I asked.

Her fellow dragons had chased her and nearly caught her, so she had put up a fight. She hadn't had an ego at the time, so there wasn't much that could've been done about that. However, right now, she had a proper sense of reason. She could at least understand that the dragons bore her no ill will.

"You tried to run away when we mentioned Thaddeus coming back. Why is that?" I elaborated.

"I don't..." the dragon started with a frown. "I mean..."

She'd ended up keeping quiet before when I'd tried to urge her on, so I patiently waited for a while. Before long, she slowly forced out words.

"I don't want to return to the stupid settlement..."

"Why's that?"

"If Thaddeus comes here, he'll drag me back. No way I'm going back," she answered. It wasn't much of an explanation, but she began elaborating a little at a time. "I've always been locked up. Always. From the very moment I was born. I never had freedom. Even though everyone else was allowed outside, I

was the only one locked away inside that damn cave. I hated it... But I had no choice..."

That reminded me that Thaddeus had said the clan held the egoless stray dragon in the settlement. I'd never really tried imagining what that implied. Suitable measures had to be taken to keep a winged beast confined to a settlement. Apparently, they'd done so using a cave.

"But you didn't have an ego at the time, right?" Lily asked curiously while casting her healing magic. "How did you hate it?"

"It's simple, Lily," Gerbera said. "She's basically the same as I was."

"How so?"

"Before meeting our lord, I had something close to a consciousness. It was but a fleeting thing that one couldn't really call an ego, though."

That was exactly what had caused the white arachne to run wild. Similarly, the stray dragon had likely possessed a faint consciousness. That was why she'd run away from the settlement. Up until now, we thought that she'd escaped by accident, but that wasn't the case. That was the reason she'd been so desperate to get away when the others came to capture her.

Now that I thought more about it, it had been quite some time since her escape, yet she hadn't attacked a single human settlement. Perhaps that hadn't been a simple coincidence. She'd avoided attacking humans precisely because she'd had a faint consciousness.

"I lived for near eternity within a deep slumber," Gerbera said. "It had always been like that until the day I met our lord. And in her case..."

Gerbera looked down at the little girl, who was biting her lip.

"No way I'm going back..." the dragon said. The deep resentment and gloominess in her voice didn't suit a child at all. "I don't have a single good memory from being there..."

It pained me to imagine having been locked inside a cave since birth without ever having the chance to go outside. Her obstinacy was born of fear from being forced to live in such an unreasonable environment.

I was beginning to understand. The red-haired girl before me was, in truth, an enormous dragon. She had a foul mouth and a willful look...but beneath all that, she was exactly as she appeared: a ten-year-old girl.

"I'm never going back. Who the hell would want to?" she muttered, her voice shaking.

"That can't be allowed," another voice said.

The dragons had returned with Thaddeus at the fore. None of them were in their true forms. Much like Thaddeus, they wore clothes native to northern Aker and couldn't be distinguished from normal humans. One among them stepped up next to Thaddeus. She was a woman with red hair. Among the seven dragons that came with Thaddeus, three of them were women.

"You may not leave the settlement without the elder's permission. That is the law of Draconia."

They had apparently overheard some of our conversation. The stray dragon's shoulders jolted, and her mouth flapped open and closed. She couldn't speak. Her expression stiffened with fear. I could tell at a glance that she was terrified. Her eyes darted around the area like a small animal's and settled on my figure. She shot up to her feet and hid behind me. With that, she finally managed to find her voice.

"B-But Thaddeus leaves the settlement all the damn time," she said. Her choice of words was strong-willed, but her voice wavered.

"Thaddeus is the explorer. He has the elder's permission," the woman said, glaring down at the stray. "*We must* bring you back to the settlement."

Seeing that the dragon hadn't come all the way here for fun, she was justified in this statement. Judging by the suppressed emotions I could hear in her voice, this woman might've sympathized with the stray's circumstances, but her sense of duty painted over such personal sentiments.

"We don't want to get rough. Be reasonable," the woman said bluntly.

"But I don't..." the stray murmured, hanging her head.

The hand she gripped my clothes with trembled. Her breaths were short. It

was easy to guess what was going through her head. The majority of her wounds had already been healed by Lily's magic. Her only choice now was to turn into a dragon again, recklessly flail about, and then run away. She had to be brooding on it. It was a hasty and childish train of thought, but I couldn't make fun of her for it.

She'd been confined to maintain the secrecy of the hidden settlement. If she'd possessed a will, there could've been another way of handling this. But she hadn't. As she was now, though, she didn't need to be locked up. She could pass her time normally in the settlement.

However, Draconia—or perhaps the very existence of her brethren—was already the living incarnation of a nightmare for her. Nothing could be done about that, especially considering how she was still a child. She couldn't control her emotions. It had been painful. It had been lonely. It had been so hard for her.

The dragons of the settlement had almost had no choice but to confine her. Still, it'd probably been hard for them to make such a logical decision, especially since it was impossible to get a child this age to accept such circumstances. That said, the dragons couldn't possibly step down now that they'd come all this way to fulfill their duty.

Neither side could give in, so a breakdown was inevitable—if they were the only parties here, that is.

“Could you please hold on for a minute?” I cut in. “I'd like to say something.”

“Very well. Please go ahead, Lord Takahiro. We've heard about you from Thaddeus,” the woman, who seemed to be the leader of the group, said courteously.

Thaddeus had apparently spoken very well of me. He'd likely mentioned my contract with Salvia. I knew how important the Misty Lodge was to the residents of Draconia. Thanks to that, they would hear me out.

“It's impossible for her to leave the settlement without permission. That's what you said, right?” I asked.

“Yes, that's right,” Thaddeus answered. “It is strictly forbidden for members

of the clan to arbitrarily leave the settlement so that we do not risk exposing its existence to the world.”

“But you’re allowed to leave.”

“Yes, but that’s because—”

“In that case, we just need to get permission for her too, right?” I said. Thaddeus looked like he’d been caught off guard by this. “Frequently going in and out will definitely increase the risk of exposing the settlement, but if we carefully consider the risk and take appropriate action, it shouldn’t be a problem for her to leave. Am I wrong?”

It was, in fact, true that Thaddeus could leave the settlement. It wasn’t impossible.

The dragons all exchanged glances.

Thaddeus suddenly flashed me a smile and said, “I see. How about it, Kath? I think it’s a good idea.”

“If she has permission...then yes, it isn’t a problem,” the woman with red hair said with a nod.

“You heard them,” I said, looking down at the stray dragon clinging to me. “So long as you get permission, you don’t have to go back.”

“Huh? Wh-What?” Her eyes darted about in confusion, her narrow understanding preventing her from keeping up with our conversation. “B-But how am I supposed to get permission?”

“The only way is to talk it out. You’ll get dragged back against your will at this rate. If you don’t want that, then you’ll just have to convince them.”

There was no bright future for her there, no matter how the dice fell. But what could the stray accomplish by fleeing the settlement like this? Even if she tried throwing herself into human society, it wouldn’t work with no knowledge of common sense. She could survive in the wilderness with the power of a dragon, of course, but seeing her cling to my clothes like this, it was hard to believe that living all alone deep in the forests would be good for a young girl like her.

In all likelihood, the dragons would capture her before that could happen, but that came with problems of its own. If they brought her back, the stray would become even more obstinate than before and definitely try to escape again in a desperate struggle. Given time, her wings would heal and she could fly away. Even if they tore her wings to keep that from happening, she could still move her legs. There would be countless opportunities for her to attempt another escape.

If she did escape, would they break her legs? Or would they lock her up in a cave again? Things had settled with her capture this time around, but next time it could become a fight to the death. What they needed to do right now was talk things out.

“B-By convince them, you mean go back to the settlement?!” the stray screamed, her face going pale.

I gently nodded back to her. “Yeah. You need to go back and talk things out properly.”

Her face spasmed as if she’d been betrayed. I had no intention of doing such a thing, though.

“Even if you run away because you don’t want to do this, it’ll only make things worse. You need to have a proper conversation with your elder. You’re finally able to do that now.”

“B-But! We don’t know if she’ll actually listen to me! How is this different from dragging me back against my will?!”

“It’s different,” I declared. I wasn’t trying to deceive her; I was going to take responsibility. “If you go back to talk, we’ll come with you.”

“Huh...?”

“If we do, at the very least, they’ll hear you out.”

I would be a mediator, in a sense. I was the Misty Lodge’s contractor, and she was special to the clan. Also, with everyone’s help, we could exercise our authority and make sure the stray wouldn’t be ignored.

It was possible that we could convince them to let the stray go, and it was

also possible that they would soundly refute us. The stray's wish didn't necessarily have to be granted as is. We needed a point of compromise that both parties could agree to, no matter what shape it took. If I had to mediate things to that end, then I intended to cooperate.

"How about it?" I said, lowering myself to a knee and matching her eyeline.

She averted her eyes, frowned, and hung her head. She wasn't used to such direct eye contact, which was why she acted like an awkward stray dog. Still, she definitely understood that things couldn't go on like this. She turned her chestnut eyes back up to me and stared at my face for several seconds. Then she nodded ever so slightly.

"Fine..."

"Good," I said, petting her head before standing up and turning to Thaddeus. "That's the general idea. How about you?"

"Does that mean you'll visit Draconia?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I promised Salvia I would to begin with."

"A promise with the Lady of the Misty Lodge...?"

Surprise spread among the members of the clan.

"Well, I didn't think it'd end up like this, though," I said. "Anyway, that is, of course, only if you're fine with it."

"What do you think, Kath?" Thaddeus said, turning to the woman with red hair. "Such are the words of the Lady of the Misty Lodge. We can't possibly ignore them."

"Let's confirm with the elder first. Will that do?" she asked me.

I nodded back to her. "Got it. All the same, until we get a response, I'll be taking charge of the stray dragon."

"That'll do. I have one request, however. Could we have Thaddeus accompany you? It's not that I don't trust the contractor of the Lady of the Misty Lodge, but we need a minimum level of assurance on our side."

"You good with that?" I said, turning to the stray dragon.

“Whatever.”

“You heard her. We’ve got a deal.”

With that, the woman with red hair smiled for the first time. There was relief in her expression, surely a display of her true feelings.



After that, all the dragons aside from Thaddeus and the stray left in a hurry. They were immediately heading to the settlement to check with the elder. The little stray watched this in a daze as I plopped my hand on her head. She finally came back to her senses and looked up at me. She tightly pursed her lips and quickly brushed off my hand. She then gripped the hem of my clothes and pouted with a dissatisfied look. I really did have problems understanding children. Still, I could at least tell that she didn’t hate me, so I gave her a lopsided smile.

“Wha?!”

Immediately after that, the girl yelped. That was because Lily had suddenly hugged her from behind.



“Let’s get along, okay?” Lily said.

“Wh-What’s with you?! L-Let go!”

“Now, now. I’m not done treating you. No struggling.”

“Y-You don’t need to hug me, dammit!”

“It’s good to see you so energetic,” Gerbera said, walking up to the little girl, who was now bright red and flailing about. “Well, we’ll be together for some time to come. Let’s get along, shall we?”

“Stop rubbing my head, you idiot! And get off me!”

“Hmm. Now that I look at her like this, her impertinence has a certain charm to it,” Gerbera remarked.

“I think she’s just normally cute,” Lily added.

“Kuuu!”

Seeing Lily hugging her and Gerbera ruffling her head, Ayame didn’t want to get left out and jumped in. The little girl screamed and wailed.

“Takahiro,” Thaddeus called to me as I watched them. Thankfully, he didn’t use the “lord” title.

“Hm?”

“Thank you.”

I gave him a shrug. There was nobody here to stop this cheerful scene as it went on a while longer.

Chapter 7: On a Beautiful Starry Night *Iino Yuna's* *POV*

Having parted ways with my fellow exploration team members, I left Serrata to find out more about the fake savior. I figured it best to head directly to the site of the news, so I went east out of Lorenz County and toward the neighboring country of Viscum.

As one of the Three Eastern Kingdoms, Viscum was located north of Fort Ebenus. Back when the exploration team was still staying at the fortress, the members who'd withdrawn from our ranks had started their new journeys by entering this country. In other words, the fake savior could be here too.

I wandered from town to town asking about the fake savior and crossed into Viscum. For a normal human, even if they wasted no time and devoted themselves entirely to walking, it would take them a week to cross the border using the route I took. However, with the legs of the Skanda, I could run the same distance in the same number of days while also gathering information the entire time. I left the town first thing in the morning, covered a day's worth of travel in under an hour, and gathered information while the sun was out. It was an extremely packed schedule, but it was entirely manageable.

I couldn't get any useful information in Viscum on the fake savior, though. I was told that several saviors were staying with the royal family, but Viscum royalty had met the exploration team in person before at Fort Ebenus. It was hard to believe that the royal family could be tricked by a fake.

It was probably safe to assume that the fake hadn't come here. My search ended in vain, but at least no one was being deceived. I moved on from Viscum into Coppard County of the Empire. I didn't find the fake savior here either, but I did at least hear rumors of them.

"Bann Viscounty and Dickson Viscounty," I muttered to myself. "Small territories to the north of Coppard County?"

I was in a room that I'd booked for the night at an inn, getting my thoughts in order as I unbuttoned my blazer.

"I'm glad I heard the rumors about the fake savior being spotted...but unfortunately, the rumors aren't fixed to one location."

I took off my blazer and placed it on the bed. Then I took off my skirt and shirt and folded them atop it.

"It's not like they have trains or cars here, so it's hard to believe that there's only one fake. Criminals of the same kind all appearing at once? No, maybe they're a group of criminals working together?"

Now naked, I picked up a moderately sized cloth. I used the runestone I had on hand to warm up a bucket of water I'd gotten from the inn's staff. Soaking the cloth in the hot water, I used it to scrub myself down. The heat of the water prickled my skin, but it instantly cooled in the air, leaving my body feeling chilly instead. I thought of how nice it'd be to soak in a bath. I let out a sigh and scowled.

It had been two weeks since I parted with the exploration team. Well, even before that, I'd been running around nonstop from the moment I arrived in this world. Fatigue was starting to catch up with me. Even though my body was abnormally sturdy now, I still felt both physical and mental weariness. I'd gotten used to traveling on my own, but functioning in an unfamiliar land still wore me out.

I started to think back to when I'd last taken it easy, and a certain boy came to mind. Now I remembered. The few days I'd spent with them had been the first and last period of relaxation I'd had since we came to this world. Although, perhaps it would be more appropriate to call that a period of recuperation rather than relaxation.

I wonder what he's up to now... He'd said that he needed to fix his broken vehicle first, so maybe he was in a town in Aker somewhere trying to get a runestone. As I thought about that, a flaxen-haired girl appeared next to his image. The two of them suited each other so well. Then even more people gathered around their images, each and every one indispensable to him. He was surely continuing his journey alongside all of them. Conversely, I was...

My body shuddered, bringing me back to my senses. I'd apparently zoned out, and my body had cooled down considerably. I shook my head and threw the cloth in my hand into the bucket. I put on the loose clothing I used as sleepwear and walked across the room to the window and opened it. I leaned on the windowsill and rested my chin on my hands, then looked up at the sky from my second-story room. A beautiful starry sky spread out above me.

Nobody could keep up with me. That was what he'd told me. There was probably some truth to it, but that was fine. If I could defeat evil like that, then I didn't mind.

"Hey, Yu? Why do you find bad guys so irredeemable?"

Was my fatigue causing this? I spent the time thinking about that guy and other past events. That had also happened on a beautiful starry night. It was shortly after the high school entrance ceremony, during a sleepover at my place with my best friend since middle school, Todoroki Miya—Todo. She'd brought dango as a present.

After pulling me out to the veranda, she'd smiled and said, *"Okay, Yu! Let's watch the moon tonight!"*

"Why this all of a sudden? It's not moon viewing season yet. It's still May," I'd told her.

"Awww, come on. I brought dango and everything."

Unlike me, Todo was an energetic and bubbly girl. She could be a little bit of an airhead and a little bit of an eccentric, and she sometimes did crazy things. This had been one such instance. As if to put her haphazard planning on display, the moon had been just a little larger than a half-moon—a very unimpressive showing. Still, the stars in the cloudless night sky had been very beautiful.

"You wanna do this at my place next time? Mattie and Nordy have gotten pretty big. You haven't seen them for a bit, yeah? You might be in for a shock."

As we chatted, Todo had started peering through a handmade telescope she'd made during an event she'd attended recently. She'd cheerfully talked about how they'd gotten cheap magnifying glasses from a thrift store and had taken them apart to make telescopes.

I'd also been invited to that event, but I hadn't participated. It had overlapped with my regular kendo classes, so I'd turned Todo down. That was why this little moon viewing session had been a form of amends, in a sense.

All the same, I would've hung out with her regardless. Honestly, it never mattered what the pretext was. It could be a study session, a pajama party, or anything else. We would always clean off the garden chairs out on the cramped veranda, take a seat, and chat in hushed voices. Our conversations had been about silly things, but I'd always had fun.

"Oh yeah," she'd said. "I studied up on lenses a bit, unrelated to watching the stars. Stuff like refraction and whatnot. I think we're gonna study it in physics next year."

"Hmm. I'll be doing social sciences, though. I'm planning to go to law school after graduation and all."

"Huh? I knew you were doing social sciences, but you've already decided on your major in university too?"

"I didn't tell you?"

"Nope. Hmm. So you've already planned it out. You sure are organized when it comes to stuff like this."

"I mean, we already have to pick between literature and science come fall, right? You should put some thought into this."

"Aah, I guess we do. Law school, huh? Maybe I'll do that too."

"Decide on your career course on your own."

"I suppose I should..."

I could never take my eyes off of Todo, what with her eccentric behavior and all. As for her... She must've had her own reasons for sticking around me. Or maybe she didn't. Either way, she was my precious friend.

"Hey, Yu? Why do you find bad guys so irredeemable?"

This had come up during our moon viewing session.

"Yu, you're gonna join the police force, right? Why exactly do you dislike

people who do bad things so much?"

When she'd asked that, her usual cheery smile had disappeared and the atmosphere around her had changed completely. It was always a shock whenever she acted like that.

"What do you mean? Isn't that normal?" I'd asked.

"So...in other words, you don't really have a reason?"

I'd nodded back to her, and Todo's usual smile had returned.

"Ha ha. That's just like you."

"What do you mean?"

Seeing me frown, Todo had replied with her usual bubbly attitude.

"I really, really love that part of you."

"Wh-What are you saying?"

I'd started blushing, and she'd smiled at me affectionately.

"For example, say I did something bad. You'd come and stop me, right, Yu?"

"Todo...?"

"But I'm a little worried. Are you going to be able to stay that way?"

I had no idea what she'd meant.

"Just always be the Yu that I love, okay?"

Todo could be an airhead, but sometimes she was very sharp. What had she seen in me back then? After all this time, I still thought about that for some reason. I decided I would ask her when we next met. There was so much that I wanted to talk to her about.

As I sank deep into thoughts and memories, I fell asleep.



"What happened here...?"

Unlike yesterday, gray clouds covered the early afternoon sky. Rain drizzled on top of me. I'd dropped by eastern Bann Viscounty, where the fake savior was

rumored to be, and entered the first village I found. Or I suppose, what used to be a village.

It was in ruins. Trampled remnants of houses were smothered in mud. The fields had been devoured, and the roads had been torn up. Even the walls protecting the village had been totally demolished, only a shadow of their former glory.

“Was it monsters?”

Traces that looked like claw marks were visible on the rubble from the walls. Elsewhere, there were what looked like devoured monster corpses, so monsters were likely the cause of this damage. I walked around the village as rain drizzled on my overcoat. The entire area was dead silent, but perhaps this was appropriate for the scenery of a ravaged village.

“There aren’t any bodies...”

After walking a little more, I figured out why.

“Graves.”

Even though nearly all the buildings had been destroyed, the graveyard remained untouched, presumably made after whatever had happened here. The gravestones were simple markers made from thick branches; they had obviously been put together quickly.

I supposed they hadn’t had much choice. There were a great number of them, after all. I estimated somewhere around a hundred graves. Considering the scale of the village, that meant nearly all of its residents had died. By necessity, an outsider must have dug this vast number of graves.

“Were you the one to dig these?” I asked.

The person standing in front of one of the graves, wearing the dignified armor of a knight, turned around to face me. She was a young woman with smooth black hair who looked to be somewhere in her early twenties. For a moment, I thought she was a visitor like me, but her facial features were those of a local. Rather than just being a serious person, she gave the impression that she had a stiff personality. She somehow reminded me of our leader’s assistant, Kuriyama.

I recognized her armor's design. "You're a knight of the Holy Order, right?" I asked.

"That's right. And you are?" she said with a quizzical look.

"I'm Iino Yuna, a visitor affiliated with the exploration team."

"A visitor...?" The woman's expression hardened and she went on guard.

I could immediately tell why, so I said, "Please wait. I'm not a fake."

I'd called myself a visitor in a region where there were rumors of a fake savior. If this woman knew of these rumors, it was inevitable she'd believe I was trying to deceive her.

"Not a fake, you say?" she said, creasing her brows. "Are you capable of proving that?"

"P-Proof...? Are you telling me to show you?"

The woman nodded and reached for the hilt of her sword. The air was tense. The powers I'd obtained as a visitor warned me of the threat this woman posed. She was quite a skilled knight. The sensation was similar to what I'd felt when I first met Shiran.

Shiran could boost her strength using the contract she had with spirits, but even without that, she was among the best of the Alliance Knights. It was no small matter to be in the vicinity of that strength. It seemed the Holy Order's reputation of being the elite who fought alongside saviors wasn't a lie.

How troublesome... I thought. She could probably exchange a few blows against a regular warrior, but I had a nickname among the cheaters. What's more, one-on-one close-quarters combat was my specialty. If it came to a fight, I could probably win in an instant. I didn't want to aggravate the situation, though.

Seeing the bothered look on my face, the woman gripped her sword, her stern brow furrowing. "If you're unable to give me proof..."

At this rate, she was going to take a swing at me. The only reason she didn't was because someone stopped her.

"Wait, Eleanor," a voice said from the side just as she narrowed her eyes to

strike. “This lady here is a true savior.”

The voice belonged to a bald man with tightly packed muscles. He wore the same armor as the woman, but the color of his skin stood out beneath it. It was a dark shade that pretty much wasn’t seen in this world. Because of that, he’d left quite the impression on me.

“If I remember right...you were at Fort Ebenus?” I said.

“So you do remember me. It has been a long time.”

The man I’d once met in front of our leader’s room in Fort Ebenus bowed deeply before me, his face remaining as still as a rock.



The man introduced himself as Sir Gordon Cavill. He was the vice marshal of the Holy Order and the commander of its Second Company. He’d been with the Holy Order’s marshal at Fort Ebenus, but he’d been dispatched here as the Second Company’s commander.

“So you came here to deal with the fake savior?” I asked. “And he’s the one responsible for this destruction?”

“Yes. That is the result of our investigation,” he answered.

Much like me, the Holy Order had assumed that monsters had attacked this village. Residents of the neighboring village had discovered the ruins two days ago, and according to Gordon’s investigation, a person calling himself a savior had visited a neighboring village three days before that and had received a warm welcome. The boy had been wearing peculiar clothes much like ours—in other words, a school uniform—and apparently had enough skill to at least defeat monsters. Well, if he didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to pretend to be a savior. The problem was that he’d visited this village next.

“Considering the timing, it doesn’t sound like a coincidence,” I said.

“We believe the same.”

“But, if so...it makes me doubt something. Was the person who visited the neighboring village really just a fake?”

I had come here to verify the rumors of a fake savior, but from what I’d heard,

another possibility came to mind.

“The fact that monsters were the ones who attacked this village bothers me,” I said, reminded of a similar incident. “Sir Gordon, do you know who Kudou Riku is?”

“So you know of him too...”

One of the culprits behind the attack on Fort Tilia, Kudou Riku, had the ability to manipulate monsters. He could make them attack a village if he wanted. If that boy, who’d claimed to be the Demon King, was behind this, then a lot of things made sense. Actually, if it wasn’t him, then I had no idea how the village had been so thoroughly destroyed. I was sure the Demon King was finally on the move.

“Hm...? Hang on, Kudou Riku’s ability isn’t suited for direct confrontation,” I noted. “In that case, how could he have the skills to defeat monsters on his own? No, it’s still possible.”

As I sank into thought, I was suddenly reminded of the incident when Shiran had returned to Fort Tilia with members of the home team under her protection. Several bull wrigglers had attacked them, and I’d dealt with the situation. Kudou had been manipulating those monsters to put on a show.

“As a matter of fact, Kudou Riku can use his ability to put on any kind of act he wants.”

The doppelqueen Anton could pretend to be him too. Either way would work.

“Miss Iino, it seems you are more familiar than us with the Army of Darkness and its lord,” Gordon said.

“What’s that?”

“That is what we call the culprit behind the attack on Fort Tilia, the Lord of Darkness. If you happen to have detailed information on him, would you mind cooperating with us, madam?”

“Cooperating?”

“We are currently deployed throughout this region, though sparsely, following the tracks of the one claiming to be a savior. If you are chasing this

same imposter, then it would be reassuring to have you with us, madam.”

“I see.”

If there was an organization chasing the fake savior, then I had no qualms with working alongside them. It wasn’t a certainty yet, but if the fake savior was indeed Kudou Riku, then I could offer a lot in terms of information. Plus, with my combat potential, my help would be of even greater significance.

Kudou Riku’s forces, made up of a huge army of monsters, were a substantial threat. Even among all the cheaters, Kudou was one of the strongest. The sheer mass of bodies would probably crush the exploration team’s common warriors. The only weakness I could think of was that Kudou tended to expend his forces in battle, so a series of fights would weaken him. Nonetheless, as a cheater and one of the exploration team’s strongest members, I should be able to confront him head-on.

There were personal benefits to cooperating with the Holy Order too. There was a limit to how much information I could gather running around on my own. It would be handy to have access to an organization’s intelligence network. Still, there was a reason I hadn’t agreed to this right away.

“Please, wait a moment,” I said. “Before that, I’d like to meet someone who has actually seen the fake savior. Is that possible?”

“You’d like to meet them?”

“Yes. I might be able to figure something out if I speak to them directly.”

This could also prevent me from getting overly eager like I had some time ago. Gordon appeared to be an honest man, but we could easily have a difference of opinion.

“Did any of the villagers survive?” I asked. “If so, I’d like to question them.”

Gordon shook his head. “No, unfortunately not...”

“I see... In that case, I’d like to go to the neighboring village. I should be able to learn something from the villagers there, right?”

I could make it to the closest village within the day if I ran, and it wouldn’t cost me much time. However, Gordon looked troubled by this idea.

“I can’t?” I asked.

“Of course you can, madam. But if you are going to the neighboring village, then I was thinking that one of us should accompany you.”

“You want to go with me?”

“We do not intend to get in the way, of course. It’s just that, in this situation where a fake savior is about, allowing you to go on your own...”

Gordon trailed off. It was clear what he was worried about.

“So you’re saying...I could be mistaken for the fake savior?”

“With all due respect, madam,” he said with a grave nod, “you may be suspected of being an impostor, just as Eleanor did earlier. We got by this time because I recognized you, but if not for that, things could have gotten dangerous.”

Even if Eleanor had attacked me, I could’ve suppressed her. Still, it would definitely have been inconvenient.

“Very well.”

I weighed my options and decided to agree with Gordon’s proposal. It was certainly going to affect my travel speed, but if I could make use of the Holy Order’s intelligence network, then it balanced out fine.

What’s more, I wanted to confirm for myself what kind of organization the Holy Order was. Louis had given me false information regarding Fort Tilia’s attack, but Travis had also been with him. I didn’t want to believe that it had been their intention, and I didn’t want to imagine that Travis was in league with this misinformation, but the situation didn’t foster absolute faith in the Holy Order.

I wanted to use this opportunity to confirm their intentions. Also...just in passing, I figured this would be a good chance to check if Travis was circulating unjust suspicions about Majima Takahiro through the Holy Order. If the misinformation had spread, I could possibly correct it.

Not that I wanted to help him or anything. He was an unpleasant guy. I hated him. Like, *really* hated him. But that had nothing to do with this. The mistake

had to be corrected. That was all there was to it.

And after reconfirming that obvious truth in my heart, I got the conversation moving again.

“Okay, so who’s going with me?” I asked, figuring that it would be Eleanor, seeing as she was a woman.

“I will,” Gordon answered, contrary to my expectations.

“You’ll go personally?” I asked.

“This involves attending to an esteemed savior,” he said, nodding gravely. “The one to do it must be of appropriate status.”

“I see...”

It was a little surprising, but after I gave it some thought, I realized it was rather convenient for me. If I was going to be in contact with the Holy Order either way, it was better to have a person of standing with me. It’d also be faster to persuade someone important if I was to dispel the misunderstanding around that guy.

“Understood. I’ll be in your care, Sir Gordon.”

And just like that, I ended up working with the Holy Order.

Chapter 8: Linking Back Up and Reporting

Using the time we had while the dragons went to get permission for us to visit Draconia, we returned to Diospyro. We had to get the others if we were going to head to the settlement, so we went straight to the inn to pick them up.

“It is good to see you safe and sound, Master,” Rose said in greeting.

It’d been a few days since we’d parted. Even though a slight puppetlike awkwardness remained in her expression, her smile was a lot more natural than before. Her gaze wandered over my entire body as if she was checking for injuries, then she made a gesture as if letting out a relieved sigh. Beside her, Katou was doing something similar. The two of them already had very similar facial features, so it really made them look like sisters.

“Allow me to help,” Rose said as she cheerfully walked up to me.

“Oh, thanks.”

She started helping me get out of my traveling gear. Lily was usually the one to take care of me in all sorts of ways, but right now, it looked like she’d decided to leave that role to her little sister because Rose hadn’t seen me for a short while. Instead, Lily was taking care of someone else.

“By the way, Senpai, who’s this child?” Katou asked, looking at the red-haired girl Lily was fussing over.

The girl was wearing the shirt Gerbera had made me kind of like it was a yukata. She had bandages wrapped tightly around her arms and legs, and she carried a large knapsack on her back. Katou stared at her in interest.

“I’m also curious,” Rose said, cocking her head as she took off my mantle. “From the looks of it, she seems to be your new servant.”

“Huh?” Katou uttered just as the girl took off her knapsack.

In the next instant, torn membranous wings spread out, leaving the knapsack empty. We’d used it to stow away her wings. She chuckled away the mantle in

her hand, then took off the bandages that'd been hiding her skin, revealing the scales that still remained here and there on her limbs.

"Haah. That was really uncomfortable," the girl said in irritation.

"A dragon boy...?" Katou muttered. "No, a girl?"

"That's right. Also, I ain't no servant or nothing," the girl said, directing her unyielding eyes at Rose. "Hey, Takahiro, is this another one of your servants?"

"T-Takahiro...?" Rose repeated, so bewildered at the girl's crude tone that she momentarily stopped moving. "Master, what is she exactly?"

There was a dubious tone in Rose's voice. To her, it was impossible to even think a servant would face me with such a blunt attitude.

"Right. She's the stray dragon," I explained.

"The name's Lobivia," the red-haired girl said, spreading out her wings and puffing out her chest. "I got it from Takahiro. A cool and thorny name, don'tcha think?"

"Thorny?"

Rose sounded baffled, but it made sense that she didn't understand. A lobivia was a type of cactus known as a lily cactus. It was one of the flower names Mikihiro had taught me when I told him that I'd been naming my servants after flowers.

I was a little curious why Mikihiro was familiar with the likes of a lily cactus. I assumed he probably saw it in a game or something. He'd drawn me a picture of one too. It looked like a round cactus with a large flower growing from it. It was actually kind of cute.

In that sense, Lobivia was misunderstanding the meaning, but either way, she liked the name. Seeing her in such a good mood, Thaddeus gave me an ambiguous smile. He'd told me that she already had a name in the settlement, but that was only after Lobivia had begged me to give her one.

She extremely disliked being called by her old name, so even Thaddeus called her Lobivia now. The gulf between her and the other dragons of the settlement was still very deep. On the other hand, Lobivia didn't put up much of a wall with

Thaddeus. At the very least, so long as he called her Lobivia, she could keep up a conversation with him, even if she was always rather curt.

Thaddeus usually wandered around outside Draconia, so maybe Lobivia didn't recognize him as one of the settlement's dragons. It would be nice if she could interact with all the other dragons like that.

"This is Rose," I said. "Just like Lily and Gerbera, she's one of my servants. And this is Katou and Kei. The two of them are my cherished travel companions."

"Hmmm?" Lobivia gave everyone a look as I introduced them, then turned back to me. "Takahiro, even though you're a weakling, you've got a whole lotta strong servants like Lily and Gerbera, huh?"

She cocked her head innocently and tugged at my clothes. There wasn't really any intention behind the gesture, though. Perhaps it was just a show of her childishness.

"It's kinda weird," she added, a curious light in her eyes.

"Is it?" I asked.

"I mean, Draconia's elder is the strongest dragon."

"Humans are different in that regard."

"Hmmm. I don't really get humans. Well, I don't really get your servants either."

"You can come to understand us little by little," Lily said, plopping her hand on Lobivia's tiny shoulder. "We'll be together for a while. You'll figure us out naturally over time."

"That so?"

"Yup." Lily nodded, then grimaced slightly. "More importantly...Lobivia? Don't throw your clothes around. Put them away properly."

"Huh? Why the hell shou—"

"*Lobivia?*" Lily repeated, gently but firmly.

"Fine..." Lobivia said with a frown.

"Very good."

Lobivia started obediently gathering the bandages she'd tossed about. After that, she picked up her mantle and folded it up nicely. Having been a dragon without an ego just the other day, there was no way she would've known how to do this before. Lily had taught her on the way here.

After neatly putting the bandages and mantle away with her knapsack, Lobivia turned back around. Lily gave her a smile. The small red-haired girl's mouth twitched, and she averted her gaze. There was no mistaking that she was actually pleased.

"Okay, then. Lily, take care of the rest," I said.

"Huh? Takahiro? Where you going?" Lobivia asked, jolting upright and turning toward me, her eyes wide. "I'm going too!"

"I'm not going anywhere. I just need to explain things to the rest of the group in the next room. It's a little cramped in here."

This room was a little small for our entire group to be in at once. It was better if we went elsewhere to settle down and talk about the situation. If I took Lobivia with me, Thaddeus would have to come too, so it wouldn't change the head count much. Furthermore, there was also Katou to consider. She hadn't collapsed lately, but it was still difficult for her to be in the same room as men like Thaddeus and Fukatsu.

"I'll be right back," I said, giving her head a pat.

Lobivia swatted my hand away and pursed her lips when Lily suddenly hugged her from behind.

"No need to pout. I'll stay with you."

"Ah?! Hey! Lily?!"

This had become a familiar scene lately. Lobivia objected, but Lily waved me off without paying Lobivia any mind. I waved back, leaving the flailing Lobivia to her, then took Rose, Katou, and Kei out of the room.



"Takahiro, is Shiran watching the manamobile this time?" Kei asked as we walked into the hallway.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Just as she said, I’d left Shiran to stay with the others who couldn’t enter town. “I didn’t plan on bringing Lobivia with me at first, but she wouldn’t listen. Lily’s been pretty passionate about taking care of her, so it was better to keep the two of them together. That’s what Shiran said, anyway. Sorry about that, Kei.”

“Don’t be. It’s nothing you need to apologize for. I’m old enough to be fine without my sister around.”

“Right.”

The way she clenched her fists was ever so charming.

We continued chatting until we reached the other room. Once inside, Kei suddenly recalled something.

“Anyway, that girl...Lobivia? She seems to be rather moody.”

“She is. All she ever does is curse at me,” I said, smiling wryly. I couldn’t deny that Lobivia was a moody girl.

“Master,” Rose said.

“What is it?”

“About this Lobivia...”

Rose trailed off. She was being a little inarticulate. She wanted to say something, but she couldn’t bring herself to speak. I had an idea why she was acting like this, based on how she’d reacted when Lobivia talked earlier.

“Takahiro, even though you’re a weakling, you’ve got a whole lotta strong servants like Lily and Gerbera, huh?”

Her words had been innocent, and there’d been no derision behind them. Rose probably knew this, but she was definitely stuck on the fact that Lobivia had called me a weakling.

“Do you dislike her?” I asked.

“No, nothing of the sort,” Rose answered, shaking her head. “But to make such a statement as if looking down on you...”

“Hmm...”

There was, in fact, a problem with Lobivia's language and behavior. However, given her circumstances, there wasn't much we could do about it. There were things we needed to warn her about, but at the very least, I thought she was fine as she was.

"You don't need to worry about Lobivia's remarks," I said.

"But Master..."

"Despite acting like that, she's fairly attached to me."

"Is that so...?"

"It's hard to tell."

Either way, Lobivia never tried to leave my side. She probably wasn't aware of it herself, but she was anxious about being abandoned. She was still at an age where she wanted to be pampered, but she'd never experienced it in her life, so she had no idea how to react. She likely didn't even know that she desired that. She was grumpy and foul-mouthed because she had no idea what she wanted or what to do.

This was precisely why Lily practically forced a lot of physical contact with her. Her approach was a little overbearing, but it was clear that Lobivia didn't hate it. She resisted just for appearance's sake, yet she never really tried to seriously shake Lily off. In that sense, Lily understood her well. It was a bit of a discovery for me to see that Lily had such a motherly nature.

"Besides, this may sound weird, but...she feels kind of like a little brother to me. Her frankness is actually rather pleasant."

"A little brother? Not a sister?" Katou asked curiously. "Oh, right. You have a little brother, don't you?"

"Yeah. He isn't quite as impetuous as Lobivia, though."

I wondered how he was doing now. It was hard to imagine that he hadn't changed in the time I'd been gone. How was my family doing without me? So long as there was no way to return, I didn't want to think about this kind of thing too much, and I tried to stop myself from doing so as much as I could. Still, it was impossible not to think about it every now and then. I hoped they were

doing well. The time I spent with Lobivia reminded me of that nostalgic and precious sensation that I thought I'd never experience again.

"Anyways...that's how it is. You don't need to worry about Lobivia's attitude."

"If you say so, Master."

Rose agreed for now because of my mediation. Well, it was unlikely she'd get along with Lobivia right away. Roses were also thorny flowers, but it turned out that Lobivia didn't have much affinity with her. Not that I was particularly worried about it. Rose and Gerbera had had far less affinity with each other, and now they got along very well. For that to happen this time, I had to start by explaining Lobivia's personal history.

"All right. Let me tell you what happened while I was away."



"And that's the gist of it."

It didn't take me all that long to finish explaining everything.

"I see... So Lobivia has been locked away all this time," Kei muttered gloomily, moved by my story.

"No need to look so down," Katou said, gently placing her hand on Kei's shoulder. "That's how it was before, but now is different, right?"

"You're right," Kei replied with a smile. "I'd like to get along with her."

"Yeah, please do," I said. "She can be kind of blunt, but she doesn't have any ill intent. She just doesn't know how to interact with people. I'm not telling you to force yourself, but try to be her friend."

"Understood, I'll do my best."

Kei clenched her fists. She was a good girl. She and Lobivia were similar in appearance and age, so perhaps she could be Lobivia's first friend.

"Anyways, about what's to come," I continued, "I'll be present for the discussions about whether Lobivia can leave the settlement. Once we get the elder's permission, we'll be going to Draconia. Sorry for deciding this without you."

“It’s fine. We don’t mind. Wherever you go, we’ll follow, Master,” Rose said with a shake of her head. “So? What are we to do, specifically?”

“We’ll leave town tomorrow and link up with the others. After that, we’ll be on standby until the settlement contacts us.”

“Very well. I’ll have our things ready to go by the end of the day. What will you be doing, Master?”

“I’m thinking of taking Lobivia for a walk around town.”

“Around town?” Rose repeated, somewhat surprised by my idea.

“Yeah. I don’t know how things will turn out, but depending on the circumstances, she might end up living among humans. I think it’s best for her to get used to it in these early stages, even if just a little. Do all of you want to join us?”

“Oh, Senpai, I’ll refrain,” Katou said, raising her hand. She looked reluctant. “If we’re leaving town tomorrow, I need to conserve my energy.”

“Okay.”

In Katou’s case, walking through the streets was both a physical and mental burden. That was why she decided not to go out.

“As for me,” Rose said, nodding, “just as I mentioned, I need to get our things ready to go, so I will also refrain. In truth, I’ve made many things while staying here, so I need to sort them all out.”

Kei looked at the two of them and hesitated a little. “Ummm, in that case, I’ll also—”

“Kei, please go ahead,” Katou said, cutting her off. “There’s no need to mind us. The last time I took a look around town, I ended up bedridden and couldn’t go out to play, anyway.”

“But...”

“Don’t you want to be Lobivia’s friend? Now’s a good chance.”

That was a good way of putting it. Kei’s eyes suddenly shot open, and she nodded in affirmation. Katou smiled with satisfaction, then turned my way.

“So, Senpai, where do you plan on going today?”

“I haven’t decided yet. The goal is for Lobivia to get used to the people in town, so just walking around aimlessly should be enough... Hm?”

As I wondered about what I should do, I suddenly turned toward the window. It was still light out, so the window was open. We could hear a ruckus outside.

“What’s going on?”

I walked over to the window and looked down at the alleyway where Shiran and Fukatsu had once quarreled. There was a group of little boys there. It looked like they’d been eating bread while walking, and one of them had dropped his meal, leading to a bit of an uproar among them. Kei popped her head up right next to mine and looked down at the scene sadly.

“Aww... He dropped his sweets.”

“Huh? Sweets?”

Katou peeked through the window on my other side, her voice a pitch higher than usual. I gave her a surprised look, and she covered her mouth with an “Excuse me.” It was an unexpected reaction.

“What? Do you have a sweet tooth, Katou?” I asked.

“Every girl likes sweets.”

That was enough to convince me.

“What about you, Senpai? Do you like sweets?” Katou asked.

“Me? Well, I don’t hate them.”

I didn’t particularly like them either.

“Women apparently tend to like sweets by instinct because of their hormones or some such,” Katou explained. “As for men, they instinctively avoid scrambling against women for carbohydrates or something.”

“Is that so?”

“Not really. I wonder about that. There are some theories that say so, but it’s a bit questionable. Mizushima-senpai often said stuff like that while chomping down on sweets from the convenience store... She was the type who didn’t get

fat no matter how much she ate.”

Katou’s voice turned bitter as she remembered that last part.

“They’re probably sweets the church handed out,” Kei said, looking down at the children.

“The Holy Church?”

“Yes. Back in my village, they did so maybe once a year, but around here, it’d be a little more frequent. The church bakes sweets and hands them out. Sweets are really valuable in villages, so everyone looks forward to it every year. Incidentally, my sister loves them, despite how she seems.”

“Hmm,” I muttered in interest. It’d probably be a little rude to say it was unexpected. Shiran was a girl too. “Sweets, huh?”

I’d heard the sweets in this world were made by mixing honey or finely crushed fruits into dough and then baking that into bread. It was maybe a bit lacking for someone used to food filled with sugar, but we hadn’t had any sweets since coming to this world. Thinking about it made me slightly long for some.

“Okay. In that case, I’ll go buy some today.”

“Huh?! Really?!” Kei exclaimed, jumping up and tugging on the hem of my clothes. Her blue eyes sparkled with expectation.

“Yeah. I was planning on going out today, anyway. It works out perfectly. Katou, I’ll buy some for you too, of course.”

“Thank you very much.”

Katou didn’t act as excited as Kei, but her tone of voice gave her away. It was worth buying them just to see her so delighted.

“I don’t really know what’s out there. Do you have any recommendations, Kei?” I asked.

“Sweets made from nasis are very tasty. It’s a fruit that grows in the Woodlands, so my village sometimes cultivates them to sell here in town. Shiran also loves them. We don’t get many chances to have any, though.”

“In that case, I’ll buy some for her too. She’s always looking out for me, so it’d be nice to pay her back somehow.”

“Really? I’m sure she’ll be delighted,” Kei said cheerfully, but then her face suddenly drooped. “Oh, but they’re expensive. Just the tiniest bit will send three meals’ worth of money flying away...”

“That’s nothing to worry about. Kids shouldn’t think about that kind of thing.”

During our journeys, meat in our stew was considered a luxury. We’d been living quite frugally. Once we were done with our business in Draconia, the only thing left for us was to reach Shiran’s reclamation village. It wasn’t that far from Diospyro, and we still had a surplus of the money the commander had given us. Some modestly extravagant spending was fine. If we thought about it as recompense for our long journey, then it was a necessary expenditure.

“Okay then, let’s head out.”

With that, I left Rose and Katou behind in the room.

Chapter 9: Visiting Town with the Dragon Child

I returned to the other room with Kei in tow.

“Welcome back, Master,” Lily greeted me with a wave of the hand. “Are you done talking?”

“Yeah. What have you been up to here?”

“We’ve been showing Lobivia the stuff Rose has been making.”

Lily looked to the window. Lobivia was observing the scenery outside through the telescope Rose had made. Thaddeus was next to her, and even though she was always so wary of his presence, she hadn’t noticed his approach. She must’ve been quite entranced.

“Lobivia,” I called.

She turned around with the most innocent of smiles.

“Takahiro! This is soooo cool!” she yelled. She was so excited that her usual thorniness was gone. “Is this magic?”

“No, it’s just a simple telescope. There’s no magic involved.”

“It makes things look bigger without magic? How mysterious.”

“From my perspective, magic is a lot more mysterious. A telescope’s mechanisms aren’t all that complicated or anything.”

I’d actually been a little surprised to learn how easy it was to make a telescope when Rose had created this one, so I couldn’t really act all high and mighty about it.

“Neat. How does it work?” Lobivia asked.

“Sorry to interrupt you while you’re so engrossed in this, but let’s stop here,” I said. “We should get going.”

Lobivia flipped the telescope around, looking into the other side, and patted its surface all over before looking up at me.

“Go? Go where?” she asked.

“I told you about taking a walk around town, didn’t I?”

“Oh yeah, you did...”

Lobivia looked bored, a complete change from her previous excitement. This was going to be her first time in a town, so the unfamiliar environment was evidently annoying her. The goal today, though, was to get her used to human society. I couldn’t spoil her.

“Do I hafta?” she asked.

“You want to leave the settlement, right? Then yeah, you have to.”

“That’s true, but ya know...”

“There are plenty of interesting things out there aside from this telescope. In fact, when I first took a walk around town, I had fun seeing all sorts of curiosities.”

“Even you?”

Lobivia looked just the slightest bit interested now.

“Yeah, I’m not from this world and all,” I said. “Just like you, I wasn’t used to the towns here. Didn’t you see anything interesting on our way to this inn?”

“Oh yeah, I guess there was a ton of stuff...”

“Just walking around and looking at things like that can be fun. Also, I talked with the others about this just now. After we finish our walk, I’m thinking of buying some sweets. You can look forward to that too.”

“Oh, that sounds great, Master,” Lily chimed in. She was all for it. Girls really did love sweets.

“What’re sweets, Lily?” Lobivia asked, pursing her lips.

“Oh, right. I guess you’ve never eaten any,” Lily said.

“It’s food?”

“Mhm. Super tasty food.”

“Super tasty...”

Lobivia was clearly very interested now. She loved eating. Even on our way back to Diospyro, she'd looked forward to every meal Lily made. She didn't remember much about the time she'd spent locked up in her cave, but she'd told us of all the things she'd found tasty back in those days. In all likelihood, eating had been one of the few pleasures left to her.

"Okay, I'll go."

Lobivia looked totally enthusiastic now. She picked up the knapsack meant to hide her wings and started getting ready to head outside. Even though this was a lesson so that she could live out in the world, it worked better if we could also have fun at the same time.

As I got lost in my thoughts, I felt someone tugging on my clothes. I turned around as Kei pointed a meaningful gaze at me. I nodded to her, then turned back to Lobivia.

"Kei will be the one guiding us."

Kei used that opportunity to peek out from behind me. Smiling brilliantly, she faced Lobivia and said, "Nice to meet you, Lobivia."

In the next instant, Lobivia jumped back a great distance.

"H-Huh?"

Ignoring the bewildered elf, Lobivia quickly hid behind Lily, then stared at Kei intently.

"Um, Lobivia?" I said.

Lobivia's face turned red. She had apparently run away on reflex because someone had approached her unexpectedly.

"I know... She's our guide, yeah?" she said in a fluster. She pushed on Lily's back. "Let's go. It's gonna get dark."

Lobivia left the room with Lily and slammed the door shut.

Kei slumped. "Looks like she doesn't like me..."

"You just surprised her a bit, that's all. Let's get going too. Thaddeus, Fukatsu, would you like to come with us?"

“Of course,” Thaddeus replied. “You’ll come too, right, Aketora?”

“Whatever. I’ve got nothin’ better to do.”

With that, we all left the room and followed Lily and Lobivia.



“Woow...”

Once we started walking around town, Lobivia got more excited. Her usually sharp features were softened by curiosity, and her mouth was agape. Her chestnut eyes were wide open, staring at the crowd walking up and down the street.

“There are so many people...”

Completely taken in by the scenery before her, Lobivia walked around in a daze. It wasn’t much compared to an imperial city, but Diospyro was one of the distribution centers of eastern Aker, so it had a reasonably large population. Lobivia’s settlement only housed a couple dozen people, so this was on a totally different scale. We’d avoided the main street on the way to the inn, so this was her first time seeing such a wave of people.

“I didn’t know there were so many humans.”

“There are way more in bigger cities. You can’t even compare them to here,” I said.

“Even bigger...”

She knit her brows tightly. It looked like she was having problems imagining it.

“No point in standin’ around. Let’s go,” Fukatsu said.

“Right,” I agreed. “Okay Lobivia, I’m sure there’s a lot you’re curious to see, but make sure you stay close to me. It’ll be a big problem if you get lost.”

“Lost...” Lobivia muttered. Then she suddenly came to her senses and clung to my arm.

“H-Hey...”

It turned out that she really didn’t want to get separated from us. Her stiff expression was that of a frightened child. The fact that she would let us see her

like this was also a sign of trust. It was a bit surprising, but if that meant she would stick close, then it was a relief.

“All right, then. Kei, please lead the way,” I said.

Kei smiled as she watched Lobivia, then nodded cheerfully. “Leave it to me.”

She took my hand and walked forth.

“H-Hm...?”

Unexpectedly, I ended up with a girl on each side. Lily and Rose would be one thing, but Kei and Lobivia were both young, so there was nothing romantic or erotic about the situation. To anyone looking our way, it totally looked like I was being led about by children.

Perhaps happy that we were relying on her, Kei guided us in high spirits. I found it hard to walk at first with Lobivia clinging to me, but it got easier as we went along. After her anxiety dissipated, Lobivia started to look around restlessly.

“So? How do you like the town, Lobivia?” Thaddeus asked from the back.

“There’s a ton of people and stuff everywhere. I’m gonna get dizzy.”

“Indeed. Such numbers are humanity’s strength,” Thaddeus said, sounding somewhat like a teacher. “In general, humans are frail, weak, and slight beings. However, by flocking together in one place and building a history together, they obtain great strength. The towns that humans built up over the long years don’t even budge from a half-hearted monster attack, and monsters that cannot be defeated by a single human are brought down by an army without any casualties. Honestly, they’re terrifying.”

I could sense that these were Thaddeus’s true feelings.

“I have considerable power among the clan,” Thaddeus continued. “However, when I leave the settlement, I’m on my own. Once in a while, I feel like everything around me is crushing me.”

Maybe Thaddeus was trying to teach Lobivia what it meant to leave the settlement. In the event that she got permission, she would be in the same position as him, after all. Yet there was one thing that Thaddeus had

overlooked.

“You’re not on your own no more, right, Thaddeus?” Fukatsu said.

“Aketora?”

“No matter what happens, I ain’t abandonin’ you,” he said with determination, even though he seemed embarrassed. “I’ve got a one-sided debt to you anyway.”

After a brief pause, Thaddeus laughed. “Ha ha... You’re right. I guess I’m not alone.”

“The same goes for you, of course,” I said to Lobivia, giving her hand a light squeeze. “You’re not alone. I’ll go with you all the way to Draconia. Don’t worry.”

“Hmph. I’m not really, um...”

Lobivia pouted, but she continued to grip my hand. Actually, she squeezed it tightly, never saying anything about disliking the idea. Once I realized that she simply wasn’t honest with herself, she was very easy to read.

Lily watched us with a smile, then turned to Thaddeus. “You two really get along, huh?” she said.

She had a point. I could feel how much time they’d spent together from their exchange. Lily had surely felt the same thing.

“Now that I think of it, how did you two end up traveling together?” I asked.

“Oh? I never told you?” Thaddeus said. “Aketora saved me when he was wandering through the forest. Well, you could also say he nearly killed me before letting me go, though.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked.

“I’d taken on my original form to travel over a long distance when I encountered Aketora in the forest. It came to battle, and I almost became his dinner.”

“What did you expect? Like hell I thought you could talk,” Fukatsu said. Their encounter had apparently been rather violent. “I thought you were game to

eat. I ran outta food too... Everythin' was a mess when I left the Colony, so I didn't have none with me."

I knew what he meant by that, and I turned around to look at him without thinking.

"Fukatsu..."

"Like I thought. You scrambled away from that chaos too, huh? The same goes for me."

Fukatsu had also been there when the Colony was destroyed. His situation had been quite different from mine, seeing that I had no power at the time, but that didn't change the fact that he'd witnessed the same thing. It made sense that he hated the other visitors after seeing that terrible spectacle.

"Meaning you came to Aker straight from the Colony?" I asked.

"Strictly speakin', I went to Fergus, the next country over. That's where I met Thaddeus. We traveled for a while after that, then this whole thing with the stray happened, and I followed Thaddeus back to Aker."

It all made sense now. I'd thought it was strange for someone from the expeditionary force to come to Aker all the way from Fort Ebenus far to the east.

This was the first time Fukatsu had talked about himself, probably because we'd made sure not to probe into each other's affairs. Maybe there had been some change in his mental state to make him open up like this now. Judging by how Lily was grinning, she probably knew why.

"I ended up meetin' Thaddeus, while you met Lily and them. I thought life was utter shit when I got outta the Colony, but I guess it ain't all that bad."

Hearing Fukatsu being so uncharacteristically earnest, Lobivia turned around and stared at him.

"Lobivia?"

I called her name, and she suddenly came to her senses and looked forward again. I could feel the heat from her hand. She kept walking forward while deep in thought. Maybe she'd felt something from Fukatsu's story.

After that, we walked around town a while longer. Having switched gears, Lobivia was now totally engrossed with the sights. Everything she saw was a mystery to her. She was particularly interested in all the armaments she saw.

With Woodlands covering half of its territory, Aker was constantly under threat of monster attacks. Everyone walked down the streets armed. There were many shops that dealt in armaments, and many blacksmiths accepted requests for repairs. When we entered the district where such shops were in abundance, the sounds around us changed. Hammers banged against steel, steam spewed from bellows, and craftsmen yelled angrily. We didn't really have any business here, so we just walked by the shops.

Lobivia stretched her neck out like a turtle and peeked into the shops. Once in a while, her knapsack would shake even though nothing was touching it. Her wings were likely moving about inside. We were walking, so I didn't think any bystanders would notice, but just in case, I warned her about it several times as we went.

After we finished a lap of the town, we decided it was time to buy some sweets, so we headed to a bakery. They called them sweets, but they weren't what would come to mind for visitors like me. They were closer to flavored bread. They would make a dough from Aker's staple potatoes, knead in fruits, and then bake it with salt and herbs. The nasis Kei had told me about happened to be slightly out of season, so right now they used dried nasis instead.

After we bought enough for Katou, Shiran, and Gerbera, we returned to the inn. The sweets could be preserved for a while, so we could keep some in our bags and give them to Shiran and Gerbera out of town when we met up with them tomorrow.

Once we got back to the inn, everyone decided to dig in immediately. We split up from Thaddeus and Fukatsu and prepared some tea in our own room.

"Mm... This is pretty good," I said.

I took a bite, and the sweet and salty flavor, along with the characteristic taste of herbs, spread over my tongue. As someone who'd eaten sugary foods since I was a child, it was a little lacking to really be called a sweet. Still, it had been a long time since I'd had anything like it, so I could feel it seep into my

core.

Everyone else seemed to enjoy it too. Lily was holding her hand to her cheek, a huge grin plastered on her face. Kei nibbled at the bread, holding it in both hands like a squirrel. Katou's smile broadened in happiness. As for Lobivia...

"Hmmm?!" Her eyes shot open with a soundless scream. "Takahiro! This is super tasty!"

Her wings spread wide open, and her tail stretched straight out. This startled Kei, nearly making her drop her snack, but she caught it in a hurry.

"Wow! Amazing! This is great!" Lobivia added.

"I get it, calm down," I told her.

She was deeply moved. This on its own made it worth buying the sweets, but I still had to give her a warning.

"That's bad manners," I said in a strong tone. "Don't flail about while you eat. You're scattering dust everywhere. Understand?"

"Ugh... My bad," Lobivia said, folding her wings up.

"I'm glad you like it," I said, relaxing my expression.

"Mm... It's tasty. It's like it's melting in my mouth. Humans are pretty amazing for being able to make something so delicious, huh?"

I felt like she was admiring the wrong thing here, but either way, her first taste of sweets was definitely a great success. Lobivia made short work of her portion, and when finished, she licked her lips with her little red tongue as if it wasn't enough.

"You want this one too?" I asked.

I'd been watching everyone else and talking to Lobivia, so I'd only taken a single bite myself.

"Really?!" Lobivia exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

"Yeah. I don't really have a sweet tooth or anything."

I wanted the people who loved sweets to enjoy such luxury goods. Perhaps it was because I had a little brother. This little exchange felt nostalgic, bringing a

little smile to my face. I handed my portion to Lobivia, and she opened her mouth wide to take a bite. And then she came to a complete stop.

Kei was staring at Lobivia, seemingly unaware that she was doing it. The moment Lobivia stopped, Kei came back to her senses and started blinking.

“You...want it too?” Lobivia asked her.

“Huh? N-No! Not at all!” Kei waved her hands in a panic, her cheeks as red as an apple as she realized she’d been greedily staring.

Lobivia’s brows wrinkled. She looked down at the snack in her hands, then at Kei, and repeated the motion several times as she fought against something inside her. Then she took a deep breath and walked quickly over to Kei. Even though she looked like a child, she was a dragon by nature.

Overawed by her monstrous presence, Kei started in place and began trembling.

“U-Umm, Lobivia...?”

“Hm!” Lobivia growled as she held out the treat.

For a moment, Kei didn’t seem to understand. She looked bewildered. It was pretty clear that Lobivia’s curt attitude was obscuring her intentions.

The young dragon blushed and frowned deeply.

“Hm!”

She thrust out the food in her hand even farther. It was like she was picking a fight. Even though she didn’t mean it that way at all, her attitude was strangely overbearing, and it brought Kei’s thoughts to an utter halt.

Things weren’t going to get anywhere without some kind of intervention, so I decided to throw her a lifeline.

“Lobivia is saying you can have it,” I said.

“Umm... Really?” Kei asked, looking both blank and puzzled as Lobivia’s glare intensified. “T-Takahiro! She’s glowering at me really strongly!”

“It’s okay. She won’t bite.”

She was just bad at communicating with others. Considering how she’d run

away when Kei had greeted her just a few hours ago, this was significant growth. The daylong walk around town must've had some kind of effect on her. Her progress was worthy of praise.

"Go ahead and take it," I said, urging Kei on.

Kei held out her hand timidly, and Lobivia handed the sweet to her with a sigh of relief. Kei looked at the slightly crumbled bread, then broke into a bright smile.

"Thank you, Lobivia."

"Whatever..."

"Okay, let's go halvesies then."

"Huh?"

Now it was Lobivia's turn to stiffen up.

"I-I don't want it. I gave you that. You eat it."

"Huh? But it's tastier if we go halvesies."

Kei cocked her head. She'd understood that Lobivia's crude behavior and language was only a facade, and she'd managed to bring things back to her own pace.

"Takahiro. Thank you," Kei said, smiling.

"That's my line. Thanks, Kei."

"Huh?"

As I watched Lobivia nibble on the half Kei had given back to her, I truly believed the two of them would become good friends.

Chapter 10: A Promise with a Wolf

After leaving Diospyro, we linked back up with Gerbera and Shiran. I gave them the sweets we'd gotten as souvenirs, then confirmed that nothing had changed. All that was left was to wait for contact from the settlement.

Come nighttime, after I finished my daily training, I returned to the campsite with my sparring partner Rose and our instructor Shiran.

"Good work out there... Huh? Rose? Did something happen?" Katou asked curiously from her seat on the ground next to Kei. "You look kind of happy."

I turned around to look at Rose and met the face of a girl with grayish-silver hair done up in a braid.

Rose's expressions were fundamentally subtle. She did this intentionally because any large changes in her facial expression would make it obvious that she was a puppet. Honestly, I didn't think it really mattered when it was just our group like this, but Rose didn't like the idea of appearing unsightly. She was a girl, so I could understand such things bothering her.

Currently, she was in a relatively neutral state. When she let go of her control entirely, her face would look completely inorganic, so even though she was working hard so that this wouldn't happen, she wasn't really making any kind of expression. Still, I could sense that she was in high spirits through the mental path. In other words, Katou's observation hadn't been baseless.

"Wow. I'm surprised, Mana," Kei said with admiration. "How can you tell?"

"The whole atmosphere around her just seems kind of fluffy, I guess," Katou answered with a smile.

"Fluffy?" Kei repeated.

"Yes. Also, I feel like her footsteps are lighter than usual."

"Um, sorry. I don't really see it..."

I didn't either. Actually, I was pretty sure nobody else could. It seemed that,

thanks to their prolonged time together, Katou had acquired a special ability to read Rose's emotions without even needing the mental path.

"So, Rose? Did something happen?" Katou asked again.

Rose nodded. "Yes. Listen to this, Mana. In the mock battle just now, my master scored a hit on me for the very first time."

Once she opened her mouth, Rose's mood became very apparent.

"Hmm. That's amazing," Katou said in genuine surprise.

Rose merrily gripped both of Katou's hands and continued. "It was a sharp blow. He warded my ax off like this, then slashed into my flank."

"Hey now, Rose. Cut it out," I said.

Even though it was something I'd done, I couldn't hold back a bitter smile seeing Rose talking about it so happily.

"Up until today, we've had more than two hundred bouts, and every single time, I got done in," I added. "Even today, I lost ten times. Among all that, I managed just one hit, which was pretty much a complete fluke. I'm still nowhere close to matching you, so when you exaggerate like that, it's, well...a little awkward."

In truth, after I scored that hit, I'd gone through a chain of losses. Being so openly praised for that made me self-conscious.

"But, Master, your daily efforts bore fruit to that exact fluke. I believe this is a day worth celebrating," Rose said in all seriousness.

"Oh, that's a great idea," Lily chimed in while watching the pot over the fire. "How about adding an extra portion of meat to dinner?"

"Lily? Are you being serious?" I asked, grimacing.

"You don't want to? Aren't you happy about improving?"

"I am...but that's overdoing it a little."

"I don't think so. Hee hee. Besides, we resupplied in Diospyro, so I wanted to use up some of our older meat. The timing is perfect."

"I'm glad I have such reliable companions..."

“Mrrgh. I would prefer you say I was your lover... Hm? Are you embarrassed?”

I averted my eyes. As I did, I saw Shiran giggling with a friendly smile on her face.

“Oh, right, Shiran,” Kei said. “Sorry for asking just as you get back, but I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Could you show Mana an example of magic? She’s having problems getting grade 1 water magic to stabilize. Mine is a little too poorly put together to use as an example. I’m thinking it’d be better if you could show her.”

“Is that so?” Shiran said, narrowing her eye for a moment before continuing. “Then Kei, as a test, please show me what you’ve been doing up until now.”

“Y-Yes.”

Kei nodded a little nervously and took Katou’s hand. A blue light shimmered in her palm, and a glyph took shape. Katou squinted, which made her brow wrinkle. She was focusing on the mana flow. This was the simplest way to teach someone magic. By touching a teacher and having them demonstrate the same magic multiple times, one could memorize the mana flow and reproduce it. When it came to simply learning a spell, there was no faster method.

Incidentally, to go a step further and make personal adjustments to magic, one needed to study mysticology, a field that detailed the instinctive parts of magic as theory. Specialists in the field were associated with an educational institution in the Empire that was crammed with nobles.

However, soldiers fighting on the front lines didn’t need that level of knowledge or technique. The grade 1 and grade 2 magic they could learn had limited applications in battle, so instead they focused on learning a single spell with as much destructive force as possible. That was enough for fighting in formation. More elaborate magic constructions were only important to the small percentage of mages who’d mastered multiple grade 2 magics, or the grandmasters who’d reached the level of grade 3 magic.

Spiritualists were an exception. The spirits they contracted with would construct the magic themselves, so a spiritualist could use magic beyond their

capabilities.

I'd also asked Lily how it worked for monsters, and she'd told me, "I guess it's all by instinct?" If she were to ever get involved with mysticology, perhaps she could contribute toward great advancements in the field.

A water bullet flew out of Kei's glyph and gouged itself into a tree.

Watching this, Shiran calmly offered her assessment, saying, "There are parts of its construction that are still lacking, and there are ways to optimize it better, but it should be fine for the purposes of teaching."

If the glyph's construction was too shoddy, magic wouldn't even activate. In the beginning, a student couldn't make anything more than an inferior copy of what the teacher had shown them, so if the teacher's magic was lacking, the student might not be able to activate their own magic. That didn't seem to be the case here, though.

"The way you assemble your magic in the first place is very clean, Kei," Shiran added. "For example, it would likely be the same if Lily or I were to use the same magic."

"Is that so...?" Kei asked.

"See? It's as I've been telling you, Kei. I'm just bad at this," Katou said with a nod, still holding Kei's hand. "Senpai only recommended that I try learning water magic to use as a form of self-defense. It isn't much of a priority compared to healing magic. I'll just take it at my own pace."

"Mana..."

"Come on, everyone is back now, so let's take a break until dinner," Katou said, giving Kei's head a good pat.

"Understood," Kei answered with a nod as she rose to her feet. "Then I'll go help out with dinner. Lily, is there anything I can do?"

"You'll help? Thanks. In that case, can you go get the meat?"

"Sure."

Kei went back to the manamobile and retrieved the salted meat. As she did, Lobivia flipped up the cloth at the back of the vehicle and poked her head out.

“Huh? Is something the matter, Lobivia?” Kei asked, coming to a stop and turning around. Unlike yesterday, Kei was acting normal without any of that strange tension in the air.

“Dinner...?” Lobivia asked.

“It’ll be a bit longer. Can you wait?”

“Got it.” Lobivia sullenly nodded and hid herself back inside the manamobile.

Since we were off the road leading to town, we didn’t know when people would pass by. Therefore Gerbera, Ayame, and Lobivia stayed inside the vehicle. It wasn’t much of a problem for Lobivia, who could go outside so long as she had her knapsack, or Ayame, who spent most of the day napping. Gerbera, on the other hand, could basically only go out in the middle of the night. I wondered whether she’d be unable to bear the gloominess of being inside the vehicle for so long, but fortunately, she seemed to be passionately working away at something, so she wasn’t bored at all.

Berta, who also had to avoid being seen, vanished for a while whenever the sun set. She was somewhere nearby, but I doubted that she would slip up and let someone discover her.

“Okay, let’s add the meat,” Lily said. “Kei, could you stir it for me?”

“Understood.”

Lily cut the salted meat Kei had brought her into thin slices and added it to the pot, using some herbs to adjust the flavor. Kei stirred the contents every now and then to make sure nothing burned to the bottom.

As I watched the two of them work, Katou came up beside me.

“Kei’s such a good girl, isn’t she?” Katou whispered to me. “She helps out all the time.”

“Yeah, she is.”

That wasn’t all. Lately, Kei had been almost solely responsible for Katou’s magic lessons. Plus, it was a form of training for Kei as well. On top of that, she trained in martial arts to become a knight, and she even helped Lobivia whenever she could.

“Kei appears to idolize you, Mana,” Shiran said, coming over and joining our conversation. “It seems that you’ve also been providing her with much advice lately. I must thank you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m just happy that the knowledge I have from my world is of any use.”

“It turns out that while I know the ways of the knight, I am rather ignorant as a woman. It’s really been helpful to have you teach her all manner of things. Please continue to provide her with your guidance from here on out.”

Shiran smiled and lowered her head, then turned on her heel.

“Where are you going, Shiran?” I asked.

“I’ve been feeling rather stiff lately, so I thought I’d follow your example and swing my sword a little. While I’m at it, I’ll take a look around the area. I’ll be back before dinner is over.”

“You’re not going to eat?”

“I’m not. I have already informed Lily of such. Oh, after dinner, I’ll teach you the ways of using a spirit just as usual, so there’s no need to worry.”

After Shiran became an undead monster, she no longer had any need for food or sleep. That was why, once in a while, she didn’t join us for our meals. It was just like her to see the bright side—that this gave her time to do other worthwhile things.

After seeing her off, I turned back to Katou. “Oh yeah, you mentioned knowledge from our world just now, right? What have you been teaching Kei? That stuff Shiran mentioned, I mean.”

“I guess you can call it teaching, but, um...”

It was just a casual question, but for some reason, Katou was hesitant to answer.

“Ummm...” Katou continued muttering.

“About underwear,” Rose answered in her stead. I froze in place. “Especially ones for the breasts. In this world, there is no female-specific underwear like there is in yours, Master. Because of that, we talked about Gerbera’s and my

trying to make some. According to Mana, it is better to pick out appropriate underwear to match a girl during her growth period.”

“Um... Kei is in her growth period, so it can’t hurt,” Katou said.

In contrast to Rose’s serious and eloquent answer, Katou was extremely embarrassed. It was awkward for me too.

“What’s more,” Rose continued, “Mana and Lily also wanted underwear. Has my sister not informed you of such?”

“Oh... Now that you mention it, I think she said something like that before? Something about wanting things from the other world...”

I would’ve preferred it if Rose had figured out why I was being awfully vague with my choice of words. Opportunities to talk about these things with Lily only came at very specific times. Incidentally, the women of this world mostly wrapped cloth around their chests. It definitely wasn’t as functional as what we had, nor was it cute... I’ll omit why I even know this.

“There’s the shape of the cup, the choice of using a wire, the thickness of the strap, and even the overall design. It’s all rather amusing,” Rose explained indifferently. “My elder sister said that she didn’t really care about such things, though.”

Rose had the right attitude. This was a normal conversation, so there was nothing to be embarrassed about. That said, even if I could understand the logic behind that, talking about that stuff was still awkward for me.

I averted my eyes to try and escape, when I saw Kei looking our way, completely stunned. She’d probably overheard us.

“Hey, Kei, it’s burning,” I said.

“Oh, right, sorry.”

Using that as an excuse, I stood up and got away from the girls. I was relieved to avoid any more of that awkward conversation. Shortly after, lying in wait for me at the pot, Lily leaned against me.

“About what Rose was saying, I’m not really fussy over it myself, so maybe I’ll pick out something that you prefer, Master.”

I was stunned into even more awkward silence.

“Tell me your preferences later, okay?” she added.

I felt red eyes staring my way from a gap in the cloth covering the manamobile. Lily had at least spoken in a hushed tone so that Kei wouldn't hear her, but Gerbera had apparently overheard us with her sharp senses. They did say one's eyes told more than one's mouth. It didn't look like I was going to be able to escape this topic for a while. And just then...

“Second King.”

A voice called me from the forest. I knew it was Berta, but I couldn't see her. She was probably being cautious in the unlikely event that someone passed by.

“I have something to speak with you about,” she said. “Lend me a moment of your time later.”



After finishing dinner and reaching a good stopping point in Shiran's lecture, I walked away from the group to speak with Berta. Wondering what this was about, Lily and I followed the wolf's tracks.

“So? What did you need?” I asked.

“I will not accompany you beyond this point,” she said, cutting to the chase. “I need not tell you the reason, I assume?”

This was all rather sudden, but I figured out the reason right away. Draconia was a hidden settlement. Only the bare minimum of outsiders could be allowed inside. Even Fukatsu was staying behind. That was to say nothing of Berta being Kudou Riku's servant. She knew full well the dangers that could be brought about by her position.

“I won't go to Draconia. That way, I won't have any way of knowing where it is. Meaning, my king will know nothing of it.”

So long as Berta remained ignorant, Kudou Riku couldn't ask her to bring him information and do something with it. In a way, this could be considered a small act of defiance against the master she'd sworn absolutely fealty to. Berta was here as our guard; she hadn't been ordered to gather information.

“Sorry our circumstances are interfering with your orders like that,” I said.

“Are you really fine with believing me so easily?” Berta said with a villainous huff. “Perhaps I plan to follow you in secret.”

“You’re not going to do anything like that after all this time, right?”

I could have said I had my doubts, especially after her cynical observation, but I trusted her character and judged that she couldn’t tell a lie to my face.

Berta huffed again. Maybe this was her way of hiding her embarrassment.

“Well, you can feel at ease however you damn well like,” Berta said. “I can’t do anything to incur your displeasure to begin with. My king forbade me from doing so.”

Berta’s tail casually waved about behind her.

“This is a good opportunity,” she added. “I’ll return to my king’s side for a while. I haven’t heard from him yet, but I plan to see if I can get in touch with him myself.” She paused for a moment, then lowered her voice. “Depending on my king’s will, I might not return here.”

“I see...”

I wasn’t so dense as to overlook what she meant. If Kudou was to start some other incident, depending on how things developed, we would be mutual enemies when next we met. Nonetheless, even if that was the case, it didn’t change the fact that Berta had guarded us up until now.

“We really are indebted to you,” I told her.

“Hmph. There wasn’t much meaning in my being here, though,” she said with another huff.

I gently shook my head. “That’s not true. During the time Lily got hurt and couldn’t move about, you guarded us well,” I said, glancing at Lily to my side. “You were our guard just in case something happened, so even if nothing happened, there was meaning in you being here. Besides, I’ve personally benefited from this too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I now know there’s someone like you serving Kudou.”

Both pairs of Berta’s eyes shot open, as if she’d been caught off guard.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she said.

“Really?”

Berta averted her eyes, looking at where Ayame was now standing. The little fox had apparently slipped away from the others. Ayame let out a *yip* and sidled up against her. Berta didn’t reject her. Seeing this, I decided to force the subject.

“Hey, Berta?”

“What?”

“If you do come back here, and as long as it doesn’t inconvenience him...could you tell us what Kudou is up to?”

Berta looked my way. As expected, there was a fierce air about her.

“Are you asking me to be a spy?”

“I’m not. If you’d like, I don’t mind if you tell him about this. I don’t want you to be a spy. I’d like you to serve as a channel between us.”

Berta sank into thought for a moment.

“Do you really understand what you’re saying?” she asked. “That will expose both of you to danger. There’s a possibility that I will leak information on my king to you, while a connection to my king could become a major disadvantage for you.”

“Even so, I can’t leave Kudou be.”

This proposal was feasible precisely because I knew Berta could be trusted now. She had a strong sense of duty. She wasn’t likely to do anything dishonest, neither to the king she’d sworn fealty to, nor to me—regardless of her king’s current command to guard me. Depending on the circumstances, this could put her in a terribly difficult position, but I’d decided to propose this anyway because I was convinced I had to.

“What’s with you people?” she said. “The slime there said something similar.”

“You did?” I asked Lily, looking at her with surprise, and she nodded. “I see.”

In other words, I wasn’t wrong to ask this.

“He won’t stop. He can’t be stopped anymore,” Berta said, a hint of anger in her voice now. “You should know that damn well.”

She’d probably said the same thing to Lily before. Her voice was dry, like a shadow was hanging over it, but there was definitely emotion behind it.

“Yeah. It’s as you say,” I told her with a nod. “He won’t stop. Above all else, he doesn’t wish to stop.”

“Then, in that case—”

“But you want him to, right?”

Berta froze. It was just as I thought. Her words had sounded like she was trying to convince herself to give up.

“What meaning is there to my own desire?” she muttered.

“So you don’t deny that you want this?”

She fell silent. She truly was an awkward wolf. Kudou wasn’t the only one I couldn’t leave be.

“You’re the only one who decides whether there’s any meaning to it,” I said.

“Are you telling me to live true to my desires?”

“You’re also the one to decide that.”

The edges of Berta’s mouth peeled back, revealing her sharp fangs. It looked like she was trying to menace us, but I could immediately tell that she was smiling.

“Heh. Heh heh... What a detestable man. It’s like I’m being cornered by what I’ve been trying to run away from all this time.”

In contrast to her barbed words, Berta seemed to be in a good mood. She actually seemed kind of refreshed.



“No... Now that it’s come to this, it would’ve caught up to me eventually,” Berta continued. “I realized it sooner because of the time I spent with all of you.”

She glanced to the side as if noticing something, but continued speaking without pointing out what it was.

“If I hadn’t realized it now, it’s possible I would have regretted it later. In that case, it is fortunate I was here. Very well. When I get back, I’ll try speaking with my king about it.”

“Thank you, Berta.”

“Hmph...” She huffed one last time and turned on her heels. This time, it was obvious she was hiding her embarrassment.

With that, the enormous two-headed gray wolf vanished beyond the trees, leaving Ayame yipping sadly behind her.

“Come here, Ayame,” I said, scooping the little fox up into my arms. I brushed her head as she pushed her snout against me. “There’s no need to feel lonely. She’ll be back.”

I didn’t know how many weeks it would take, but I was sure we would meet again. Berta had promised us we would.

Lily watched us with a grin until Ayame calmed down, then suddenly turned toward the trees.

“How about coming out already?” she said. “You’re there, right?”

Several seconds later, Lobivia came out from the shadow of a tree. I wasn’t particularly surprised. I’d sensed her presence through the mental path. I hadn’t expected to see Kei with her, however.

“S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Kei said, bowing.

“You just came to stop me, didn’t you?” Lobivia mumbled.

Lobivia had probably come here wondering what we were up to, and Kei had followed her when she noticed Lobivia leaving. This had naturally led to them listening in on our conversation.

“Well, I’m pretty sure Berta already noticed,” Lily said, folding her arms and sighing. “Seeing as she didn’t say anything about it, she didn’t really mind. Still, this isn’t praiseworthy behavior.”

“Sorry...” Lobivia said awkwardly.

She hadn’t done it on purpose, so this was enough. Lily left things at a light warning.

“That wolf...” Lobivia muttered, looking off to where Berta had vanished.

“Hm?” I murmured.

“She looked at me.”

“Is that so?”

“Our eyes met.”

Berta had glanced toward Lobivia’s location earlier. I didn’t know she’d been looking at the dragon, but there was no mistaking it now. In that case, maybe Berta had spoken of this so that Lobivia could hear her. She was good at taking care of others, after all.

Lobivia had definitely felt something by listening to Berta’s confession and seeing her resolve. That was what it meant to possess an ego. By experiencing the many things that the world had to offer, she was sure to grow. I watched over the young dragon attentively as she matured ever so slightly in this moment.

Chapter 11: The Mist Barrier

I didn't have much to do while we waited in the forest off the road for news from Draconia. If we were in town, I could kill time loitering around the marketplace, but that wasn't really an option in the forest. I could train more, but there was a limit to how long I could spend simply swinging a sword about. Actually, in all seriousness, I'd practiced too much already, and my arm felt a little sluggish. The fact that I thought it'd be a good opportunity to take it slow and read a book or something meant that I had more time than I knew what to do with.

"Lobivia, I'm heading back. What about you?"

The little dragon, with nothing in particular to do, had been sitting nearby in a daze while I swung my sword. She seemed to be deep in thought. When I called out to her, she blinked as if waking from a dream. She rose to her feet, then corrected the position of the knapsack on her back.

"I'll go too..."

"Okay."

I returned to the campsite with Lobivia. I was planning on borrowing a book from Lily. I'd recently started learning how to read the writing in this world, but unlike Lily, who was unexpectedly passionate about learning and had immediately grasped the language, I only knew a few words. Because of that, I had to keep the dictionary Lily had made for me close at hand.

Incidentally, Rose had successfully replicated a translation runestone recently. It took some time to make one, but the day when we'd all have one for ourselves wasn't far off now.

"My Lord?" When I got back to the manamobile, Gerbera poked her head out of the vehicle and called me. "May I have a moment?"

For some reason, she was excited, her expression almost childlike. I wondered why that was, but I didn't have any reason to refuse.

“Lobivia, you go ahead without me.”

“Mm...”

Lobivia nodded and walked off, but her steps were hesitant, as if she didn't want to leave me. I was a little worried, but then Kei ran up to her, so it looked like Lobivia would be fine. Relieved by the sight, I prioritized Gerbera's business. She'd already withdrawn into the manamobile.

“So? What is it?” I asked as I flipped up the cloth and entered.

The first thing I saw was Gerbera wearing nothing but a bra, so I spun around on the spot to leave.

“My Lord? Why are you leaving?”

“More importantly, what are you doing...”

Nothing made sense. What I'd seen was too unexpected. Or maybe it wasn't? Something about it niggled at me, so I recalled the image now burned into my mind. Gerbera was wearing a bra. The girls had talked about bras recently.

“I tried making it to suit your tastes. I'd like your opinion.”

Using the opening I'd created when I sank into thought, Gerbera abruptly grabbed my arm and pulled me back into the manamobile with her unopposable strength. I lost my balance and pitched forward, my face plunging into two womanly bulges covered by underwear. I pulled myself back up in a panic.

Gerbera's near-naked figure jumped into view. Her usual clothes were draped around her waist, leaving her upper body completely exposed, save for a simple bra covering her breasts. The design itself wasn't all that cute. It was probably still in an experimental phase. Still, in this case, the contents beneath the underwear were the real problem.

Her figure sprouting from her spider-half was fair, graceful, and beautiful. That was a hard enough blow to my self-restraint as it was, but I was also in love with this girl. The destructive power behind her half-naked form was nothing to laugh at. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. Gerbera had a feminine allure to her that made me vividly aware that I was a man.



“Gerbera, did you forget that I already answered your confession?” I said, pinching my brow.

“Hrm? I haven’t... Oh! Could it be?!” Gerbera exclaimed, her bloodred eyes widening. “Has this garment by some chance made you fall madly in love?!”

“Normally, I’d think you were trying to seduce me here...”

If this were Lily, I’d definitely get the impression that she was in the mood, figure it out as her lover, and act in kind. However, Gerbera was unaware of what she was doing. Despite that, her actions sometimes left her horribly defenseless, so I had a hard time figuring out how to respond. It felt like I’d been left hanging.

“I-I’m ready at any time, just so you know,” Gerbera said.

“But you’ll squish me flat in your embrace, right?”

“Right!”

No matter how endearing I found her, when her legs restlessly skittered about like this, I had no choice but to maintain my sense of reason.

“Grrr... Something must be done about this...” she mumbled.

This greatly vexed Gerbera. I gave her a wry smile, then leaned in.

“I’m looking forward to it,” I said.

Even as I closed the distance between us, Gerbera didn’t put herself on guard. She never did with me. She simply appeared curious. That was why it wasn’t all that hard for me to press my lips against her cheek.

“I’ll see you later then.”

This amount of physical contact was probably fine once in a while. Gerbera froze as she stared at me blankly, so I used that time to exit the manamobile—half to avoid the danger of being squished and half to maintain my sense of reason. I definitely didn’t have the confidence to control myself for a prolonged period of time with my lover in her underwear.

Feeling hot, I sighed and walked off. I’d planned on borrowing a book from Lily, but now I changed my mind. Instead, I decided to immerse myself once

more in swinging my sword.



“Huh? What’s wrong, Senpai?” Katou asked with a cock of her head when I returned to the campsite. “You look tired.”

“It’s nothing.” I wiped my wet hair and sat down. My body felt heavy, but I’d managed to calm my racing heart. “Practicing magic?”

“Yes. I just happen to be taking a break, though.”

Katou, Kei, and Rose were sitting together. The others were apparently in the manamobile.

“How’s it going?” I asked Katou.

“Not too well.”

Katou picked up the cup of water in front of her. If I remembered right, she was practicing water magic today.

“Did you make that?” I asked.

“That would be nice, but Kei did this as an example,” she answered, sighing. “Water magic sure is tough.”

“Sorry, Mana,” Kei said. “If only I could do something more for you.”

“It’s okay, Kei. It’s not your fault.”

Katou shifted closer to Kei, giving her a hug and a few gentle pats on the back. Katou had a small build, even for a girl, and wasn’t all that much taller than Kei, so they looked much like two dolls lined up side by side. It was cute. Rose was watching them with affection. In truth, Rose, the tallest among them, was the actual doll here. The world was mysterious.

“I would’ve liked to have an aptitude for healing magic,” Katou said, “but honestly, doesn’t dark magic seem to suit my image better?”

“Th-That’s not true!” Kei exclaimed.

“She’s right, Mana,” Rose joined in. “Magic to soothe and heal others truly suits you.”

Katou had been joking, but knowing that Rose was dead serious, she blushed at the sudden compliment.

“That’s true,” I said, smiling on reflex because of her cute reaction. “I also think healing magic suits you, Katou.”

“S-Senpai!” Katou protested. Her eyebrows drooped, and she hung her reddened face. “Jeez... That’s embarrassing.”

“Sorry.”

Katou slowly drank the cup of water in her hands. With that, she managed to regain her composure and then changed the topic.

“Oh, yeah. Lobivia seems to be acting a little weird lately. Did something happen?”

“You noticed?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. She’s been in a daze ever since this morning, so I figured maybe something happened.”

Katou was sharp when it came to these things. Even if she wasn’t, Lobivia was easy to read, so of course Katou would notice.

“Nothing really happened,” I answered. “She’s just, how to put it... She just has something on her mind.”

“What, exactly?”

“I don’t know. However, she’ll refuse to tell me if I ask.”

“She *is* pretty obstinate.”

Katou really did have a good eye.

“If I attempt to get it out of her, it’ll probably have the opposite effect,” I continued. “I plan on waiting until she tells me about it herself. Or, I guess, until I can get her to trust me enough to tell me.”

“It looks like you already have her trust. Lobivia is really attached to you, Senpai.”

“I wonder about that. It’ll be nice if that’s the case,” I said, shrugging. “Thanks for looking out for her, Katou.”

Katou shook her head. "There's no need for that. Lobivia is really cute. I just can't leave her be."

I really liked this aspect of Katou, almost unexpectedly so.

"Katou, do you maybe like kids?" I asked.

"Huh? Why do you ask all of a sudden?" Katou remained puzzled, but she didn't deny it. "Yeah, I do."

This was news to me, but thinking back on things, it made a lot of sense. Right after we arrived at Fort Tilia, Katou had immediately opened up to Kei. Also, when we came back to the campsite, she'd been the first one to come out and greet Lobivia.

"It wasn't set in stone or anything," she added, "but I kind of thought it'd be nice to become an elementary school teacher."

"Hmm. That's a little surprising, but also just like you."

"It's a stable living too."

"Aah, I can see that."

"What about you, Senpai? Did you have any dreams for the future?"

"Me? Not really. Go to university, graduate, find a job at some normal office or work for the government. The only thing I really took into consideration was that I wanted to travel a bunch when I became an adult. My parents love traveling, so they took me and my brother on vacations throughout Japan all the time."

These memories were only from half a year ago, but the sense of nostalgia I got from them made me smile. Back then, I'd never even imagined going on a journey like this in another world.

"I've never been abroad, so there were a few places I wanted to go," I continued. "Like, you know, Sagrada Familia and the like. I wanted to go and see it for myself."

"That's in Europe. Spain, I think? Mizushima-senpai said something similar. She mentioned it was going to be finished in a few years, so she wanted to see it while it was still under construction or something. But Senpai, I thought you

were bad with English. Would you be okay traveling abroad?”

“Who told you that?”

I grimaced as Katou put her hand to her mouth and giggled. A smile came to me once more. Lately, I’d had quite a few opportunities to talk about our world with Katou like this. I’d decided to live in this world with everyone, but I still had some lingering attachment to mine. I used to try my best not to think about it, and even now, it pained my heart. Despite this, or rather because of this, I often talked about our world with Katou. By doing so, I could relegate any regrets to the corner of my heart.

That was all this amounted to, of course. I couldn’t go to those places anymore; I couldn’t go home anymore. These regrets would remain unresolved for eternity, so all I was doing was settling my own feelings. Still, that was probably enough. I felt salvation just from that. I was very grateful for Katou’s presence.

“Takahiro, may I have a moment?” Thaddeus said, bringing me back from my thoughts. “I’ve gotten word from the settlement.”



The leader of the stray dragon pursuit force, the woman named Kath, visited us. She came to inform us that the elder had given us permission to enter the settlement and that she would come by to get us tomorrow.

“That went quicker than I thought,” I said. “I figured it would take longer.”

“It’s an insular settlement, so I’m sure opinions were split,” Thaddeus said, “but if the elder has made her decision, nobody can object.”

“Conversely, that means that not everyone in the settlement approves of our visit.”

We couldn’t really help that. We were outsiders about to enter a hidden settlement, after all.

“To put it another way,” Thaddeus added, “the stray dragon pursuit force was composed of those who sympathized with Lobivia. Despite Kath’s attitude, she is actually very kind...or a little soft, I suppose. She was as considerate as

possible given the bounds of her discretion. It's a different story, though, when it comes to inviting humans into the settlement."

"You mean some deem it unacceptable to break the rules that protect the settlement just for the stray dragon's sake?"

"I hope you don't misunderstand them," Thaddeus said with a smile that somehow looked lonely. "They just want to protect our home. For the past few centuries, everyday life in the settlement has been stable. Changes in that environment, no matter what they are, invite fear. It might sound pretty pathetic that dragons, with their enormous bodies and outrageous fangs and claws, feel that way, though."

"I don't think so. I can understand."

To them, I was like a foreign invader. I braced myself for what was to come when I entered the settlement.

"These are *their* opinions," Thaddeus said, suddenly smiling. "Mine is a little different."

"Hm? How so?"

Thaddeus looked me straight in the eyes, his gaze gentle, then said, "I believe you may be a symbol of hope, in a sense. Lord Takahiro, you gave Lobivia an ego. To us, that is a major deal. Please do remember that."



The following day, Kath guided us toward Draconia. We weren't really in a hurry this time, so we didn't opt to fly there on dragonback. Instead, we rode our manamobile north through Aker. Come nighttime, we gathered around the campfire and listened to Thaddeus.

"I'm sure you already know this, but a branch of the Aralia River serves as the northern border between Aker and Longue County of the Empire. A patch of Dark Woods covers that region. That's where our settlement is located. I suppose you may have figured that out already."

"Well, yeah," I affirmed.

Salvia had told me before that she wanted me to meet someone who knew

the past and that they were in the Dark Woods of northern Aker. I'd also heard the name of the lord of that forest before.

"The lord of the Dark Woods is a legendary monster called the Rage of the Earth. Meaning..."

Thaddeus nodded. "Yes. Your guess is correct. "The Rage of the Earth" is the common name humans use for our elder. She does, of course, have a different name of her own."

"I never heard anything about there being a settlement there. Well, I guess that makes sense. No human will set foot in the Dark Woods, so that makes it a pretty good place to hide."

Something specific came to mind, and I suddenly scowled.

"I wonder about that," Lily said, thinking the same thing I was. "At the very least, it's known that a powerful monster resides there, right? In other words, humans might want to subjugate the Dark Woods. Won't they dispatch an army there eventually?"

"You have a point, but there are two reasons that that isn't an urgent problem," Thaddeus said.

"What do you mean?" Lily asked.

"Basically, it's impossible to clear any Dark Woods without the help of a savior. Plus, this is Aker, not the Empire."

"Oh, I get it," Lily said. "So it's low on the priority list?"

"Precisely. There are plenty of other Dark Woods left in the southern Empire, and there are even a few in the northern Empire, which is the most stable area in the world. Also, it's known that the monsters in northern Aker's Dark Woods don't inflict much damage. Well, that's because we cull the monsters in the area, but in any case, that pushes it even further down the priority list. There's no reason for them to go out of their way to try and deal with it."

"Is that the reason your settlement was created in northern Aker?" Lily asked, cocking her head.

"Half," Thaddeus answered with a meaningful smile. "The other half has to do

with the second reason the settlement is considered safe. You'll find that out tomorrow, so look forward to it."



The next day, we finally reached the Dark Woods and immediately understood the meaning behind Thaddeus's words.

"Mist?" I murmured from the driver's seat.

"The Dark Woods of northern Aker are famous for being covered in a thick fog all year round," Shiran said from the seat next to mine. "We're still on the outskirts, but it appears we're starting to see a little of it."

Kei peeked out from the carriage to add, "Visibility is poor here, so you need to be careful not to get lost. The people from our hometown never step foot in this region."

Shiran and Kei were natives of Aker, but even though their home wasn't near this area, they still knew about the fog. However, there was something they didn't know. This was no simple mist.

"What's going on? I sense mana in this mist," I said.

"Huh? Really, Takahiro?" Shiran asked.

"Yeah."

"That's somewhat strange, My Lord," Gerbera said, switching places with Kei and peeking out from the back. "I cannot feel any magic at work here. Are you sure you sense mana?"

"I'm pretty sure..."

I lost a bit of confidence when Gerbera put it like that.

"Lord Takahiro is correct," our guide Kath said, backing my waning confidence. Walking briskly in front of the manamobile by Thaddeus's side, she looked over her shoulder at us. "This is no common mist. Strictly speaking, it isn't magic, so it can't be compared, but if we were to apply some metric to it, it would be equivalent to grade 5 glamor magic."

"Grade 5?!" I exclaimed.

I was speechless. That was the highest grade of magic in this world. Even among the cheaters of the exploration team, only a few were able to cast any.

“It might be even higher than that,” Kath added. “It’s wrought by the hands of the Lady of the Misty Lodge. We call it the Mist Barrier.”

“Salvia did this? Does that mean...this is a separate dimension created by the Misty Lodge?”

“Your wisdom is just what I’d expect from the Lady’s contractor. It is as you say. This region has been half-transformed into a separate world. The Mist Barrier causes any trespassers to lose their way. It is impossible to get through the mist, no matter who you are. We dragons are the only exceptions.”

Back when we wandered into the Misty Lodge, its magic had even completely captured Gerbera. Yet the glamor used in the Misty Lodge was only an auxiliary effect. Here, it was a defense mechanism that made trespassers lose their way. For that reason, the glamor magic was much more intense. The reason I was able to sense it was definitely because I’d made a contract with the one who’d made the mist.

“But how on earth...?” I muttered. “The Misty Lodge requires a tremendous amount of mana to create its world. It can only be maintained for a few days at most.”

“We touched upon that last night,” Thaddeus said, smiling. “The settlement remains hidden thanks to the Mist Barrier. This is the second reason we need not fear human invasion even though we live in the Dark Woods. Clearing the forest is next to impossible because of the mist, and just as I mentioned yesterday, there are few merits to doing so. Even if they did manage to clear it, it would take a long while with such poor visibility, which would give us sufficient time to escape.”

Thaddeus paused and looked at the thin mist enveloping us.

“This fog is also part of the reason the settlement had to be created here. The Lady gave us a magic tool that maintains the Mist Barrier.”

“A magic tool?”

“Yes. It’s called a Dimensional Cornerstone. It can maintain the world of the

Misty Lodge, even if only in a restricted manner.”

“That’s...pretty amazing.”

That was why Kath had said that it wasn’t strictly magic. The Mist Barrier used this magic tool to operate.

“The Dimensional Cornerstone is the treasure of Draconia, and it possesses monumental power. But despite its great strength, it can only be used in an extremely limited set of locations. This is one such location.”

“And that’s why the settlement was created here...”

A magic tool that could only be used in restricted places—I’d heard something similar before. After I thought about it for a few seconds, I remembered the barrier runestones that had protected those huts. They only worked within the Depths. And the Dimensional Cornerstone would only work in the Dark Woods. I found this rather interesting. The Dark Woods and the Depths were both dense with mana. Perhaps that had some kind of influence. Still, as far as I could tell, the Dimensional Cornerstone’s conditions were much stricter.

While I was thinking about that, Kath turned around to face me.

“It is about time for the fog to get thicker,” she said. “Please be careful. The settlement is a few hours away. We’ll be going all the way there today.”

Immediately after she said that, a white haze obstructed our vision. At the same time, the ground turned moist and barren, probably because the mist blocked the sunlight. The trees were also sparsely dispersed.

“Lord Takahiro. It might be a good idea to descend from the vehicle. This area can be—”

“Whoa.”

“It appears I was a little late.”

The manamobile’s wheel sank in the soft soil. Gerbera could lift it back out, but the vehicle wouldn’t be of much use from this point onward. Besides, it wasn’t all that necessary here. Humans rarely entered these lands, and visibility was practically nil, so there was no need to hide Gerbera and Ayame. We accepted Kath’s offer to have someone from the settlement come get the

manamobile later, then set off on foot.

“Anyway, can we really reach the settlement when we can barely see in front of us?” I asked.

“It is the other way around, Lord Takahiro,” Kath said. “This mist is exactly what tells us the direction of the settlement. It doesn’t obstruct us from guiding you there. Visibility is simply poor, so please be careful that you do not go astray. We will be entering the Dark Woods shortly. On rare occasions, we may encounter monsters, so please do ready yourselves for the unexpected.”

White dominated our vision as we continued walking, unable to even see who was next to us. We traveled in silence, and after a while, we began seeing trees around us once more. As the density of the trees increased, the area became a proper forest. Goose bumps suddenly ran down my skin. I remembered this sensation.

“Senpai,” Katou called.

“Yeah. It’s the same as the Woodlands.”

Katou felt the same thing. It was the opposite of our experience three months ago when we left the Woodlands. We were definitely in the Dark Woods now. Though sunlight was scarce, the trees grew in droves without a care, fully displaying how abnormal this forest was.

It was already difficult to progress just because of the fog. Combined with the forest terrain and the powerful glamor in place, these lands were like an impregnable fortress.

“The settlement is thoroughly hidden, huh?” I commented.

“Yes. That is exactly why we are able to live stable lives,” Kath replied in a gentle tone I’d yet to hear from her. “This is the small world where we monsters can attain peace. We owe the Lady of the Misty Lodge an unpayable debt.”

We proceeded through the forest, which had been transformed into a world of its own. The next day, we would reach Draconia.

Chapter 12: Draconia

There was basically no undergrowth in the Dark Woods of northern Aker. Even the afternoons were gloomy because of the fog, so there wasn't enough sunlight for any vegetation to grow. The only flora prospering in this barren soil was the trees of the Woodlands.

Nonetheless, not even these trees could escape the influence of the sunless environment. Unlike normal trees, these didn't stretch straight up into the sky. Distorted trunks twisted out of the reddish-brown soil and vanished into the mist above. It looked like some kind of haunted forest, and as we walked on, I found it quite amusing that dragons lived in these woods.

"Hey, Takahiro."

When we were only a short distance away from Draconia, someone called my name and tugged on my sleeve. I looked down to see Lobivia stuck to my side. It was a little hard to walk like this. Her wings remained extended and would sometimes slap me on the back. Not that I was going to say anything about it. She was obviously nervous.

"There's something I don't really get. Can I ask you about it?" she said.

Ever since we joined up with Kath, Lobivia had become taciturn. However, starting this morning, she'd been asking me a lot of questions like this. The closer we got to the settlement, the more anxious she became.

"What is it?" I asked in as gentle a tone as I could manage. "If you don't understand something, then feel free to ask."

Lobivia cocked her head curiously, her red hair swaying behind her.

"Takahiro, are you and Lily mates?"

Her unexpectedly frank question silenced me for a moment.

"Yeah. I guess so," I eventually answered.

I was a little worried about the others listening to us, but seeing as how I'd

told her to ask freely, I had no choice but to comply.

“So...is Gerbera also your mate?” Lobivia asked.

“Mm-hmm. That’s right,” Gerbera answered from behind us. “We share a mutual love.”

She puffed out her bountiful chest and clenched her fists. Her lips quivered happily. Her flushed face was really cute. I was a little embarrassed with everyone around, but when I saw Gerbera’s honest expression of affection, happiness swelled up inside me. Was this what they referred to as the weakness of falling in love? My cheeks felt a little hot.

“Hmmm?” Lobivia hummed, tilting her head to the opposite side and looking at Gerbera. “But I’ve never seen you sleeping with Takahiro or nothing?”

“Gwah?!” Gerbera yelped. Lobivia had dealt her a major blow. Gerbera staggered and held her hand to her chest. “Th-There are some challenging circumstances regarding that matter. Mutual love truly is difficult.”

“Difficult how?” Lobivia asked.

“Well, how do I put it... When I get too excited, I feel I’ll, like, squish our lord flat in my embrace?”

“Squish him flat?!”

Shocked, Lobivia spread her wings wide, then clung tight to my leg.

“H-Hey there,” I said, feeling like my legs were going to tangle up.

Lobivia didn’t listen to me. She growled, and even though her gaze was already sharp by nature, she glared daggers at Gerbera.

“Are you gonna crush him?” she asked.

The way her wariness exuded from every pore of her body was much like a thorny cactus.

“I-I’m not! Not at all! That’s why I’ve yet to share a bed with him, right?!”

Gerbera began panicking and making excuses. This scene felt familiar. It reminded me of the time Rose had gotten angry at Gerbera for the same thing. Did Rose and Lobivia actually share an unexpected commonality as thorny

flowers?

Someone's stifled laugh brought me back from my thoughts.

Kath, who was up front guiding us, covered her mouth with an "excuse me." Her eyes were kind as she watched Lobivia glare at Gerbera and cling to my leg.

Lobivia's growling subsided, replaced by a groan. She folded her wings.

"It's fine as long as you don't crush him. It don't make no sense, though."

"Mrgh. I can't help it. I simply can't control my strength when I get too aroused. One day, you will experience this too."

"I wonder about that, Gerbera. I'm pretty sure it only applies to you..." Lily said wryly.

"Lily?!" Gerbera shrieked.

"You sure are pathetic despite being so strong," Lobivia said, sighing. She sounded astonished. "Why don't you just tie up all your arms and legs or something?"

"Ugh. You have quite the mouth on you... Hm? Tie up?"

"Hey, it's fine to have fun and all, but leave it at that," I said. "We're in the Dark Woods here. Monsters could show up at any moment."

I didn't mind a little idle chatter, but we were getting a bit too relaxed, so I decided to give them a warning. Everyone nodded in agreement, but Lobivia had a pensive look on her face.

"What's up, Lobivia? Something on your mind?" I asked.

"No... I was just thinking it made sense now." Lobivia craned her neck to look up at me. Her large, almond-shaped eyes reflected my image. "You've got Gerbera and Lily's mana in you, yeah? Is that 'cause you're mates?"

"What?"

All of our eyes grew wide with shock.

"Huh? Did I say something weird?" Lobivia asked with a blank look.

"I knew about Gerbera's mana...but Lily's too?"

We'd learned a long time ago that Gerbera's mana flowed into me through the mental path, but this was the first we'd ever heard of Lily's mana being present too.

Lily, who was holding my arm opposite of Lobivia, and Gerbera, who was walking directly behind us, both moved immediately.

"Hang on a sec, Master. Let me check."

"I shall as well, My Lord."

Girls were pressing down on me, their eyes closed, from the side and rear. I could hear Kei mumbling "Awawawa" farther to the back. At a glance, this scene might have appeared rather erotic, but it felt more like they were holding me captive. There was no way I could keep walking like this, so our whole group came to a stop. After a few seconds, Lily and Gerbera backed off.

"It's true... My mana really is there," Lily said.

"Mm. I never noticed the change because we were always so close," Gerbera added.

They were in agreement, meaning Lobivia was right. Now that I thought about it, Lobivia had looked at the three of us curiously when we first met. That was apparently because she'd been surprised by the resemblance of our mana.

"But when did it become like this?" Lily asked with a cock of her head. "Before it was just Gerbera's mana, right?"

"Well, I have felt like I've had more mana lately," I said.

It had started around the time we encountered the Misty Lodge. I'd grown accustomed to the extra mana, though I had wondered how it came about. I never guessed it was because Lily's portion of mana in my body had increased.

"As for the timing," I added, "it would have been around the time you turned Mizushima Miho's ability as a visitor into partial mimicry?"

Or maybe...

I was about to suggest something else, but I swallowed my words. During the fight with the Mad Beast, even though it'd been just for an instant, I'd successfully reproduced the power of Gerbera's white tyranny. Perhaps that

was related to this too. Thinking back, that had been a major milestone in my growth. It was like I'd ascended to the next stage and deepened my understanding of my abilities. It wouldn't have been strange if there had been other effects as well.

"I don't really get it, but are you saying it's got nothing to do with mating?" Lobivia asked, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"Yeah. The key point is being my servant. Mana flows into me through the mental path."

"Hmmm."

Lobivia stayed glued to me and closed her eyes much like Lily and Gerbera had. She then wrinkled her brow and concentrated.

"Oh, it's true," she said, her eyes popping open. "It's just a teensy bit, but I can feel mine too. As for the others, I can't really sense any."

"That's a matter of capacity," Rose said. "I don't have anywhere near as much mana as Gerbera or Lily. As such, I cannot contribute to our master's mana capacity. In a sense, I am the most useless among us."

"What are you saying?" I protested. "Don't you make all of my equipment? You've contributed more than enough."

"The same goes for all of our equipment too," Lily added.

"Even when we went to save Lobivia, the equipment you made was tremendously useful," I said. "I'm very grateful."

"Thank you very much," Rose said, bowing cheerfully. "I shall endeavor to do even better."

Such serious words suited her.

"Now then, it'll get dark if we sit around for too long. We should get moving again," Thaddeus said, urging the group on. "We're nearly at Draconia."



Thaddeus was right. The white mist that had clung so densely around us suddenly disappeared, vanishing from our sight like a curtain being raised. A

tranquil body of water, an enormous lake with a small island at its center, suddenly came into view.

The overwhelming fog that enveloped the entire region was completely absent around the lake. However, the sky was still covered by mist, so it was like a white dome over the area. I spotted several slender pillars of water swirling like vortexes out of the mirrorlike sheen of the water's surface. At their peaks, the pillars turned into dense mist that drifted up into the white ceiling, supplying it with more fog. There was no way this was a natural phenomenon; it looked like celestial pillars supporting an enormous heavenly dome. I was utterly speechless.

"This lake is the source of the mist," Thaddeus explained. "The mist eventually turns into water, returns to the land, and comes back to the lake underground."

While I listened to Thaddeus, I stared at the scene before us. A group of houses made of large stones were clustered together by the lake's shore. There was nowhere else that resembled a residential area, so that made it Draconia. In other words, the one who knew the past would be there.

"Let's go on," Kath said, walking along the lake's shore.

Now that there was no mist blocking our view, we could see much more clearly, but it was still gloomy because of the fog covering the sky. It was unlikely that this settlement could be found even by flying overhead.

As we walked, I felt something thud against my back. It was Lobivia's wing. Her expression was dark and stiff, and she was deathly pale. The settlement she never wanted to return to was right before her, so it was only natural that she'd be anxious.

Still, her reaction was far worse than I expected. I couldn't help but worry about her. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to hold a proper conversation.

I felt I should probably say something to her, but then Lobivia suddenly met my eyes.

"Hey, Takahiro? Is this gonna be okay?" she asked, expressing her apprehension. "I don't get it."

"What don't you get?" I asked.

“What I wanna do,” she answered, sounding helpless. “You talked about it with Berta when she left, yeah? About what she wanted to do, I mean. That made me realize. That’s probably super important. And then Berta said she woulda regretted it if she didn’t notice. I don’t wanna regret anything.”

Lobivia wasn’t really getting to her point. She wasn’t used to conveying her thoughts to others. She also hadn’t organized her own thoughts yet, and she didn’t have the life experience to understand what she’d felt during my conversation with Berta.

“I don’t wanna live in the settlement, but that’s different from wanting to do something...I think. I still don’t have anything I wanna do. If I can’t leave the settlement, I might never find it. I don’t want that.”

Her awkward confession made me a little happy because she was talking to me about what had been bothering her.

“Lobivia,” I called to her, plopping my hand on her head. Strangely enough, she didn’t swat me off. She simply looked up at me with her chestnut eyes.

“What?” she huffed. She was still acting tough, and she put herself on guard for whatever I was about to say.

“What do you plan on doing if the talks here go well?” I asked as if it were a simple question.

“Huh?”

“Forget about the possibility that you’ll have to stay here. You need to think about what you’ll do if you can go outside, right? Have you thought of anything?”

“Well, um, not really...”

As I expected, Lobivia didn’t have an answer. Just asking for permission to leave had already filled her immature mind to the brim. Her earlier anxieties about not knowing what she wanted made this evident. Her thoughts were fully occupied by the obstruction before her, so there was no room left to figure out her feelings. But, in my opinion, that wouldn’t work. She had to have hopes for the future so that she could persevere. That was why I’d asked her about what lay beyond the obstacle occupying all her thoughts.

“If it’s okay, how about coming with us?” I suggested.

“With you?” she repeated. There was concern and fear in her voice...but also a tinge of hope. “Can I really go with you?”

“Of course,” I answered with a nod. “I was hoping you would be one of our companions if you wanted.”

“It’s like our master says,” Lily joined in, peeking at Lobivia from my other side. “Earlier, you said your mana is in our master’s body, right? That makes you the same as us. I can even be your big sis if you’d like.”

“Ooh, that sounds nice,” Gerbera added cheerfully. “Then you may also adore me as your elder sister.”

A small shadow then jumped on top of Gerbera’s head.

“Kuu!”

“Hrm? What’s wrong, Ayame?” Gerbera asked.

In response, Ayame puffed up her body with pride.

“Oh, right,” Lily said with a clap of her hands. “That also makes Ayame your big sister.”

“Kuu!”

Ayame yipped in confirmation, then leaped into the air. Lobivia caught her tiny body on reflex. Ayame’s cute round eyes stared up into Lobivia’s shocked face.

“Kuu!”

The way Ayame yipped proudly as if to say she could be relied on was almost a little awe-inspiring.



“Th-This is my big sister...”

I burst into laughter at Lobivia’s expression. Everyone else laughed too, including Lobivia herself.

“So? How about it?” I asked after the laughing subsided.

“Oh, uh. Ummm...” Lobivia faltered, and her cheeks flushed. She nodded and replied, “I-I’ll think about it.”

“Sounds good.”

When I saw the shadow of anxiety fade a little from her expression, I removed my hand from her head. I knew now she’d be able to speak her mind during the negotiations.

“Hm?”

Just then, I noticed Kath had been looking back our way. Her eyes were fixed on Lobivia. Her gaze was heartrending, but then her expression suddenly tensed.

“What’s this?!”

She turned around in a flash and looked at the wall of mist surrounding the lake. Thaddeus also looked in the same direction. Immediately following that, a man pushed his way through the white wall.

“Wha—?!”

We all went on guard as a terrifying muscular man blocked our path. He wore similar clothes to Thaddeus and Kath and looked somewhere around two and a half meters tall. Despite his extraordinary height, his width left more of an impression. His face was rectangular, his neck was thick with muscles, and his arms were like logs. Superhuman wasn’t enough to describe it. Seeing as how he was inside the Mist Barrier, he was definitely a dragon.

“Rex,” Thaddeus uttered.

“What are you doing here?” Kath asked.

The man ignored both Thaddeus and Kath and glared at Lobivia. “I won’t permit you to leave the settlement, Patricia.” His deep voice matched his

appearance.

Patricia was Lobivia's name in the settlement. I'd also heard the name Rex before. Thaddeus had told me about the conservative faction within the settlement who were opposed to letting Lobivia leave. Rex was the name of the man who was most fervent about it. I hadn't expected him to come out right as we got here, though.

"Aah... Uh..."

Lobivia turned ghostly pale, which made sense. Rex obviously had no intention of talking things out, and this was the attitude that Lobivia had feared the most. Lily and I shifted to hide Lobivia behind us, while Gerbera pulled her back a little and Ayame let out a menacing growl, still in the little dragon's arms. Rex's expression grew even sterner, but then Thaddeus suddenly cut in between us.

"Come on now. Wait a minute, Rex."

"What do *you* want, Thaddeus?"

"What are you doing, showing up so suddenly? Actually, it's bad manners to hide and eavesdrop on people."

Thaddeus had chided Rex, but he'd said it somewhat jokingly so as to avoid angering Rex too much. His efforts didn't seem to pay off, however.

"What's wrong with me—the one charged with safeguarding this settlement — confronting intruders?"

The brazen Rex had apparently been laying in wait for us behind the fog. The Mist Barrier had the effect of glamor magic, and not even Gerbera had sensed his presence.

"Intruders?" Thaddeus said, then sighed. "I believe I informed you beforehand of Majima Takahiro's visit."

"I don't recall approving it," Rex spat, glaring at Thaddeus. "What are you even thinking, Thaddeus? And you too, Katherine? Bringing a *human* to the settlement, of all things."

"He is contracted to the Lady of the Misty Lodge," Thaddeus said.

“Even so, he’s human. Like hell he can be trusted just because of a contract,” Rex replied, clenching his rocklike fist. “Humans *can’t* be trusted.”

He was being stubborn, but at the same time, there was sorrow in his voice.

“We dragons should never leave this settlement,” he continued. “Why can’t you understand that? Have you forgotten what we learned back then?”

“Rex...”

There was pain in Thaddeus’s voice too. Something had happened to them. I didn’t know what that was, seeing as how I’d yet to speak to the one who knew the past, but I could feel the deep sorrow in Rex. Regardless, his grief quickly passed.

“We can’t leave Patricia to some human,” he said scornfully, looking my way. He was clearly being hostile. “Take a good look. That there is a human. What will you do if something happens after you leave Patricia to such a scrawny little thing? What if something happens because that filth knows about our settlement?”

Rex glared down at me, but his eyes didn’t seem to perceive me. He didn’t recognize me as an individual. His words weren’t really directed at anyone; he was just expressing his distrust of humanity, spurred on by his boiling rage.

“Go back to where you came from, human. In deference to the debt we owe you for saving Patricia, I won’t take your life.”

His very presence weighed down on me. Even his impossibly large body seemed like a feather compared to his intimidating aura. This was the pressure of a dragon. Not that I could possibly let him overwhelm me right now.

“We came here to talk. Let us through,” I said, my eyes snapping open with determination. I stared him down.

Rex looked stunned. Perhaps he was surprised that I didn’t fear him. In any case, his reaction only lasted for a single instant.

“There’s no worth in listening to a filthy human’s words.”

Rex took a step forward. Thaddeus and Kath lowered their stances, planning to hold Rex back if it came to it, but the large man ignored them and continued

his march. And just then...

“Hang on a sec, Rex,” someone called, their voice young and curt. “The hell did you say just now?”

It was Lobivia. There was no fear in her words. A different emotion dominated her right now.

“Mrgh.”

Rex halted. Lobivia’s tone was so forceful that it had stopped the large man’s stride.

“Did I just fucking hear you call Takahiro filthy?”

Cracks resounded about her as her two little arms transformed into dragon claws. Her eyes were wide open, and her pupils contracted into reptilian slits. Sparks crackled out of her mouth as if the rage burning inside her couldn’t be contained.

“You ignorant shit. I’ll kill you.”

She had completely snapped, forgetting about how scared she’d been just moments ago. Even if she was little, she was still a dragon. Her aura was just as intimidating as Rex’s.

“She’s right. You may have gone a little too far just now,” said a voice joining the fray. It was Rose. Even though she appeared calm, she was seething on the inside. “Our master came here to talk. I cannot possibly ignore this poor treatment of his good intentions. I’ll have you rescind your statement right this instant.”

Pulling an enormous ax out of her apron pocket, Rose stood next to Lobivia, her braided hair swaying behind her.



So long as we were accompanying Lobivia here to keep the dragons from confining her, we needed to put on a show of force so that the dragons didn't act unjustly. Sincerity was only meaningful if they treated us sincerely to begin with. There was no point if they treated our sincerity as naivete. Hence, we couldn't let them look down on us.

That was why Rose had drawn her weapon, but despite her logic, she was definitely angry. Otherwise, she wouldn't have reacted so quickly. Rose was usually calm, but when it came to me, she was easily agitated.

The difference between Lobivia and Rose was that one exploded the moment she snapped, while the other swallowed her anger and made a rational decision before getting angry. Either way, these two flowers were both baring their thorns now.

"P-Please wait a moment!" Thaddeus cried in a panic.

If a fight broke out, it could lead to war between my camp and the settlement. Thaddeus couldn't possibly allow that to happen. Well, this was nothing more than a show of force. We had no intention of seriously fighting them, and if it came to it, I would just take Lobivia and run away. That would trouble Thaddeus, though.

"Rex! That's enough!" Things were reaching a breaking point, so Thaddeus finally stared up at Rex's large frame and shouted, "If you continue to act so rudely toward Takahiro, then I will be your opponent."

"Have you gone mad, Thaddeus? Do you mean to fight among the clan?" Rex asked, his thick eyebrow rising. He seemed incredulous, but Thaddeus was dead serious.

"It's better than allowing you to fight Takahiro."

"You've lost your mind spending so much time in the outside world," Rex groaned. "That's why I said it was unnecessary to have an explorer."

"It's a little vexing that you're calling me insane over this. I believe Takahiro can grant our isolated lives a future."

Thaddeus's tone remained calm, but there was determination in his voice.

"I believe you may be a symbol of hope, in a sense."

That was what he'd once said to me.

"If you insist on getting in the way any more than this, then I will knock you down a peg," Thaddeus continued. "We finally managed to make a connection with a man like Takahiro, and I cannot allow it to be lost now."

"A future for our isolated settlement? What can a filthy human do?!" Rex roared back at him. "What's wrong with being closed in?! If we're going to lose something precious to us, then we're better off this way!"

"But there's no future like that!"

"You only say that because you live outside the settlement! This is the only place for us!"

As they yelled at each other, their appearances began to shift. Scales began spreading across their skin, and their teeth tapered into fangs. Their human voices turned into deep growls. They were moments away from battle.

"Thaddeus... Rex..."

Unable to find the resolve to stop them, Kath panicked as she watched her fellow dragons. But then her expression completely relaxed. Her eyes were fixed on another woman running our way.

"Ella!"

Kath's relieved cry weakened the two men's fighting spirit. Shortly after, the woman reached us. She looked a little older than the other dragons.

"I thought I didn't see you this morning. So this is where you've been, Rex," she said in a reproachful tone.

"I was just—"

"I'll hear none of it. Stand down."

After she subdued Rex with just her presence, the woman turned my way. I couldn't sense any kind of hostility from her.

"Thank you for making your way here, esteemed contractor of the Misty Lodge," she said, bowing gracefully.

It seemed she was welcoming us. That made it three against one. Of course, Rex wasn't going to start rampaging in such a situation, so he went back to yelling.

"Ella! I thought you were opposed to Patricia leaving the settlement!"

"I am opposed. But that is separate from showing respect to the Lady's contractor."

It appeared that opinions differed among the dragons. Ella was likely a moderate among the conservatives.

"More importantly, I don't believe all humans are definitely evil," she added.

"But..."

"Besides, the elder will be the one to decide. She says she will meet them. I'll only tell you one more time. Stand down."

Rex's face went red. "Have it your way! But I'll be attending these talks!"

With that, he turned on his heels and stomped off. We watched his enormous body shrink into the distance.

"Please forgive the ruckus, Lord Takahiro," the woman said, giving me an apologetic smile. "My brethren spoke out of turn. I truly am sorry."

"It's fine. It doesn't really bother me."

I didn't feel like Rex had been directing his words at me as an individual. It would be futile to get angry about that.

Humans were entering the hidden settlement of dragons. I'd predicted it would turn out like this, and Rose and Lobivia had gotten angry for me already. There was nothing more for me to say. Besides, Rex only had the settlement, and nothing but the settlement, on his mind.

Rex just wanted to live a peaceful life here, and humans could ruin that. Therefore, humans couldn't be trusted. I couldn't deny his feelings, and I did sympathize with him in some ways. To him, I was nothing more than a foreign invader here to disturb the peace. I was sure he wasn't a bad person, despite his attitude.

“More importantly, I’d like to see the elder,” I said.

“Of course. Kath, lead the way.”

“U-Understood.”

After giving Kath a nod, the woman suddenly turned to Lobivia.

“Also, welcome home, Patty.”

Lobivia jolted. Her burning rage had already been extinguished, so she was acting timidly again. Still, she managed to speak clearly.

“My name’s Lobivia.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, I heard you go by that now.”

The woman looked a little lonely, and her expression was similar to the one Thaddeus and Kath sometimes showed.

“Then let’s start over. Welcome home, Lobivia,” the woman said, masking her loneliness with a smile and addressing Lobivia warmly. “I’m glad to see you safe and sound.”



The houses by the lakeshore were simplistic buildings made of stone, but they were very different from what we’d seen in town. To put it simply, they were insanely huge.

“There are those who find it more relaxing to sleep in dragon form,” Kath explained.

“That makes sense. So they’re built to accommodate a dragon’s size,” I said. “Which building is the elder in?”

“She isn’t in any of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“The elder lives over there.”

Kath pointed to the lake and its enormous pillars of water. Or more precisely, she was pointing at the small island at its center. There was a short, rugged mountain atop the island, and from this distance, I could spot something like a

shrine built atop it.

“All the way over there?” I muttered.

“Yes. We will cross the water now.”

There was no bridge to the island. Everyone in Draconia could fly, so there was no need for one. We split up into two groups, rode atop Thaddeus and Kath to cross the lake, and landed on the island. At that moment, I realized I’d greatly misunderstood.

Kath led us on foot. After we passed through the shrine, which, unlike the rest of the settlement’s buildings, was sensible in size, we headed for the center of the island. Rex, who’d gone ahead of us, and the one who knew the past awaited us there.

“I thank you for coming,” a mumbling voice greeted us.

Next to Rex, an enormous stone about ten meters wide and five meters tall split open, revealing a huge glaring eyeball. I held my breath. If this enormous stone was the profile of a head, then the mountain I’d seen from a distance was actually the entire body of a gigantic dragon.

“I am the carapace wyrm Malvina, the elder who supervises this settlement.”

This was the dragon that Salvia had asked me to meet—the elder of Thaddeus’s clan. She was an enormous dragon much like a mountain, over fifty meters in size.

Chapter 13: The Dragon Clan

“I thank you for making the long journey here. Well, take a seat.”

The carapace wyrm Malvina pointed her eye to a spot where a rug had been laid out. This didn't look like something Rex, who was standing by Malvina's side, had prepared himself. It was probably the work of the woman we met earlier.

I took a seat right in front of the eye looking down at us. From this angle, the dragon looked even more like a towering cliff. At her size, she was more of a kaiju than a monster. Though she was a resident of a fantasy world, she seemed like she'd be right at home in science fiction. I recalled the black kaiju from the FX movies that had become part of our national pop culture. She had wings, so she was more like a certain golden villain, though. Or maybe not. That one had three heads, so the impression it gave was a little different.

“It must be difficult to understand my words, so do forgive me. I struggle with transforming into a human form.”

“It's fine. I don't really mind,” I said, shaking my head.

Her voice was, in fact, somewhat difficult to make out, but it wasn't to the point where we couldn't have a conversation. Actually, considering how Thaddeus and the others couldn't even speak unless they took human forms, Malvina was quite skilled.

“Hmm, how surprising,” Gerbera said.

“What's up?” I asked.

“Nothing much. It's just that Malvina here,” she said cheerfully, “is stronger than me, at least in terms of mana capacity.”

This left me speechless.

“If it came to an actual battle,” Gerbera continued, “well, I don't know who would win. I'd definitely be at a disadvantage. My threads wouldn't be very

useful. Hee hee. I never thought there'd be a monster stronger than me in this world."

"Hmph. What are you even spouting? That's my line," Malvina replied with a snort. "I'm a dragon, and I've lived in this world since antiquity. I'm probably one of the oldest living monsters in the present day. I've been around for a long time, though not as long as the Misty Lodge. Despite that, with such a difference in body size, it's impossible to tell which of us is stronger."

Given that dragons were born with tremendous strength by nature, the Great White Spider of the Depths truly did stand out above all others. That said, this ancient dragon did, in fact, have the power to surpass her.

"The world is so vast..." I muttered.

"Indeed. I couldn't agree more," Malvina said. "To think the day would come when I would meet another human who doesn't seem to fear me at all. I've had a long life."

There was a hint of nostalgia in Malvina's voice. I didn't miss the "another" in her statement either. She was surely remembering some other human she'd met long ago.

Her enormous eyeball stared at me fixedly. Her gaze was filled with fathomless intelligence. That eye had watched the flow of time longer than any human could imagine. I felt like I could trust her far more than any thoughtless human. No matter how big she was or how sharp her fangs and claws were, I had no reason to fear her.

"At the very least, it seems there is worth in speaking with you," she said. Something like a laugh came from deep within Malvina's throat as she watched me stare right at her. After stirring slightly, she narrowed her eyes. "Now then, let us ask what you've come all the way out to this remote region for."

"There are two reasons for my visit," I answered, placing my hand on Lobivia's small shoulder as she remained seated next to me. "The first is about Lobivia...Patricia. She says that she wants to leave this settlement. I've come to get your permission as the elder of Draconia."

"I see."

Malvina merely nodded along, while Rex's expression grew more harsh. Well, that reaction seemed pretty typical of him.

"I'm sure you have objections," I added. "If she is allowed to carelessly go in and out, it could expose the settlement's existence. I think I understand your circumstances in this regard. If she comes back to the settlement periodically, then some sort of arrangement needs to be made. I came here to talk and find a compromise, taking all of this into consideration."

"I see. And your other reason for coming?"

"I've heard that there was someone who could communicate with a monster's heart before me. I was also told that you know the past and knew him very well. Malvina, I've come here to hear his tale."

"I suppose there's no need to ask why you know that. This is Misty's doing, isn't it?" The enormous dragon huffed from her nose. "What a meddlesome busybody."

"She seems to love you all very much."

"Stop that. My entire body is getting itchy. What do you plan on doing if the island sinks from me squirming about?" she said jokingly, perhaps trying to hide her embarrassment. "So? Where is Misty? It's rather cold of her not to show herself."

"Oh, dear. Please do excuse me."

A voice came from a swirl of mist that emanated in front of Malvina's eye. The mist then took on the shape of a woman smiling pleasantly.

"Long time no see, Malvina."

The Misty Lodge Salvia floated in the air cheerfully. She brushed the golden-brown hair cascading down her large chest and narrowed her downturned eyes nostalgically.

"Hmph. It's been a couple hundred years, Misty," Malvina replied casually.

"The last time I came was around ten years after Carl was taken down, I suppose. Also, I go by Salvia now, so please do remember that. Not that I'll tell you to call me that after all this time."

“Aah, I heard that he bestowed you with a name. With that and the contract you formed, it seems you’ve fallen head over heels for this little boy.”

“That’s right. He and his servants are all such adorable children.”

Malvina spoke in a friendly tone, while Salvia giggled in an affable manner. I could sense through this short exchange how long they’d known each other. They were long-lived beings, and they’d surely gone through many, many things. The amount of time they’d spent talking with each other was likely immeasurable. Still, this meeting wasn’t something we’d prepared for their sake.

“Now then. Let’s leave this chat between neglected friends there, shall we?” Salvia said after a short while. “I feel bad for getting a little too caught up in our talks. After all, I’m not playing the leading role today.”

“You never play the leading role. Fickle like the wind, the bystander of mist... Well, I already know that you’d prefer that,” Malvina said, sounding sympathetic at the end. Then she turned to me once more. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Very well. First, shall we discuss the treatment of our little one here?”

Her behavior went from being open-minded to strict in an instant. The enormous cliff-like being before me seemed to have even more gravity now. I wasn’t overawed or anything, but I did feel a pressure deep in my stomach. Malvina was now facing us as the leader of Draconia. Nonetheless, I could sense her willingness to discuss things, unlike Rex.

“Lobivia,” I said, pushing the little girl’s shoulder lightly. “You should speak for yourself.”

“Mm.” I was a little worried, but Lobivia grasped my hand and replied in a far more reliable voice than I expected. “I want to leave the settlement, so I want your permission.”

“And what do you plan on doing by leaving?” Malvina asked bluntly. “Do you intend on living in the wilderness as a stray dragon?”

“No. I...want to go with Takahiro.”

Lobivia turned to me, and I nodded back to her. Lobivia broke into the slightest of smiles, but Malvina’s cross-examination didn’t falter in the least.

“Do you hate this settlement that much? Is that why you cause trouble for others?”

“It’s not,” Lobivia answered quickly and clearly. “It’s true I don’t want to be here, but that’s not the only reason.” Her hand clenched mine tightly before she declared, “I want to be with them. I don’t want to go with Takahiro because I want to run away from the settlement. I want to go with him, so I want to leave the settlement.”

I honestly thought she’d done more than enough by just stating her desire to leave. I was surprised she could express her hopes so openly like this. She was no longer the little girl who was simply scared and had no choice but to go on a rampage.

I was happy to hear that she wanted to come with us, but there was one person for whom that wasn’t enough.

“Don’t be stupid!” Rex roared, no longer able to endure this quietly. “Not only do you want to leave the settlement, but you want to go with a human?! Do you understand what you’re saying?!”

“Shut your trap!” Lobivia shouted back at him. “I already decided! Quit yammering from the goddamn sidelines!”

The two of them snarled at each other. In contrast, Malvina didn’t react. The ancient dragon directed a peaceful gaze at Lobivia.

“Malvina?” Salvia uttered suspiciously.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but she’d sounded apprehensive.

Before Salvia could say anything, Malvina stated, “I understand what you’re trying to say.” Lobivia looked up at her. “Do as you like.”

“Wh-Wha?!” Rex sputtered and then went silent.

Lobivia’s expression brightened up immensely. “Really?!” the little dragon exclaimed.

“Yes,” Malvina replied in a relaxed tone. “However, you are never allowed to return to the settlement.”

“Huh...?” Lobivia froze.

“Under no circumstance are you to interact with the people of the settlement either.”

“Wha...?”

“Why are you so surprised? Interactions with the outside world are not tolerated. This is the absolute law that I have imposed on the settlement. You wish to leave, so isn’t this obvious?”

“Th-That’s true... B-But...”

Lobivia tried to say something, but she could only open and close her mouth.

Malvina was correct, but her words were still merciless. The dragons of her clan were symbols of fear to Lobivia, but they were also her family. It was possible they could eventually reconcile. Somewhere deep down, she must’ve hoped that would happen.

“If you leave the settlement, then you are no more than a stranger to us, *Lobivia.*”

Lobivia had never expected to be rejected so plainly like this. Her face turned deathly pale, but in the next instant, she flushed to a dangerous degree.

“Oh?! Is that so?!” she screamed, shooting up to her feet. Her ability to snap in an instant was her strength, but it was also her weakness. “What a relief, you shitty old hag! Like hell I wanna see your stupid face again!”

Lobivia ran off without looking back.

“Lily...”

“Got it.”

Lobivia couldn’t be left on her own right now. Lily nodded back to me and ran after her. Their footsteps faded off into the distance.

“Kath. You stay,” Malvina said, stopping Kath from giving chase.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Rex yelled, finally released from his stupor. The shock had frozen his thoughts, but once Lobivia left, he managed to come to grips with the situation. Even with his superhuman stature, he had to look up at the ancient dragon’s eye. He was as red as Lobivia had been.

“Exactly as I said,” Malvina replied bluntly. She lowered her eyelid as if to say there was nothing left to discuss.

“Are you fine with misfortune befalling Patricia?!”

Rex was enraged, but he was angry for Lobivia’s sake. He thought if she were to leave the settlement, she would be unhappy. That was why he’d acted so hostile toward me. He was hardheaded, but his feelings were genuine. As for why he went so far...

“Enough of that,” Malvina said. “She’s already a stranger to us.”

“Like hell she is!” Rex yelled, his giant fists trembling. “Patricia is my real sister! Isn’t that right, mother?!”

They were family, and this was none other than an expression of an all-too-common sentiment.

“Rex,” Malvina said, opening her eyelid. Her gaze was heartless. She had such a cold look about her it almost seemed fake. “If you have a problem with my policy, then you may also leave the settlement.”

“What...?”

She glared at Rex as he turned pale. The way his complexion changed so easily really highlighted his similarity to Lobivia.

“I...”

However, Rex didn’t throw a tantrum like Lobivia had. He might’ve been close to doing so, but he managed to endure by grinding his teeth.

“I’m going to go cool off...”

He turned on his heels and stomped off. Since he called himself the protector of this settlement, he had no other choice.

Now that the violent storm of emotions was gone, the first to speak was Salvia.

“Malvina... Couldn’t you have picked your words a little better?” Salvia said.

“It’s fine this way,” Malvina replied, sounding tired. “If possible, I’d even like Rex to leave the settlement.”

“You’re going to explain things to us, right?” I said, cutting into their conversation.

I never thought it would turn out this way. In that respect, I’d taken the situation too lightly, so I had a responsibility to properly grasp the situation.

“It’s simple,” Malvina said, lowering her gaze to me. “It’s because I believe it’ll be best this way.”

Though she was a powerful and ancient dragon, it looked to me like Malvina had aged in an instant, as if all the time she’d been alive was suddenly crushing down on her.

“I’m sure you were planning on bringing her back here every now and then,” Malvina continued, “but I can’t possibly allow her to return if she leaves. I can only protect this settlement by shutting it off from the world.”

“I fail to understand...” Gerbera muttered stiffly. “You possess more than enough power, do you not? Those living here are also plenty strong.” She gave Thaddeus and Kath a look before continuing. “What is there to fear so badly? What in the world happened to you? As long as you don’t tell us, we can’t possibly accept this.”

The sternness on her beautiful face was for Lobivia’s sake.

Seeing Gerbera like that, Malvina narrowed her eye in relief. “Well, I suppose it’s only fair I tell you. You came here to hear this to begin with. Shall we start from the very beginning? It all happened long, long ago.”



“Once upon a time, a human who could speak to a monster’s heart came to these lands. Much like the boy here, he was a visitor from another world. Your thinking is correct. Unlike Misty, I did not gain an ego all on my own. I was his servant. I’m sure you deduced this much already.”

“Well, it was a reasonable assumption,” I said with a nod. “My predecessor, then? What kind of man was he?”

“A good man. He might have resembled you a little. He was burly and manly.”

“That doesn’t sound like me at all,” I said, grimacing.

“Well, in terms of appearance, it doesn’t. Still, he treated me dearly. At first, he came as a savior to defeat me, but after a series of coincidences, I became his servant. I was lucky. I probably felt the same as your servants do now.”

“What kind of ability did he have, exactly?” Katou asked. “You said that he could speak to a monster’s heart, but you mean it in a different way from how Majima-senpai’s cheat works, right?”

“Why do you say that, Mana?” Rose asked, seated next to her. She cocked her head.

“Because Malvina said that he came as a savior to defeat her. If he had the same ability as Majima-senpai, he wouldn’t be considered a *savior* in this world. Besides, there are no tales among the church’s legends of a savior who could tame monsters.”

“What a clever girl,” Malvina said with admiration. “It’s as you say. His ability was different from the boy’s. He could transform into a dragon.”

“Meaning it’s the same type of cheat as Takaya’s...” Katou said.

Takaya was a first year student like Katou. We’d witnessed firsthand how a cheat could transform one’s entire body and way of life, so we could easily accept Malvina’s explanation as fact.

“I get it now. In that case, you really were lucky,” Katou added.

“What do you mean?” Rose inquired.

“Because unlike Majima-senpai, that man wouldn’t have been able to communicate with any monster but a dragon.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

A human who could turn into a dragon, and a dragon who possessed some amount of intelligence. Their encounter must have been fate. Now that I thought about it, the way Malvina had described him as “burly and manly” was likely because he could transform into a dragon. After all, to Malvina’s eyes, normal humans looked minuscule, so she wouldn’t have normally used those descriptors.

“There are in fact legends of a savior who could transform into a dragon,”

Shiran said. "But I've never heard of him being able to speak with dragons..."

"The Holy Church passes down the legends, right?" Malvina replied. "They conceal any inconvenient truths. It was already well known that a savior who could transform into a dragon existed, so I suppose they couldn't erase that portion."

Malvina seemed irritated. The fabricated image of saviors. The cleanly collated legends. I'd felt this way about them before, so I didn't doubt what she said in the least. Shiran looked a little dismayed, but she didn't say anything.

"One who can transform into a dragon, and the dragon with whom he could communicate... I see. That's why everyone in this settlement is a dragon," Gerbera muttered in satisfaction. "That means the other dragons, including Thaddeus, also became his servants, right?"

"No, not quite," Malvina said. "To be precise, those children are servants, but not."

"What do you mean?" Gerbera asked, her brows knitting.

"It's not all that complicated," Malvina answered. Her next statement came out like it was nothing, but maybe, it was actually a bombshell. "That visitor was my husband, and Thaddeus and all the others are our children."

"What...did you say...?" Gerbera asked, her red eyes wide with shock.

"I said he was my husband. That visitor was everyone's father."

Gerbera froze on the spot.

"You don't look all that surprised," Malvina said, lowering her gaze to me.

"Well, I'd considered it already."

I'd had a vague idea of what exactly Thaddeus and the others were. Malvina and her husband's relationship resembled the type I had with my servants, so I could see how it could have progressed to that stage. Besides, I'd asked Thaddeus before whether he was just a monster. Thaddeus had looked impressed by that because my words had prodded at the truth.

Furthermore, some of the things he'd mentioned stood out. He'd told me that, normally, monsters couldn't hide among humans. That was true, but

considering how he'd been doing exactly that, his statement seemed contradictory. In other words, he'd worded it that way because he wasn't just a monster. He was also half-human. That explained why he could take a human form and easily slip into human society.

Gerbera hadn't noticed anything, but Lily might've inferred this. Or, rather than a sound deduction, perhaps Lily saw it more as a hopeful possibility, which was why she empathized with Lobivia and Thaddeus—as did I. We felt compelled to because, in a sense, they were our future.

“Is that, um, really possible...?” Gerbera asked, coming to the same realization. She sounded hopeful.

I could sense something like a wry smile coming from Malvina.

“What a thing to ask... Though, in this case, I suppose it's understandable. I've done it, after all.”

Gerbera was speechless. Her red eyes darted around.

“But let me tell you now. I don't know if it'll be the case for you,” Malvina added, clearly realizing what Gerbera was thinking about. “But there's nothing to lose by knowing of a precedent.” The ancient dragon narrowed her eye, looking far off into the distance. “They were happy days. Aah. I would've traded anything for them to go on forever.”

The look in her eye was so gentle. She was definitely reminiscing about the good old days.

“But that is all in the past,” Malvina added gloomily, a shadow falling over her eye.

Sorrow enshrouded Thaddeus and Kath as well. Salvia had already hinted to me that things had ended in tragedy. That was why Salvia had wanted me to come here. She wanted me to hear their story and use their experience as a source of encouragement, and to make sure their tragedy wouldn't end in vain. I also wanted to hear it because they were one of our possible futures.

“What happened?” I asked sincerely.

“Humans murdered my husband,” Malvina replied, her gloomy voice rumbling

as if it was coming from the depths of the earth. “He was killed for being a dragon.”

Chapter 14: Tragedy of the Past

At Malvina's offer, we decided to recover from the fatigue of our journey by staying in Draconia for a few days. Since this was a hidden settlement, no travelers ever came by, so there were no facilities to accommodate guests. Instead, they lent us one of the inhabitants' houses. It was human-sized, and since it belonged to someone who preferred to remain in dragon form, it was left clean and unused.

Lobivia stayed with us. After Lily brought her back, she'd done her best to act unconcerned. She was a strong girl, but there was no way that harsh rejection hadn't bothered her. Even if there'd been no other choice, it still felt...

I sat down on a bed in one of the house's rooms. Nobody else was with me. I felt like spending some time alone to get my thoughts in order. The others had sensed this and moved to another room. I thought about the story Malvina had told us—about how a former savior had been murdered.



After Malvina met the former savior, she secretly left her original domain to live elsewhere, far away in the middle of nowhere. Their life together was quiet and fulfilling, even if there was nothing flashy about it. In a way, I admired that kind of lifestyle.

But then a human army happened upon the area. Malvina took her children and ran away. She had no other choice. Several of her children were already adults, but some were still infants. Above all else, though, she was pregnant.

Her husband, the former savior, tried to buy time so that they could get away. He attempted to talk things out at first, even taking his fully grown children to negotiate, but it was all in vain.

Nobody came back. The details weren't clear, but negotiations failed, and following a fierce battle, the human army treated him as an evil dragon and "defeated" him. The Holy Order and the savior of that age killed him.

Shiran and Kei had turned pale when they heard that. Even if Malvina's husband was no longer active as one, knights had killed a savior. That detail was significantly shocking for Shiran and Kei.

Naturally, the knights in question hadn't known that he was a former savior. They'd gone there to suppress monsters in the region and, by coincidence, had encountered the former savior. It had been many years since Malvina's husband had vanished from the human world, so even though the church surely had records of his appearance and abilities, the knights couldn't have realized that during a sudden encounter.

Given their understandable ignorance, negotiations were doomed to fail. This world didn't recognize monsters with wills who wished no harm to humans. On the other hand, some monsters could take on human forms, like doppelgangers, so it wouldn't be surprising if they had showered the former savior with blows before he could even talk.

In the end, the former savior and his children were killed. The savior who killed him survived the encounter, but he'd been severely wounded and had even lost an arm. The Holy Order had also suffered major losses.

According to Shiran, that savior had lost the ability to fight at a young age, and it had led to serious casualties across the world. It was a horrible tragedy caused by coincidence.

After the incident, Malvina decided to sever all contact with humans. She'd lost so much that was dear to her all at once, so even though she had tremendous power, she became overcautious.

"Hey, Salvia?" I said up to the air.

"What is it, my dear?" Salvia responded, manifesting and floating in front of me.

"Malvina decided to disregard her desire for revenge and sever all contact with humans. She created this hidden settlement in the Dark Woods where nobody dared to enter. You helped her do it, right? I heard you gave her a pretty valuable magic tool."

"The Dimensional Cornerstone, you mean. I got it from an old friend long,

long ago. The Holy Church was in charge of it before. There are apparently several of them in the imperial capital. You want to know why I lent it to her, right? There's no point in carrying it around, even if it is valuable. It was a request from one of my few dear friends, so I decided to use it."

Salvia spoke as if it was no big deal, but I wondered about that. This magic tool could maintain her mist magic over this area. Wouldn't that mean that her old friend had given it to her so she could anchor the Misty Lodge itself to the world without having to form a contract with anyone?

Hiding the truth behind a faint smile, Salvia said, "I decided to cover the forest in the Mist Barrier so that such a thing would never happen again." She sighed before adding, "It looks like Malvina thinks it was the wrong choice, though."

"So it seems..."

I'd felt the same thing when I listened to Malvina's story. She'd said that shutting off the settlement was her only way of protecting it. She'd only done so because she'd had no other choice. But once she'd finished her tragic story, she'd gone on to say, "We have no future. All that is left for us is to quietly die in obscurity without anybody knowing it."

The true meaning behind those words lay in Malvina's belly when she lost her husband. After the incident, the pregnant Malvina laid an egg—a new life. After they'd lost so much, the egg was a symbol of hope. Sadly, it didn't hatch for a very long time.

Under the impression that she couldn't even birth new life, Malvina sank further into despair. Nevertheless, she continued waiting. She kept waiting for a long, long time. And then, a miracle occurred. The egg hatched...or rather, cracked open.

Nobody could've predicted that the egg would become a final coating of despair on their lives. Unlike her other children, this one didn't develop an ego. Yes, that child was Lobivia.

Why wasn't she born with an ego? What made her different from the other children? In all likelihood, the difference was the absence of the former savior. Much like me, although in a different form, he could speak to a monster's heart. That must've played a major role in molding his children's egos.

His absence hadn't had an effect on Malvina and their other children; they'd already established their own egos. However, his presence was an absolute necessity for the newborn.

In short, Malvina and her children couldn't even build a future while hiding out in the wilderness. All that was left for them was to die in obscurity, just as Malvina had said.

I now understood why Thaddeus had said that I could grant them a future. The fact that I'd granted Lobivia an ego meant that their future, which had been shut off by the former savior's death, could once more be shaped. In spite of that, Malvina felt differently.

"Majima Takahiro, you might be able to restore our future. Thaddeus would say you should remain in the settlement, but I do not wish for that. We gave up on everything back then, but things might be different for you. Everything is already over for us. You mustn't restrict your own possibilities for our sake."

The emotions behind those words were heavy. I'd sensed a certain type of attachment in them. Much like how I saw our futures in Malvina and her children, maybe she also projected what could have been for her in us. Because of that, she feared restricting our future.

"Take care of Lobivia."

That was the last thing Malvina had said. She wanted at least Lobivia to leave this dead world. Even Rex, whose strength was apparent at a glance, hated humans and let his great fear of them dominate him. In all likelihood, Thaddeus was the only exception. The majority of the dragons of Draconia probably shared Rex's disposition.

Lobivia, on the other hand, hadn't experienced the loss of her father and siblings. In a sense, she wasn't cursed by the past. She could live freely. That was why Malvina had decided to drive Lobivia out so cruelly. She wanted to make sure that she and the others wouldn't become chains to tie Lobivia down in case she got homesick. The reason she entrusted Lobivia to me was because she saw the possibilities for her in my existence.

"Possibilities, huh?"

It was a loaded word. It didn't necessarily mean good things. There was always a flip side to the coin. If there were good possibilities, then there were bad ones too.

"Do you perhaps regret learning about Malvina and her family?" Salvia asked, looking sad as she watched me unconsciously sigh.

"No, I don't," I replied, shaking my head. "It was worth coming here. It's not like I hadn't thought of the future...but hearing about what actually happened and the emotions behind it really was meaningful."

Hearing the story directly from Malvina gave it weight. In a way, it made me realize that we had no idea what the future had in store for us. We had to account for any and all worst-case scenarios.

Still, we couldn't be too pessimistic. If we secluded ourselves here, it would seal off our future. Malvina was right. Thinking back on it, it was the same as when I was staying in Fort Tilia and realized I could start trusting people. I had to be careful, but I couldn't be scared. I had to learn about this world.

I was fully aware that there were risks to this, of course. If it came to it, I couldn't hesitate. No matter who my enemy was, I needed the resolve to struggle, fight, and strike them down. That was my responsibility as the leader of my group.

"I'm glad I came here and heard her story."

"I thought you'd say that," Salvia replied with a smile. She sat next to me, though without putting any weight on the bed, and held out her arms.

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Her embrace was gentle. We were a spirit and a contractor, so Salvia touched me in a friendly manner all the time, but this was the first time she'd hugged me close like this.

"Thank you, my dear. Thank you for listening to Malvina's story."

"You brought me here because you thought it'd be good for me to hear, right? You don't need to thank me."

"Yes, but you came to grips with the emotions she harbored when she said

the word ‘possibilities,’ right? That makes me happy.”

The tragic incident that had befallen Malvina and the former savior must have greatly affected Salvia too. She smiled at me from the bottom of her heart.

“So, thank you,” she said again.

“I should thank you too. I’m grateful you brought me here.”

That was all I could say. What was I to do from now on? I felt like coming here had made the vague goal I’d had until now become clearer. I had to talk it out with the others. I had to talk with Lobivia.

As I continued to think, my eyelids became heavy. Part of it was the fatigue from my journey, but if pushed to say it, it was mostly the warmth nestled against me. Salvia’s embrace had a different feeling to it than Lily’s or Gerbera’s. I could feel the considerable motherly tenderness and affection in it.

Given how much older she was than me, I didn’t recoil at the thought of being treated like a child. Besides, this motherly embrace felt unexpectedly nice. It gave me a sense of security, as if it was making up for my loss. Before I knew it, I fell asleep. I yielded my entire being to rest until a knock at the door disturbed my slumber.



Chapter 15: The Dragon Sisters *Katou Mana's POV*

Around the time the sun started setting, Kath visited the house we were staying in, bringing bags of ingredients.

"Please use these," she said.

"Thanks. That really helps," Lily replied, accepting some leather bags from her.

I also came out to the entrance and took one of the bags. There were multiple ingredients inside. In Draconia, aside from the potatoes they grew in fields, they largely lived off the fish in the lake, the underwater plants that grew natively here, and the monsters they could hunt in the Dark Woods.

The bag I'd taken was filled with thick aquatic plants, while Lily had a bag of potato bread, a bag of fish, and a bag of bird drumsticks. The meat was from a large bird monster called a howling pheasant. From what I'd been told, it looked almost exactly like a green pheasant, except for its size. The drumsticks in the bag had already been defeathered and prepared, so I couldn't tell anything besides that it was a pretty big bird.

"As a matter of fact, green pheasants were used as food for a long time in Japan, weren't they?" Lily said. "Now they're Japan's national bird and treated as such, but one of the reasons they were picked is because their meat was just so tasty."

"Huh? Was that why...?" I muttered.

"These drumsticks are delicious too. I consider it the best-tasting food we can get in the region," Kath said.

The three of us chatted in the entranceway. The way Kath so easily treated monsters as simple foodstuffs showed the slight gap in cognition between humans and dragons. It was pretty amusing. In any case, tasty meat was something to look forward to. I was sure Majima-senpai would be delighted.

If I were to ask for luxuries, I would've preferred that the people of the

settlement do the cooking, seeing as how they were used to the ingredients. But though they seemed to receive us warmly, they also had to consider Lobivia, as well as those like Rex who didn't have a very good opinion of humans. Therefore, they only gave us ingredients. It was unfortunate, but there was no point in complaining to Kath when she'd explained this to us with an apologetic expression.

As for Kath right now, she was looking around the house restlessly.

"Are you wondering how Lobivia is doing?" I asked.

"That's not... I mean, yes. How is she?"

She'd tried to pass it off, but she immediately stopped trying to keep up appearances.

"She's really cheerful," I answered. "On the surface, at least."

"Is that so?" Kath said with a sigh as the door opened.

"Hrm? What are you all doing talking out here?" Gerbera said as she came in. "What's with the long face?"

"Oh, um... What is Lobivia doing?" Kath asked her.

"You've seen the toy Rose made for Ayame, right? Lobivia is using it to play with Ayame right now."

Gerbera walked my way as she answered. Incidentally, this toy she mentioned was basically a dog toy.

"Th-This is my big sister...?"

Now that I thought about it, that conversation felt a little absurd. Well, perhaps it was just a big sister helping her little sister relax. That didn't really feel like it was the case, though...

"I get it now," Gerbera said. "Kath, are you worried about Lobivia?" She'd quickly grasped the situation from their short exchange. "There's no need for concern. You may leave it to our lord."

She'd declared that with ease. It sounded irresponsible, but she wholeheartedly trusted Majima-senpai. She truly believed that everything

would go smoothly if we left it to him. As someone who always spent so much time thinking of everything, I found her behavior endearing.

“Although, if you’re worried, why not join us for dinner?” Gerbera added. “There are enough ingredients here that it won’t matter if one more person joins us.”

“I’ll refrain. I’ve... The elder has prohibited me from doing so.”

“Aah, I see. But wouldn’t it be okay to ignore her?” Gerbera said casually, leaving Kath wide-eyed. “She’s not necessarily always right. Actually, I find her opinions rather questionable myself. Considering the future, I do at least understand her claim that Lobivia should be kept at a distance, but that doesn’t mean Lobivia’s feelings should be made light of right now, does it?”

Gerbera stopped there and let out a snort.

“You can claim that we forced you to stay, if you need an excuse,” she added.

“That...might be true,” Kath said hesitantly, averting her gaze and knitting her brows. “But I’ll still refrain. Lobivia will hate it.”

“Hmm. If you insist, I shan’t force the issue... But give it some thought. Once she leaves, Lobivia will never return here. Well, a connection will still remain through Thaddeus, though.”

Malvina had only forbidden Lobivia from coming back to the settlement. However, Thaddeus spent his time outside the settlement, and if Lobivia needed to, Malvina didn’t mind if Lobivia contacted him.

In her own way, Malvina was also worried about Lobivia. She’d even accommodated Majima-senpai as much as she could. She’d told him that if something happened, he could rely on her, and if it came to it, he could even run away to Draconia. Naturally, if he decided to do that, he would have to sever all ties with human society, but Majima-senpai was simply grateful to have a last-ditch escape option.

Since Malvina had approved it, Lobivia would still have a minimal connection to this place even after she left. Nevertheless, that would still only be possible through Thaddeus’s mediation.

“I don’t know what the future holds,” Gerbera continued, “but you two will not see each other for a while. Wouldn’t it be silly to leave undone what you can do now and then regret it later?”

Her opinion was optimistic, straightforward, and above all else, directly to the point. It was just like her to respond that way.

Nothing would happen if Kath feared being hated. She still hesitated a bit, but in the end, she resolved herself for what was to come and nodded.

“I suppose you have a point,” she said. “In that case, allow me to accompany you.”

“Hee hee. There’s no need to get so worked up,” Lily said, delighted by Kath’s decision. “Lobivia is stubborn, but she’s kind at heart. I’m sure she’ll understand. I’d be happy if you could teach us how to cook these ingredients.”

“Of course. I’ll gladly teach you.”

We then proceeded into the house as we chatted.

“Oh, right. There’s something I need to ask you, Kath,” Gerbera said on our way. “There’s a cave here that Lobivia used to live in, right? I’d like to borrow it for the night. Is it being used for anything?”

“No. That cave was only used to keep Lobivia locked up, so nobody goes there anymore.” Kath surely didn’t have any good memories of that, and a shadow fell over her face. “It was to be destroyed, but with Lord Takahiro’s visit, that matter has been left at large. It’s still there, so you may use it as you like.”

“You have my thanks. There’s just a little something I’d like to do there.”

As we continued talking, we headed over to the hearth. Lobivia frowned when she saw Kath, which saddened the older dragon. We encouraged her to stay strong and began preparing the meal.



After dinner, we all spent time in our rooms as we liked. Rose, Lily, Lobivia, Kath, Ayame, and I were together in one room. Majima-senpai was on his own in another. He seemed to be deep in thought during dinner, so he was probably pondering a number of things right now.

Rose's spare arm clattered about as she tinkered with it. Lily was reading a book that she'd acquired recently. Meanwhile, I sat there watching over the two dragon sisters.

"How was dinner?" Kath asked.

"So-so..." Lobivia murmured.

"Was there anything you liked?"

"Not really."

"If there was, I planned on bringing more of it tomorrow."

"Meat. The big bird leg."

"Oh? I like that too."

Kath had talked with Lobivia like this about all manner of things even during dinner. At first, Lobivia had acted really crabby, but she wasn't the type to continuously respond coldly to someone being kind to her, so by the time dinner was over, she at least spoke with Kath—although still somewhat curtly.

"Then I'll bring some tomorrow," Kath said. "Oh, but there might not be any drumsticks left." When Lobivia gave her a sullen look, Kath added, "Don't be like that. It'll be fine. I'll go get some early in the morning."

"I'm not disappointed or nothing..."

"Oh, Kath, if you're going out hunting, then can I come along?" Lily asked, looking up from her book.

"I'd be glad to have a helping hand."

"Great. In that case, in exchange for helping, I'd like to get a whole bird for myself."

"I don't mind... Were the portions I brought today insufficient?"

"Oh, no. That's not what I mean."

Lily went on to explain her ability as a mimic slime.

During that time, Lobivia began fidgeting. Rose noticed her behavior, and as she continued to work on her spare arm, she said, "If you'd like, why don't you

go with them, Lobivia?”

“Hwuh?!” Lobivia yelped, her face going red. “I-I don’t really—!”

“There’s no need to put on an act, Lobivia,” I said a little loudly, cutting her off as she tried to refuse.

She was probably just acting embarrassed because Rose had correctly guessed what she wanted to do, but this was going to end up with her obstinately refusing and regretting it later. Lobivia was easy to understand, so it wasn’t difficult to help her.

“You want to get a birdy, right? With more people out hunting, won’t the chances be better?”

“Huh? Mana, what’re you...? Hmm? Oh!” Lobivia was a little dubious at first, but then she suddenly cheered up. “R-Right! It’s better to up the odds!”

Having found a reasonable excuse, Lobivia nodded vigorously over and over.

“Okay, so you wanna come with us, Lobivia?” Lily asked, stifling her laughter and throwing the little dragon a lifeline.

“I’ll come,” Lobivia answered immediately.

The look of happiness on her face was so cute. However, her expression suddenly darkened as she realized something.

“Oh... But I guess I gotta say something,” she said dejectedly.

Lobivia was still feeling the effects of what had happened during the day.

“We can just say I’m borrowing Kath’s help to go hunt some monsters,” Lily said to cheer her up.

“But Rex might make a fuss again.”

“That’ll be fine,” Kath assured her. “After being yelled at like that, he’s sure to keep quiet for a while.”

That was enough to convince her. Lobivia replied with a small nod, but her expression remained gloomy.

“Anyway,” Lily said cheerfully, trying to change the topic, “Rex is awfully hard to handle. I got the chills when we met him, and it almost turned into a fight

between him and Lobivia.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s not something you need to apologize for, Kath,” Lily said, waving her hand. “He’s just a little too protective of the settlement. Other than his reckless remarks about our master, I don’t hate people like him. There are ways that he’s similar to our master too. Rex is way more stubborn, though.”

“How should I say it? Rex seems...kind of peculiar, doesn’t he?” I said, offering my honest opinion.

Kath’s expression clouded over. “During the incident when we lost our father, the only ones allowed to go with him and negotiate were the men above a certain age. Thaddeus and Rex were the oldest of the men left behind. Before he left, our father told them to protect our family, and then he died.”

“So that’s what happened...” I said.

“After that, Rex swore to himself he would protect the settlement and devoted himself to training. In contrast, Thaddeus chose to leave the settlement.”

“The explorer. The traveler looking for new lands to settle...right?”

Thaddeus had already told us he was the only dragon who could leave the settlement.

“Yes. The Mist Barrier can only be erected in a few restricted regions. It’s the explorer’s job to search for places we can move to in case we have to abandon the settlement. Thaddeus volunteered for the position right away, and after he received one of the Dimensional Cornerstones the Lady of the Misty Lodge had gifted us, he left the settlement.”

“Thaddeus and Rex... They live very different lives.”

“They do, but they started at the same point. I’m sure both of them hold our father’s words close to their hearts. Even after all this time...”

Kath had probably watched over them all the while. The emotions that she didn’t express in her words showed in her profile.

“Hey, Kath?” Lobivia said, looking up at her. Her expression lacked its usual

thorniness.

“What is it?”

“What kinda person was dad?”

Lobivia lost her father before she was even born, so she didn't know what he looked like, let alone anything else. She'd likely never been interested before now, but listening to this story seemed to pique her curiosity.

“Right... He was a sublime dragon with golden scales,” Kath answered, a happy expression on her face. “He was about as big as our mother is now, but he had no carapace. He was magnanimous and kind toward us, but when it came to it, he could be ferocious. He taught us how to hunt, not that he was very good at it himself. He had a tendency to crush his prey flat. Oh, there was this one time he reduced his prey to cinders and got pretty depressed. His body was enormous, so he wasn't all that dexterous at delicate work.”

Kath wistfully jumped from one story to the next.

“I see,” Lobivia responded. She looked to be in a bit of a daze, probably trying to imagine her father's figure in her mind.

We all smiled at her. Time spent like this was probably a big deal to the still-young Lobivia. In my opinion, Majima-senpai was right to visit the settlement and have her talk things out.

There'd been some unexpected developments, but we'd managed to get permission for Lobivia to leave the settlement. Also, other than the exceptions like Rex, we'd formed a friendly relationship with the dragons. We'd even heard the story we needed to hear from Malvina.

The turmoil we'd gotten involved in concerning the dragons had settled down exactly as it should've. All that was left was to help Lobivia during our stay here, recover from the fatigue of our journey, and spend some time contemplating the information we had now.

“Hey, Kath?” Lily suddenly said. “You've only talked about what he was like as a dragon. What was he like as a human?”

Lily was obviously wanting Lobivia to hear more about her father.

“Sorry. I don’t know much of him as a human,” Kath said with a sad look.

“Huh?” Lily uttered, puzzled.

“Our father didn’t take a human form very often. He felt more comfortable as a dragon.”

Lily cocked her head. “Hmm... Is that so...?”

I wondered the same thing. Did that mean it felt more natural to him to be in dragon form? The first thing that came to mind was Takaya. He also had the power to transform, and in the end, he’d turned into a senseless beast. Maybe it was the same with Lobivia’s father.

Naturally, unlike Takaya, who’d stopped seeing reality after he lost Mizushima-senpai and had wished to become a mad beast, Lobivia’s father probably hadn’t lost his mind. Having married an intelligent dragon, he’d become a proud and gentle dragon himself.

Maybe that was one of the reasons he’d been blessed with children with Malvina, who was also not very good at taking a human form. By that time, he was no longer a human who could change into a dragon, but an actual dragon.

Visitors who could transform themselves eventually lost their humanity. It was interesting how that gain also came with loss. The mole that found it could live underground lost its sight. Whales and dolphins dived into the oceans, and unlike other mammals, they no longer had legs to walk across land.

In short, it had to do with capacity. Humans and dragons. Or perhaps, humans and beasts. Maybe the human vessel simply wasn’t large enough to support both ways of life. Thinking of it like that, perhaps the inherent ability to transform always came with inevitable change. I continued exploring this train of thought as I watched the two sisters open up to each other.

Chapter 16: Incapable of Noticing *Katou Mana's POV*

After spending some time in our room, Kath reluctantly left. Lily saw her off to the entrance, then came back.

“What’s up, Katou? Thinking of something?” she asked.

Only when she called me did I realize I’d been deep in thought. Why was this? Something Kath said was niggling at me. Something was off with my own train of thought, but I couldn’t tell what.

One hadn’t been a human who could turn into a dragon. He’d become an actual dragon.

One wasn’t a human who could turn into a beast. He became an actual beast.

Two visitors who could transform into something both lost their humanity. Maybe this was an inevitability for those with that inherent ability.

Anybody could have reached this same conclusion, so it was a perfectly reasonable concept. Yet this sense of unease remained. I just couldn’t get rid of it. It was like I had a fish bone stuck deep in my throat, like I hadn’t arrived at the conclusion I was meant to reach. Had I not given it enough thought? No. I’d given it plenty of thought. So if I hadn’t reached the proper conclusion, it meant my mind was unconsciously avoiding—

“Katou?”

“Oh.”

I came back to my senses when Lily called my name again. She looked at me with concern. It seemed I’d zoned out again.

“It’s nothing,” I said with an ambiguous smile.

This sense of unease was so vague that I had no idea how to explain it. It could just be that I was overthinking things. Or maybe it was a simple misunderstanding. If so, I felt bad for making Lily worry about me.

“Sorry, Lily,” I said, adjusting my smile. “I was just zoning out a bit.”

“Really? All right,” Lily said, walking across the room and sitting on a bed. “But if something’s bothering you, then feel free to tell me about it. You’re the type to try and carry everything on your own, after all.”

Lily remained relaxed as she opened a book on her lap.

“I mean, even if I can’t help you reach a conclusion, I can worry about it with you,” she added. “Just that should help you feel better, right?”

“Thank you...” I managed to smile more naturally now. “But I’m really okay. I was just absorbed in some useless thoughts.”

“Hmm... If you say so.”

Lily seemed convinced now, and her eyes began running over the pages of her book. I ended up staring at her as she read. Our exchange felt slightly familiar. The way she read also overlapped with another memory. Just maybe...actually, I’d started to feel this for a while now.

For example, Lily had started out reading only every now and then. Some time after, out of the blue, she’d suddenly started learning to read with zeal. And then, during the conversation with Kath earlier this morning, she’d interjected miscellaneous knowledge out of nowhere as if she’d suddenly remembered it.

Her casual conduct tickled my memories of a girl who was supposed to be no longer in reach. I didn’t know the truth, of course. Maybe it was just my imagination. I had no choice but to wait for the day when she would tell me the truth.

Coming to that conclusion, I tore my gaze away from her, then spotted Lobivia sitting on the floor.

“What are you up to, Lobivia?” I asked.

She was searching through a bag of luggage between her legs.

“Hey, Mana? Where’s the telescope again?”

It seemed she couldn’t find what she was looking for. We had an unexpectedly large amount of luggage, so this was pretty common. There were a number of people in our group, and a journey required many necessities to begin with. To top it off, Rose had made heaps of things. In truth, we had

enough that it would normally be a huge pain to carry them around, but we managed by using magic bags.

Not only could a magic bag carry lots of items thanks to its expanded interior space, but it would preserve food and even reduce the weight of anything inside. The only downside was its extravagant price. Because of that, merchants didn't use magic bags, instead opting to move about in manamobiles that carried all their goods.

We had Rose with us, though. It took her a fair amount of time to make a magic bag, but we could have multiple bags when it was normally difficult to acquire even one. Furthermore, we could put one inside the other, which was immensely convenient for storing things.

Lately, because we had treated them as disposable, we'd found out that Rose could skip a few steps and make them much faster. With that, we could split our foodstuff into several days' worth of portions and still carry it with us.

However, with bags within bags like this, it inevitably made it harder to find things. Lobivia had looked to me for help because I mostly knew where all of our stuff was. I was always by Rose's side, so I had many opportunities to touch her work.

"Umm, the telescope Rose made should be in this bag here."

"Oh! Thanks, Mana!"

I picked it out for her, and Lobivia took the telescope gratefully.

"Why are you looking for this, anyway?" I asked as I watched her act all delighted.

"I was thinking of bringing it when we go hunting tomorrow. It'll be convenient, don'tcha think?"

So it was for tomorrow's hunting trip. That was why she was strangely happy. It turned out Lobivia was really looking forward to it. That was wonderful, but she would have to reconsider using the telescope.

"If you're hunting in the forest outside the settlement, then the mist will hamper visibility. You won't be able to use it."

“Oh...”

Telescopes were useful, but the forest here was a poor environment for one.

“I see...” Lobivia muttered dejectedly.

“Still, maybe you can show it off to Kath?” I suggested. “You might surprise her. It seems there aren’t that many people who’ve used a telescope in this world. If I recall, Shiran said that she’s never used one herself.”

“Oh? Shiran said that?” Rose asked curiously.

Since it involved something she’d made, Rose would have remembered Shiran mentioning it. Seeing that she and I spent so much time together, she found it strange that she didn’t know this while I did.

“Ummm, oh, right,” I said, recalling when this had happened. “I think it was when we were on our way to Aker, just before entering the Kitrus Mountains. Do you remember when Kei got shocked by the little incident in one of the villages we passed by? That night, Lily and the others were looking at the telescope, right?”

“Aah... Yes, that did happen,” Rose said, nodding.

“I was studying magic with Senpai and Shiran then. That was when Shiran said it. You were with the others at the time, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. That makes sense.”

Now that Rose was convinced, I turned back to Lobivia.

“Kath has lived a pretty long time, so I can’t say for sure...but she’s been cooped up in this settlement. It’s pretty unlikely that she’s used one before. It’s not a necessity for normal life, so it’s possible she doesn’t even know they exist. How about showing it off to her?”

“You’ve got a point... If she doesn’t, then she’s in for a shock, huh?” Lobivia said with a nod, then turned to Rose. “Everything you make is, like, super amazing, Rose. Mhm. I’m sure she’ll be shocked.”

Rose smiled gently. The distance between her and Lobivia had shortened quite a bit with our visit to the settlement.

“So long as you know how it’s structured, it isn’t all that difficult to make,” Rose said. “If you have a lens and learn how it’s made, you should be able to build one yourself, even if the quality isn’t quite the same.”

“Really?!”

Lobivia went wide-eyed. Despite being so crabby, her expressions were really honest at times like these. Just watching her soothed the heart.

Hearing me giggle, Lobivia turned my way.

“Mrgh? Whaddya laughing at?”

“Oh, sorry. I wasn’t making fun of you or anything.”

I’d found her reaction adorable, but I’d given her the wrong impression. I decided to explain to her.

“I was just laughing because, like you, I don’t know how to make a telescope. Majima-senpai also said something similar.”

I suddenly remembered the conversation I had with Majima-senpai that night.

“So it’s possible to make a telescope from scratch, huh?”

“It doesn’t appear to have much magnification, though.”

The discussion had been frivolous, but the memory warmed my heart. I was well aware that my lips were naturally widening into a smile...

Maybe because we were passing our time in such a warm atmosphere, Lily’s next words rang with dissonance.

“Our master said that?” Lily asked. “What did he say, exactly?”

She looked extremely dubious, as if I’d said something very strange.

“Ummm...” Even though I wondered what was wrong, there was nothing to really hide, so I answered honestly. ““So it’s possible to make telescopes from scratch,’ or something like—”

Lily stood up. A thud resounded through the room. The book she’d been reading had fallen to the floor, its pages still open. Lily, however, paid it no mind and walked over to me, grabbing my shoulders.

“Really? Did he *really* say that?”

She looked deadly serious. It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to call her expression bloodcurdling.

“Y-Yes. Wh-What about it...?”

“What's the matter, sister?” Rose asked in a reprimanding tone, finding Lily's behavior strange.

Lobivia also looked confused. Lily didn't seem to notice any of this as she lowered her gaze to the floor.

“That can't be...”

The mutter spilling from her lips was like a drop of ink on a white sheet. Another color stained the warm atmosphere in the room. I probably wasn't the only one who felt a sudden chill run down their spine.

“Mana, don't you find it weird?” Lily asked.

“F-Find what weird? Huh? Wait a sec. ‘Mana’?”

“I mean, during the stargazing event at school... Oh, right. Fukatsu said you didn't...”

She kept muttering. The way her thoughts ran while she talked was familiar to me. After a while, I met Lily's eyes. No. Was this really Lily? That slight suspicion I'd been harboring suddenly turned to conviction.

“Mizushima...senpai...?”

“Listen to me, Mana.”

She didn't deny my claim, not because I'd figured out the truth, but because now wasn't the time for that.

“Right after we enrolled in high school, there was a stargazing event for first years at the end of April. Do you remember that?”

Instead of the girl I never thought I would see again greeting me, she threw me a rather odd question.

“Y-Yes. I didn't go, though...”

“I know. Fukatsu told me.”

“Fukatsu did?”

I didn’t know why she brought up Thaddeus’s travel companion, but Mizushima-senpai—or in this case, Lily—had heard from him that I hadn’t gone to the stargazing event.

“Mana, you didn’t go to that event, so you couldn’t know this,” Mizushima-senpai continued, still grasping my shoulders. “You see, when I was a first year, I participated in the event. There were about thirty other students there. For example, that famous Todoroki who got the name Beast of Darkness was there. I first met Iino when her best friend Todoroki introduced us.”

“Is...that so...?”

“Mm-hmm. And...Majima and Kaneki also participated.”

I couldn’t figure out what she was getting at. At the very least, I knew nothing about all the things that Mizushima-senpai said. Still, I couldn’t see why she’d bring up an event that happened a year and a half ago. Was this also because there was something I still didn’t know?

“Listen to me, Mana,” Mizushima-senpai said, peering into my eyes. She then continued in an ice-cold voice. “We built handmade telescopes during the event.”

For an instant, time stopped. That was of course a hallucination. Reality didn’t stop. It couldn’t stop for us.

“We even went out to buy magnifying glasses. The event happened right after we entered high school. This leaves a big enough impression as it is, and it hasn’t even been two years. Despite this, Majima said, ‘So it’s possible to make a telescope from scratch.’ No matter how you look at it, isn’t that strange?”

Mizushima-senpai slowly backed away from me. I was the only one left behind in the flow of time. I remained utterly frozen as my brain recalled something. Back when I talked to Iino by the riverbed, she’d looked at Rose’s telescope and said it was nostalgic. That was because her best friend Todoroki had forced a handmade telescope on her. Then they had gone stargazing together. Todoroki had definitely made that during the school event.

“Wh-Why...?” I barely managed to squeeze out the words. “Like you said, Mizushima-senpai, it’s definitely weird. But back then, Majima-senpai really didn’t seem to know. Th-That’s as if...”

The remaining words got stuck in my throat. My thoughts didn’t stop, however. Earlier, I’d unconsciously avoided thinking about something. Now I finally knew why.

The man who’d found being a dragon more comfortable had lost his human sensibilities. The boy who’d turned into the Mad Beast no longer had anything resembling human intelligence. Even though they’d gone down different paths, both of them had lost their humanity.

I’d believed this was a peculiarity to those who had an inherent ability to transform themselves. But what about Majima-senpai? Shiran had once suggested that his soul was gradually becoming inhuman. Transforming one’s body and soul were two different things, but Majima-senpai was no different from them in that his cheat transformed him.

The truth was that Majima-senpai couldn’t remember something he would normally never forget. In other words, he hadn’t simply forgotten.

I had to know for sure... I had to know what was happening to him, even if I had to learn of a cruel reality.

Thus, we all headed over to see him.

Chapter 17: Things Lost, Things Not Lost

I woke up to the sound of knocking. I'd apparently dozed off because of the fatigue from traveling.

"Takahiro!"

I let out a groan from my bed. The knocking continued as I opened my eyes. I sat up, holding my hand to my head. I could feel the soft fitted sheet beneath my other hand. A strange scent tickled my nose as an unfamiliar room came into focus. There was nobody else with me. I felt a sense of unease for no particular reason. In any case, someone was calling right now. I could leave such thoughts for later.

"Takahiro? You asleep?"

"Aah. Sorry. I'm coming," I replied as I headed for the relatively old wooden door. It was locked, so I flipped the deadbolt and opened it.

"So slow."

"Sorry."

On the other side of the door was my pouting little brother.



"I thought you went to take a bath. Where's your key?" I asked.

"Mom has it. She hasn't come out of the bath yet."

"Aah, she does take a while."

"Dad asked me to get his wallet."

"His wallet? Where'd he put it again...?"

I walked back into the room as we talked. We were staying in a Western-style boarding house for an extended vacation. The ambiance was nice, and it even had a hot spring, so it was a relatively popular inn. Our room was in an area set aside for families.

Come April, I would be a third year middle school student, so before I got busy preparing for entrance exams, my travel-loving parents had brought me out here. It was a pretty good choice for a place to make memories as a family. I actually really liked visiting unknown lands, so I was enjoying myself quite a bit.

“Oh yeah, Takahiro, you wanna go take a bath?” my brother asked around the time we found the wallet.

“Sure.”

After we finished dinner, I'd gotten sleepy, so I'd been taking it easy in our room. At some point, I'd ended up dozing off, so I was far less sleepy now. I'd washed off my sweat before dinner, but at times like these, it was better to enjoy things as much as possible. Going in again with my little brother sounded like a good idea.

The two of us left the room. From the hallway windows, we could see the scenery surrounding this mountain boarding house. The building's warm orange lighting reflected on the snow. The scene seemed to seep into my chest, filling me with mysterious emotions.

“There are three different baths here, right? Have you been to all of them?” I asked.

“Hmm, nope. I haven't been to the open-air bath yet.”

“Want to go to that one?”

“It's pretty cold... There's another bath with a waterfall or something over it with hot water coming down.”

“Okay, then let's go to that one.”

We chatted as we walked down the hallway. We talked about the middle school I was currently attending that my little brother would start going to next year. We talked about popular games and manga. We talked about souvenirs. Our conversation was frivolous, but there was so much to talk about that it seemed it would never be enough no matter how much we did so.

In truth, I couldn't talk to him, so maybe it was only natural there'd be no shortage of topics. How long had we walked? Before I knew it, it had gotten

dark. I couldn't see the orange light from outside the window anymore. With that, time ran out...and I realized that this was the eternal farewell I'd dreamed over and over again, many times now.



I woke up to the sound of knocking.

"Oh, are you awake now, my dear?" Salvia asked, sitting right by my side. She'd apparently stayed with me while I slept.

"Aah... Yeah," I replied hoarsely.

I stirred slightly, rubbing against the coarse fabric beneath me. I must have been sleeping pretty heavily. It felt like there wasn't enough blood in my head, and I had quite the headache.

"Huh? Takahiro? You asleep?"

I could hear Lobivia muttering on the other side of the door.

"Sorry, Salvia... Could you get the door?"

"Yup, sure thing."

I didn't feel like shouting, so I left it to Salvia.

"Hello, come on in."

I listened to her voice as I put my hand to my throbbing forehead. I felt like this had happened before, but I couldn't remember when. It was just déjà vu, nothing more. Something similar could have really happened before, but at the very least, I couldn't remember it.

I was drawing a total blank. I couldn't remember anything. This temporary, unidentifiable amnesia happened to me every now and then, and each time it did, I felt a peculiar unpleasantness. That said, thinking about it wouldn't get me anywhere, so I got up from bed as I tried to hold back my headache.

"Why are you all here?" I asked.

Lily, Rose, Katou, and Lobivia had come together. They all had stern expressions. Lily took a step ahead of the group and stood in front of me as I remained seated on the bed. No...this wasn't Lily.

“Majima.”

“Mizushima?”

I wasn't all that surprised. I still had my memories from our stay at the Misty Lodge. My suspicions were instead focused on why she needed to come out. Considering that she'd gotten her feelings in order to the extent that she *could* come out, her expression was unnaturally tense.

“Do you remember the stargazing event when we just got into high school?” Mizushima asked, hiding her tension with an expressionless look.

“What are you talking about?” I answered, knitting my brows curiously.

Little did I know that my vague reply was as eloquent as it needed to be. They then informed me of the truth.



“Memory defects...”

After listening to what they had to say, I nodded in agreement. Maybe they'd all hoped I would refute them. That was what it felt like. Unfortunately, I couldn't live up to their expectations. Like Mizushima said, I didn't remember this event I'd participated in when I was a first year student. That part of my memories was a gaping hole. It was so cleanly erased that I hadn't even realized it was gone.

“You don't look all that surprised,” Mizushima said, looking puzzled. “Did you notice it before?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It's a bit of a shock...I think. But I'd already prepared myself for at least this much. It's a good thing that Shiran told me back then about the abnormality within me.”

I wasn't completely unaffected by this shocking reality, but at the same time, it wasn't so bad that it would show on my face. The shock was small enough that I could organize my feelings on my own.

“Also...right. I don't have a real sense for it,” I added, focusing my thoughts inward. “Besides, I don't think it'll get all that bad.”

“What do you mean?” Rose asked. “If you are losing your memories, then this

is a grave matter. We must immediately implement a countermeasure. If we don't, then one day..." She paused for a moment, finding it difficult to finish her sentence. "One day...you might even forget who you are."

"Relax. That won't happen," I declared.

Rose was astonished.

In her stead, Mizushima asked, "How can you say that so confidently?"

"Because, fundamentally, our powers as visitors are based on our wishes."

"Huh...?"

"Since these powers come from our wishes, we can assume that what we wish for will remain secure. For example, Malvina's husband lost his human sensibilities and became a dragon, but he never had a problem living with dragons. It wouldn't make sense otherwise. If it did end up being a problem, it'd be like putting the cart before the horse."

"That...might be true, but..."

"In that case, I can make the same claim. My power comes from wanting to live with all of you, so nothing that can hinder that will manifest," I said, shrugging. "Well, even without that logic, in the end, this concerns my own ability. I understand the crucial points behind it."

There were presumably several reasons I could remain so calm. I most likely already had an unconscious understanding of my situation, so I wasn't so much surprised as I was convinced.

"Like Shiran said, the shape of my soul is definitely changing. The human portion of it is significantly eroded. Losing some of my human faculties...like my memories, is probably related to that."

I was no longer a genuine human. I could still be described as human, but how long would that last? Just as Shiran had told me, I was changing into *something* that was neither human nor monster.

I had no idea how far that had actually progressed, though. For example, if the human part of my soul maintained my human memories, then when that part eroded away, it would make sense that the memories went with it. My

cracked figure I'd seen in that strange dark world when I went to save Shiran strongly hinted that this was the case.

"Therefore, the situation isn't all that serious," I said, trying to sound cheerful to brighten up the dark mood in the room. "The parts that have changed probably won't change any more than this. I mean, the memories I have from after arriving in this world, after I changed and gained this ability, after I met all of you... None of them are likely to be affected."

If so, then it wasn't a problem. I could continue my life with everyone. No matter how much vanished, no matter how much I lost, I wouldn't lose what was most important to me right now. In that case, it was fine. I was sure of it. I *had* to be sure.

I smiled to try and put everyone at ease, then said, "So really, I'm—"

"What are you saying?! You'll lose all your fondest memories of the other world, Senpai!" Katou cried, cutting me off.

This was the first time I'd ever heard her scream like this. I froze in place.

Katou stomped across the room and pressed herself against my chest. She grabbed my clothes at my stomach.

"There's no way you can be indifferent about that!" she yelled vehemently.

She looked up at me, her eyes wet and red. Her trembling voice couldn't withstand the surge of emotions and cracked.

"Th-Those memories aren't so insignificant that you can just treat them like nothing, right...?"



“Oh...right.” Seeing a beautiful tear trickle from her eye, I realized something. “I talked with you about memories of that world, didn’t I?”

I’d spoken with Katou the most about our world. We’d sought conversation from each other to deal with the fact that we could never return. I couldn’t talk about that with anyone but her.

We’d talked about our families, places we wanted to go, and even dreams of the future. We’d talked about all sorts of other things too. I remembered how happy and adorable Katou was when she listened to my stories. She knew just how important these things were to me.

“There must be some way...some way of getting your memories back...”

Her voice gradually grew quieter. She was a clever girl. She knew that such a miracle would be hard to find. Reality was cruel. It had been until now, and it was sure to be from now on.

Katou’s hands trembled, my shirt still in her grip. I lamented my own powerlessness, but I’d been mistaken. After all, her feelings were exactly what gave me the strength to rebel against such a cruel reality. I wanted to preserve them, along with everything else that was precious to me.

“Thank you, Katou.”

She was crying for my sake. I took her hands, so tightly clenched that it was as if she blamed herself, and unfastened them from my shirt as gently as I could. Then I lightly squeezed them.

“But it’s fine. This is the path I chose.”

It was time to announce my plans for what we were going to do after this, and this was a good opportunity to do so.

“Everyone, hear me out.”

Chapter 18: Looking toward the Future

“I’ve been thinking about what we should do from here on out.”

Malvina saw possibilities in us. Ever since she told me that, I’d been thinking of what specifically those possibilities could be.

“I always thought I’d be fine if I could just live a quiet life in this world, but after hearing Malvina’s story, I don’t think that’s enough. Or at least, I don’t think it should be my objective.”

All I had to do was think of the tragedy that had befallen the savior and the carapace wyrm. They’d already realized the life I’d been aiming for, but even then, an irreversible calamity had occurred. An unfortunate coincidence and crossing of paths had led to their losing something irreplaceable, and all those left behind had been driven into an isolated world. Now that we knew their story, we could use that knowledge and search for another outcome.

“We need to somehow create a place that will accept us so that some unexpected and unfortunate incident doesn’t end in disaster, like it did for Malvina. That should be our first goal.”

“But Senpai, that’s...”

“I know.”

I stopped Katou by lightly squeezing on her hands. She gulped as I continued.

“It goes without saying that this will be difficult to accomplish. Who knows whether it can actually be done. That’s to say nothing of how irresponsible of me it would be if I said I’d absolutely manage to do it.”

“Senpai...”

“But I don’t think it’s impossible.”

There were people like Shiran and the commander who’d already accepted us. If not for them, we wouldn’t have made it this far. I could never forget that fact.

“It’s worth trying to achieve this. Besides, by doing so...” I paused and let go of Katou’s hand, then looked at Lobivia. “Malvina and the other dragons won’t need to stay here anymore, right?”

“Oh...” Lobivia’s chestnut eyes went wide with understanding. “If that happens, I can meet everyone from the settlement whenever...?”

“Yeah,” I replied, nodding to the hopeful little dragon. I gave everyone else in the room a glance. “There is a risk to doing this, though. By trying to find out what possibilities we have, something will happen, for better or worse. We need to prepare for any and all worst-case scenarios and proceed with caution, but without being too pessimistic... Even then, something unavoidable might still pop up.”

I stopped there for a moment and shook my head.

“However, the same goes for doing nothing. At the end of the day, we can’t nullify the risk. If we do nothing, and something happens, nobody will be there to come to our defense. We’ll be repeating Malvina’s tragedy...”

I clenched my fist, then continued.

“We need to take appropriate action so that that doesn’t happen. If doing so comes with risk, then we just need the strength to overcome it.”

We needed the power to rebel against any circumstance so that we could attain happiness.

“To that end, I won’t hesitate to better understand my ability.”



Yes, I had no intention of hesitating, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t worried.

“Anyway, why in here...?”

I walked through the cave on my own, my footsteps echoing through the darkness. It was vast. I’d lived in a cave before, but I’d only ever seen one this large on TV back in my world. This was the cave they’d used to lock Lobivia away when she was just a dragon with no sense of reason, so it had to be big. I’d been told that it was abandoned now.

Apparently, they were planning on destroying it soon, along with all the bad

memories associated with it, but the cave's foundation was sturdy enough that not even a dragon could easily cause a cave-in, so they left it abandoned for now.

The reason I was walking through this cave was because Gerbera had called me here. She had some important business with me and said she would be waiting for me here. Still, why in this cave? I asked myself that question repeatedly. In all likelihood, she wanted to speak with me in private.

It looked like Gerbera was already here. Cocoons hung from the ceiling, each housing a red flame inside, illuminating a path. Gerbera had left right after dinner, so she must have been preparing this.

"Gerbera...?"

I obediently followed the lights. After walking about fifty meters, I reached the end of the cave and came out into an open space about the size of a small sports ground.

"Ooh. My Lord. This way," she called from the other side of a jutting rock. "Could you come over here?"

"Sure."

Still wondering what she needed from me, I walked toward her. Nothing came to mind, but whatever. This was a good opportunity. Gerbera hadn't been with the others, so I decided I would tell her about what was happening to me and what our plans for the future were.

At that thought, I felt a familiar sense of anxiety. I'd felt the same thing when I spoke with the others earlier. I hadn't lied in front of everyone, of course. I wouldn't hesitate to use my ability to secure a peaceful future, one where I could live with all my precious companions—even if I were to lose something in the process. Nonetheless, as far as how much loss I could actually withstand... I wasn't all that confident. Like Katou said, my memories of that world were also precious to me. Naturally, I was afraid of losing them.

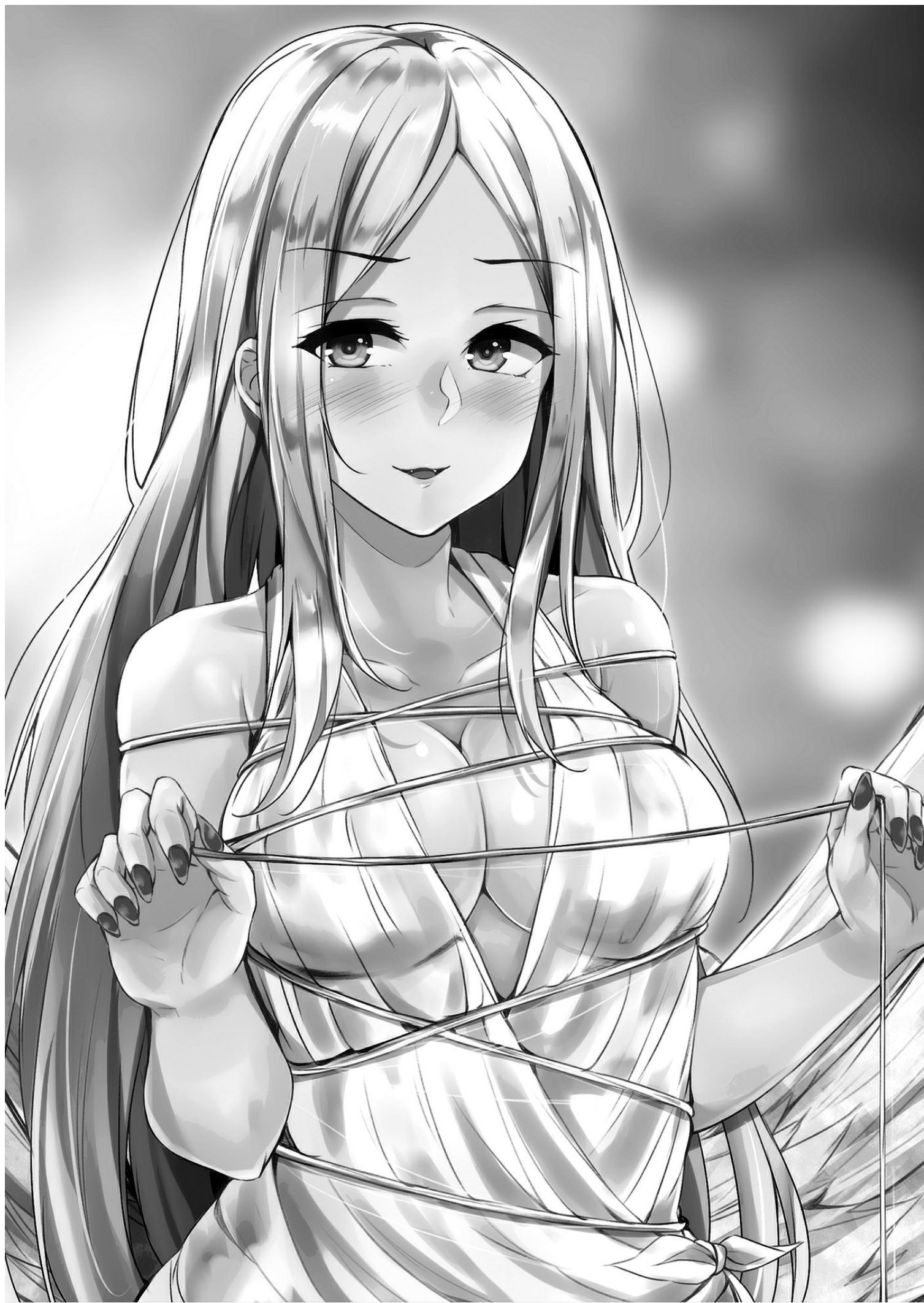
The fact that I didn't feel a real sense of loss with them gone gave me chills. There were sure to be many other things I'd already lost aside from the memory Mizushima had mentioned. It made me want to scream.

Be that as it may, if there was something to gain in the process, I had no choice but to fight this fear. Still, I was just a tiny and weak human. I was neither a hero nor a monster. I knew that. Would I really be able to withstand the shock of loss?

I held these anxieties in as I came around the rock. There I found...a spider caught in her own spiderwebs.

“You’ve done well in making it here, My Lord!” she called out like some evil boss welcoming the hero. “I was getting tired of waiting!”

Her voluptuous breasts sprang up as she brazenly laughed. Her entire body was restrained with her sturdy threads.



“Huh?”

I was dumbstruck. All thoughts flew cleanly out of my head. That was how shocking this scene was. Gerbera’s spider half was stuck in a web built using a cavity in the sturdy rock face. Each and every joint on all eight of her legs was tied up with pointless meticulousness. Her human half was also wrapped up, both her arms unusable.

“What?”

I couldn’t really understand what I was seeing. I wanted someone to come and explain it to me. Why was Gerbera restrained? And by her own threads, of all things? And why did she look so proud? Where had that relatively serious atmosphere vanished to?

As if to answer all of my doubts, the Great White Spider, the one sung about in legends, loudly declared, “Come, My Lord! It’s time to make babies!”

I couldn’t follow... Regardless, Gerbera continued without paying any attention to my bewilderment.

“According to Malvina, we can have children too. We can’t remain idle. We must conduct trials immediately. However, the simple act of sharing an embrace with you is too much for me to handle. What’s more, I can’t make myself sit still and do nothing. That just won’t do. Fortunately, I came to a sudden realization!”

Gerbera spoke eloquently as she turned her face upward and huffed in pride.

“Do you remember what Lobivia said this afternoon? ‘Why don’t you just tie yourself up?’ Remember? When I heard that, it dawned upon me! If I tie myself up, then I can’t possibly crush you!”

Gerbera’s entire body radiated the question, “Isn’t this a wonderful idea?!” Her smile was absolutely beaming.

“This is my plan so that we can flirt all we want!”

“Oh. I get it now. That’s what’s going on.”

I could finally see the full picture. I understood...but my head started hurting.

“So you understand, My Lord! What do you think?! Is it not wonderful?!”

“Uh. Sure. Mm. Well, there’s a whole lot I’d like to say, but...” I replied, lightly rubbing my temple to hold back my headache. “What do you plan on doing after the fact?”

“Hrm?”

“You tied yourself up so that you can’t escape. Adding me to the mix won’t help you get out of that,” I said, pointing at the spiderwebs rendering her immobile. “So how do you plan on getting out?”

“Oh...”

Gerbera averted her gaze. She apparently hadn’t thought of that.

“That’s, um, you know... If I call Lily over, she should be able to undo this, right?”

“Are you telling me to go call her after everything is done? That’d be way too awkward...”

Lily was clever. She would definitely realize what was going on. Not only that, this situation was really odd, no matter how you looked at it. What kind of masochistic game was it supposed to be? How would Mizushima, who was always watching from inside Lily, take this? All of this really made my head pound.

“Gerbera. You really are just so...”

Even if she never thought of the consequences, there had to be a limit. I sighed, and my shoulders suddenly shook from the emotions building up within me.

“Heh. Heh heh...”

“My Lord?”

I could only laugh. Everything I’d been thinking of until now had vanished from my mind entirely. All of my depressing feelings had been pushed aside without a trace of their existence. It was so strange, and also so fortunate.

What was the point in being pessimistic about the future? What was I steeling

myself for to begin with? It was all for a happy and peaceful future, so it would be useless to drown myself in dark thoughts and get depressed.

The truth I'd discovered in Draconia taught me of the obstacles I would no doubt face in the days to come. However, that wasn't the only thing I'd learned from it. I'd also learned of a shining possibility.

I had to see the future in a bright light, just as Gerbera did. The way she faced straight forward and continued marching nonstop toward her destination was a type of salvation to me.

"Wh-What's wrong, My Lord?" Gerbera asked, looking perplexed.

"I was just thinking," I said with a smile, "that you really are adorable."

Gerbera stiffened, her eyes wide as saucers. "Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you saying all of a sudden?!"

Blood instantly rushed to her porcelain cheeks. She was bright red from her neck all the way to the tips of her ears, so much so that she could be called the Great Red Spider now.

"I mean, it's not all that sudden. I've been thinking it all this time... I guess I haven't ever really told you directly, huh?" I said, walking toward her. "Well, the situation being what it is, important things like this should be said aloud."

"W-Wait a moment, My Lord!" Hearing the sound of my footsteps across the gravel, Gerbera immediately began panicking. "Please wait a moment! This is extremely embarrassing somehow!"

"You're the one who set this all up..."

I was astonished, but I didn't stop walking. Gerbera's panic continued to escalate exponentially.

"M-M-M-M-My heart isn't... Ooooh?! My legs are tied up! I can't escape?! Why?!"

"Calm down."

I stood before Gerbera as she writhed about. She was a silly girl who'd managed to dangle herself from the ceiling with her own threads. To say I was completely charmed would be an understatement.

Because both her arms were bound, her already risqué clothing was stretched tight, accentuating the alluring curves of her body. Her shoulder strap slipped down, revealing pink underwear beneath it. She'd probably made this recently since we last talked about it. A cute bra clung to her womanly breasts.

Gerbera bent backward to try and escape, but it only made her large breasts even more prominent. I doubted she realized this. Honestly, my sense of reason was on the brink. How could it not be? Both my body and heart had long since been a captive of her threads.

One of her legs came into view. I suddenly remembered the feeling of her white hairs and touched her leg. Gerbera let out a strange and surprised "Nyahyah?!" Her legs squirmed about, causing the threads to creak and hum. I'd tried to calm her down with that action, but apparently I'd failed. Maybe it would've been better to awkwardly do nothing. I pulled my hand back. In truth, I was pretty much at my limit.

"Hey, Gerbera?"

"Wh-What is it, My Lord?"

"Do you remember our promise?"

I took another step closer. There was now no space between us.

"P-Promise? Wh-What promise...?"

"That we'd kiss. Didn't you ask for one?"

The day she'd asked that was when her white threads had captured my body and my heart.

"Th-Then when that happens, s-smooch! I want to try that!"

"A kiss?"

I remembered our exchange. The affection I'd felt at the time remained in my heart even now, still as strong as ever. I wrapped my arms around Gerbera's beautiful body. Hardships were sure to come swooping down on us in the days to come. Many trials would stand in the way of our goal. Still, I couldn't possibly lose. I had to overcome everything without giving up or exhausting my strength to its limits. That was how I'd reach my happy and peaceful future.

With those thoughts in mind, I pressed my lips against hers.

Extra Story: The Dragon's Friend *Kei's POV*

The situation I was currently in felt a little strange. I was just a child, just like any other you could find in this world. There was nothing special about me. If I had to pick one thing that made me stand out, it was the fact that I was the younger sister of the northern Woodlands' strongest knight. This did, of course, mean that my sister was the special one, not me. In truth, while I was at Fort Tilia, how people treated me—be it good or bad—hadn't actually been directed at me, but at my sister's little sister.

The Alliance Knights were pretty much the only exception. My sister's comrades had always treated me like any other child. To them, I was nothing more than a commonplace squire hoping to become a splendid knight. That was who I was, and I had no questions or qualms about it.

And right now, despite being just a commonplace girl, I was staying at a hidden settlement of dragons that nobody in the world knew of. I felt really out of place. Just maybe, if there was in fact something special about me, perhaps it was that fate had connected me to special people. My sister and Takahiro were two of them. However, even if I were to mention to them how great they were, both of them would tell me in unison, "I'm not special or anything."

I didn't know whether that was true. In all honesty, it didn't matter to me either way. They were both so special to me. I loved them both dearly.



"I-I'm spent..."

I threw myself to the ground, gasping for breath. After I practiced swinging my sword for a few hundred repetitions, tracing the correct form the entire time, my training session had come to an end. The path to knighthood was a daily accumulation of discipline. No laxity was permitted, and being at the dragons' hidden settlement didn't change what I had to do.

My body felt sluggish after pushing myself to my limit, but I also felt

refreshed. I could've even gone to sleep like this. I couldn't do that outdoors, of course. It would be poor manners, and I was also covered in sweat. I had to wipe myself off, or I could catch a cold. I understood that, but my eyelids felt so heavy.

"Hey."

"Hyah?!"

A voice called out to me, startling me greatly. I opened my eyes wide and saw an upside-down girl with red hair looking down at me. She looked just about as surprised as I was.

"Wh-What's wrong, Lobivia?" I asked her.

"That's my line..." she replied. Her surprised expression faded, and she returned to her usual grouchy manner. "What'cha doing out here?"

"Umm... I was just, uh, a little tired, so I was taking a break."

She'd asked me this rather dubiously, so I ended up brushing her question off with a smile. I couldn't possibly say that I'd almost carelessly fallen asleep out here. That would be way too embarrassing. It was a good thing that she'd called out to me before I fell into a deep slumber. I'd nearly shown her a slovenly side of myself. I sighed in relief as Lobivia continued to stare at me.

"How careless," Lobivia said. "You nap out here, and the dragons are gonna crush you. You're tiny and all."

"Mrgh. I'm not tiny."

I pouted a little. I was, in fact, growing pretty well for my age. Even though mana enhanced my constitution, there was nothing better than having a good base physique. I wasn't picky with food, and I didn't stay up late at night. I put in a great amount of effort every single day.

"I mean, you're pretty tiny yourself," I said.

"I've probably been bigger than you since I was a baby."

"I'm not talking about you as a dragon."

I rose to my feet. Lobivia had a point. An enormous dragon could easily miss

seeing me lying on the ground. Twice, I'd seen dragons wandering around the lake. They'd looked this way, probably because they were curious about the house Lobivia and Takahiro were staying in. Malvina had forbidden any contact, but there was no guarantee they wouldn't come this way. It would be dangerous to remain on the ground for too long.

"Huh...?" Just then, I realized something. "Lobivia, did you maybe call out to me because you were worried?"

Her face turned red in the blink of an eye.

"Th-That ain't it!" she exclaimed, arching her brows as if she were angry. Still, it was the only explanation I could think of. "The hell're you smiling at?!"

"Hm? Uhhh, nothing?" I replied with a grin, feeling really happy for some reason.

Ever since we left Fort Tilia, I hadn't been around anybody my age. Lobivia was a little smaller than me, and she could be pretty moody sometimes, but I knew from her interactions with Takahiro that she was a good girl. I thought it'd be nice if we could get along, which was why I'd been proactively trying to talk with her.

At first, she had run away from me, but little by little, she'd started responding. Nevertheless, Lobivia pretty much never started a conversation with me on her own. This might have been the first time. It was a step forward, even if only a small one.

Having said that, I didn't think this was purely a result of my own efforts. I was sure that by coming back to this settlement, something had happened to change Lobivia's mental state. Now that I thought about it, even though she'd been so down after talking to Malvina on our first day here, she'd cheerfully gone out with Lily the next morning to go hunting. It would make sense if something had happened to make her more open.

I naturally thought of Takahiro. I didn't have any proof that he was involved, but I was pretty sure of it. Takahiro always had the most influence on his servants.

"Hee hee. Thank you for worrying about me," I said.

“I’m telling you that ain’t it...”

Lobivia frowned, but that didn’t ruin my mood.

Perhaps feeling that she was getting nowhere with this, Lobivia changed the subject. “What’s got you so tired that you gotta take a break?”

“Hm? Exactly what it looks like. Sword training.”

I put down the wooden sword and shield I’d still been holding and stood up. Resilience was an important trait for knights. I’d only taken a short rest, but my sluggishness had largely gone away. Realizing that my sweat was starting to feel cold, I reached out for the towel I’d prepared earlier. I wiped myself down so that I wouldn’t get sick.

Lobivia looked at me as if she found something fishy. “So you like this stuff too...” she muttered, unamused. I wondered what she was getting at, but I understood immediately when she continued. “Takahiro does it day after day after day without ever getting bored too.”

“He does. Takahiro is serious...no, earnest.”

Being serious wasn’t enough to go as far as he did. The training regimen Takahiro imposed on himself was extremely harsh—especially the real-combat training he did with Gerbera. She was so madly in love with him, but during their training, she would ruthlessly beat down her precious master. That was what he wanted, after all.

Takahiro was far, far away from the great saviors in our legends. He didn’t want to be like them to begin with. He was trying to get stronger by fighting losing battles, struggling in pain, and standing to face his hardships. It was painful to watch. It was such a dangerous way of living that I couldn’t peel my eyes away from him.

Whenever I watched Takahiro, those opposing emotions warred within me. My heart throbbed when I looked at him. It wasn’t a bad feeling, but it was probably a different matter for Lobivia. I’d seen her watching Takahiro’s morning practice before. She’d looked very displeased at the time, just like she did now.

“Is it really that fun...? Don’t it just hurt?” she asked.

Her tone was aggressive, but it didn't bother me. Lobivia just couldn't stand watching Takahiro go through all that pain.

"It don't make no sense," she added.

"Hmm. I get where you're coming from," I replied casually.

Looking back on it, I'd never really given it much thought. Improving my sword skills, learning more magic, and honing my mind so I could make a contract with a spirit—all this training was obvious to me, so there was never a reason for me to question it.

"Moving about feels good, and it's fun too," I told her. "I'm also happy when I feel like I'm getting better. But like you said, there is some pain to it. Actually, that's the majority of it. I mean, it's training."

"And you still do it?"

"Yup."

I had no reason to hesitate, so I answered her with ease.

"You mean, 'cause of that? Being a knight or whatnot?" Lobivia asked.

"Hmm. Right. I'm for sure trying to get stronger so that I can become a full-fledged knight. But that's not all..."

"It ain't?"

I shook my head. "No... I don't think so."

As I formed the answer to Lobivia's question, something in me became clearer.

"I kept trying harder and harder to become a splendid knight like my sister. But now I think it's different. That isn't all... I just want to try hard for the sake of those who are dear to me. I'm just a commonplace squire, so when it comes down to it, there's pretty much nothing I can do, but I don't believe that's a reason for me to sit back and do nothing."

I wasn't special, but that didn't mean it was okay for me to idle about.

"Takahiro's circumstances are very serious. I want to put in as much effort as I can to find the tiniest thing I'm capable of. Takahiro is probably the same."

It was because Takahiro was like that that I realized the same thing about myself. My sister and Takahiro were both special to me; I loved and admired them. I couldn't possibly thank the heavens enough for having had the chance to meet them both.

"Huh...? Lobivia?" I said, realizing that she'd gone quiet. "What's wrong?"

Lobivia pouted. Her sharp eyes were filled with vigor. It felt like she was pressuring me.

"Ummm?" I murmured in bewilderment.

She turned away from me and briskly marched forward. She picked up the wooden sword and shield I'd set aside and swung the sword once, then twice. She snorted and turned my way.

"Bring it on," she muttered, her tail thudding against the ground as she pushed the wooden sword and shield into my hands.

My eyes darted about in confusion. "Huh? What?"

"Bring it."

With that, Lobivia sprung backward away from me. She bent her knees and lowered her waist, placing one hand on the ground and taking a strangely low stance. She spread out her wings, which were still torn, and swayed her tail about to maintain her balance. She resembled a little girl, but there was no mistaking it. She'd assumed the combat posture of a beast—a dragon.

"H-Hang on a sec, Lobivia!"

I panicked. How had it suddenly come to a fight? I didn't understand. Naturally, there was no way I could ready the sword and shield she'd handed to me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Lobivia grimaced. The crease between her brows deepened. She genuinely did look angry. Had I said something to offend her? I thought back over our conversation, but nothing came to mind. As I did, Lobivia's face turned redder and redder. Her gaze got even sharper. What was I to do? She was really angry. Well, that made sense. Something had made her angry enough to pick a fight. I

couldn't think of a reason, but that didn't change the fact that she was upset.

I'd finally taken a step forward with her, but now, I might've taken a huge step back. I'd been so happy earlier, but now I felt a little like crying. Not that I could possibly cry. I wasn't going to fight Lobivia. If I'd said something careless to offend her, then there was only one thing to do. I lowered my head.

"It'd be better to—"

"I'm so sorry! Huh?"

My apology overlapped with whatever Lobivia was trying to say. I raised my head and met her confused gaze.

"Why're you apologizing?" she asked.

"Hwuh?" A strange sound came from my mouth.

"I just thought it'd be better to have an opponent..." Lobivia said.

My thoughts couldn't keep up. Better to have an opponent? For what? Lobivia's cheeks turned even redder. She clearly saw that I wasn't understanding. I finally realized she'd been turning red due to embarrassment.

"That's what Takahiro does. Training with Gerbera. If you do it like that... Oh, wait. I won't be that harsh, but ain't it better to have an opponent like that? So I... What?"

After explaining in a fluster, Lobivia gave me a dubious look.

"Oooh. I get it now."

I lost all my strength and sank to the ground. I'd jumped to an entirely wrong conclusion; I'd been hasty like a fool. That was why Shiran always told me that I had to remain calm.

"Kei?"

I heard my name. I looked up and saw Lobivia peering down at me. She seemed somewhat worried. I noticed that it was the same situation as earlier. It was a little comical.

"Lobivia, you're terrible at this," I said to the bewildered girl as I stood up.

"Wha—?"

“Hee hee. But thank you for offering. I’m really happy.”

I wiped away the tears blurring my eyes and thanked her from the bottom of my heart. In the next instant, Lobivia quickly averted her eyes. Her face was redder than ever.

“Hmph.”

She was just as crabby as usual, but this was simply her being embarrassed.

“So? What’cha gonna do?” she asked.

This time, I didn’t misread her intent.

“Mhm! Let’s do it!”

“Whatever.”

Lobivia nodded curtly, but I could see the corners of her lips slightly curving upward. She wasn’t very honest with herself.

“Oh, but how should we do it?” I asked. “We should put on protection, right? We need to get you a weapon too.”

“You put it on. I don’t need it.”

“Really? It’ll be dangerous.”

“I’ll hurt you if I don’t use my hands. I’ve never used a weapon or nothing.”

“Um, I was talking about you.”

“If I let my scales out, that little stick won’t hurt at all. Well, you’re never gonna hit me, anyway.”

“Mrgh. Big words. My sister was the one who trained me, just so you know.”

We noisily chatted as I went to get my protective gear and came back. In the end, just as Lobivia had said, she thoroughly defeated me. I was a little daunted by her; it was if she were an adult training me like I was a child. Lobivia gradually became more accustomed to my movements and fought more precisely as we went on, so I got discouraged. Seeing me so vexed, Lobivia panicked, but after I explained I wasn’t angry, she looked relieved. When I told her, “Let’s do this again sometime,” she briefly looked happy, but then she huffed.

We returned to the house while conversing like village children talking about what game to play, and we found Takahiro and the others looking at us in astonishment. Hand in hand with Lobivia, I greeted them with a smile.

Extra Story: The Shut-In's Companion

After dinner, I went to see Rose and Katou. When I asked Rose how her work was going, she told me that she'd finally managed to complete an imitation translation runestone. I gave it a try, then casually chatted with Katou about trivial stuff.

Some time after that, Rose asked, "Is something wrong, Master?"

"Huh?" I was a little taken aback by her sudden question.

Rose stopped her work and stared at me.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I apologize if I'm misunderstanding. I just thought you've been a little restless since you entered the room," Rose said, looking worried.

I was a little embarrassed to reply. "Do I really look that way...?"

"Yes. Did something happen?" she asked with a nod, looking dead serious.

Was I that easy to understand? I couldn't help but smile bitterly at the thought.

"Well, more or less," I answered.

"Is there something I can do?" Rose asked immediately.

I shook my head. "No. The sentiment is enough."

"Are you sure...?"

"Sorry for worrying you," I said. Rose looked a little saddened by this, so I added, "This is just something I have to do myself."

"Something you must do, you say?" Rose repeated, cocking her head.

"Now that I think of it, Senpai," Katou joined in, "you canceled your magic lesson with Shiran today, right? Also, Lily doesn't appear to be with you."

"Lily returned to our room ahead of me," I said.

Katou was as sharp as ever. I could tell from this little exchange that she had a vague idea of what was going on. Not that she had any intention of saying more than this. She'd only hinted that she'd noticed because she wanted me to know that she would help if needed. She'd also done it out of consideration for Rose, so I was all the more grateful. In this one case, however, I wasn't going to take advantage of their good will.

"All right then. I should head back to my room."

I rose to my feet, and the two of them saw me out to the hallway.

"Okay."

I psyched myself up and started walking. I stopped in front of the room I was using during our stay in Draconia. I hesitated for a moment. The wooden door seemed strangely heavy. Of course, this was just my emotions talking, so I threw away my hesitation, knocked on the door, and entered the room.

Inside was a girl sitting on a chair. She raised her head from the book she was reading, her flaxen hair swaying behind her. She had the same face as Lily.

"Majima."

We'd arranged this meeting beforehand, so she wasn't surprised to see me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mizushima."

"No need to apologize."

Mizushima shook her head, but her expression was a little stiff. Was she nervous? There was an air of doubt about her.

"How about taking a seat?" she said.

Only then did I realize I'd been standing in the doorway. Apparently, I was the nervous one here. I let out a small sigh, then nodded.

"Yeah. I'll do that."

The only chair in the room was the one Mizushima had brought in, so I crossed to the other side and sat down on the bed. I faced her once more. I opened my mouth to say something, but I hesitated. My focus then shifted to her clothes.

“Your uniform...” I said.

“Huh?”

“You changed.”

“Oh, yup.”

Mizushima was currently wearing her school uniform. She and Lily shared a body. When Lily returned to our room ahead of me, she’d been wearing her usual white dress. In other words, Mizushima had gone out of her way to change before I arrived. Now that I thought about it, she’d also been wearing her uniform in the Misty Lodge.

“That dress is Lilz’s,” Mizushima said, but then she waved her hands in a fluster. “Oh. No, um, I don’t mean I hate wearing it or anything, okay?”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t think that.”

I wasn’t going to complain. Actually, I was grateful. Even if I knew it in my mind, my emotions and senses didn’t necessarily keep up. If she dressed like Lily always did, I might accidentally treat Mizushima the same way I always treated Lily. That would be very rude.

“Strangely enough, wearing my uniform seems to help me maintain my mimicry better. Maybe ’cause it makes it easier to imagine my own figure?”

“I see. The reason you wanted time was so that you could change, then.”

“Yup. Sorry for taking up your time.”

“It’s fine. I don’t really mind. I’m the one who called you out. Besides, I was talking to Rose and Katou, so it wasn’t a waste or anything.”

I’d dropped by Rose and Katou’s room because Mizushima had asked for a little time before we talked alone. Katou seemed to have figured that out too.

“Oh, yeah, have you spoken with Katou yet?” I asked.

Katou and Mizushima had been close friends. They’d been together when Takaya Jun had taken them away from the Colony. Now that it was known that Mizushima was inside Lily, I figured the two of them would have plenty to talk about.

“Mm-hmm. We spoke. It was the day after we all talked in your room. Mana called me out. She cried, even though there’s nothing for her to apologize for.”

They’d escaped the Colony together, but Katou had been saved, whereas Mizushima had passed away. Even if nothing could’ve been done about it, Katou obviously felt deeply guilty for having survived on her own.

“If Rose hadn’t been there to calm Mana down, it might’ve been a bit of an ordeal,” Mizushima added. “Rose really saved me... Well, Mana was the same as usual. She’d predicted that it would end up like that and had already asked Rose to stay with her.”

“It’s hard to tell whether she’s breaking down or keeping her cool, huh?”

“Seriously.”

We both laughed, but I knew that my smile was a little stiff. I knew the reason for this too. When I reunited with Mizushima, I felt awkward around her, but hadn’t been able to settle that because of the topic of my lost memories.

Mizushima was now one of our traveling companions, though. So long as I was with Lily, I couldn’t sever ties to Mizushima, seeing how they shared a body. I couldn’t let things between us remain uncomfortable. I’d asked for this meeting today so we could clear things up.

“Mizushima,” I said very stiffly, correcting my posture, “I have to apologize to you.”

Her eyes shook. Her smile had already vanished. She was a clever girl; she could probably guess what I was getting at.

“Apologize...? What for?” she asked flatly.

I felt like I’d just swallowed a lump of ice, but I couldn’t stop here.

“I used you. I fed your body to Lily.”

A repulsive image came to mind, one I couldn’t wipe away. Not that I had any intention of forgetting it.

“I need to apologize for that,” I said.

“But it was necessary, wasn’t it?” Mizushima asked expressionlessly.

I nodded. "Yes. If I hadn't done that, I probably wouldn't be here today."

"The same goes for me," she replied indifferently. "I was supposed to be dead already, but because of a bunch of coincidences, I'm here today. That only happened because of what you did that day. I'm actually satisfied with the present. I'm grateful, Majima."

"That still doesn't change what I did."

"You sure are serious."

I caught the slightest hint of inconcealable anger in her words. Lily acted like a human by using Mizushima as an example, so they had many commonalities. Having so much experience with Lily, it wasn't all that hard to sense when Mizushima was keeping a lid on her emotions. She certainly hadn't forgiven me for what I'd done. I could sense it.

"I plan on doing anything I can to take responsibility," I said.

The person I needed to make amends to the most in this entire world was right here, and I was going to do so no matter how much time it took. I'd resolved to take responsibility for what I'd done to her. Nonetheless, if Mizushima had no intention of forgiving me, this resolve meant nothing.

"I understand," Mizushima said coldly. She rose from her seat with a clatter. She remained expressionless as she stood before me. "Is that all you wanted to talk about?"

"Yeah."

"I see. Then that's all for today." Mizushima nodded, but her eyes didn't meet mine. She kept them glued to the ground. "I'm glad we could talk today. All right then, I'll switch out with Lily. I'm going to change, so could you give me a little time again?"

"Sure."

If she was going to change, then I couldn't stay in the room. Even if this was just an excuse to drive me out, I had no choice but to abide.

"Okay, later then," I said, standing up from the bed.

"Mhm."

Mizushima responded to me, but she still wouldn't look at me. For some reason, my heart really hurt. I told myself that I didn't have the right to feel this way. The only thing I could do for her was to take responsibility for what I'd done. That was all. There was nothing else to it...

However, I'd misunderstood absolutely everything, and I only realized I had shortly after this.

When I passed Mizushima to leave the room, I heard a sudden voice.

"Aagh. Jeez. I guess I've got no choice."

I couldn't consider the meaning behind those words; it just wasn't the time for that.

"H-Hyah?!"

Mizushima shrieked and tilted over. Had she been assaulted by a dizzy spell? I didn't have time to think about that, though. I reflexively reached out and pulled her upright. Her body fell my way. It had all happened in an instant, so I lost my balance. Still, I was at least capable of catching a girl without falling. Or, I was supposed to be. When I caught Mizushima, my legs got strangely tangled up.

"Wh-Whoa?!"

What kind of coincidence was this? It was as if my legs had been swept out from underneath me. I could've managed had I braced myself, but the soft sensation entwining my legs made me hesitate. As a result, I stumbled and fell backward. I prepared myself for the impact while protecting Mizushima, but the impact came much faster and was far lighter than I expected. One beat later, I realized I'd fallen back onto the bed.

"That startled me," I said, speaking my exact thoughts. "Are you all right, Mizushima?"

"Ow... I hit my nose," Mizushima replied, lying flat against my chest.

This was a bit of a disaster, but nothing serious had happened. I felt relieved, but then I realized the position we were in.

"Jeez. How did this happen...?" Mizushima grumbled.

The top of her head was right in front of my face. Her body was laying on top of mine. I was used to the weight, but she wasn't Lily. Suddenly conscious of the sensation in my arms, having wrapped them around her, I sprang back and let her go.

"Oh, sorry."

I had nothing to apologize for, but I'd said it reflexively. I had nothing to feel guilty about either, naturally.

I tried to sit up right away, but something hindered me from doing so.

"Wait."

I froze. Still lying on top of me, Mizushima had planted her hands against the bed. She looked down at me, her gaze earnest.

"Majima, you feel guilty about me, right?" she asked. It was as if her eyes were pleading with me. "You feel responsible, right?"

There was more sorrow than anger in her expression.

"Is...that all?" she asked, a tear forming in the corner of her eye.

The moment I saw it, I started to doubt myself. Had I misunderstood something? When I looked at Mizushima, I felt like I had. But what was it? What had I misunderstood?

"Hey, Majima? Do you remember that night?" Mizushima asked.

She hadn't been very clear, but I knew what she was talking about right away. Her earnest expression and the way she straddled me overlapped with another girl in my memories. I recalled that night in the hut from several months ago.

After discovering the corpse of a girl I knew, I'd committed a necessary but inhuman act to survive. I now knew that my deadened emotions had been an instinctive defense mechanism to protect me from shock.

That night, because of everything that had happened, I'd felt like the weight of my emotions would crush me. I would've been done for on my own. I'd only managed to maintain myself because I'd had someone to heal, support, accept, and love me.

The girl from back then overlapped with the girl before me. Surely, I'd mixed them up... No, that was a lie; it wasn't because of that. I felt certain of something. If I was wrong, Mizushima would never have asked me whether I remembered that night. Yes. Back then, Lily hadn't been the only one I'd bonded with. There had definitely been someone else there.

After that, she'd vanished. Rather, she'd been lost to begin with. By the time I reached her, it was already too late. I wasn't able to do anything. All I could do was fulfill her regrets. That didn't change the truth of her death. At least, that was what I'd always believed.

But that wasn't the case. She was here right now. She hadn't been lost. She'd always been with Lily, right by my side. That was why she'd asked me if all I felt was guilt and responsibility. It wasn't that she couldn't forgive me for what I'd done to her that day. To her, none of that mattered. There was something far more important than that, so when I hadn't touched on it at all, it had angered and saddened her.

I realized my misunderstanding now. So what was I to do? I didn't really need to give it any thought.

"I remember," I said, not even aware that I'd spoken. I unconsciously stretched my hand out and touched Mizushima's cheek. "Yeah. You're right. If I'm to take responsibility, then that's far more important."

One half of the warmth that saved me that night was right here with me.

"Sorry for being slow," I said.

"Dummy..."

Tears flowed from her eyes. The warm droplets steadily dripped from her face and didn't stop for a good while.



How much time had passed? Mizushima kept her forehead pressed against my chest and didn't move. After a while, the sensation of heat against my body was my entire world. The feeling of truly taking back something that had been lost was sweet. Mizushima likely felt the same way. She seemed satisfied.

Before long, she got up, and our eyes met. If this were Lily, she would've smiled impishly and stolen a kiss from me or something. Of course, she wasn't Lily. I didn't confuse the two of them, and I understood they would react differently. The two of them occupied the same body, but they possessed independent personalities.

Even so, I hadn't predicted *how* their reactions would differ. Had I tried to, maybe I would've been able to. Given her attitude while we were in the Misty Lodge, and given the reason she'd shut herself in, I already knew that this cheerful, lighthearted, and wise girl was also shy, awkward, and a late bloomer. Besides, everyone had things they weren't good at handling.

The moment Mizushima met my eyes, she gave me a weird look. She'd likely been acting entirely on her emotions up to this point. Now, she'd come back to her senses and realized the situation we were in.

She was straddling my waist. We were all alone on top of a bed. Not only that, I'd been holding her until now, and we could both still feel the heat from each other's bodies.

"Ah..."

She gasped and turned bright red with enough vigor that I felt like I could hear a sound effect accompanying it. Her reaction was so drastic that it caused me to jolt. That only made Mizushima panic more.

"H-Hang on. Um, this is— Hyah?!"

She pulled back immediately. However, she'd done so with so much force that she toppled backward and tumbled off the bed with a thud.

"H-Hey?!" I shouted.

I froze in astonishment but then got up in a fluster. She was on the floor, groaning, and sitting in an immodest position.

"M-Mizushima...?"

She started and looked up at me, her face red. Perhaps she thought that her reaction had been unsightly.

"S-Stop!" she screamed, tears in her eyes, waving her hands about like she

was trying to hide her face.

“Huh?”

“Forget that just now!”

Even if I could...I didn't know from what point to what point she wanted me to forget. Maybe she didn't know herself. That was possible, considering how flustered she was.

Mizushima sat on the floor, utterly discomposed. But in the next instant, her expression changed to one of exasperation.

“What the heck, Miho...?”

It was a voice I was very familiar with.

Her face once more flushed red. “B-But Lilz! This is embarrassing...” the same mouth said in a miserable tone.

“Don't ‘but’ me... That was just mean,” she said, sounding exhausted, as if there was no dealing with this.

If one didn't know the situation, this would look like a one-girl comedy act. I could tell right away, though, that Lily and Mizushima were talking to each other.

“Miho, you know Katou told me that you were dense when it came to this stuff, right? Still, no matter how tone-deaf you are to romance, how could you possibly waste such a good mood like that? It all went up in smoke. I even went and helped you...”

At that point, I finally realized that Lily had made me trip me earlier. She'd come out for just an instant like she was doing now. It was quite the skill.

“Uuuugh...”

Mizushima plopped to the floor and put her hands against her red cheeks. Her eyes met mine. In an instant, her expression crumbled.

“A-Anyway! That's how it is!”

After she yelled that cryptic phrase, Mizushima switched out completely for Lily.

“Huh? Hang on. Miho?!” Lily said, blinking in surprise.

Bewildered, Lily put her hand to her chest, but Mizushima showed no signs of resurfacing. After a full ten seconds, Lily grasped the situation and her brows drooped.

“Wow... She ran away.”

Of all things, Mizushima had deserted under enemy fire. Not that I was an enemy or anything. It just felt like the situation was pitiful enough for that phrase to fit.

“Miho, you chicken...” Lily said, slumping.

I couldn’t hold it in anymore and burst into laughter.

“This isn’t the time to be laughing, Master. Miho reverted back into a shut-in, you know? A chicken *and* a shut-in. She’s beyond help!”

“Really? Well, I guess so.”

Even as I spoke, I couldn’t suppress my urge to laugh. I’d thought Mizushima was the type of girl who could skillfully do anything. I didn’t know she had this side to her. It just felt so strange.

“So we’ll have to do something to get her to come out, huh?” I said, rotating my shoulder. “I need to take responsibility too, yeah?”

My meaning seemed to get across properly, because Lily smiled and nodded. Immediately following that, the girl inside her suddenly made a reappearance. Her cheeks red, her voice sounding both embarrassed and happy, she said a single word—“dummy.”

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“Apologize?
What for?”

“I have to
apologize to
you.”

MIZUSHIMA MIHO
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT











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by Minto Higure

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