

My Pet Saintess



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MORGANAİK

A former priest-warrior who loved Calsedonia. He was tempted by a demon and ultimately faced heartbreak.

TATSUMI YAMAGATA

A Japanese boy, in the midst of mourning the death of his pet, was suddenly summoned to another world.

BARSE

A junior deacon in the Savaiv Temple who becomes friends with Tatsumi, as they both share the same rank.

GIUSEPPE

Calsedonia's adoptive grandfather and the esteemed high priest of the Savaiv Temple.

CALSEDONIA

Chiko's new form after reincarnating in another world. Driven by her strong desire to reunite, she succeeded in summoning Tatsumi to the other world.

CHIKO

Tatsumi's pet parrot. After her death, she was reincarnated as a human in another world.

REINCARNATED AS A
BEAUTIFUL GIRL!

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

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Chapter 1: Departure

One summer day, when the heavy air was filled with the chirping of cicadas, an elderly woman clad in traditional Japanese attire quietly pressed her hands together in front of a tombstone. Behind her stood a man in his forties, silently watching over her. How long had they been standing like that?

Slowly, quietly, the woman opened her eyelids to reveal eyes as blue as sapphires—despite her traditional dress, she was clearly not of Eastern origin. Her visage, marked with numerous wrinkles, hinted that she must have been quite beautiful in her youth. This dignified, foreign woman had come from far away.

With her graveside prayer concluded, the man behind her spoke up. “Are you really... planning to leave, Auntie?”

Turning to face her nephew, the elderly woman replied, “Yes. In this town... I don’t have anyone left.” A look of sadness crossed her face as she laid bare her feelings. “Aoi-san, Takashi-san, and Yasutaka-san... They’ve all gone far away.”

As she spoke their names, memories of her beloved ones surfaced in the woman’s mind. These were precious memories she had accumulated from the time she arrived in this town—no, in this world—up to the present day. However, those who had been by her side throughout her youth had all passed away, leaving her alone.

This solitude was not necessarily painful for her. Sorrow might swirl within her heart, but she understood that human life was fleeting. She had always known she would one day find herself in such a situation.

“Now that this memorial service is over... I already decided, remember? Once Yasutaka-san’s forty-ninth day was observed, I was always planning to set out on my journey.”

Her husband had been a renowned novelist, and his death had grieved many. The large funeral had been attended by numerous fans, but in accordance with Yasutaka’s wishes, only relatives had been invited to today’s service.

As the widow and chief mourner, the elderly woman had managed everything impeccably, from the funeral to the past seven weekly memorial services. With the completion of the forty-ninth day service, her husband’s mourning period had officially come to an end.

Of course, the commemorative services—including those held on the first and third anniversaries of his death—would continue. Buddhists hold the belief that forty-nine days after a person has died, the deceased receives judgment from the King of Hell and officially departs for the pure land of paradise. Thus, as of today, her husband had officially become a resident of the afterlife.

“The future services for Uncle... we’ll take care of them. So, Auntie, you should live however you wish. That was what you promised Uncle, after all.”

“Thank you,” the elderly woman responded with a smile, turning back to her nephew—the son of her late husband’s sister. The woman and her husband hadn’t had any children, which had also been a factor in her decision to depart.

“I’ll leave my husband’s whole estate behind,” she told him. “There’s no point in taking it with me.”

Where she planned to go, Japanese currency would naturally be of no use. Of course, she intended to take valuables like jewels and precious metals, but exactly how much they would actually be worth would be uncertain until she arrived. Arrangements had been made through a lawyer to transfer everything except for the precious metals to her nieces and nephews.

“All the memories I have of him... that’s more than enough for me,” she added with a bright smile. It was then that her appearance changed in an instant.

The wrinkles engraved all over her face and hands seemed to peel away, disappearing as if they were never there. Indeed, they *had* truly been peeled away—the elderly woman persona she had been wearing like a cloak had been shed.

Hidden beneath this illusion was skin as white as untouched snow, without a single wrinkle to be seen.

The no-longer-elderly woman watched as even her clothing transformed into something else entirely. Emerging from beneath the illusion of the traditional Japanese garments was a bodice of soft, white-dyed leather, paired with a skirt colored the green of newly sprouted grass that barely reached her knees, revealing her dazzling white thighs.

A belt wrapped around her waist held a short sword, and a dagger hung at her back. However, the most distinctive feature of her appearance was her long, pointed ears. To those with even a slight familiarity with fantasy, her appearance would unmistakably suggest a famous mythical race.

An elf.

Frequent denizens of fantasy novels and comics, elves are a fairy folk closely resembling humans, and this woman was undeniably a true elf. Her apparent age, in human years, would have been around twenty, and her features—as meticulously crafted as a work of art—were brimming with hope and curiosity for the journey ahead.

Parting with her husband and close friends had been saddening, but she could not remain captive to that sadness forever. While he was alive, her husband had always said, “After I’m gone, you should live free. Whether you choose to stay in Japan or embark on a journey is up to you. I know how much longer elves live than humans. There’s no need to be bound by me forever.”

Taking her husband’s words to heart, she had decided to go. Staying in Japan, filled with memories of her husband and close friends, was indeed too painful for her. This, too, was one of the reasons she had resolved to depart.

“You really do look better in that outfit. It suits you as a former adventurer,” her nephew said, looking admiringly at his transformed aunt. He handed her the luggage placed at his feet, prepared for her departure to another world.

The suitcase contained daily necessities, clothing, and mementos of the husband she had cherished. Of course, it was impossible to take everything with her, so she had carefully selected only the most essential items after much deliberation.

“Thank you,” the woman said, blushing a little at her nephew’s compliment. Then, she removed the dagger strapped to her back and cradled it with both hands as if embracing it. This dagger was imbued with magical power—the power to travel between worlds.

She had come to modern-day Japan because she found herself caught up in the activation of this dagger’s magical power. There, she’d met the man who would become her husband. They fell in love, and were soon married. She’d then spent the next seventy years of her life in Japan with her husband.

“Well, Yasutaka-san... I’m leaving now,” she said now with a gentle smile toward her late husband’s grave, holding the dagger out in front of her again. Slowly, she drew the weapon from its sheath.

The blade that emerged shone with the luster of freshly forged steel, reflecting her cerulean eyes. However, nothing else happened. Confused, she began to wave it around as her nephew watched with a mix of concern and amusement.

“Uh, that’s odd... This dagger definitely has magical powers. I thought the magic would activate once it was drawn from the sheath...”

“Just try to calm down, Auntie. Why don’t you try to remember how you came to Japan again, but slowly this time?” he suggested.

“Remember?” she repeated with a harsh little laugh. “It’s been more than seventy years...”

Just the same, she endeavored to recall how she’d first arrived in Japan from her homeland. By focusing intently on her memories, she eventually succeeded in activating the dagger’s magical powers.

Thus, she embarked on her journey once again. Whether the dagger would lead her back to the world of her birth or to another realm entirely was something she didn’t know at the moment. Nonetheless, she was an adventurer

at heart. The curiosity for the unknown, the allure of uncharted worlds, is the adventurer's north star.

Smiling as she considered this new possibility, she left Japan behind—the country where she had lived a lifetime.

It was a departure that felt unresolved, a bit anticlimactic, but it marked the beginning of another grand adventure.



Chapter 2: Another Transferee

Pulled awake by the dazzling morning light streaming through the window and the feeling of something squirming around on her stomach, Calsedonia consciousness slowly drifted up from the depths of sleep. As her awareness sharpened, so did the sensations—and the warmth she felt against her back.

“Um... What are you doing?” she mumbled, turning to the person who was embracing her from behind.

“Mmm, I’m rubbing your tummy, Chiko,” came the cheerful voice of the man who could be deemed her fated partner. “Your skin is so smooth... It feels so nice. I think I could keep doing this forever.”

“Stop, it tickles,” she protested, squirming a bit more at his touch.

The intimate and playful moment they shared underscored the deep bond between them, a connection that transcended the ordinary, hinting at the larger story that’d led to this encounter and the life they’d begun to share.



Despite her protestations, the delight in Calsedonia's voice was unmistakable. Knowing this, Tatsumi didn't stop his gentle caresses. The two of them were bare of all clothing, their skin against one another, their bodies nestled warmly under fur blankets.

Ever since the night the magic painting had first brought them together, they had slept skin to skin almost daily. It wasn't that they made passionate love every night; simply being close, feeling each other's warmth and breath, was enough to fill them both with contentment.

Continuing to tickle Calsedonia as she squirmed, Tatsumi buried his nose in her hair, savoring her scent. "It's strange," he mused. "You smell just like the Chiko I knew from before... It might just be my imagination, though."

Calsedonia placed her hand over Tatsumi's, which was wrapped around her stomach, and closed her eyes in happiness. "I remember the past too. Back when I was still small..." she whispered.

During the time Calsedonia was a cockatiel, she had always been with Tatsumi. She would perch on his head, his shoulder, his knee, always looking up at him. Sometimes, she would even doze off on the warm, comforting surface of his stomach while he was laying down.

Back then, they were inseparable. Yet most good things come to an end, and they'd had to part ways. Now, however, Tatsumi and Calsedonia were together again in this world.

Tatsumi was grateful to Calsedonia for summoning him here, and Calsedonia, in turn, felt an even greater love for Tatsumi, who had so willingly accepted living here.

Overcome with a surge of affection, Tatsumi hugged Calsedonia's soft body tightly. Calsedonia, feeling the pleasant warmth of her beloved man against her back, smiled happily in his embrace.

In spite of this blissful atmosphere, Calsedonia began to stir, preparing to leave the bed.

"Come on, Master. Today's your first visit to the tavern where beast hunters gather. We'd better start getting ready soon."

“That’s right. As much as I hate to leave this warm bed, it can’t be helped. All right, Chiko, you go ahead and get up first.”

“Huh?”

As soon as Tatsumi finished speaking, Calsedonia felt the unexpected sensation of floating. She blinked quickly in surprise, finding herself teleported out of the bed! She managed to orient herself in midair, narrowly avoiding a fall to the floor. However, this meant exposing her unclothed body to Tatsumi’s gaze in the bright morning light.

“Hyeeeeeeek!”

Realizing she was naked before Tatsumi, Calsedonia let out a cute little scream and crouched down, hugging her chest with both hands. Tatsumi propped himself up in bed and watched her with a grin.

“Ah, a feast for the eyes.”

“Jeez. Master has been a bit of a tease lately!”

Still crouching on the floor, Calsedonia reached up for a pillow and launched it at Tatsumi—who caught it effortlessly. A second later, laughter broke out between them, affirming their happiness together despite everything.

※ ※ ※

After breakfast and a relaxed conversation, the pair of lovers left their home around the fourth bell—the time Tatsumi would have called noon back home. They were headed for a tavern once frequented by Calsedonia during her training days: a base for beast hunters.

As they walked through the falling snow, drawing close for warmth, fond smiles and friendly greetings came their way. They were a familiar sight in the neighborhood.

“Oh, Tatsumi and Calsedonia! Heading out together again today?”

“You two are as close as always.”

“Really. With you two around, even all this snow seems like it could melt away.”

Tatsumi took the well-intentioned teasing bashfully, his gaze averted, while Calsedonia responded with a pleased smile. Slowly, they made their way to the main street, then toward the city center.

Calsedonia led the way, turning off the main road onto a small side street.

“So, what’s this tavern owner like, the one you said you used to visit?” Tatsumi inquired.

“Apparently, he came to the Zoisalight continent from a distant land about twenty years ago,” Calsedonia explained. “He wandered around the continent for most of that time, then came to Levantis about five or six years ago and opened this tavern.”

As he listened, Tatsumi pictured a rugged middle-aged man with the air of a seasoned warrior. A mercenary or beast hunter who had roamed the continent, retiring due to injuries or other reasons, and then opened a tavern to mentor the next generation.

Yeah, that sounds plausible, Tatsumi thought as Calsedonia went on. “The tavern’s gotten more popular recently, and it’s turned into an important base for skilled beast hunters. When I used to go there all the time, it had just opened and wasn’t as well-known, but now it’s a landmark in Levantis.”

Tatsumi could hear the nostalgia dripping from Calsedonia’s words. Her time there must have meant a lot to her.

“Since I became an exorcist, I haven’t been able to go there as much... I wonder how the landlady is doing?”

Ah, so the tavern’s esteemed proprietor had a wife. A tough, stubborn tavern owner with a bright and capable wife supporting him—indeed, it seemed like a standard setup.

As Tatsumi imagined the scene, Calsedonia’s excited voice caught his attention. “Ah, there it is. Our destination: the Elf’s Repose Inn.”

He followed her gaze to see a three-story red-brick building. It almost could have been a house, except for its size and the beautiful large wooden door that marked its entrance. The door showed signs of age but was well enough maintained to reveal the grain of its wood. The tavern, Tatsumi figured, must be on the first floor, with the guest rooms on the second and third.

What truly caught his eye, however, was not the building itself but the sign next to the door. Adorned with stylized images of a fork, knife, and a beer mug, it clearly indicated the place's function as a tavern, with a bed icon underneath signifying its dual role as an inn.

Although he'd recently become literate in this world's script, Tatsumi understood the importance of such symbols on signs, considering the low literacy rate here. Most signs around Levantis had similar symbols.

It wasn't the symbols that captivated Tatsumi's attention, but the writing itself, etched in a style starkly different from the flowing script of this land. To Tatsumi, these characters were far more familiar than the local script.

But these characters, he thought, shouldn't exist here.

"How...? Why is it in Japanese?" Tatsumi murmured as he stared at the sign in astonishment.

The words "Elf's Repose Inn" were unmistakably written in a combination of hiragana, katakana, and kanji.

Seeing Tatsumi staring at the sign in a daze, Calsedonia tilted her head in confusion. "Master? Is something the matter?"

"Uh, yeah... I was just looking at the writing on that sign..."

"Ah." Calsedonia followed his gaze. "That's the language from the country the landlady used to live in."

Even though Calsedonia could speak Japanese, she apparently had no idea what the written language looked like. Now that Tatsumi thought about it, in her previous life, she'd been a bird; she might have understood the language to some extent from listening to Tatsumi and his family, but of course she wouldn't have learned how to read or write.

“So, you mean... she could be Japanese, just like me?”

The idea that there was another Japanese person in this country—no, in this world—was a shock, to say the least. The feeling that spread through his chest was perhaps best described as longing. Although he had resolved to leave his life in Japan behind, there were times when he couldn’t help but feel homesick.

If this woman really was Japanese, might she share Tatsumi’s sense of longing? With this hope in mind, and with Calsedonia beside him, Tatsumi stepped into the tavern.

As soon as they entered, Tatsumi’s nose picked up the smell of alcohol and a wide variety of food. Just as he’d guessed, the first floor was the tavern, with a counter at the back and tables and chairs set for four spread throughout the spacious interior. Some of these were occupied by men in armor—*Must be beast hunters*, Tatsumi thought—who cast uninhibited glances at him and Calsedonia. A few even blatantly ogled Calsedonia, prompting Tatsumi to subtly position himself between her and their leering gazes.

The two of them were bundled up in thick cloaks. Beneath her cloak, Calsedonia wore her usual attire, while Tatsumi was armored in boiled leather and equipped with a steel sword at his waist.

Even so, their equipment made it clear to the seasoned beast hunters that they were not mere civilians. Even Tatsumi’s movements, shaped by his training as a priest-warrior, betrayed his vocation. This was probably why, despite some probing glances, none of the hunters spoke up or caused trouble—they knew better.

Some hunters even seemed to recognize Calsedonia as the Holy Maiden of the Savaiv Temple, judging by their awed stares and whispers. But Calsedonia, unfazed, simply led the way toward the back of the tavern.

As Tatsumi followed, his gaze landed on a woman busily working behind the counter. *She must be the landlady*, he thought, his anticipation growing. *Could she be Japanese?*

As he got a clearer view of the woman, Tatsumi’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“Uh?”

The woman was shorter than Tatsumi, around 160 centimeters, with a slender figure and skin as pale as Calsedonia's. Her hair was a light blond, slightly darker than Calsedonia's platinum locks, and her eyes shone a deep blue, contrasting with Calsedonia's ruby red. But most strikingly, her ears were long, pointed, and tilted upward—the telltale characteristic of a certain well-known fantasy race.

“An elf...?” Tatsumi murmured in disbelief.

Only humans worked at the Savaiv Temple; while Levantis held some of what this world called “demi-humans,” and Tatsumi had occasionally passed one on the street, this was his first time seeing one up close.

Perhaps hearing Tatsumi's murmur, the elven woman turned her face toward him and Calsedonia. In the space of a second, her expression blossomed into one of surprise and joy.

“Calsedonia! Is that really you, Calsedonia? Wow, it's been so long! Have you been well?”

“Yes, I've been well, thanks! How about you? How have you been?”

“Well, thanks! I've also heard about your achievements, Calsedonia... About the rumors of the Holy Maiden of the Savaiv Temple, you know?”

As Calsedonia and the elven woman continued to chat pleasantly, Tatsumi wondered, *If this is the tavern's landlady, who wrote the Japanese on the sign?* But then her gaze shifted to Tatsumi, and suddenly her face filled with shock.

The landlady's blue eyes widened as she uttered in a hoarse whisper, “Eh...? Could it be... you're from Japan?”

There was no doubt in Tatsumi's mind: the words that fell from the elven woman's lips were in Japanese.

A decorative rectangular border with intricate, symmetrical floral and scrollwork patterns in a light gray color, framing the chapter title.

Chapter 3: The Elf Who Was Once a Freeloader

The elf introduced herself as Elle Zephyr Feera Sylvara Akatsuka. “If that’s too long and hard to remember, feel free to call me Elle,” she suggested—and confirmed that yes, she was the landlady of the Elf’s Repose Inn and had once lived in Japan.

“So, Miss Elle, you came to this world after your husband passed away?” Tatsumi inquired.

“Yes. After my husband Yasutaka died, I used the power of a magical dagger that can cross worlds to come here. This world is the third one I’ve come to know after my homeland and Earth.”

Tatsumi and Calsedonia listened from their seats at the tavern’s counter as Elle shared her life’s story. She had been transported from her original world to Japan due to a mishap with a magical item. There, she’d been helped by a variety of people until she’d eventually met and married a Japanese man, becoming a citizen in the process. However, she and her husband had had no children, and being an elf with a much longer lifespan, she’d traveled to this world about twenty years ago using the same magical item after her husband’s death.

“I was really surprised to learn that you lived in Japan with your husband,” Tatsumi commented.

“I’m just as surprised,” Elle responded. “Who would have thought that Calsedonia’s previous life was as a cockatiel, and her longing for her past owner led to her successfully summoning you... It’s beyond belief, like something out of a story.”

All three of them enjoyed reminiscing about Japan together. The surrounding beast hunters tried their hardest to listen in, but unfortunately for them, the conversation was conducted in Japanese.

“Cockatiels, huh? I’ve never had one, but I used to see them all the time in pet stores. They were adorable... That reminds me, my husband loved animals too,” Elle reflected, her gaze drifting to a photograph displayed on the counter.

The picture showed a younger Elle smiling next to three other high school students, a boy and two girls. The boy must have been her late husband; the tender gaze she cast toward the photo made it clear to Tatsumi and Calsedonia that she still loved him deeply.

The conversation continued with Japan as its focal point—neither Tatsumi nor Elle could think of the last time they’d really been able to discuss their homeland like this.

“Wait, you’re from Nisshin, Aichi? I lived in Seto. That’s so close!”

“Yeah, it’s very close! I’ve been to Seto lots of times. I went to the pottery festival and visited Iwayado Park for the autumn leaves.”

“Hm... I didn’t really go to Nisshin much, maybe just on a school trip to a farm when I was in elementary school.”

“We might have passed by each other at some point.”

While Tatsumi and Elle enjoyed their lively exchange, Calsedonia sulked with her cheek in her hand. It seemed she wasn’t too thrilled about how joyful Tatsumi was to engage in conversation with Elle.

Calsedonia had spent a lifetime in Japan, of course, but she’d been a cockatiel; her understanding of everything she’d seen was extremely limited, which made it hard for her to follow along.

Noticing Calsedonia’s mood, Tatsumi reached out to gently stroke her hair. Her expression softened instantly. She smiled happily and rested her head on Tatsumi’s shoulder with a content sigh.

Elle’s eyes widened in surprise as she watched the interaction. “I’m amazed... I never thought I’d see Calsedonia be so affectionate with a man.”

Every time she'd come to the tavern, Calsedonia had kept her interactions with men to the bare minimum. Sure, she'd often worked alongside male beast hunters on jobs. But she'd never acted as if she depended on any of her partners, let alone held affection for them.

That Tatsumi's and Calsedonia's bond was one that transcended the need for words, however, was palpable to Elle. She looked on for a moment with fond amusement, then suddenly swapped from Japanese to the common trade language of the Zoisalight Continent. At the same time, her demeanor abruptly swapped from friendly to professional.

"Now, let me formally welcome you to the Elf's Repose Inn!" she proclaimed. "This inn and tavern mainly serves as a base for beast hunters. I, Elle Zephyr Feera Sylvara Akatsuka, am the owner. Besides myself, there are a few employees who help run the place. I'm here most of the time, but the staff rotate, so you'll see different people every day."

The tavern apparently not only attracted beast hunters but also served as a hub for information on beasts and a place to post requests for their subjugation. Of course, it also welcomed those simply seeking food and drink, as well as lodgers needing a place to spend the night.

"There are no organizations backing us like the guilds you might know from games or novels here. There's also no concept of rank. The moment someone decides they're a beast hunter, they are one, regardless of whether they actually have the skill to defeat beasts."

Requests for beast subjugation posted at the tavern were typically first come, first served. However, whether an individual could handle a given task was up to their own judgment. While familiar faces and more experienced hunters might offer advice, ultimately the responsibility of making the final decision rested on the hunter's own shoulders.

"As the owner, I can't assign a task to someone who's clearly incapable of completing it. If we had people failing all the time, it wouldn't just affect them but my tavern's reputation too. Still, it's not uncommon for people to overestimate their abilities, especially after they see an impressive reward. I've

seen them sustain some very serious injuries... Some never come back. So, be careful when you decide to take on a request, all right?" Elle cautioned.

"All right. I'll start slow and take on some simpler tasks first," replied Tatsumi, who understood the importance of pacing himself.

"That's the right attitude," Elle agreed with a nod, her expression carrying a hint of mystery. "Now, as the owner of this establishment, I need to gauge the abilities of everyone who takes on a task here. So, I'd like to propose a small test for you, Tatsumi, if you'd be willing to take it."

Tatsumi understood why she would want to check his skills, and he didn't hesitate in his response. "I'd be fine with doing so," he told Elle. "Can I ask what it will involve?"

Elle chuckled. "When it comes to testing the mettle of newcomers, there's nothing more classic than an herb-gathering quest."

"I see. So, I need to collect a certain type of herb?" Tatsumi guessed.

"Yes, but you don't need to gather a specific amount. Just bring back a single specimen of the herb I tell you. That will be your test."

The herb Elle tasked him with finding was called gurendan. It had been used in the region for ages as an ingredient for wound medicine and antiseptics.

"This is purely a test of your abilities, so you cannot accompany him, Calsedonia," Elle stipulated.

"Understood," she acknowledged, albeit with a hint of reluctance. She hated the idea of leaving Tatsumi's side, even if only for a few hours, but she knew better than to voice such selfish desires.

"Gurendan..." Tatsumi pondered. "I haven't ever seen it before."

"I can show you what it looks like. Twirl, if you please," Elle told the ring adorning her right middle finger, and a tiny figure appeared atop it.

The figure, about fifteen centimeters tall, seemed like a human scaled down to a tenth of the normal size. Dragonfly-like wings sprouted from its back, and it wore green clothes along with a matching triangular hat. Its most notable feature was a large bulbous nose sitting prominently on its face.

After flashing a smile at Elle, the figure vanished. In its place, a lush sprig of an herb materialized in Elle's palm.

"This is gurendan. Take a good look at it so you remember."

Tatsumi hadn't quite moved on from the way the herb had suddenly appeared in Elle's hand. "Was... Was that magic?"

"Yes, indeed. I used the power of a phantom spirit to create this illusion."

"Wow! That was spirit magic?"

Spirit magic was a system of magic entirely distinct from the incantation magic used by people like Calsedonia. Tatsumi wasn't too familiar with it, but he recalled Giuseppe mentioning it months before, during his first few days in this world. In fact, the old man had said a certain woman was responsible for spreading the knowledge of spirit magic throughout the world.

"Could it be that... Are *you* the woman who popularized spirit magic, Miss Elle?"

For the first time that day, Elle's smile turned bashful. "Hee hee, well, yes, that's technically correct."

She explained that when she'd arrived in this world twenty years ago, several individuals had been interested in her entirely novel system of magic and had sought out her tutelage, hoping to become her disciples.

Unfortunately, not all of those disciples had been able to master spirit magic. Beyond the inherent magical talent needed, spirit magic required an additional quality: the ability to communicate with spirits. As a result, even among this world's small population of magicians, only a handful could learn spirit magic.

It had only been about ten years ago that Elle's few remaining disciples had gained enough recognition for their abilities to be acknowledged by society. Since then, spirit magic had begun to spread.

Leaning closer to Tatsumi and Calsedonia, Elle whispered, "But please don't let anyone else know that it's me. Some... let's call them 'complications' came up in the past because of it."

Naturally, neither Tatsumi nor Calsedonia had any reason to refuse her request. They both nodded in agreement.

“Today has been full of surprises,” Tatsumi remarked, still in awe. “Not only did we learn that you spent a lifetime in Japan disguised as a human, but you’re also the founder of spirit magic.”

It seemed even Calsedonia hadn’t been aware that Elle was the founder of spirit magic. *Well, she’s only frequented this tavern for a few years*, Tatsumi mused. *Of course she wouldn’t have seen Elle use spirit magic during that time.*

“So, Tatsumi, have you memorized what gurendan looks like?” Elle asked.

Tatsumi glanced down at her palm; he’d forgotten the holographic herb was still hovering there. He studied the plant intently, trying to imprint its shape, color, and distinctive features into his memory. However, he wasn’t at all sure whether he’d be able to identify the thing in the wild.

Tatsumi debated for a second, then decided to make use of some modern technology. He reached into a small pouch hanging from his belt and pulled out a small item. It was his cell phone, one of the few things that had come with him when he was summoned to this world.

It was only a flip phone, but it was solar powered and still turned on. Of course, it wouldn’t be making any calls any time soon, but its camera worked just fine.

Tatsumi activated the camera and snapped a picture of the herb in Elle’s hand.

“Wow, that’s quite an antique you have there,” Elle said in surprise. “Is that from the early 2010s? When I started living in Japan, those were already getting scarce.”

“Actually, I was in Japan around the mid-2010s,” Tatsumi replied. “Flip phones were considered old-fashioned, but there were still quite a few people using them. They weren’t antiques, you know?”

“Hm? In the mid-2010s?”

Elle looked puzzled, and Tatsumi finally realized there was a slight mismatch in their conversation.

“So, how long were you in Japan, Elle?”

“I was there until the 2080s...”

Elle explained that she’d been transported to Japan in the 2010s and met her husband, who was then in his teens. She spent about seventy years in Japan, until he passed away.

“I see. So, there’s a gap in the periods we were in Japan...”

“It seems so. Maybe when I crossed worlds, I crossed through time too. After all, there’s no guarantee that time flows the same way in different worlds. And I guess there’s no real way to know—perhaps my Japan and your Japan are similar but not quite the same versions in entirely different worlds.”

Tatsumi nodded. It made sense that time in different worlds might not flow identically. There might even be variations in the pace at which time moved.

“What’s more important is that we’ve met each other now,” Elle said with a warm smile. Then her grin turned mischievous. “So, what about the test? We can proceed with it now if you’re ready.”

Tatsumi nodded, standing up from the counter and turning to face Calsedonia. He missed the brief look of surprise that crossed Elle’s face at his readiness.

“I’ll head back home first to get ready, then go look for the gurendan. What about you, Chiko?”

“I’ll wait here for you, Master,” Calsedonia replied. Her voice was as steady as ever, showing no sign of worry. She seemed to have complete faith in Tatsumi’s success.

“By the way, Elle, could you tell me where I might find the herb?”

“Gurendan grows near the entrance to the forest, a bit south from the city’s southern gate, but... you’re seriously planning to go now?” Elle asked, her response betraying a hint of concern.

Tatsumi just cheerfully proclaimed, "I'll be back soon," in response and walked out of the Elf's Repose Inn.

As Elle watched him go, concern finally settled in. "Calsedonia! Are you really okay with letting Tatsumi go alone?"

Elle's words were tinged with panic, but Calsedonia responded confidently, without a hint of worry. "It's all right. Master will find the herb, and he'll be back soon!"

A beast hunter who had been listening nearby interjected with a worried look, "Hey, Holy Maiden, if he's heading out of town to search for gurendan now, there's a chance that guy might not make it back alive. You know that, right?"



Chapter 4: The Hidden Dangers of Herb Hunting

It was only after the beast hunter spoke up that Calsedonia understood how dangerous of a task Tatsumi had been assigned.

The man turned to Elle. “Isn’t that a bit cruel, landlady? Sending a newbie to look for herbs in this season?”

“I-I assumed Calsedonia would stop him. I never thought she would send Tatsumi off with a smile,” Elle responded, flustered. Her eyes darted from the hunter to Calsedonia, then over to the tavern’s entrance. After a moment’s indecision, she stepped out quickly from behind the counter. “We need to hurry and stop Tatsumi before it’s too late.”

Just as she was about to dash out of the tavern, Calsedonia stopped her. “There’s no need to worry,” she assured her friend. “Maste— I mean, Tatsumi will be back with the gurendan within a koku.”¹

“Come on, Holy Maiden. That’s impossible, isn’t it?” the beast hunter questioned, shrugging in disbelief. “Just getting to the southern gate from here takes quite a while; this city’s not small. And from there to the forest southward, it’s impossible to cover the distance on foot in a koku right now. Sure, there’s nothing to get in your way in the plain before the forest, but that’s only if there’s no snow. Now, with the snow slowing you down every step you take...”

“That’s not all,” pointed out another hunter. “It’s true that gurendan grows year-round, but finding some in this season is incredibly difficult. After all, they don’t grow high enough to stick out above the snow.”

Trudging through the snow-covered plains and aimlessly digging around for the herb would not only demand physical strength—it would be mentally draining too. Finding even just one specimen in that vast wintry landscape would be far from an easy afternoon's work.

“Plus, it's almost fifth bell, right?” Elle added. “There's only two koku left until sunset. This time of year, someone unfamiliar with camping might freeze to death if they try to spend the night outside... Does Tatsumi have any experience camping in the cold?”

The fifth bell corresponded to about 2 p.m., which meant they had about four hours until sunset at 6 p.m. Considering that's how long the round trip from the city gate to the forest took, Tatsumi would be left with basically no time to search for the herb.

“We've camped when there's no snow for our temple training, but I don't think Tatsumi has any experience with winter camping,” Calsedonia responded.

This only made Elle and the beast hunter, whose name was Rint, grow more anxious. If Tatsumi had never spent a night outside in these conditions... Well, recklessly trying to do it now could indeed lead to a situation where he would never wake up from the freezing cold.

Calsedonia, however, showed no sign of worry.

“Hey, Holy Maiden, are you *really* okay with this? Like I said, he might not come back. He's important to you, isn't he?” Rint pressed.

“Yeah, Calsedonia,” Elle agreed. “If we don't do something, what Rint says might happen to Tatsumi...”

Calsedonia took a moment to observe the Rint guy. He seemed as concerned about Tatsumi as if it were he himself who was about to freeze to death.

The man appeared to be in his mid-thirties to early forties, and he exuded a confidence that told Calsedonia he was very good at his job. Plus, his equipment—all of it made from beast materials—showed he had taken down creatures far out of the reach of an average hunter.

Thanks to his genuine worry for Tatsumi, Calsedonia already liked him.

“Everything will be fine,” she reassured Rint with a smile. “Tatsumi will be back soon, but only after he’s found that herb.”

Following this exchange, an unusual tension filled the Elf’s Repose Inn. Elle and Rint glanced restlessly toward the entrance, their anticipation turning to disappointment each time the door swung open and someone else entered. The reactions among the tavern’s other patrons varied: some were completely indifferent to Tatsumi’s fate, while others clearly shared Rint’s concern. A few even made bets on whether Tatsumi would return alive.

Calsedonia... she alone remained composed, gracefully sipping a mug of tea that Elle had brewed.

Then, just as the seventh koku was nearing its end...

“I’m back,” came Tatsumi’s carefree voice as he pushed open the big wooden door to the Elf’s Repose Inn. Then, “Huh?”

The beast hunters inside had all turned their surprised gazes toward him. Puzzled by the strange atmosphere in the tavern, Tatsumi made his way to the counter where Calsedonia and Elle were waiting.

“Here, Miss Elle. Is this it?” he asked, presenting a sprig of herb still dotted with snow and with soil clinging to its roots.

It was gurendan, the objective of Tatsumi’s test.

“Th-This *is* gurendan, but... How the hell did you manage this in such a short time?” Elle asked, her astonishment clear.

“That, I’d like to keep that secret,” Tatsumi replied, placing a finger to his lips and winking. It wasn’t that he had anything to hide, but he preferred not to boast about his abilities.

Rint, too, was closely examining Tatsumi’s find. “Hm... This wasn’t bought from somewhere. And given the soil and snow on it, it hasn’t been long since it was picked... Hey, man, where did you find this?”

“Just where Elle told me to go, near the southern forest.”

“Sure, gurendan grows around there, but how did you manage to get there and back so quick? Wait, are you a magician?”

“Yeah, I’m a magician,” Tatsumi responded with a smile, thinking to himself, *Well, more accurately, a magic user.*

Rint crossed his arms and hummed in thought as he continued to gaze at the plant, the snow on its roots now dripping onto the bar.

The others in the tavern displayed a mix of reactions. Some admired Tatsumi’s feat, others suspected trickery, and a few were clearly agonized over making losing bets.

Calsedonia—the only one who’d never doubted that Tatsumi would succeed—approached him with a broad smile. “Well done, Master. And welcome back.”

“Thanks, Chiko. Happy to be here,” Tatsumi replied, and no further conversation was necessary; their smiles conveyed all that needed to be said between them.

Once again, Elle and Rint, along with the other beast hunters, expressed a mixture of admiration and disbelief at the bond between the Holy Maiden and this strange new man. They teased them a little too, but their words only elated Calsedonia given that Tatsumi was involved. Tatsumi, for his part, was well used to it by now.

He turned to Elle. “So, did I pass?”

“Of course! I, Elle Zephyr Feera Sylvara Akatsuka, as the proprietor of the Elf’s Repose Inn, hereby recognize Tatsumi as a beast hunter, albeit a new one!”

With Elle’s proclamation, the room erupted in cheers.

“Keep it up, rookie!”

“Don’t get cocky and do anything dumb.”

“Don’t get hurt and make the ladies sad either.”

“And don’t get too familiar with the landlady, you hear?”

While a few remained indifferent, the majority of the beast hunters seemed to warmly accept Tatsumi as one of their own. From now on, the Elf’s Repose Inn would be his home too.

The ice broken, the hunters formed a tight circle around Tatsumi and Calsedonia, eager to learn how this newcomer had managed to bring back the gurendan in such a short amount of time.

“Well, I used a little bit of magic,” Tatsumi explained.

“The magic at my Master’s disposal was just the right match for this herb-gathering task,” Calsedonia added.

Tatsumi could tell that Elle, Rint, and the others were curious about the specifics of the magic, but they respected his privacy too much to press further.

Indeed, Tatsumi’s magical abilities had been perfectly suited for this test.

The most significant challenge had been navigating through the deep snow, which impeded movement and concealed the herbs that were his target. However, Tatsumi’s magic had proved more than capable of overcoming these obstacles.

For travel, he had the perfect ability to move unhindered by the snow. Within the city, he could usually only teleport from rooftop to rooftop; outside, however, with so little to obstruct his view, Instant Teleportation was a viable option for quick movement.

That said, despite Tatsumi’s seemingly limitless magical capacity, there was a finite amount of mana he could store internally. It was less than Calsedonia’s and only slightly more than that of an average magician. When Tatsumi had first used Instant Teleportation in battle against a Demon, the amount of mana he’d been able to manipulate had been increased due to a kind of overload state, something he’d never managed to replicate under normal conditions.

The mana required for teleportation scaled with distance, meaning it naturally imposed a limit on how far a person could teleport in one go. Since Tatsumi’s mana fully regenerated in mere moments, however, he could teleport multiple times in succession to cover great distances.

After teleporting a number of times and reaching the vicinity of the southern forest in just minutes, Tatsumi had taken a brief rest to recuperate before searching for the gurendan. Again, his Instant Teleportation had proved invaluable. Drawing a circle on the snow with his sheathed sword, he’d

teleported away the entire patch of snow within the circle, eliminating the need for digging. Even the circle hadn't been a hundred percent necessary, but it had clearly defined the area for teleportation, making it easier to visualize and execute the spell.

It'd only taken repeating this process a few times before Tatsumi had located the herb. After that, there'd been no rush. He'd taken the opportunity to survey the flora around the forest's perimeter, memorizing the locations of various trees and plants that could be useful in the future as he went. The forest near the capital had been devoid of dangerous animals and Demons, allowing him to explore and recover his strength at his leisure. Then, after a while, Tatsumi had again used Instant Teleportation to return to the city.

"Oh, Tatsumi, that reminds me! Should we exchange contact info?"

Conversation in the tavern stopped abruptly as the beast hunters tried to figure out what Elle was talking about.

"I mean, I know we can't actually use cell phones here, but it's the thought that counts, right? Wow, exchanging numbers and email addresses, it's been so long," Elle mused, clearly delighted by the idea.

Seeing her enthusiasm, Tatsumi couldn't help but grin. Indeed, it would have been years and years since Elle had had this sort of opportunity.

"All right, I won't argue with that," Tatsumi agreed, pulling out his phone for the second time that day.

Elle, meanwhile, retrieved a thin, transparent plate from her pocket.

"Is that... a cell phone from the 2080s?" Tatsumi asked, intrigued.

"It is. There were also the embedded kind that you could implant directly into your brain, but my husband didn't like those, so I chose this instead," Elle explained.

"That's so high tech. But how do you charge it?"

"I brought a few things with me when I came to this world." Elle pointed toward a small device placed in a sunny spot by the window.

Tatsumi was surprised he hadn't noticed the thing before. "Is that a little solar panel?"

"Exactly. It doesn't produce enough electricity to run the whole tavern, but it's enough for a few small appliances in my private quarters."

It appeared that Elle had meticulously prepared for her journey across worlds. Tatsumi couldn't help but wonder what he might have brought with him if he'd had the chance to prepare beforehand.



He quickly pushed that thought out of his mind. Dwelling on the past wouldn't change it. Besides, he had acquired something far more valuable in this world than any convenient gadget or familiar delicious meal could ever offer.

After he and Elle had traded phone numbers and email addresses, Tatsumi turned to smile at the treasure sitting next to him—the woman with platinum-blond hair.

“Is something the matter, Master?” Calsedonia inquired.

“Nothing at all,” Tatsumi replied sincerely. “I’m just happy to have you by my side, Chiko.”

Calsedonia’s cheeks tinted with a blush and she smiled back, visibly pleased to hear her beloved’s feelings spoken aloud.



Chapter 5: My Goblin Girlfriend

Tatsumi and Calsedonia stood open-mouthed, trying to process Barse's announcement.

"Wh-What did you just say, Barse?" Tatsumi managed to utter. He glanced sideways at Calsedonia and was glad to see she was just as surprised as him.

"I was thinking it's about time I got married," Barse reiterated.

So, I didn't mishear him, Tatsumi thought. The three of them had been eating lunch in the temple's garden when Barse had casually dropped this revelation.

"Um... You have a girlfriend?" Tatsumi's question might have seemed impolite if he was talking to anyone else, but he was too shocked to care.

Barse wasn't even slightly offended. "Oh, didn't I mention her? We were friends when we were kids. When I left my village to come here, she came with me. I barely made it as a junior priest at the temple, and she's been working as a waitress in a restaurant."

Barse's narrative lacked any hint of bragging; he simply stated the facts. Yet, his tone made it clear that he held deep affection for this person.

"Now that I've become a senior priest and officially a priest-warrior, I thought it might be a good time to start a family." Then, turning to Calsedonia, Barse added, "I was wondering if you could be the witness at our wedding ceremony, Lady Calsedonia?"

"Me?" Calsedonia asked in surprise.

"Yeah... I know I'm just a priest, and it's asking a lot for the Holy Maiden of the Savaiv Temple to come to my wedding, but my fiancée is a devout follower of

yours. She was thrilled just to see you at her restaurant once—she said it was a dream come true. Having you as a witness to our wedding is her dream.”

Barse’s earnest request highlighted the significance of Calsedonia’s role in his and his girlfriend’s lives, as well as revealing the deep respect and admiration his fiancée held for the Holy Maiden. He scrambled to his feet enthusiastically, then gave a deep bow.

“Please! Make her dream... Make Nanu’s dream come true!”

Calsedonia instinctively looked over at Tatsumi, who was already looking back at her. They shared a smile and a nod.

“All right. If I’m suitable, I’ll serve as a witness for the two of you,” Calsedonia agreed.

“Really?!” Barse exclaimed, his face lighting up.

“Yes, of course. But I’d like to meet this Nanu at least once.”

At that moment, Tatsumi saw through Calsedonia entirely. The curiosity sparkling in her ruby-red eyes was undeniable. She absolutely loved stories of romance. And yet, when he thought about the name Barse had mentioned, a shadow crossed over his face.

“Uh... what?” Barse asked, taken off guard. “You see, my girlfriend Nanu is actually, well... a goblin,” he confessed rather sheepishly.

Tatsumi found himself preoccupied with something beyond the man’s embarrassed admission, however. Nanu was a goblin—there was no mistaking it. That was what Barse had said.

Tatsumi was familiar with goblins. They were a staple antagonist in fantasy novels and games, almost always depicted as weaker foes who appeared early on. Their skin color varied from green to gray to brown, but they were typically unsightly creatures the height of a child with bulging eyes and disproportionately large heads. They also tended to have craven personalities, fawning over the strong and bullying the weak. And due to their tendency to emerge in swarms, they were quintessential fodder, easily dispatched.

Such was Tatsumi's understanding of goblins. And Barse's girlfriend was one of them.

"Um..." Tatsumi trailed off, having absolutely no idea what to say. Perhaps something like "To each their own, I guess," would work? Or maybe it would be better to be blunt and say, "You've got unusual taste."

As Tatsumi agonized over his response, he glanced to Calsedonia for help. But she clearly had no better idea how to respond than he did.

Even so, she spoke up. "Uh, Barse? Is this Nanu *really* a goblin?"

"Yes, that's right. Near my hometown, there's a goblin settlement. Our village has had a trading relationship with them for a long time. Somehow because of that I got to know her when we were both kids, and it led to this," Barse explained, sitting down on a nearby bench. He smiled, but it felt somewhat forced. "Well, I get that marriage between different races might not be well received. But still, I want to be with her... with Nanu."

"I see. If the two of you love each other, then surely you'll be blessed and protected by Lord Savaiv," Calsedonia murmured, clutching her holy amulet and offering a silent prayer to her deity.

Later, Tatsumi would learn from Calsedonia that interspecies marriages were not particularly welcomed in this country. They were known to lead to a variety of problems, including significant differences in lifespan and lifestyle, and the possibility of not being able to have children.

Among the royalty and nobility, marriages to other species were completely taboo. While it was not uncommon for them to keep lovers or concubines from other races, such individuals almost never became their official spouses. However, among the common folk, interspecies marriages did occur, albeit rarely. Naturally, such unions were often not understood by those around the bride and groom, but some still chose to be together, driven by their strong feelings for each other.

"I see. Well then, I'll support Barse and his beloved Nanu too," Tatsumi declared, knowing he would have to say it aloud to make it true. Yet in his heart, he secretly bestowed the title of "hero" on Barse. The guy was intent on marrying a goblin, of all creatures!

Full of curiosity at the thought of meeting Barse's beloved, Tatsumi and Calsedonia followed him through the streets of the royal capital. But when they arrived at their destination—which was a certain tavern—both looked up at the sign in astonishment.

“Um... Nanu works *here*?” Tatsumi asked Barse.

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

The sign Tatsumi and Calsedonia were staring at clearly read “Elf's Repose Inn.” Barse stepped into the tavern like he'd been there a hundred times before, and his two friends could only shrug and follow him. Since that first day Tatsumi had met Elle, they had become frequent guests at the tavern—although they had never ventured to the lodging facilities on the second and third floors.

Seeing them, Elle called out a greeting with a smile. “Welcome, Tatsumi, Calsedonia. I see you're with Barse today.”

Yet another surprise—apparently Elle already knew that Barse was friends with Tatsumi and Calsedonia. Maybe Nanu had told her? As Tatsumi pondered this, he suddenly found himself questioning something. In all their visits to the Elf's Repose Inn, they had never encountered a goblin.

As Tatsumi mulled this over, a cheerful voice erupted from a corner of the tavern. “Ah, Barse! You really brought the Saint here?!”

“Hey, Nanu! I told you, didn't I? Calsedonia's husband is a good friend of mine.”

A petite figure leaped energetically into Barse's arms, and he caught her securely. Tatsumi watched this scene with a dumbfounded expression, while Calsedonia smiled joyfully beside him—she was probably just happy to have been introduced as a friend's wife to Barse's beloved. When no one was looking, she often brushed back her hair to better show the earring that symbolized her engagement with Tatsumi.

This time, Tatsumi was too busy watching Barse and Nanu to notice what Calsedonia was doing. The newcomer came up to about Barse's chest in height, and she was distinct from Calsedonia and Elle in a number of ways. For one

thing, she had brown skin and wavy silver hair that reached her shoulders. Her large round eyes shimmered a mystical gold, and from her forehead peeked two small horns. She looked to be about thirteen or fourteen years old in human terms—what Tatsumi would have called a middle schooler. Yet, beneath her uniform, it was clear that she possessed the figure of an adult woman.

All in all, she exuded the impression of a vibrant, beautiful young lady.

Indeed, Tatsumi had seen her many times here in the tavern, and he'd guessed she was some kind of demi-human. Yet he'd never considered that she might belong to the fantasy species known to be quintessential cannon fodder.

"Is that what a goblin looks like in this world?" Tatsumi uttered, his face betraying his shock.

Elle nodded quickly. "I totally get your confusion, Tatsumi. My first encounter with the goblins of this world left me just as surprised. Especially because the goblins from my world line up perfectly with the ones people imagine in Japan."

She went on to explain that Nanu was recognized as a mature adult among her goblin peers. Goblins here, both males and females, generally appeared similar to Nanu, with variations in the horns on their foreheads, which could be singular or dual in number.

"Goblins are famous as a race filled with beauties, male and female alike. Unfortunately, their attractiveness leads to their mistreatment as slaves in some nations," Calsedonia said, sorrow evident in her voice.

Given their everlasting youthful and attractive appearance, Tatsumi thought he understood why they'd be sought after by those with particular preferences. They were probably considered premium goods in the slave market.

Slavery existed in the Largofiery Kingdom, though primarily as a form of debt repayment or as a last resort of destitute individuals rather than through forceful abduction. Nonetheless, the existence of illegal slave traders lurking in the shadows couldn't be entirely dismissed, even though the kingdom didn't officially sanction their actions.

Seeing the joy Nanu and Barse shared, Tatsumi hoped more than anything that the goblin could steer clear of such tragic destinies and forge a happy life

with her soon-to-be husband.



Chapter 6: The Six Demi-human Races

Taking a break from her duties, Nanu promptly sat down next to Barse at the table he was sharing with Tatsumi and Calsedonia. As Tatsumi told his story, both Barse's and Nanu's faces filled with astonishment.

"Wait, Tatsumi, you're saying there are absolutely no demi-humans where you're from? None at all?"

"So, no elves, ogres, goblins, or cait sith? That's unbelievable..."

Barse and Nanu exchanged a look of disbelief.

"I'm not very familiar with the details of my Master's homeland, but it really does seem there were no demi-humans," Calsedonia contributed. Her knowledge of Japan was essentially limited to Tatsumi, his family, and their immediate surroundings.

Elle stopped by to deliver the food they'd ordered. "It might be hard to believe, but it's true," she affirmed. "Where Tatsumi comes from, it's just humans."

"Right, you mentioned before that you used to live there too," Barse recalled.

"That's right; I came from the same place as Tatsumi—Japan," Elle responded before moving on to the next table.

Watching her walk away, Barse remembered the stories Nanu had shared about Elle's past. When Elle was in Japan, she'd been involved in an accident and left with nowhere to go. A teenage boy had taken her in, treating her with incredible care, and they'd become close friends—and eventually, husband and wife. Being an elf, of course, Elle had outlived her husband. Since they'd had no

children, she'd ventured into this world and opened a tavern here in the capital a few years ago.

That was the extent of Elle's past as far as Barse knew. Shifting his gaze from Elle back to Tatsumi, he grinned smugly. "So, Tatsumi, I guess you don't know about the Six Demi-humans either?"

"The Six Demi-humans...? Uh, no, I don't. Do you, Chiko?"

She gave one of her usual soft smiles. "Yes... If you'd like, I can explain?"

"Certainly, I'd appreciate it," Tatsumi responded, relieved to have Calsedonia bail him out.

Delighted to be relied upon, Calsedonia began her explanation with a joyful expression.

The Six Demi-humans—the term referred to the six primary species of demi-humans that held deep connections with the spirits of the six main magical elements. Ogres were closely associated with the element of Fire, elves were intimate with Water, cait sith were allies of the Wind, goblins were the kin of Earth, sprites were the children of Light, and Shades were nurtured by Darkness. While numerous other types of demi-humans existed, these six were the most well-known species.

The elves in this world mostly looked like the mythical ones Tatsumi was familiar with. On this continent, however, they dwelled in water rather than in the forest—though they could come onto land without any issues.

What surprised Tatsumi the most about the elves' way of life was that, perhaps due to their aquatic lifestyle, they didn't have much of a tradition of wearing clothes. That said, when they ventured onto land, they conformed to the customs of other races by putting clothes on. Conversely, when visiting their underwater settlements, it was considered polite for members of other species to remove their clothing.

Elle, incidentally, was said to hail from a clan known as the Aqua Elves in her home world. Ironically, however, these elves couldn't live entirely underwater.

As for goblins, Tatsumi was still as astonished over their appearance as when he'd said Nanu a moment ago. Their brown skin, golden eyes, and silver hair

were said to be blessings from the earth spirits, as were their advanced agricultural skills and their ability to cultivate crops that others could not.

Goblins were also known for being prolific breeders, with twins or triplets being the norm. Even quintuplets or sextuplets weren't unheard of. In fact, Nanu had two older sisters and a brother, as well as three younger sisters and a younger brother. Among them, one sister and one brother were twins, and Nanu and two of her siblings were triplets. At the same time, however, goblins had a significantly shorter lifespan; their average life expectancy was forty to forty-five years. This, the scholars said, was probably why there were fewer goblins in this world than humans.

As for ogres, cait sith, sprites, and shades, Tatsumi was completely unfamiliar with them. According to Calsedonia's explanation, ogres were a race characterized by their tall stature—averaging nearly two meters in height—and robust physique. They had a close affinity with fire and were completely impervious to the effects of flames and heat. Taking advantage of this trait, they possessed advanced blacksmithing skills and could use temperatures far above what other races could handle. Their glassblowing and pottery-making skills were similarly unparalleled and were closely guarded secrets.

In spite of their large size, ogres were also known for their dexterous fingers, and most humans couldn't hope to replicate their intricate craftsmanship. In fact, Tatsumi and Calsedonia's engagement earrings had been made by an ogre craftsman.

Cait sith were catlike beings capable of bipedal walking, averaging about a meter in height. Due to an ability inherent to their race, they were able to walk in the air, and they preferred wandering from place to place over settling down. Scholars suggested that the development of this nomadic lifestyle had been influenced by the wind spirits.

Sprites were said to be small creatures, about thirty to forty centimeters tall, with dragonfly-like wings on their backs. "Said to be" being the operative words, as sprites were known to excel in creating illusions by manipulating light refraction, and could also turn themselves invisible. They rarely revealed themselves to other races.

Despite this, sprites were known for their love of pranks, approaching other races while invisible to play various tricks. However, because their pranks were always harmless and rather endearing, those on the receiving end rarely took offense.

Shades, deeply connected with the spirits of darkness, possessed a slender and tall stature. They had grayish-brown skin and jet-black hair and eyes. Yet their most distinctive features were their four eyes and four arms. Their quadruple vision not only let them see distant objects with exceptional clarity but also granted them infrared night vision.

Moreover, shades were renowned as warriors, primarily because their four arms enabled them to attack at an incredible speed compared to other races. They specialized in wielding four weapons simultaneously, slicing through enemies like a whirlwind in battle. Known for their calm, composed, and loyal nature, they were said to never break a promise.

These six types of beings were the most famous of the demi-human races on this continent.

When Calsedonia finished her explanation, Tatsumi slowly let out a breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Wow... I didn't know there were so many different types of demi-humans."

"Yeah. Some sages say that demi-humans are the result of humans being influenced by the power of spirits and diverging into different races."

"So demi-humans and humans are that closely related?"

"They are. Demi-humans are like dear neighbors to humans," Calsedonia explained with a warm smile.

Just then, as if she'd been waiting for a pause in the conversation, Elle approached them. "Excuse me, Tatsumi. Would you like to start taking on quests as a monster hunter?"

Tatsumi's expression suddenly grew serious. Despite being a regular now at the Elf's Repose Inn, he hadn't yet accepted a single quest. There were several reasons for this, one of the main ones being the harsh cold of the season, which reduced the number of small monsters and wild animals—a typical target for

novices. The monsters and animals active during this season tended to be larger and beyond the capabilities of a newbie.

Another reason was that Tatsumi had yet to decide on companions to form a team with. He knew, of course, that it was more efficient to team up than to work on quests alone. Tatsumi's first pick for his team would naturally have been Calsedonia. However, she was leagues ahead of him in terms of abilities, and Elle had already disqualified her. It was an unspoken agreement among monster hunters that teams should comprise members of similar levels of strength.

"Do you have a quest for me? And does that mean you've found someone who could be my teammate?"

"No, that's... We haven't found a newcomer yet who could team up with you, Tatsumi," Elle replied apologetically.

The regulars at this tavern were either already part of established teams or were advanced hunters who preferred to operate solo. That meant that integrating Tatsumi forcibly into an existing team wasn't an option; it could greatly disrupt the harmony of their hunting dynamic.

Although there were times when hunters sought temporary teammates, Elle hadn't gotten any such requests recently. As a result, Tatsumi's only option had been to wait for a newcomer to form a team with.

"However," Elle said now, presenting him with a quest sheet, "we do have one that you could handle on your own, Tatsumi."

Tatsumi quickly skimmed the sheet. Apparently, the task was to collect a certain quantity of herbs.

"Gathering herbs this season is challenging, but I believe you can manage it, can't you, Tatsumi?"

Faced with such a request, Tatsumi had no choice but to agree. Even though he hadn't explicitly revealed his methods, the fact that he could collect herbs quickly had already been proven.

"Demand for herbs goes up this season, so the reward for this request is quite generous compared to other seasons. What do you say? Will you take it on?"

“Of course. Should I start right away?”

“Yes, that would be really helpful. I’ll show you what the herbs look like, like last time.”

Elle used magic to create illusions of several herbs for Tatsumi, who then took pictures of them with his mobile phone’s camera.

“Hey, Tatsumi. What’s that you’ve got there?” Barse looked puzzled, and Tatsumi realized it was the first time he’d ever seen a phone.

“This is... Well, you could say it’s a kind of sealed magic device. I brought it with me when I came to this world.”

Truly explaining the thing to a resident of this world would be nearly impossible, so Tatsumi decided to call it a sealed magic device to avoid further questions.

“Then, Elle. I’ll go home and get ready, and then I’ll head out to collect the herbs,” Tatsumi said, standing up and making his way to the door of the tavern. Naturally, Calsedonia quietly followed Tatsumi, and Barse, judging the timing to be right, also got up.

“See you, Nanu. I’m heading back to the temple, so good luck with your work!”

“Yup! Good luck with yours too, Barse!” Nanu replied cheerfully, standing up to return to her duties. Barse messed up her hair, rough but playful. “Hey! What are you doing? Stop that!”

Although Nanu complained verbally, a happy smile was clearly visible on her face. Watching the exchange between the two, Tatsumi paused at the door and whispered to Calsedonia, “They seem really close, those two.”

“Yeah, they’ll be a lovely couple for sure,” Calsedonia agreed, looking up at Tatsumi with a bright smile, then hugging his arm close to her ample chest. “Hey, Master. Let’s make sure we don’t lose to Barse and his partner, okay?”

“U-Uh... Yeah, right, of course,” Tatsumi responded, his cheeks flushing with warmth from Calsedonia’s closeness. Lately, there were times when Calsedonia would surprise him, but more often, Tatsumi found his heart racing from her

straightforward words. *Maybe this ability to maintain composure comes with growing older*, he mused, looking off into the distance.

Soon after Tatsumi, Calsedonia, and Barse left the Elf's Repose Inn, a new figure appeared amongst the throng of beast hunters in the tavern. It was Nanu, attending to customers near the entrance, who first noticed the newcomer.

"Welcome to the Elf's Repose Inn! What brings you here today?" she greeted cheerfully, looking up at them.

The visitor glanced curiously around the inn, tilted their head slightly, and asked, "I was wondering—how does one become a monster hunter?"



Chapter 7: A Prospective Ally

As soon as he accepted the herb collection request, Tatsumi stopped by home, accompanied by Calsedonia. He pulled out a full set of equipment from the attic storage room and, with Calsedonia's help, donned each piece one by one—they consisted of a set of boiled leather armor, a round shield, and a one-handed sword.

All these pieces were, in fact, gifts from Calsedonia, imbued with her wishes for both his safety and success in his new role as a monster hunter. While it wasn't quite top-shelf gear, it was more than adequate for a beginner.

Tatsumi completed his outfit with a backpack, a small pouch, a water flask, a knife, a machete, and finally, a cloak for warmth, then asked Calsedonia to check everything over.

"Yeah, everything looks good. But please, be *really* careful," she advised.

Tatsumi nodded earnestly. "Will do. You'll be waiting at home, right?"

"If I came with you, I would just slow you down," she replied. "Besides, today's task is just gathering herbs. I'll stay home and get dinner ready."

"That's true, I guess. Though carrying you wouldn't make much difference when it comes to my ability to teleport... Regardless, I'm looking forward to your cooking. It's always delicious."

When Calsedonia blushed with pleasure, it wasn't just at the compliment—she was also secretly imagining herself being carried through the snowy fields in Tatsumi's arms. In a princess carry, of course.

"Well then, I'm off," Tatsumi announced.

“All right, take care. But...” Calsedonia trailed off, her snowy cheeks tinted ever so slightly red. When she glanced up at him, she managed to add, “I’d really be happy if you came back soon. Just saying...”

“Ah, yeah, okay. I’ll t-try my best...” Tatsumi stammered, his heart warming at her concern.

Feeling a little embarrassed, he let his gaze wander left and right while Calsedonia stared at him intently. Gradually, their lips drew closer, neither of them actively initiating, until the distance between them became zero.

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As he walked slowly down the main street of Levantis, Tatsumi noted that the day was still young. According to Elle, he would only have to teleport a few times after leaving the city to reach the region where the herbs were located. With this in mind, he proceeded along the well-cleared main thoroughfare.

Tatsumi was aware that he was being followed by several people. Pretending to glance at some street vendors’ wares while surreptitiously checking his surroundings, he recognized a few monster hunters he’d seen at the Elf’s Repose Inn.

I see, he thought. They want to know how I’m finding the herbs so quickly. As Elle mentioned, herb collection during this season could be quite profitable. Although dried herbs collected before the snowfall were available, some herbs—such as the ones included in Tatsumi’s current request—couldn’t be preserved and had to be freshly gathered. The monster hunters trailing him would be keen on replicating his methods.

Well, they’re free to follow, but that doesn’t mean I have to accommodate them. Adjusting his cloak to fend off the cold, Tatsumi slowly began to gather magical power within him. He knew the desire to learn from others wasn’t necessarily bad; in fact, it was a sign of ambition. However, he also knew that the hunters following him would have a hard time replicating his Heaven magic.

As Tatsumi walked slowly toward the southern gate, an occasional glance backward showed his followers weren’t much interested in stealth; they were

walking only a short distance behind him and weren't even trying to disguise their intentions.

Let's see how far they're planning on tailing me, Tatsumi thought. As soon as he'd exited the city's gate, he released his accumulated magical energy in one burst.

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A young monster hunter, a novice with no real achievements yet, had recently begun to frequent the Elf's Repose Inn. The man's apparent closeness with the inn's proprietress had rubbed some of the regular patrons the wrong way. Among them were those who had fallen for the landlady's personality and beauty and those who sought out jobs at her establishment. Everyone was aware that she was a widow who still dearly missed her late husband. Many, not just those few regulars, had expressed their feelings to her, but she had never shown any signs of reciprocating.

The landlady always maintained a professional relationship with everyone; she knew just when to be attentive and when to be strict. Her fair treatment was why the regulars trusted her, or in the case of some, venerated her. So why was she getting so close with this new guy? Some of them had asked her about it directly.

"Well, he shares the same hometown as my husband, so I feel a bit of a connection with him," she'd explained. "Besides, if I had a son with my husband, he might have grown up to be someone like him. So, I guess I just can't help caring for him a bit. Like an aunt, you know?" she continued with a laugh. "Watching over him as he grows."

The followers breathed a great sigh of collective relief—her feelings toward the newcomer weren't romantic at all. Still, every time they saw her engaging in joyful conversation with the newcomer in a language they couldn't understand, their jealousy flared anew. To make matters worse, the man always had a beautiful woman by his side. It was soon apparent from the matching earrings they wore that the pair were engaged. When it later became known that his

beautiful fiancée was the famous Holy Maiden of the Savaiv Temple, it only added more fuel to the fire of their jealousy.

Fortunately, no one contemplated attacking the newcomer behind her back—well, more accurately, while some did harbor such thoughts, no one dared to act on them. If there was anything the proprietress of the Elf’s Repose Inn detested, it was fighting among her regulars. If someone were to attack the newcomer and she found out, they would undoubtedly be banned from the inn forever.

Additionally, it was clear to everyone that this new man was no ordinary novice. Attacking him could result in severe repercussions, even if the Holy Maiden of the Savaiv Temple wasn’t always at his side. Injuring a close relative of the highest priest of the Savaiv faith like her would practically be the same as making an enemy of the Savaiv Temple itself. No one who frequented the Elf’s Repose Inn was foolish enough to attempt such a thing.

Even among the landlady’s closest followers, some harbored unfriendly feelings toward the newcomer. A few of them had happened to overhear the conversation between her and Tatsumi when he’d accepted her request to collect herbs.

“He’s taking an herb-collection request in *this* season? Is he an idiot?”

“What? You didn’t know? He completed the last herb-collection trial she gave him in an incredibly short time.”

“He gathered herbs in a short time with this snow? How?”

“I dunno. He didn’t even tell the landlady his method.”

“Must be the Saintess went with him and used some magic, right? Like melting the snow with fire magic?”

“Nah, she stayed here at the inn; it was just him out there. So it couldn’t be that... Plus, if he used fire magic to melt the snow, he’d risk burning the herbs too.”

“Then how did he...?”

All they could do was look at each other in confusion. They had no idea how Tatsumi had performed his feat.

“Hey, why don’t we follow him and see what he does? It’s probably something we can do too, and then we could make a killing from herb collection this season.”

“That sounds good. Herb gathering in the snow is no joke.”

As they continued talking over their plan, they realized something else: the newcomer didn’t look to be equipped for today’s task, which meant he would probably be going home first to get ready. Assuming his destination was the southern forest, he’d inevitably exit through the city’s southern gate.

With that in mind, they decided to catch him on the main road leading to the south gate and follow him from there. Their guess was spot on, as they soon easily spotted the newcomer, now fully equipped, walking leisurely by himself.

“What do we do? Just keep tailing him and try to stay quiet?”

“Ah, what does it matter? Just follow him. It’s not like it’s illegal to copy someone’s techniques.”

“That’s right. That’s how we learn as beast hunters.”

With that settled, they fell into step a reasonable distance behind Tatsumi and followed him down the street. When he left the city through the south gate, so did they.

Outside the city of Levantis lay a vast world cast in silver. Snow covered the plains like a thick white blanket, and very few human footsteps could be seen on its smooth surface. Even the roads were seldom used at this point in the season.

Naturally, they figured the newcomer would need a significant amount of time to traverse the wilderness. One can imagine their surprise, then, upon exiting the gate and seeing no trace of Tatsumi.

“Where did that stupid newbie go?!”

“There’s no question he went out the south gate! Could he be hiding around here?!”

“Hey, look!” one of them said, pointing. “Isn’t that him over there?!”

The others looked in the direction the beast hunter had indicated to see the back of the newcomer standing in the middle of a snowy plain at least several hundred feet away.

“How did he get there so fast? He couldn’t have gone out the gate any more than a few seconds ago...”

“Even crazier, he didn’t leave a trail. Walking across all this snow should have at least left footprints.”

“Hey, guys... isn’t he getting farther away?”

Looking back at the newcomer’s back, they noticed it was getting smaller and smaller.

“How is he moving so fast through the snow?”

In the end, they could only stand there, watching their quarry’s back grow more and more distant.

Tatsumi, meanwhile, arrived near the forest a couple of minutes later. Once again, he used Instant Teleportation to clear the snow, comparing each plant that appeared with the images he’d captured on his phone camera. This time he had to collect several different herbs in specific quantities, which took more time and effort than before. Still, with perseverance, he repeated his process from before and successfully gathered each requested herb.

Next, Tatsumi carefully sorted the collected herbs by type, placing them in small bags to avoid any damage. “Looks like I’m all set. Now I just need to head back to the Elf’s Repose Inn and hand these over to Elle,” he said to himself once he was finished. He checked his watch and nodded with satisfaction; there was still plenty of daylight left.

Near the entrance to the forest, Tatsumi took a short break, sitting on a log that was protruding from the snow. He pulled a bento box Calsedonia had hastily prepared for him from his backpack. This request had come so suddenly that it was all she’d been able to prepare—her culinary skills were more than enough to satisfy Tatsumi’s palate, however.

Really, I can't thank Chiko enough, he mused, thinking he needed to do something special for her as a token of his appreciation someday.

Collecting a few handfuls of stones from the ground nearby, Tatsumi improvised a stove and placed a pot filled with snow on top. Next, he put some twigs he'd gathered into the stove, chanted the Ignition spell, and used the blazing flames to melt the snow in the pot.

"Chiko was right about teaching me Ignition," Tatsumi thought out loud as he warmed his hands in the heat. Lately, she'd been teaching him a variety of spells that were quite useful for everyday life.

Unfortunately, the only one he'd managed to cast so far was Ignition. Calsedonia had insisted he learn it, saying, "It will definitely be useful, so you *have* to master it."

Tatsumi's lack of aptitude for fire-based magic meant even the basic Ignition spell required several chants for him to activate it, and it consumed a considerable amount of his mana. Still, the spell proved to be incredibly convenient; it was almost like having a lighter.

After bringing the water to the boil and making himself a cup of hot tea, Tatsumi ended his break and made his way back to Levantis.

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Moments after Tatsumi's departure, three men appeared at the spot where he'd sat. These, of course, were the beast hunters who had attempted to follow him, only just arriving at the spot after hours of struggling through the snow. They stopped short when they saw the snow cleared away to reveal the ground—and it was a lot of ground. No one person would be able to move that much snow in such a short time.

"What the... What is this?"

"That new guy cleared this whole area of snow alone?" one of the men marveled, gazing at the bare dirt before him. "I can't believe it. How the hell did he...?"

A closer inspection revealed some grasses here and there. However, the medicinal herbs within sight had almost all been collected, leaving behind only the most common weeds.

“What manner of human is that guy...?”

The three men continued to stare at the scene before them in shocked silence. When one of them finally snapped out of it, the western sky was filling with shades of red. “Hey, we don’t have time to dawdle!” he realized in a panic.

“Damn it!” said one of the others. “We’ve got to get back before it gets dark!”

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When the door of the Elf’s Repose Inn swung open and Tatsumi entered, Elle stepped out from behind the bar and approached him, her expression slightly troubled. “Um, Tatsumi... A little bit after you left, someone new came in wanting to become a beast hunter.”

Elle glanced briefly behind her. Following her gaze, Tatsumi saw an unusual-looking man sitting near the bar. He was significantly taller than Tatsumi—well over six feet, maybe even six foot three. Even through his winter coat, it was evident that his body was well sculpted. But that’s not what caught Tatsumi’s attention. Black hair and eyes were nothing unusual for Tatsumi, but he had never before seen someone with grayish-brown skin, let alone four eyes and four arms.

“Is that a shade?”

“Yes,” Elle confirmed. “He left his village recently. If it’s all right with you, Tatsumi, would you consider teaming up with him for a while? Of course, if it doesn’t work out, you can disband the partnership at any time.”

“I don’t mind, but is he aware of who I am?”

“I’ve told him that you’re a novice beast hunter as well.”

Hearing their conversation, the shade approached them. His four bright eyes roved up and down over Tatsumi, appraising him from head to toe.

At first, all those eyes made Tatsumi uneasy. Then, with a sly smile and a deep, resonant voice, the Shade spoke.

“So, you’re Tatsumi, the one the landlady mentioned? Hm, you seem more capable than I imagined.” With that, one of his eyes winked skillfully at Tatsumi. “My name is Jardock. Pleasure to meet you, Tatsumi.”

Thus, Tatsumi encountered a shade, one of the members of the six demi-human races, for the first time. His first potential companion as a beast hunter was a strikingly handsome and outwardly odd person with four eyes and four arms.



Chapter 8: The Gift

Occupying a table at the Elf's Repose Inn was Tatsumi's new hunting partner—for now, at least—Jardock the shade. However, it was Jardock's overwhelmingly bold personality, completely at odds with his refined and rugged looks, that had Tatsumi staring at him in utter disbelief.

"Oh? Is there something on my face?" Jardock asked with a grin, noticing Tatsumi's gaze. But in the next moment, his smile transformed into a mischievous smirk. "Or could it be you've fallen for me at first sight? Ah, my, what can I say? It's just my charm, isn't it?" He winked dramatically, making a clicking sound with his tongue.

Tatsumi was surprised to find that, despite the four eyes—two horizontally aligned like a human's and two positioned vertically on the shade's forehead—he had already grown accustomed to Jardock's appearance. The initial shock had faded, overshadowed primarily by Jardock's flamboyant personality.

"No, that's definitely not happening. I don't swing that way," Tatsumi replied coolly, grounding the conversation. Jardock seemed genuinely surprised by Tatsumi's composed retort. "Anyway, Mister Jardock—" Tatsumi began.

"Just 'Jardock' will do, my dear," Jardock said flirtatiously. "I'll be calling you Tatsumi, after all. No need for formalities between us." He blew a kiss toward Tatsumi.

Tatsumi could almost see a heart-shaped object flying toward him, and his eyebrows bunched up in consternation. However, that was the only outward sign of discomfort he showed, which in turn made Jardock raise his eyebrows in surprise.

“So, Jardock. Elle asked me to team up with you for now. Can you tell me about your combat style and what you’re good at?”

“Ooh la la. Well, these would be my weapons of choice,” the shade announced, presenting a massive two-handed battle-ax and two one-handed maces.

The battle-ax, over six feet in length and considerably hefty, would undoubtedly become a fearsome weapon in the hands of the tall Jardock. The maces, though one-handed, were no less formidable in weight or lethality.

“A battle-ax and two maces...” Tatsumi mused. “That’s some serious destructive power.”

“Of course. No matter the enemy, I’ll smash ‘em to bits.”

Even under his clothes and armor, Jardock’s well-developed muscles were plain to see. The shade race was known for its warrior lineage, and this ensured Jardock would be a reliable fighter. His torso was clad in hardened leather armor much like Tatsumi’s. If the guy ever decided to wear full metal armor, he would essentially become a tank.

“Now, may I ask you something?” inquired Jardock.

“Sure. I mainly use a one-handed sword and shield. And while it might be somewhat specialized, I can use magic as well.”

“Oh, Tatsumi, you’re a mage? But that’s not what I was going to ask.” Jardock’s four eyes suddenly took on a serious gleam, piercing directly into Tatsumi. “Let’s cut to the chase. Tell me, Tatsumi. Do you find me repulsive?”

From a young age, Jardock had been well aware that he was different. As hard as he’d tried—and oh had he ever tried—no effort had seemed to amend this deviation. His body had grown more masculine and robust, but his heart hadn’t followed suit. Eventually, no one in his hometown could beat him during combat training, yet he was still not accepted by those around him.

Weird, they called him. Demon-possessed, perhaps. Regardless, a failure.

When one lives in a small town, there’s nowhere to get away from the rumors. Nonetheless, Jardock had worked tirelessly to hone his combat skills.

For a shade, strength was a matter of pride. As long as you were strong, minor discrepancies could be overlooked. But his efforts hadn't been enough, and Jardock had found himself an outcast among the shades. Being outwardly male but internally female had marked him as not fully either.

And so, after years of trying to fit in, Jardock had left his home village.

Jardock had heard rumors that in the cities of humans, there were people who made their living hunting powerful monsters, and this ability alone granted them respect. Perhaps, he'd mused, he could find a place among them. So, he—or should we say she?—had left her homeland behind.

"Until I made it to Levantis, even humans thought I was an odd duck," Jardock explained. "Some people even mocked me to my face. Of course, I made sure those people understood their mistake," she added with a fierce smile. "But you, Tatsumi, you're different from those people. Do you, by any chance, already know anyone like me?"

Indeed, although Tatsumi had shown surprise upon meeting Jardock, there had been no disgust on his face. And that said a lot more about him than most other people Jardock had met.

"Hm... I wouldn't say I'm familiar with it, but people like you— Well, I saw quite a few of them back in my homeland," Tatsumi mused. He was thinking of the flamboyant personalities who frequently appeared on variety TV shows.

During his time on Earth, drag entertainers had carved out a distinct niche for themselves, and turning on the TV almost guaranteed an encounter with them. Some opted for an unbelievably outrageous appearance, purely for comedic effect. Compared to how overwhelming Tatsumi found those people, he harbored no aversion toward the well-groomed Jardock.

"Anyway, I was definitely surprised at first, but I wouldn't say I find you disgusting. You just have what we'd call gender dysphoria."

"Gender dys... what? What's that?"

"It's hard to explain. How should I put it...?" In present-day Japan, there's a growing understanding of gender dysphoria, but in Tatsumi's new world, such a

concept was virtually nonexistent. “Let’s see,” he began, trying to explain. “I guess you can think of it as a slight mishap by the gods.”

“A mishap by the gods?”

“Right. Normally, a male soul is meant to inhabit a male body, but because of some mistake, a female soul might somehow end up in a male body. So, it’s the gods who’re at fault, not you, Jardock.”

“Wait, wait, Tatsumi! Is it really okay to say that the gods are to blame? What if some priest heard you? Wouldn’t that be terrible?!”

“Ah, no worries there. I know it might not look like it, but I’m actually a priest of Savaiv.” Tatsumi lowered his collar to reveal the holy seal tucked under his shirt, leaving Jardock staring at him in dumbfounded silence.

“Tatsumi... Who exactly *are* you?”

“Hm... All I can say is I’m a priest of the Savaiv and a budding monster hunter.”

Although the priest thing is more a charitable gesture, Tatsumi thought to himself ironically.

Jardock looked at him blankly for a moment, but then, a smile began to form on her face, quickly becoming brighter. It was as if a weight was being lifted from her. Not being familiar with Jardock’s normal facial expressions, Tatsumi barely noticed the change.

At that moment, Elle arrived. “Here you are, Tatsumi. You did a great job with the herb gathering today. This is your reward.” She handed him a small handful of silver coins. “You collected a good quantity of herbs and they were extremely fresh, so I added a little extra.”

“Thanks very much,” Tatsumi said, looking at the coins in his hand with a mix of emotions. This was, effectively, the first money he’d technically earned in this world. Not income that came through Giuseppe’s generosity as a priest, but something that came entirely through his own effort. It may have been just a few silver coins, but to Tatsumi, it was worth far more.

“This is your first income as a beast hunter, isn’t it?” Elle asked, smiling warmly as Tatsumi happily examined the coins in his hand. “Maybe you could buy something to commemorate the occasion?” While a few silver coins might not buy anything significant, there were plenty of practical, affordable items a beast hunter could use, like a knife.

Tatsumi’s expression turned bashful. “Actually, I’ve already decided what I’m going to use today’s earnings for. Well, more like, I thought of it while I was out there collecting.”

He opened his waist pouch and carefully placed the silver coins inside, then glanced sideways at Jardock, who was seated across from him. Just a moment ago, the shade had been cloaked in a rather prickly and troubled aura, but the short conversation with Tatsumi had transformed her into a much gentler presence.

It seems like Tatsumi managed to do just what I was hoping for, Elle thought with satisfaction.

Given her appearance and personality, Elle had known Jardock had likely had more than her fair share of difficulties in life. Having lived in Japan, Elle, like Tatsumi, felt little aversion toward the shade. This was why she’d thought of pairing the two of them up—she believed Tatsumi’s exposure to various cultures in Japan would help him accept Jardock with no prejudice.

Indeed, while Elle didn’t know exactly what the two of them had been talking about, she could tell that Jardock was in much better spirits. It seemed Tatsumi had dispelled her gloom with effortless skill.

Maybe Tatsumi will make a good priest after all.

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Leaving the Elf’s Repose Inn, Tatsumi walked slowly along the main streets of Levantis. Jardock had stayed behind, having decided to spend the night at the inn due to how exhausted she was from her long journey from her home village. Now that she had a plan for monster hunting, she knew she would need to rest her body to be ready for this new journey.

After peeking into several stalls, Tatsumi finally found something that satisfied him. It cost him nearly all of the day's earnings, but as he headed home to his waiting fiancée, he wore a satisfied smile.

"I'm home!" Tatsumi announced as he unlocked the magic-sealed front door with the password and entered the house. Inside, the living room was warmed by a cheerful flame burning bright in the fireplace.

"Welcome back, Master. How did everything go?"

"Perfectly," Tatsumi responded with a thumbs-up.

"Is that right? Well, I expected no less, Master."

Calsedonia took Tatsumi's hand, leading him toward the warmth of the fireplace. She tried to seat him on the fur rug in front of it and wrap her arms around him from behind, only to be stopped by Tatsumi. "Um... Master?" Calsedonia began, confused and dissatisfied, but Tatsumi stopped her with a gentle touch to her face. "Huh?"

Where Tatsumi had touched her felt... unusual. Calsedonia reached two fingers up to feel it and encountered a hard sensation. Puzzled, she turned to Tatsumi, who was holding something familiar. It was Calsedonia's favorite hair ornament. And yet, she still felt something atop her head...

Touching her head again, Calsedonia realized what was there, and her beautiful face lit up with surprise and joy. "Master, is this...?"

Tatsumi just smiled in response. Signaling for Calsedonia to wait, he walked quickly to the bedroom and returned with something in hand which he presented to Calsedonia: a mirror.

Calsedonia's reflection showed her platinum-blond hair adorned with a brand-new hair ornament. Compared to the ones she had cherished before, this new addition was noticeably simpler, perhaps even several grades less extravagant. Yet Calsedonia handled it as if it were the most precious treasure, carefully removing it from her head to gaze at it with reverence.

Like the headband she'd favored before, this new piece was designed to be worn over the head and was crafted from wood. It was embellished with

several small gems in a range of colors, which added a modest sparkle to the wooden band.

“Master...” Calsedonia’s eyes shifted from the new treasure in her hands back to Tatsumi, and in that moment, her eyes gleamed with a clarity and brilliance that rivaled the gems on the ornament.

“I bought it with today’s reward money,” Tatsumi explained with a shy smile. “Though it wasn’t much, I must say, so I couldn’t afford anything expensive. But I tried my best to find something that would suit you within the budget I had, Chiko.”

Tatsumi met her glistening eyes with his own, and they held each other’s gaze as they shared a moment of mutual appreciation.

“I wanted to say thank you for everything up to today, Chiko. You’ve always taken care of me. So, I thought I should give you something as a thank you when I got my first payment as a beast hunter.”

“Master...” Forgetting to wipe away the tears that started to overflow, Calsedonia gazed at Tatsumi, her cheeks flushed.

“I know this isn’t much compared to all you’ve done for me, and it hardly compares, but can you accept it?”

“Yes... I’ll treasure this gift for the rest of my life!” Calsedonia clasped the headband gently with both hands, then drew it close to her chest, as if embracing it.



Indeed, the hair ornament had been modestly priced. To Calsedonia, however, it was far more valuable than any treasure of gold or silver.

Finally wiping away her tears, Calsedonia once again leaned into Tatsumi's chest. "I'm sorry, Master... Could you put this in my hair one more time?" she asked, nuzzling her cheek against his chest and gazing up at him.

When she had first summoned Tatsumi, they'd been almost the same height—Tatsumi had only been marginally taller. But now, he stood a full head above her.

He carefully took the hair ornament from Calsedonia's hand and placed it gently back into her hair.

Over the following days, Calsedonia's new hair ornament became a small topic of conversation among the female priests at the Savaiv Temple. When one priestess close to Calsedonia asked her directly, she said the piece was a gift from her fiancée. "Sure, it's not much," she told the priestess with pride, "but to me, this ornament is more precious than any treasure."

The priestess was sure she had never seen Calsedonia looking happier.



Chapter 9: Hunting

Even on the fresh, deep snow, the creature's movements were swift and sure. When it launched an attack on its prey, its robust legs kicked off of the accumulated snow as if it were bare ground.

Standing on its hind legs to support its body, the snow lizard stood slightly over four feet tall at the shoulder, with its head and tail adding another two feet of length. The relatively small carnivorous magical beast was one that hunted in small groups and specialized in lengthy leaps powered by its highly developed hind legs. It was a far cry from its cold-blooded reptilian cousins that hibernated or slowed down during the cold winter months.

Whether all reptiles in this world were like this or not, Tatsumi had no idea. In any event, this type of lizard thrived in snowy environments, and its body was covered in white scales.

Snow lizards were known for their extensive jumping abilities and their sharp claws, specially designed to tear their prey to shreds. The force of their attacks, augmented by the velocity of a descending leap, could bring down a small tree.

But.

"Oh my, how naive," a figure said with a smirk. A sly smile bloomed on their face as they crossed two maces above their head with two of their four arms, easily blocking the snow lizard's attack.

An ear-splitting cry echoed through the forest as liquid of a dark, crimson hue was scattered over the white snow. The snow lizard, having been bisected midair by the four-armed figure's battle-ax, spilled its entrails and blood onto the snow as its halves thumped to the ground.

The unlucky lizard's prey—Jardock the shade—took a quick step back to avoid the splattering blood and guts. "Ew, what nasty rain," she commented lightly. Her relaxed tone belied her sharp gaze, already seeking out the next target.

Setting her sights on another nearby lizard, Jardock moved toward the animal with a smoothness that belied the snowy terrain beneath her.

The snow lizard was quick on the cold ground. It hunted Jardock with short, repetitive leaps, as it would when trying to corner and eventually kill less nimble prey. This time, however, its target was moving across the snow just as swiftly, if not more so, than the lizard itself.

As one of the snow lizards bared its sharp fangs and lunged at Tatsumi. He deflected the attack with the shield on his arm, then vanished in the blink of an eye before appearing in the snow lizard's blind spot and slashing through the lizard's scaly hide with the sword in his other hand.

Blood sprayed forth, but it didn't fall on Tatsumi; the moment after his strike, he'd vanished.

Again, and again Tatsumi disappeared and reappeared, gradually draining the snow lizard of its strength with strikes of his sword. When the lizard's movements noticeably slowed, Tatsumi thrust his sword straight, delivering the final blow.

Calsedonia sat silently, watching the two burgeoning beast hunters from a short distance away. There was no anxiety in her deep-red eyes; she knew what Tatsumi and Jardock were capable of, and she knew there was no chance they'd be bested by snow lizards. And even if they were to get injured, unless it was a severe or fatal wound, her healing magic was there to mend them. In fact, knowing this allowed both of them to exert themselves to their full strength without reservation.

Eventually, the last of the snow lizard pack was defeated.

With the noise of the battle gone, the woods fell into a profound silence, disturbed only by the sounds of wind passing through the forest and the labored breathing of Tatsumi and Jardock. After looking around to confirm there was no more prey around, both of them sheathed their weapons and returned to where Calsedonia was waiting.

“Good job, both of you,” Calsedonia commented. “That was quite an impressive fight.”

“Thanks, Calsey,” Jardock replied with a grin.

“Any trouble on your end?” Tatsumi asked.

“No, Master. None of the snow lizards came this way,” Calsedonia responded.

“Leave it to us. Protecting the hirelings is part of a beast hunter’s duty,” Jardock said, referring to the helpers hired by beast hunters to perform menial tasks like carrying the game. Since they didn’t actively participate in the hunt, hirelings had no right to the spoils or any other rewards beyond their wages.

Beast hunters often teamed up with others of similar skill levels, so it was common for novices to learn from experienced hunters by accompanying them as hirelings. Though Calsedonia, as a more skilled beast hunter than Tatsumi or Jardock, wouldn’t normally serve as a hireling for those of lower rank, her reasons for doing so—and for accompanying them on their hunts—needed no explanation.

One thing Calsedonia could do as a seasoned beast hunter was to offer her critique of the newcomers’ technique. “As warriors, your fighting style is commendable,” she said. “But as beast hunters, it’s barely passable.”

Tatsumi and Jardock listened intently, not interrupting though their faces tensed at the harsh critique.

“A beast hunter’s job is to bring back the hide, fur, fangs, claws, and sometimes even the bones or organs of the creatures they hunt as materials, then sell them for sustenance. So, you need to make every effort to avoid damaging those materials. Sure, when you’re fighting against large beasts, wearing them down with repeated blows can be effective. But with smaller monsters like snow lizards, it’s better to strike at vital points with a single blow.”

Calsedonia’s gaze shifted from the two before her to the scene behind them, where the carcasses of the defeated snow lizards lay scattered. These remains were visibly less valuable when thought of in terms of product, having been

either bisected by Jardock's brute strength or covered in numerous fine cuts by Tatsumi.

"If this were a mission to get rid of pests ravaging the fields, there would be no issue. However, your goal was hunting—not for food, but for materials. From that perspective, this is clearly a failure."

Tatsumi slumped his shoulders in disappointment, and Jardock let her four arms hang limply as she gazed up at the sky.

This snow lizard hunt had been meant to assess each other's capabilities as newly formed teammates and, of course, earn them some money. Snow lizard hides, valued for their cold resistance and aesthetic appeal, were perpetually in demand for winter cloaks and armor materials, and their nutrient-rich meat was an indispensable protein source in seasons when game was scarce.

Unfortunately, as Calsedonia had pointed out, the hides of these lizards were too damaged to sell for a good price—though fortunately, the meat looked salvageable.

Tatsumi and Jardock nodded gravely in response to Calsedonia's feedback, then the three of them set to efficiently skinning and preparing the carcasses.

"You two aren't that skilled at this," Calsedonia couldn't help but remark, watching them so expertly dismantle the game.

Indeed, though Tatsumi had honed his skills since arriving in this world, being strong in battle was different from just surviving in the wilderness. No matter how powerful one might be, no matter how capable of defeating formidable enemies, those skills alone wouldn't keep you alive in the dead of winter. The combat techniques and the techniques needed for safely acquiring food were entirely separate disciplines. Tatsumi still had much to learn, including how to skin and butcher game properly without diminishing the value of the materials.

"You'll be fine, Master. You'll get the hang of it quickly," Calsedonia reassured him.

"Yeah, I'll take a cue from your method, Chiko," Tatsumi agreed.

"All right, let's start with how to skin this part. You hold it here while..."

Dismembering living creatures was a sight Tatsumi, raised in modern Japan, would rather avoid. Yet it was an unavoidable part of life in this world, especially since he'd decided to become a demon purifier through beast hunting.

Swallowing hard, Tatsumi peered intently at Calsedonia's hands as she worked.

Jardock watched the two of them from a distance, a tender smile on her face. "Really, Tatsumi always surprises me," she murmured, too quietly for his partner to hear.

When Tatsumi and Jardock had been looking for a suitable challenge, Jardock had heard about a small group of snow lizards recently spotted in a forest near the royal capital. Even though snow lizards were adapted to this season, the smaller animals they liked to hunt were becoming scarce. Occasionally, this drove the lizards closer to human settlements.

Snow lizards posed no significant threat; unless the group was particularly large. Tatsumi and Jardock had known they'd be more than capable of handling them.

After a brief discussion, the two had decided to set out early the next day for the snow lizard hunt. The creatures were the perfect prey for novices like them, and they'd been keen to get to them before Levantis's other beast hunters.

When Tatsumi and Calsedonia appeared at the Elf's Repose Inn on the day of the hunt, Jardock had been waiting for them. At first, she'd been surprised to see Tatsumi arrive with a woman, but each new revelation only increased her surprise. First, she'd found out that this woman was the famed Saintess of the Savaiv Temple. Then she'd learned that Tatsumi and the Saintess were engaged. And finally, that she would be joining their hunt as a hireling!

By this point, Jardock was already speechless. But little did she know that her astonishment was far from over.

Luck was on their side, and it hadn't taken much searching before they'd discovered the snow lizards. Tatsumi and Jardock had immediately started getting ready for battle, while Calsedonia had stepped back to a safe distance.

The hunt had then begun, but it wasn't long before Jardock had experienced an even greater shock.

Tatsumi, who had been right beside her, had suddenly vanished, only to reappear behind a snow lizard moments later.

"Huh?" For a moment, Jardock forgot she was in the midst of combat as she stared dumbfounded at Tatsumi.

"Jardock!"

The sharp cry from Calsedonia snapped her back to reality. Turning around, Jardock saw a snow lizard lunging at her, fangs bared.

The shade's reflexes kicked in, and she shoved her club into the lizard's open mouth. There was a sharp *crack* as its two front fangs broke and the creature went flying backward.

"Oh my, how careless of me. But, well..." Jardock kept a vigilant eye on her surroundings while simultaneously tracking Tatsumi's movements. Her partner was still vanishing and reappearing over and over, always positioning himself in the snow lizard's blind spots. "Could that be the legendary Heaven spell, Instant Teleportation?" Jardock wondered aloud. She had heard fairy tales about Heaven magic—and about its sole practitioner.

Tatsumi had said he was a mage, but one that used Heaven magic? *Seriously, who is this guy?* Jardock wondered as she continued to both fend off more snow lizards. Her eyes never left Tatsumi.

He was the fiancée of the Saintess of the Savaiv Temple *and* a Heaven magic user. In addition, it seemed that Tatsumi and the Saintess's engagement hadn't just been an arranged thing, and they were genuinely in love. If Jardock wasn't mistaken, she was even more enamored with him than the other way around.

I have a feeling I've teamed up with someone who's going to be incredibly influential in the future, Jardock thought, allowing herself a sly smile. As she continued to dispatch the snow lizards before them, she resolved to stick with Tatsumi for the foreseeable future.

Finally, covered in blood and fur, Tatsumi and his companions finished butchering their game. They had just divided up the skins, meat, claws, and

teeth among themselves and begun their journey back to the royal capital when, suddenly, Jardock's sharp ears picked up a faint noise.

"Hey, watch out," she whispered to Tatsumi and Calsedonia. "There's something nearby."

As the trio held their breath, the nearby bushes rustled, and something white slowly emerged.

"What is...?"

"Oh my."

"Uh..."

The three hunters' eyes went wide with surprise. From the depths of the bushes had stumbled a human woman about Tatsumi's age. And for some reason, she was completely naked.



Chapter 10: The Greater Snow Lizard

As soon as she saw Tatsumi, Calsedonia, and Jardock, the naked woman's eyes widened in surprise. But the look lasted only for a second, relief washing over her face before she collapsed weakly to the ground and lost consciousness.

"Uh, are you okay...?" Tatsumi asked as he moved toward the fallen woman, but suddenly, his entire field of vision turned dark. For a moment he panicked, and then a familiar voice began shouting from behind him.

"No, stop!" Calsedonia cried, clinging to Tatsumi's back, her hands covering his eyes. "Master, you shouldn't see any woman naked except for me! If you want to see someone naked, I'm always ready and willing to show you, so you shouldn't look at another woman's nakedness!"

Even through his leather armor, Tatsumi could feel the warmth of Calsedonia's body. If he hadn't been wearing it, he might have felt the softness of her chest against his back... The thought made him feel slightly regretful.

Jardock's probably really annoyed right now, Tatsumi realized. "Uh, Jardock, sorry to ask, but can you take care of her?"

"Really, you guys..." Unseen by Tatsumi—who couldn't see anything at that moment—and Calsedonia, who was preoccupied with covering his eyes, Jardock looked at the pair with a mix of irritation and amusement. "Sure, I'll take care of her. Calsey, why don't you take Tatsumi away from here for now. We might need your healing magic later." While she didn't see any injuries on the woman, Jardock figured she might have internal injuries like fractures that would need treatment later.

As Calsedonia pulled Tatsumi away, Jardock couldn't help but smirk. However, just as she approached the fallen woman, a roar shook the surrounding trees.

Crouching instinctively and readying her weapon, Jardock took a careful look around her. Though she couldn't determine the beast responsible for the roar, its direction was clear: It'd come from where the naked woman had appeared. This suggested that the woman and the source of the roar were not unrelated; in fact, she had probably fled from it.

"Calsey," Jardock said without taking his eyes off the bushes. "Do you know what that was?"

Calsedonia paused momentarily, opening up her senses and dipping into her memories. "Yes, I have heard it before. I think that's the call of a Greater Snow Lizard."

"A Greater Snow Lizard?"

Greater Snow Lizards were a significantly larger version of the common snow lizard, typically serving as a boss of a snow lizard pack. Such packs were typically larger and more coordinated than a random group of snow lizards, making them much tougher opponents in a fight.

"Although, the number of lizards in this pack seems too small to be led by one of them," Calsedonia added, looking around at the corpses scattered across the snow.

"Let's worry about that later. For now..." Jardock slowly retreated toward Tatsumi and Calsedonia's position, holding her weapon at the ready.

At Jardock's request, Calsedonia quickly considered their chances against a Greater Snow Lizard. She figured the three of them could still best it, but doing so decisively and swiftly wasn't a realistic expectation. The battle would require cautious strategy—they'd have to gradually wear down the beast's stamina to achieve victory.

The only problem was today, they couldn't afford to prolong the fight. There was an unclothed woman on the snow before them; not only would they have to keep her safe during the battle, but she would also freeze to death if they didn't get her out of there soon.

“We *could* win, but it would be wiser to take her and retreat,” Calsedonia concluded.

“That’s what I thought,” Jardock agreed.

There was no real need to confront the Greater Snow Lizard; their snow lizard hunting venture wasn’t a formal quest but a voluntary one, meaning retreating back to the city posed no issue.

Of course, the very fact that the beast was here, so close to the capital, was concerning. However, alerting Elle back at the Elf’s Repose Inn would be far more prudent than engaging in battle. There was a plethora of skilled monster hunters among the inn’s regular patrons, any of whom could be mobilized to deal with the threat.

“We have no other option but to retreat,” Calsedonia said with a sigh. “Master, this is an emergency. Bring that woman over here, please.”

“All right.”

Tatsumi had been on guard with his weapon ready, but at Calsedonia’s request he immediately teleported to the woman and lifted her into his arms. He then teleported the two of them back to Calsedonia’s side.

“Jardock! Come over here!”

“Yes, Tatsumi?” Jardock responded, feigning confusion as she walked over to Tatsumi.

While Calsedonia wrapped the woman in a cloak and held her, Tatsumi embraced Calsedonia with his right arm and reached out to Jardock with his left. “You might feel a bit dizzy since you’re not used to it,” he warned.

“What? What are you planning to do with me?” Jardock joked, but she knew what was coming.

Tatsumi absorbed the surrounding magical energy, preparing for the laborious task of teleporting two humans, one demi-human, and himself. The distance they could leap would be shorter and the magical energy required would be greater, but Tatsumi was ready for the challenge. Firmly aware of his companions, he once again activated Instant Teleportation.



As her consciousness gradually returned, the woman slowly opened her eyelids to find a beautiful lady with pale golden hair looking down at her, concern in her blue eyes.

“Ah, are you awake?” the blonde lady asked with a gentle smile.

The woman’s consciousness sharpened, and she realized she was lying on a bed—and that the blonde lady before her had the long ears of an elf. “Where am I?” she murmured.

“This is the Elf’s Repose, a tavern and inn. My name’s Elle Zephyr Feera Sylvara Akatsuka. If that’s too long, feel free to call me Elle,” the lady said, her smile deepening.

“The Elf’s Repose Inn?” The name sounded familiar...

Now that the woman thought about it, the Elf’s Repose Inn was a place she and her companions had often dreamed of frequenting one day. After all, it was famous among the capital’s skilled beast hunters.

Suddenly, a number of disjointed memories struck her: A huge snow lizard. The white ground littered with the devoured remains of its smaller brethren. A look almost like a smirk on the giant beast’s face, reeking of malevolence. A pair of eyes, glowing a fierce red, gazing at them as if relishing their presence...

“AAAAAAH!” she screamed in agony, instinctively curling up on the bed as if to shield herself from something.



“Ugh... I’m still dizzy.” Jardock mumbled. She was slumped over at one of the tables, her head cradled in two of her four arms.

“Here, I brought you some water. Maybe it’ll help clear your head a bit?” suggested a young man, placing a wooden mug filled with water near the shade’s head.

“Thanks, Tatsumi, but how can you not feel sick after all that teleporting? You’re really something...” Jardock muttered, her tone a mix of admiration and disbelief.

“Hm... I’ve always been fine with roller coasters and thrill rides, so maybe I was just born with a strong vestibular system,” Tatsumi speculated.

“Sometimes, Tatsumi, you say things I just can’t comprehend.” Jardock spoke with her face still down on the table, lacking the energy to lift her head.

Smiling wryly at Jardock’s state, Tatsumi took a seat at the same table. Then, suddenly, someone leaned against him from the side.

“Ah, I feel sick too...” Calsedonia murmured. “Will you take care of me?”

Tatsumi might’ve grown worried, but her voice carried more delight than discomfort. Like a little bird snuggling up to its parent, she leaned on Tatsumi with her antenna-like tuft of hair twitching as she sought affection. Some of the other monster hunters nearby teased them, while others just looked on warmly—but Calsedonia paid no mind to any of them.

Tatsumi’s expression furrowed with discomfort, but he let Calsedonia have her way. “I wonder if that woman’s okay,” he mused. “What could have happened to her?”

“None of her injuries were severe,” Calsedonia told him. “Of course, she had random scrapes and minor cuts all over, and with those old scars... I bet you that woman is a beast hunter.”

Calsedonia had told the same thing to an astonished Elle once they’d teleported back to the city and rushed into the Elf’s Repose Inn. Upon hearing their story, the landlady had instructed her female staff to carry the unconscious woman to a room, where she and Calsedonia had then taken care of her. Calsedonia had been right; the woman had only minor injuries and no serious wounds. Calsedonia’s magic had quickly healed the minor ones.

All that had been left was to wait for the woman to wake up. Leaving her in Elle’s care, Calsedonia had returned to the tavern to rejoin Tatsumi and Jardock.

“We’ll probably find out what happened once she wakes up,” Tatsumi said. His gaze drifted to the staircase that led to the second floor, and Calsedonia and

Jardock's followed.

A short while later, a frantic-looking Elle rushed down the stairs, changing the atmosphere abruptly.



Chapter 11: An Unfortunate Encounter

When Mirial and her companions had caught wind of the rumor, they'd inwardly thanked Gravavi, the goddess of the evening moon, believing it to be an unexpected stroke of luck.

Gravavi was a deity of the night and was worshiped by those who lived by the moon's light, including courtesans and minstrels, and was also seen as a protector of gamblers and thus a bringer of good fortune.

"Hey, Tadd, you sure that rumor's true?" asked Mirial, intrigued.

"Absolutely," Tadd confirmed. "A small pack of snow lizards was seen in the woods near the capital."

Their group was comprised of four beast hunters: Tadd, Lance, Koran, and the sixteen-year-old Mirial. Mirial, with her bright chestnut hair cut to shoulder length and large brown eyes of a similar hue, had a lithe and nimble figure that bore an almost feline grace and was complemented by the slightly slanted corners of her eyes.

Having grown up together, Mirial and her trio of friends were inseparable. She was well aware of her male friends occasionally staring at her in admiration, but Mirial was less interested in romantic pursuits than in gaining renown as a beast hunter.

It had been a year since the four of them had ventured from their village to the capital with aspirations of becoming beast hunters. Since then, they'd eked out a living with day jobs, squirreling away their earnings while learning combat skills at the temple of the sun god Grayba.

After about half a year of diligent work and saving, they'd managed to afford secondhand weapons and armor, thus affording them the ability to begin their beast-hunting lifestyle. They'd started with simple tasks like gathering herbs, but as the increased compensation being offered suggested, finding them was far from easy. However, by working together to unearth them from beneath the snow, they'd gradually began to see their finances move from the red to the black.

Currently, they were having a discussion about the next job they were going to take. They were at their usual lodgings, the West Wind's Embrace Inn—a favorite among newbie hunters like them. Whatever lay ahead, they knew their bonds with one another and mutual ambitions would bear them through.

When Tadd had arrived at the meeting, his mood had clearly been buoyed by the rumor he'd heard. "Snow lizards, huh? They're not that tough. Perfect for beginners like us," he posited. "What do you say? Shall we go for it?"

"Yeah, why not? I'm sick of shoveling snow and gathering herbs."

"Right. Time to show what we're made of."

Tadd, Lance, and Koran were pumped up, and Mirial found herself caught up in their enthusiasm. She knew that successfully defeating the pack of snow lizards would give their beast-hunting careers a massive boost.

"But can we really do it?" This came from Lance, the most cautious of the four.

"Don't worry," Tadd reassured him. "The four of us together can definitely take on a pack of snow lizards. I've heard it's a really small pack anyway. Plus..." His gaze shifted to Mirial. "We have Mirial. With her magic, snow lizards are nothing to be scared of."

"Oh yeah, that's right! We have Mirial's magic!"

"And when Mirial uses her magic... Heh heh heh."

Lance and Koran looked at Mirial with a mischievous gleam in their eyes. The girl frowned uncomfortably, noticing the undertone in their stares.

“Hey! I don’t use my magic that lightly, you know! I only use it when absolutely necessary! Besides, my magic is self-taught; I probably don’t use it the way you’re supposed to, and it only lasts a very short—”

“We know,” Tadd interrupted. “But just knowing we have your magic on our side makes us feel more at ease. It’s really great having you as a part of the team.”

“Hey, Koran? Didn’t you say you wished someone as beautiful as the Saintess of the Savaiv Temple would join us?”

“Wait a minute! Tadd and Lance, you guys agreed with me!” Koran protested.

“Hm, I think I understand how all three of you feel,” Mirial retorted with feigned indignation. “So, I’ll just leave and you guys can go ahead and try to recruit the Saintess into our group!”

“Hey, hey, it was a joke, a joke!” Tadd protested, trying to smooth things over. “I mean, there’s no way someone like the Saintess would team up with beginners like us, right?”

Lance and Koran nodded in agreement.

Of course, Mirial wasn’t genuinely angry, nor did she intend to part ways with them. Still, deciding they shouldn’t get off too easily, she settled for making each of them treat her to a meal to appease her.

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Knowing they needed to act fast, Mirial and her friends started getting ready for their quest. The rumor of the snow lizard pack would spread fast, and if they wanted to be the ones to make the kills, they would need to be first on the scene.

Setting out from the capital at dawn the next day with several days’ worth of provisions, the four, equipped with their weapons and clad in boiled leather armor, followed Tadd’s lead.

Before long, Mirial’s sharp eyes spotted multiple animal tracks in the snow. “Look at this.”

“Are these snow lizard tracks?”

“I’ve seen snow lizard tracks before; I’m sure that’s what these are.”

“Great, the tracks look fresh. Let’s follow them,” Tadd decided.

And so, the group pursued the tracks across the snowfield. The trail led them over the grasslands and into the woods, where they carefully made their way through snow-laden tree branches, never letting the tracks out of their sight.

Eventually, they caught sight of a large lizard with scales as white as the snow. They had finally caught up!

Unconsciously gripping their weapons tighter, the four of them renewed their resolve, ready for the hunt to begin. However, the scene that unfolded before them was far from what they’d anticipated.

“Is that the alpha of this pack?” someone asked.

A particularly large snow lizard stood in their line of sight, but that wasn’t the surprising part. Mirial and her companions had heard tales of alpha lizards leading packs, but this one...

The Greater Snow Lizard was in the middle of a very bloody, very messy meal. It was so engrossed in eating that it appeared not to notice them. But no, that was inconceivable, especially as they drew nearer and encircled the lizard with weapons drawn. Still, it chose to continue eating.

“Hey...” Tadd, at Mirial’s right, pointed out with trembling fingers. Around the Greater Snow Lizard lay the bodies of other snow lizards, members of its pack, their once-white scales stained with crimson.

“Is it... eating its own kind?” Mirial wondered aloud.

Indeed, the meal the Greater Snow Lizard was devouring so greedily was the other snow lizards it presumably led.

“I’ve never heard of snow lizards cannibalizing each other...”

Mirial wasn’t sure who whispered those words; she was too captivated by the sight of the Greater Snow Lizard feasting on the innards of its comrades while its eyes—and only its eyes—gyrated to meet her gaze.

The glowing red eyes of the Greater Snow Lizard narrowed, exuding an emotion that was close in semblance to a human smirk. It was a sight Mirial would never be able to unsee.

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Her tale concluded, Mirial fell silent. She was dressed in the simple clothes Elle had provided her now, and she was sat on the edge of her bed, staring down at the floor and hardly moving.

Despite her stillness, Elle, Tatsumi, Calsedonia, and Jardock noticed a slight tremble in her shoulders—the young girl was crying, swallowing hard and struggling to keep her tears from flowing.

Tatsumi didn't need to ask what fate had befallen Mirial's companions.

As the girl continued to shake with silent sobs, Elle turned to face Calsedonia. "As you've just heard, the situation is grave. A Demon-possessed beast—a monster—has shown itself near the capital. While it's unlikely that it will enter the city, the risk it poses to travelers on the roads is very high."

"Yes, I'll report this to the temple right away and request exorcists to be deployed. Of course, I'll plan to go as well. Master..." Calsedonia's ruby-like eyes locked onto Tatsumi with determination. "I've always fought Demons with Morganaik. But now, Morga's not here. Master, will you fight with me?"

Tatsumi knew that he might not measure up to the Free Knight. He might even slow Calsedonia down. Yet he could see the flicker of anxiety in her gaze—she didn't want to face this monster alone. Recognizing her apprehension, Tatsumi felt a deep resolve to stand by her side.

Calsedonia trusted and had immense faith in Tatsumi. However, this would be their first time fighting a monster together. She knew that fighting alongside him would be very different from fighting with Morganaik. Everything about the two men was different, including their capabilities as exorcists, with Morganaik being far more experienced. Still, Calsedonia had asked Tatsumi to fight by her side—which meant the world to him.

For this reason, Tatsumi didn't hesitate to respond. He hoped that his calm, confident tone would alleviate some of Calsedonia's concerns.

"Of course. If you think I can be of any help, I'm ready to fight with you anytime, Chiko."

Tatsumi was under no illusion that he could fight like Morganaik, but at the very least, he knew he could teleport Calsedonia to safety if the need arose.

"Thank you. I thought you would say that," Calsedonia said, her cheeks flushed as she smiled gently.

Her smile filled Tatsumi with warmth.

Then Jardock contributed her own reassuring words. "Well, if Tatsumi's fighting, then of course I'll be joining in too. Sure, I've never fought against Demons either, but I can at least shield you and Calsey," she added with a mischievous grin.

"Are you sure?" Tatsumi asked, surprised.

"Of course. We're partners, aren't we?" Jardock said with a wink.

"Got it. I'll be counting on you."

"Leave it to me!" Jardock said confidently, thumping her chest and nodding, then extending a fist for Tatsumi to bump.

"Master, would you go to the temple and tell my grandfather about this?" Calsedonia asked. "I'll go home to get ready. Let's meet back here afterward."

"Sure," Tatsumi agreed.

Though there was a bit of distance from the Elf's Repose Inn to the Savaiv Temple, it wouldn't take long for Tatsumi with his teleportation. But just as Tatsumi and Calsedonia nodded to each other, ready to set out with Jardock and Elle, a desperate voice from the bed halted them.

"Wait! Please, take me with you... I want to go with you!"



Chapter 12: Those Who Take Up Arms

Just as Mirial broke her silence, her mind flashed back to her harrowing encounter—a memory so vivid and terrifying that it momentarily rooted her to the spot.

From her right came a heavy thud and a wet squelching sound. Confused, Mirial turned her gaze that way, only to see Tadd wearing a stunned expression. She blinked and he was pinned to the ground, impaled through the chest by the sharp hind claw of the Greater Snow Lizard.

A faint gasp escaped Tadd's lips as breath and blood poured out of him in a rush. The lizard had leapt with its powerful hind legs, covering the distance to Mirial and her companions in an instant.

As the Greater Snow Lizard shifted on Tadd's body, its claws gouged deeper, scattering red onto the surrounding snow. Mirial heard the gruesome sound of flesh being torn, followed by a slicing whoosh through the air and a sharp *smack*.

The lizard had turned, stepping without a thought on Tadd's body and whipping its tail at Koran, who'd been standing beside Tadd. Koran had gone flying, unable to even scream, and crashed back first into a nearby tree. Now, he was slumping motionless down at its base.

It was then that Mirial had snapped back to reality. "Run!" she screamed at Lance, who was still unharmed.

Tadd's life had been extinguished in an instant—no human could survive having their heart pierced through like that. Koran, too, was beyond help; he

hadn't moved since he'd hit the tree, and his neck was bent at a highly unnatural angle.

It felt cruel thinking it, but Mirial knew she would have to prioritize the lives of herself and Lance, who were still safe. But this Greater Snow Lizard was not an enemy they could hope to defeat, even together. Their only option was to flee.

We can't even collect the bodies, Mirial realized in anguish.

Gritting her teeth, she ordered Lance to flee, then activated her trump card—her magic. Its duration was incredibly short, but while it lasted it significantly boosted her physical abilities, attack power, and defense.

She quickly formulated a plan, which involved using her enhanced abilities as a distraction so Lance could escape. She could find her own opportunity to flee after. However, her plan quickly fell apart when Lance disregarded her instructions and rushed back toward their fallen friends.

“Lance, no!” Mirial called, but Lance just kept running; had he not heard her, or was he ignoring her plea? She cursed inwardly.

“Koran! Tadd! Are you okay?!” Lance cried out.

He never reached them. A sudden shadow loomed over him, and when he looked up, he saw the foot of the Greater Snow Lizard descending upon him.

“... Huh?”

That foolish sound was all that escaped Lance's lips before his head was crushed between the ground and the lizard's hind leg, bursting like an overripe fruit.

Overcome by shock, Mirial could do nothing but stare at the gruesome scene. Then the Greater Snow Lizard's crimson eyes had turned toward her, and something inside her snapped.

With a scream tearing through her mind, Mirial charged at the Greater Snow Lizard, her magic-enhanced speed matching that of the beast. She closed the distance in a blink, striking the lizard with all her might.

Under normal circumstances, penetrating the lizard's scales would have been impossible for her. But her temporarily boosted attack power, combined with her frenzied state, allowed her blades to slice clean through the lizard's protective layer.

Scarlet lines marred the white body of the Greater Snow Lizard as dark blood spurted out forcefully. At the same time, the lizard let out a pained roar.

Driven purely by anger, Mirial continued to swing her arms wildly. When her rage subsided and she regained her calm, the Greater Snow Lizard was nowhere to be seen. Had it fled in fear, or had she unwittingly fled from the lizard? In any case, by the time she regained awareness, she was trudging through the snow-blanketed forest completely naked, her magical power exhausted.

Having lost her companions, equipment, and purpose, Mirial walked on, unclothed, through the snow. Just as the cold had truly begun to sink into her bones, causing her to shiver and hug herself with both arms, she heard a beast's roar. Was it the enraged call of the injured Greater Snow Lizard, or was it some other creature?

Mirial had no idea, but panic surged through her. Her magic was spent and she was utterly defenseless. Gripped by fear, she started running, directionless, naked, and alone in the snowy forest.

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"Please, take me with you... I'm not looking for my friends—I don't even think I can avenge them myself. Please, just let me see that Greater Snow Lizard die... Please, I'm begging you," Mirial pleaded, bowing deeply. However, she quickly raised her head to look directly at Tatsumi and the others. Her eyes, wet with tears, harbored a firm conviction.



Calsedonia and Jardock turned to Tatsumi.

“What should we do, Master?”

“What’s the plan, Tatsumi?”

Tatsumi hesitated. Bringing Mirial along could indeed have its benefits. She had, albeit briefly, engaged with the Demon-possessed Greater Snow Lizard and even managed to wound it. Her experience and strength could prove useful. It wasn’t like she would be a burden to the group.

What’s more, refusing her company could lead her to confront the Greater Snow Lizard alone, which would undoubtedly result in tragedy. It seemed wiser to have her under their guidance.

Tatsumi nodded, his mind made up. “All right, Mirial. You’ll come with us. But I need you to follow our instructions without question and not do anything on your own. That’s the condition.”

“I understand. U-Um...” Mirial hesitated, tilting her head.

Realizing they hadn’t yet introduced themselves, Tatsumi said, “I’m Tatsumi, Tatsumi Yamagata. And this is—”

“I’m Calsedonia Yamagata. Good to meet you, Mirial,” Calsedonia cut in with a bright grin.

Bold move claiming my last name, Tatsumi thought with a slight smile. Is that meant to be a subtle warning to Mirial?

Suppressing a laugh, Jardock spoke up. “I’m Jardock. As you can see, I’m a shade. Nice to meet you, Mirial.” She gave Mirial a wink, causing the young girl to blink in surprise.

“We’ll be getting ready, so Miss Mirial, why don’t you get some rest in the meantime?” Tatsumi suggested.

“Just call me Mirial,” the girl said, smiling and shaking her head. “I mean, I think we must be about the same age.”

“All right then, call me Tatsumi,” he responded warmly.

“Well, in that case, you can call me Calsey,” Calsedonia added, offering a friendly smile.

“And you can just call me Jardock, of course,” the shade chimed in with her characteristic cheerfulness.

Now firmly on a first-name basis, the group felt a newfound camaraderie with one another as they prepared to embark on their mission. Watching them from a distance, Elle couldn’t help but smile, even if she did feel a bit left out.

They seem like they’ll make a great team, she thought to herself. Their future looks quite promising.

The loss of Mirial’s companions was a tragedy, no doubt. However, as harsh as it might sound, death was a risk all beast hunters must be prepared to face. Elle hoped that Mirial could overcome this tragedy and grow stronger as a hunter. Moreover, her presence could serve as a valuable stimulus for Tatsumi and Jardock, both budding hunters eager to prove themselves.

Feeling more optimistic than she had all day, Elle, too, began her preparations. A monster had appeared near the capital, and she’d be damned if she wasn’t going to do everything she could to help.

As she headed to her room, a thought crossed her mind. *I wonder what kind of magic Mirial uses? What sort of nature and type?*

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Tatsumi walked back to the temple and gave the news of the monster to Giuseppe, who formally assigned the task of its subjugation to him and Calsedonia. Within the temple’s upper echelons, there were some who questioned the wisdom of pairing Calsedonia, a highly skilled and renowned exorcist, with a seemingly obscure beast hunter like Tatsumi. However, as soon as it became known that Tatsumi was her fiancé, those dissenting voices quieted.

This adjustment in perspective hinted at an underlying respect for Tatsumi’s capabilities, suggesting that his partnership with Calsedonia wasn’t simply a

matter of convenience but a potentially powerful alliance against the looming threat.

As a beast hunter, Tatsumi wasn't yet well known. But being the second-ever user of Heaven magic and Calsedonia's fiancé—both of these distinctions had gained him widespread renown not just within the Savaiv Temple but even across other temples and parts of the Largofiery kingdom. This was thanks in large part to his direct mentorship by Giuseppe; by now, he was considered the High Priest's disciple.

Thus, with Tatsumi's effective use of Heaven magic against Demons and Calsedonia's status as the Saintess, their collaboration was beyond reproach. Moreover, the task of subduing the monster was a direct order from the High Priest himself, rendering it impossible for anyone, even the king, to oppose.

Officially, it was Tatsumi and Calsedonia who were on a mission from the High Priest, with Jardock and Mirial employed under them. Yet neither Jardock nor Mirial intended to remain mere hires; they aimed to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with Tatsumi and Calsedonia against the Greater Snow Lizard. Elle, too, had decided to join Tatsumi's group, primarily to aid in reconnaissance rather than direct combat.

The target monster was presumed to be lurking within the forests near the capital, but its exact whereabouts were still unknown. Initiating a large-scale search would likely have driven the creature, whose intelligence was greatly augmented by the Demon who possessed it, to flee far from the capital.

This was exactly why Giuseppe had decided to assign this mission to Tatsumi and Calsedonia. Should the exorcists from Savaiv and the other temples have mobilized in a coordinated hunt, the monster would likely have promptly escaped.

Experience dictated that engaging the creature with a small team presented the best approach, and the inclusion of Elle meant that the group could communicate with spirits to help locate the monster. By engaging with the spirits of the trees and snow, they hoped to uncover the Greater Snow Lizard's hiding place.

Spirits represented magic endowed with sentience. They were present everywhere there was magical power, whether in bustling, populated towns, within the deep forest, or even in barren volcanic regions scarcely inhabited by life.

It was often assumed that one could instantly learn nearly anything by asking questions of spirits. In reality, however, there were significant mental differences between spirits and humans. Particularly, the concept of time was almost nonexistent for spirits. They only had a vague distinction between the present and the past, with the future being an almost entirely foreign concept to them.

For example, if one were to ask a spirit whether snow lizards were present in the forest, they might respond, "I saw one before." But was that yesterday or ten years ago?

Furthermore, a spirit's perception of size was quite ambiguous compared to that of humans, which meant they wouldn't be able to distinguish between a Greater Snow Lizard and an ordinary snow lizard. For them, both would simply be big white lizards.

For these reasons, questioning spirits required experience and exquisite care. One had to choose questions that they could easily understand, then accurately analyze their responses.

If there was anyone capable of overcoming these challenges and gathering useful information from the spirits, it was Elle, the progenitor of spirit magic. Thus, a plan to hunt down the monster, involving Tatsumi, Calsedonia, Elle, Jardock, and Mirial, was put into action.



Chapter 13: Just Before the Decisive Battle

Before the group of beast hunters lay the traces of a tragedy. Tatsumi and his companions now stood where Mirial and her friends had tragically encountered the Demon-possessed Great Snow Lizard.

Blood still stained the white snow, and scattered here and there were the ravaged remains of numerous smaller snow lizards, as well as the remains of something entirely different.

“Koran... Tadd... Lance...”

The sight of Mirial’s comrades’ severely damaged bodies was almost too much to bear. Left in the snow, the decomposition hadn’t progressed much, but the clear signs of the way they’d been devoured made Tatsumi swallow and turn away from the carnage.

Had the Greater Snow Lizard returned to this site to feast after Mirial left? Or had they been ravaged by other beasts?

“The snow lizard pack we exterminated must have been running away from the leader, which was already possessed by the Demon,” surmised Jardock.

“Yeah, I think that’s likely,” Elle agreed. “There were reports of small packs of snow lizards near the city, so I’m guessing that this started out as a sizable pack, and they scattered to get away from their Demon-possessed leader.”

Indeed, whispers had been circulating of snow lizard packs near the capital. Leave it to Elle to know this; as the proprietor of an inn and tavern frequented by monster hunters, she was always the first to hear such reports.

While listening to the two behind him, Tatsumi turned his gaze toward Mirial. She was kneeling in the snow, letting her tears flow freely.

Tatsumi understood Mirial's grief all too well. After all, he too had lost his whole family in a single blow. As he watched her, he felt his own sorrow threatening to resurface. Just then, Calsedonia came to stand beside him, gently taking his hand.

They gazed for a moment into each other's eyes, and Calsedonia offered him a gentle smile of encouragement. She had always been well-attuned to Tatsumi's emotional state.

"Master, let's say some prayers to the gods for those who have fallen here."

"Yeah... That's a good idea."

As a priest, Tatsumi had learned various ways to speak to the gods. As he and Calsey stood side by side, they began to weave words of prayer. Occasionally, Mirial's soft sobs intermingled with their words.

Once Mirial had calmed down, Tatsumi and his group commenced with their next steps, beginning with the burial of Mirial's fallen comrades. There was no need to talk it over; they all felt it would be profoundly disrespectful to leave them exposed to the elements.

Before the burial, Mirial collected several items that had belonged to her friends to keep as mementos.

"Tadon, would you mind?" Elle requested. She touched her earring, and a mole-like creature peeked out from beneath the snow at her feet.

"Elle, what's that thing?"

"This is Tadon, an earth spirit I'm contracted with. When I was in Japan, I only had contracts with two spirits: Picho, a water spirit, and Ziru, a phantom spirit. Since coming here, I've contracted with more, and now I'm bound to five spirits in total," Elle explained with pride.

Tatsumi recalled that the spirits Elle was contracted with encompassed water, phantom, earth, ice, and light. Tadon, meanwhile, had agreed to help in exchange for Elle's magical energy and had begun to dig a grave for the bodies.

Once the spirit was done, Tatsumi and Jardock worked together to wrap the bodies of Mirial's friends in some spare cloaks and bury them in the prepared

grave. Although Tatsumi had considered using teleportation to move the bodies into the grave, it'd felt somehow disrespectful to the deceased, so they chose to return them to the earth by hand.

After the burial, with the mound of icy dirt piled high, Calsedonia whispered prayers while sprinkling wine over the grave. The act served as both an offering to the dead and purification. Unlike in places like Japan, where flowers were commonly offered to the deceased, it was customary in this world to present the dead with wine and food.

Once all the rites were concluded, Mirial bowed deeply to Tatsumi and his companions. "Thank you, Tatsumi, Jardock, Calsey, Elle... All of you."

"Oh, we were just helping out a fellow beast hunter. But are you all right, Mirial?"

"Yeah... I won't pretend I can move on right away, but dwelling on it won't do my friends justice. And for right now, we have something more urgent to work on."

"Right. We need to find that monster and defeat it."

At Tatsumi's words, Mirial nodded with determination. Elle then focused her mind, tuning in to the voices of the spirits. Within seconds, a chorus of new voices entered her head.

Speaking to them in the language of spirits, Elle asked for information on their target, the Greater Snow Lizard. The spirits' responses were erratic, to say the least. Numerous ice, wind, and earth spirits spoke to her all at once, each saying whatever came to their mind, including much that was entirely unrelated to her questions.

Patently sifting through their words, Elle isolated the information she needed. Then, after concluding her communion with the spirits, Elle turned back to her companions.

"To the northwest from here, the spirits mentioned seeing a large white lizard. There's no guarantee that it's the Greater Snow Lizard we're searching for, but it's worth checking out."

“Hm, spirit magic sounds quite handy. Hey, landlady, do you think I could learn spirit magic too?” Jardock asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Elle’s expression grew slightly troubled at the question. “Spirit magic is very different from incantation magic. Incantation magic can be used by anyone with enough magical power, but for spirit magic, you need to be able to communicate with spirits. And since that’s more of a sensory experience, it’s hard to explain verbally.”

Demi-human races, being under the influence of spiritual forces, tended to have a higher aptitude for spirit magic than humans. Yet, even among them, there were those who couldn’t sense the presence of spirits. No matter how much they tried, they would never be able to feel them.

“Besides, Jardock, your amount of magical power isn’t particularly high...” Calsey hesitated, looking uncomfortable with what she was about to say. “In that sense, I th-think it might be best to give up on using magic,” she finally concluded with a sigh.

Jardock’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

“Were you that eager to use spirit magic?”

“It’s not just about spirit magic; I wanted to use *any* kind of magic. I mean, I’m the only one here who can’t use any sort, right? It just feels... unfair, you know?” Jardock sighed, clearly in agony over this realization.

That’s true, Tatsumi thought. Chiko and I can both use magic. I mean, strictly speaking, my situation is a bit different, but for all appearances, I can use magic like everyone else. As for the others, Elle could use spirit magic, as just demonstrated, and Mirial had mentioned she could use magic as well.

“Now that’s rare, to have so many magic users in one group. Quite unusual, actually.”

“Huh? Tatsumi, you’re a mage too?”

“Well, according to Giuseppe, I’m not exactly a mage, I’m a magic wielder.”

“Giuseppe? Who’s that?”

“Ah, Giuseppe! He’s talking about Giuseppe Chrysoprase, the High Priest of the Savaiv Temple. Mirial, haven’t you heard his name before?”

Mirial expression was bewildered. She had indeed heard of the High Priest of the Savaiv Temple, but she hadn’t anticipated such a significant figure’s name to drop so casually from Tatsumi’s lips.

“So, what, you *talk* to him? Are you... Wait, don’t tell me—Tatsumi, are you some noble’s son?” It was only then that it struck Mirial that Tatsumi had indeed introduced himself with a surname.

“No, I’m not a noble, but Giuseppe *is* essentially my mentor, and more importantly, he’s Calsedonia’s grandfather,” Tatsumi explained, causing Mirial to shift her dumbfounded gaze from him to Calsedonia.

“C-Calse... Calsedonia? Could it be that you’re th-the Saintess of the Savaiv Temple?”

It was well-known that the Saintess of Savaiv Temple was the granddaughter of the High Priest. However, during the introductions, Calsedonia had used the name Yamagata instead of Chrysoprase, and Mirial, who couldn’t begin to imagine such a renowned figure would be standing before her, had thus failed to connect Calsedonia’s name with the Saintess’s.

Overwhelmed by these revelations, Mirial found herself in utter disarray.

“By the way, Mirial, you mentioned you can use magic too, right? What kind of magic do you use?” Tatsumi inquired, snapping the young girl out of her confusion.

“D-Do I have to say...?” Mirial responded with a nervous grin.

Tatsumi and Calsedonia exchanged curious glances.

“Mirial, we’ll need to work together to fight this beast,” Calsedonia insisted gently. “Understanding each other’s abilities is the first step toward that.”

“I understand that, but... By the way, what kind of magic does Tatsumi use? What’s his element?”

Mirial’s clear attempt to change the subject didn’t go unnoticed, but before Tatsumi could respond, Calsedonia eagerly took the lead.

“Tatsumi’s element is Heaven! The second Heaven mage in history is none other than my Master!” Calsedonia puffed out her chest proudly as if bragging about her own achievement, putting a noticeable emphasis on “my.”

“Huh? No way! Heaven mages are just something out of fairy tales, aren’t they?”

“No, Heaven mages *do* exist. In the past, and now as well,” Calsedonia said emphatically, her face taking on a slight blush as she looked up at Tatsumi. The look she gave him was full of immense trust and more, which the other three standing next to them could see loud and clear.

“It’s true. I’ve seen it myself. I saw Tatsumi use Heaven magic—teleportation, specifically.”

“Teleportation...?” Elle said, looking shocked. She’d probably just figured out why Tatsumi had been able to gather herbs so quickly under the snow.

“So, what about you, Mirial? What kind of magic do you use? Do tell me, please!”

Pressured by Jardock’s inquiry, Mirial shifted uncomfortably. “Well, um... My element might seem like a dud, so it’s a bit embarrassing. My magic is self-taught and focuses on physical enhancement. I use magic to boost my physical and defensive abilities for close combat. But it only lasts a very short while, so it’s more for quick battles. Happy now?”

When Mirial spoke those final words, she was addressing Calsedonia, the leader for this operation. Having banished numerous Demons as an exorcist, Calsedonia’s leadership was undisputed. Tatsumi and Elle hadn’t given it a moment’s thought before asking her to take charge, and with Tatsumi and Elle’s recommendations, Jardock and Mirial had had no objections.

“I know I’m being selfish, but I promise when the time comes, I won’t hesitate to use my magic,” Mirial assured Calsedonia. Stepping closer to the Saintess, she reached out a hand to offer her something. It was the possessions of her fallen comrades, including a lock of hair and a beloved dagger. “If I use my magic, I might lose these. Could you hang on to them for me?”

“Huh?” Calsedonia said, puzzled by Mirial’s request. But she nodded and took the objects all the same.

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“Let’s go over the plan for this operation one more time,” Calsedonia announced before they set out to confront the Demon-possessed Greater Snow Lizard. “When fighting a Demon, never deliver the killing blow.”

Tatsumi and the others nodded silently at Calsedonia’s instructions. Demons were essentially incorporeal mental entities, meaning that defeating a Demon-possessed beast didn’t kill the Demon itself. If the host was killed, the Demon would merely seek a new body to possess.

Weapons that could harm both the possessed host and the Demon did exist—sacred swords, holy spears, and the like—but they were incredibly rare. Thus, the standard method to defeat a Demon involved weakening the monster and then using Exorcism magic from the Light or Holy categories to destroy it.

“This time, though, it’s different,” Calsedonia continued. “It’s fine if you kill the beast. Use all your power to defeat the Greater Snow Lizard.”

This operation deviated from the norm because they had Tatsumi, a sort of natural predator of Demons, on their side.

Under normal circumstances, a Demon that left its host would become invisible. Tatsumi, however, was a sensor on top of a Heaven mage, which meant he could perceive a Demon once it was no longer attached to a host. A Demon with no host posed no threat, and by attacking it right away with Tatsumi’s Heaven magic, they’d hopefully be able to eradicate it without giving it a chance to fight back.

“Not having to hold back makes this easier, doesn’t it?” Jardock mused.

“Sure does. I’ll be going at full power from the start,” Mirial agreed, her fighting spirit surging.

“I’ll be supporting from the rear, but I’ll do my best!” assured Elle.

Tatsumi nodded, sure having the founder of spirit magic on their side would bolster them all.

“All right, let’s go!” Calsedonia declared.

And so, with Elle, Jardock, and Mirial nodding in agreement, the group stepped forward, heading in the direction where the Greater Snow Lizard was most likely to be found.



Chapter 14: The Other Magic User

“What?! Mirial is the same sort of magic user as me?” Tatsumi asked in surprise.

Calsedonia nodded. She and Tatsumi were covering the rear as the group made its way toward the monster. Elle was leading the way, continuing to listen to the voices of spirits, and Jardock and Mirial were walking side by side just behind her.

“Earlier, she mentioned that her magic’s self-taught,” Calsedonia pointed out. “Spells used in incantation magic are all complete; they’re not meant to be used in a self-taught style.”

“So being self-taught means she doesn’t use spells, just like me... Could it be possible that Mirial’s magic is spirit magic?”

“If Mirial’s magic were spirit magic, there’s no way that Elle wouldn’t have noticed,” Calsedonia said, shaking her head. “Plus, Mirial mentioned that her magic only works for a short duration. That’s just more evidence that she’s a direct magic user.”

“I get it. Direct magic users emit magic power continuously.”

Using magic directly, without spells, was a form of ancient magic. To maintain its effects, the practitioner had to consume magic power continuously, hence why they quickly ran out of magic. The exception, of course, were those like Tatsumi, who were elemental wielders. But Mirial was not one of them.

“So Mirial not saying anything about her magic was because she’s a direct magic user?”

“I can’t be sure of that. And...” Calsedonia tilted her head, her trademark tuft of hair bouncing slightly. If she focused her vision, she could see the magical aura emanating from Mirial’s body. The color was a pale blue with a slight tint of red—a combination Calsedonia had never seen before. “Based on the blue color she emits, I believe Mirial’s magic must belong to some derivative of the Water element.”

In fact, Calsedonia realized, it was likely that Mirial’s magical lineage was extremely rare, like Tatsumi’s Heaven magic. Such magical lineages had no researchers or developers of spells, and their wizards often ended up as direct magic users.

“Well, even if we don’t know the specifics of Mirial’s magic, our strategy doesn’t change.”

“No,” Calsedonia agreed with a smile. No matter how formidable the foe waiting for them, as long as they had Tatsumi—the natural enemy of Demons—defeat was unthinkable. Calsedonia was sure of it.

Indeed, at that time, no one knew what was to come...

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All of a sudden, a loud crash echoed through the forest, accompanied by an all-encompassing burst of light. Both were the result of Calsedonia’s Thunderstorm spell raining down lightning within a set area.

As the thunder and lightning ceased, a blizzard of ice and snow whirled into existence, unleashed by Elle via the power of her contracted ice spirit.

Unfortunately, both Calsedonia and Elle’s magic had failed to catch their target. The Demon-possessed Greater Snow Lizard had effortlessly dodged their spells, flying freely over the snow.

“That quick little bastard!” Elle cursed.

No matter how many times Calsedonia and Elle had cast their spells, the Greater Snow Lizard had managed to evade every one of them.

The team's strategy involved weakening the Greater Snow Lizard with the magic of the two exceptional mages in their party—Calsedonia and Elle—and then having Jardock and Mirial deliver the finishing blow. After the Greater Snow Lizard was separated from the Demon, Tatsumi would then eliminate it. However, the plan was falling apart for one singular reason: The Greater Snow Lizard exhibited agility far beyond Calsedonia and Elle's expectations.

Both mages had previously faced and defeated Greater Snow Lizards. Their estimates of the monster's capabilities were based on those experiences, factoring in an upward adjustment due to the Demon. But this... this beast was on an entirely new level. It was impossible to hit it with long-range magical attacks; they were only wasting their magical power.

Similarly, the close combat duo, Jardock and Mirial, couldn't even get close to the lizard due to its unnatural speed. Even as Jardock charged with her battle-axe and two maces, the lizard almost seemed to mock her as it hopped nimbly over the snow and dodged out of the axe's reach. Mirial, too, failed to catch the enemy and cast her planned magical attack.

Taking our story back a couple of hours, back to when Tatsumi and his companions were moving through the forest, Elle had suddenly stopped, scanning the area sharply.

"There's something nearby," she warned. "Be careful!"

There was no need to ask what she spoke of. Instead, Tatsumi, Calsedonia, and Jardock also scrutinized their surroundings for any signs of presence. Mirial, meanwhile, took off her backpack and threw it into the snow.

"Uh, hey, Mirial?" Tatsumi asked as he scanned their surroundings.

"Don't worry about it. If I don't do this when I use my magic, everything I'm wearing will be destroyed. I've attached a marker to the backpack so I won't lose it in the snow," Mirial said, her cheeks taking on a slight color.

Indeed, the bag she'd tossed onto the snow was wrapped with a red cloth. Now, she was dressed only in her clothes and a coat for warmth, not wearing any armor. In her hands, Mirial held a spear longer than she was tall.

The spear must have been her preferred weapon. Having lost all her money and possessions in the last encounter with the Greater Snow Lizard, Mirial had borrowed money from Calsedonia to equip herself for the current operation.

As for Tatsumi and Jardock, they were dressed in their usual hardened leather armor, while Elle wore a set of soft leather armor dyed white, over which she'd donned a coat for warmth. She also wore a small sword at her waist, but it was purely for self-defense.

Calsedonia wasn't wearing anything resembling armor. However, what she wore under her coat... At first glance it was a simple, undecorated gray robe, but it was in fact a magic-sealing garment, offering far greater defense than any metal armor. In her hand, Calsedonia held a twisted, ancient-looking staff, another sealing item that enhanced her magical power.

"Tatsumi, Mirial, let's limit the chit-chat," Elle began, but she faltered, looking up into the trees. The others followed her gaze to see several snow lizards falling from the canopy.

"These aren't Greater Snow Lizards... Just regular snow lizards, huh?"

"Did they call what's left of their group?"

Weapons at the ready, Jardock and Mirial swiftly intercepted the falling snow lizards. It seemed that until Mirial had inflicted a wound on it, the Greater Snow Lizard had only viewed its fellow lizards as food, but now it decided to use them as troops to protect itself.

Mirial's spear pierced through the throat of one snow lizard, while Jardock's battle-ax crushed the head of another. However, the two of them couldn't intercept all of them.

The snow lizards that landed safely turned their glaring eyes toward Calsedonia and Elle—the two who weren't suited for close combat. Tatsumi positioned himself between them and the snow lizards, but just as he drew his sword and charged toward the advancing monsters, flashes of lightning and arrows of ice shot past him on both sides, instantly taking them down. Turning around in surprise, Tatsumi saw the two mages smiling back at him.

Within minutes, it was clear that ordinary snow lizards would be no match for Tatsumi's team.

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After their brief skirmish slowed down, the familiar roar of the Greater Snow Lizard resounded through the trees. Hearing this, the other snow lizards stopped fighting and began to flee.

"Looks like the leader ordered its forces to retreat," Jardock speculated, ceasing her axe swings and slinging the weapon over her shoulder as she watched the lizards flee. "What do we do, Calsey? Let them go in peace, or do we go after them?"

"Let's not chase them too far. Anyway, that call gives us a rough idea of where the Greater Snow Lizard is. Let's head in that direction, but stay alert," Calsedonia decided.

The others nodded in agreement. The group then rearranged their formation and began to move. Jardock and Mirial took the lead, followed by Calsedonia and Elle as rear guard, and Tatsumi lingering behind.

Guided by the recent roar and the snow lizards' tracks, the group made their way through the snow-covered forest, and about ten minutes into their journey, *it* happened.

The Greater Snow Lizard burst from beneath the snow as it launched its attack on the group. It must have been lying in wait there, anticipating their passage. Its first target was Mirial—perhaps because she had wounded it before, or because she wore no armor and it deemed her the easiest target.

In any case, the monster's flank attack caught the young girl completely off guard. But just as it seemed the sharp, saliva-dripping fangs would sink into her flesh, scattering her crimson blood just like it had her companions', the lizard's jaws snapped shut on nothing but air.

At that moment, Calsedonia glanced behind the lizard to see Tatsumi, who had teleported to Mirial's side. He then teleported again, taking Mirial with him to safety behind the lizard.

“Master! Mirial!” Calsedonia shouted in concern.

“We’re okay!” Tatsumi called back. “Stick to the plan!”

Calsedonia began to chant her spell, and Elle called upon the spirit she had made a pact with. Meanwhile, Jardock and Mirial took up the task of guarding the mages, who were vulnerable while casting their magic.

The first spell cast was Elle’s. “Lurlan, let’s go!” the elf urged.

At her fingertips, a ball of light appeared, about the size of a child’s head. Lurlan trembled, and around it, countless smaller orbs of light appeared. Then, with an even more violent tremble, Lurlan released the smaller light orbs all at once, sending them hurtling toward the Greater Snow Lizard.

The light bullets each followed a unique trajectory as they swarmed toward their target. Some traveled straight ahead, some curved right, and others curved left. Some even ascended into the air before plummeting down or skimmed just above the ground, lifting at the last moment to target the Greater Snow Lizard’s feet.

Just when it seemed the barrage of light bullets would hit, the Greater Snow Lizard leapt up, using the tree trunks as footholds to dodge the rain of light by moving all over the place. Losing their target, the light bullets collided with each other and dissipated.

Now airborne, its movements restricted, the Greater Snow Lizard was left vulnerable. Seizing the opportunity, Calsedonia released bolts of purple lightning from her palms. As the lightning sliced through the air toward the suspended lizard, it seemed the monster had no way out, but it soon skillfully manipulated its long, flexible tail to adjust its posture in midair. Kicking off the nearest tree and leaping forward again, it dodged the approaching lightning bolts in a maneuver that left the onlookers dumbfounded.

“How can it move so unpredictably in the air?!” The agility with which the monster had evaded their magic seemed impossible, not just for an ordinary snow lizard but even for a Greater Snow Lizard.

Their disbelief was so profound that Calsedonia and Elle momentarily froze in place, which the cunning beast didn’t fail to exploit. Kicking off another tree,

the Greater Snow Lizard dove toward them from above, its hind claws gleaming menacingly. But just as it seemed Calsedonia and Elle would be torn apart by its sharp claws, they vanished. Once again, Tatsumi had teleported, whisking them to safety.

Reappearing at a safe distance, Tatsumi held Calsedonia and Elle in his arms. “Looks like we’ve been outsmarted by this beast,” he remarked, not taking his eyes off the Greater Snow Lizard.

When Calsedonia landed on the snow, she realized what Tatsumi had meant. “This area... The snow is a lot softer than it was back there.”

Indeed, it appeared they were in a snowdrift zone, where the freshly fallen snow remained soft and powdery, not yet frozen into a solid mass. This condition would restrict everyone’s movements, but especially those of Jardock and Mirial, who relied on close combat.

In contrast, the Greater Snow Lizard was built for moving through soft snow. And that was just a regular Greater Snow Lizard—when you considered that it was being possessed by a Demon, the humans’ disadvantage became even more pronounced.

That’s probably exactly why it hid here, waiting for us, Tatsumi realized. We’ve been lured right into its trap.

Before they knew it, several more snow lizards had gathered around their leader, baring their menacing fangs.

All of them—Calsedonia and Elle, the exceptional mages, Jardock and Mirial, the warriors who excelled in close combat, and Tatsumi, a mage of Heaven magic and a natural adversary of Demons—sensed the tide of battle turning against them. Despite their initial confidence in an easy victory, they now reluctantly realized they had stumbled into an unexpected and challenging situation.



Chapter 15: Mirial's Magic

“Let’s change strategies,” Tatsumi decided. With their initial plan in ruins, switching to a different tactic was the logical course of action.

“Master...” Calsedonia’s face momentarily showed concern, but she quickly adopted a resolute expression as she addressed Tatsumi. “In these conditions, only a Heaven magic user like you can match this Greater Snow Lizard’s speed. It’ll definitely make things much harder for you, but...”

“That’s all right,” Tatsumi assured her. “I’ll do what I can.”

“While you confront the Greater Snow Lizard directly, the rest of us will deal with the other snow lizards. Is that all right?”

Calsedonia’s suggestion was met with unanimous nods from their companions.

“After they defeat the other snow lizards, Jardock and Mirial will support you as much as possible. Then, when we’ve managed to slow it down, we’ll hit it with our maximum—”

“No, that won’t do,” Tatsumi interjected. “The finishing blow will be left to Mirial. It’s her task.”

“Me...?” Mirial pointed to herself, surprised.

Tatsumi smiled. “Yeah. Avenge your friends with your own hands. We’ll create that opportunity for you.”

“Okay, I will,” Mirial agreed, her voice carrying a newfound determination.

“Think of it as a once-in-a-lifetime chance. At that moment, strike with all your strength,” Tatsumi advised, his gaze locking onto the Greater Snow Lizard.

The beast and its minions observed them from a distance. To Tatsumi, all those glowing red eyes appeared to be looking down at rodents caught in a trap.

The Greater Snow Lizard roared once again. At the same time, several of the smaller snow lizards around it charged toward Tatsumi and his companions in unison.

“Leave the small fry to me!” Tatsumi called out, disappearing from his spot without waiting to see his companions’ nods of agreement. He was confident in their response—he didn’t need to.

“T-Tatsumi just *disappeared*...?” Mirial mumbled, growing only more stunned when he reappeared directly in front of the Greater Snow Lizard,

“No way...” Elle said under her breath. “Is Tatsumi really a Heaven magic user?”

Tatsumi had used his teleportation spell in front of both women multiple times before, sometimes even carrying them with him. Those instances had been during emergencies, however, and because they’d been teleported along with him, they hadn’t fully grasped what was happening. This was the first time Elle and Mirial had objectively witnessed Tatsumi performing a teleportation.

While they stood there dumbfounded, Jardock rushed past them, weapon ready for battle. “No time for daydreaming, you two! Our guests have arrived.” Although her tone was light, her gaze was focused sharply on the approaching snow lizards.

Baring their fangs and clacking their claws, the beasts glided across the snow toward the four fighters.

“Seriously? We’re stuck trudging through this snow, and they move like they’re on solid ground. It’s just not fair,” Jardock commented with a smile. This smile wasn’t her usual carefree one; it was more like the ferocious grin of a predator spotting its prey.

One snow lizard had broken out ahead of its companions, and it opened its mouth wide as it lunged at Jardock.

“Hah! It’s way easier when they come straight to me,” Jardock quipped, undeterred by her restricted movement in the snow. If the enemy was willing to

close the distance between them, the situation wasn't quite as disadvantageous.

Jardock thrust one of her battle staves directly into the charging snow lizard's mouth. The force of the counter sent the lizard's body airborne, swinging its lower half toward Jardock like a pendulum, with the staff and its head as a pivot point.

Then, swinging his other staff horizontally, Jardock broke the snow lizard's legs before bringing down his battle-ax, severing the creature's neck. "Oh, I can really let loose when we're not here to gather materials," she mused, shifting her focus to the next target.

"You're quite enthusiastic, aren't you?" Mirial remarked, standing next to her with her spear ready.

"Of course, why wouldn't I be? Tatsumi's trusted us to deal with these underlings, hasn't he? If that's the case, we'd better live up to that trust. Repay kindness with kindness, revenge with revenge, and trust with trust—that's the creed of us shades. And besides..." Jardock glanced sideways. "It seems I'm not the only one eager to fight."

The sound of a spell being cast came from behind them loud and clear, unmistakably spoken by Calsedonia. A snow lizard that had slipped past Jardock lunged at her in the midst of her chanting.

For most mages, being attacked during casting could be disastrous. Yet Calsedonia didn't stop chanting for a moment as she twirled her staff, using centrifugal force to strike the lizard's body.

A *thunk* rung out, and the lizard fell into the snow. Before it could rise again, Calsedonia completed her chant. Pointing her staff at the lizard, she unleashed a jet of flames that engulfed its prone body.

In most seasons, it would be highly inadvisable to use fire magic in a forest, due to the risk of igniting trees and underbrush and causing a wildfire. But with snow covering the ground, the risk was minimal.

As the flames burned, the snow lizard let out a death cry—at the same time, a stone spear as big as a stalagmite burst from the ground to impale the

creature's body, delivering the coup de grâce.

"Thank you, Elle!" Calsedonia shouted in gratitude.

"No, Calsedonia, it's you who did splendidly," Elle responded with a smile.

"I need to do my best too," Mirial encouraged herself, inspired by their exchange, and practiced a few moves with her spear to psych herself up.

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"Amazing..." Mirial muttered under her breath, awestruck by the high-speed combat unfolding before her eyes. Having dispatched all the lesser snow lizards, she was now scanning the area to catch up on Tatsumi's battle with the Greater Snow Lizard. What she saw left her speechless.

The Greater Snow Lizard, which continued to scamper across the snow and utilize the trees around it as footholds, would be nearly impossible for a human to chase down under these conditions. Yet there was one who could.

As fast as the monster leapt from snow to tree, Tatsumi pursued it. Far beyond just being faster than the monster, he was bypassing space itself, teleporting ahead to where the lizard would move next before striking it with his sword and inflicting wound after wound.

The Greater Snow Lizard, now covered in numerous cuts, roared in anger and frustration, swiping its hind claws in a furious attack. But in the next moment, its human adversary vanished, only to reappear behind it.

The tables had turned and the predator had become prey, showcasing the extraordinary abilities of a Heaven mage engaged in a life-or-death battle against a formidable beast.

With a silent exhale, Tatsumi swung his sword. Upon contact with the Greater Snow Lizard's body, the golden magical light infusing the blade exploded violently, causing the massive lizard to stagger.

Among the several types of magic Tatsumi could wield—Teleportation, Acceleration, Self-Healing, and Magical Strike—the latter might be closer to a sword technique than a spell. Magical Strike involved unleashing the magical

power harbored in a blade upon the enemy, causing it to explode on impact, rather than shooting out magic projectiles in a ranged attack. However, with Tatsumi's abilities of Teleportation and Acceleration, the distance between him and his opponent was hardly a concern.

Despite the force of Tatsumi's attack, the Greater Snow Lizard's scales were tough, and its vitality far surpassed that of humans. The slashes from his sword had inflicted only minor wounds, and the explosions from Magical Strike didn't deal critical damage. If he could focus all his magic into Magical Strike without relying on Teleportation, perhaps he could break through the lizard's sturdy scales, but keeping up with the monster's mobility without Teleportation was impossible, so he was left to cast his moderately powerful Magical Strike attack over and over.

After landing one more Magical Strike on his adversary, Tatsumi teleported to Calsedonia. "Chiko, could you..."

He trailed off, his breathing heavy. Despite the chill of the day, his body was drenched in sweat. While his magical power was virtually limitless, his physical stamina was not. The continuous use of magic in intense mobile combat had significantly drained his stamina.

Resting her hands on Tatsumi's heaving shoulders, Calsedonia cast a Stamina Restoration spell to temporarily replenish his energy. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I feel much better now. I can keep going," Tatsumi replied, taking a deep breath before vanishing again. Reappearing behind the Greater Snow Lizard, he resumed his assault, his sword wrapped in magical power.

Calsedonia knew the limits of her own magic too. Even with her spells to replenish stamina, there was only so much she could do before Tatsumi's physical strength would inevitably be depleted. They needed to act quickly. Never taking her eyes off Tatsumi, she sought desperately for a solution.

The issue at hand was the snow. If only there were less of it... but how would she be able to achieve that result? Her fire magic couldn't melt all the snow in the area, and Tatsumi's teleportation wasn't suited for the job. It required clear

recognition of what was being teleported, so moving an undefined amount of snow, like “all the snow he could see,” was out of the question.

If only there was some kind of marker... she thought with a sigh. Tatsumi had once drawn a circle in the snow when they were collecting herbs. If only they could do something similar now. But in their current predicament, drawing a circle around all this snow would take far too much time.

“I need a spell, any spell that could mark the snow... Wait, what about spirit magic?!” Hit with a spark of inspiration, Calsedonia turned to her elven friend. “Elle!”

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Tatsumi, meanwhile, continued to fight with increasing difficulty. Despite drawing on his last reserves of strength and willpower, his sword strikes were insufficient against the Greater Snow Lizard’s tough scales.

When he finally took a moment to catch his breath after teleporting away from the lizard, the air was filled with his labored breathing. Still, even amidst his heavy breaths, the voice of the woman he cherished reached his ears.

“Master!”

Without diverting his attention from the Greater Snow Lizard in front of him, Tatsumi glanced at Calsedonia. *What’s she pointing at?* he wondered, his curiosity piqued by the sight of a red glow at the edge of his vision. *What is that?*

Momentarily forgetting his dire situation, Tatsumi let his gaze follow the red light. This created a significant opening in his defenses; luckily, the Greater Snow Lizard was equally distracted. It looked on in confusion as the strange red glow encircled the area, shining upon the snow like a line drawn with radiant red paint.

“Master! Elle is drawing us a marker! Move the snow... Move all the snow now!”

When Calsedonia’s voice reached him again, suddenly everything made sense. *So, that’s it! That’s Elle’s illusion magic!* So, it was she who was keeping the red

light shining over such a large distance.

Discarding his sword, Tatsumi slammed his palms onto the snow beneath him with all his might, letting out a roaring scream of exertion. The sound was filled with determination, as he channeled his last reserves of energy and all his magical power to recognize and teleport the snow marked by Elle's marker.

In an instant, almost all the snow within the encircled area vanished, leaving behind a significantly altered battlefield that could potentially turn the tide of their struggle.



The snow that had surrounded Tatsumi and his allies seconds before now lay in a pile a short distance away, and several trees had been knocked down in the process of its teleportation. The ground upon which they and the Greater Snow Lizard stood was almost devoid of snow, revealing the dark soil underneath. It was muddy, true, but it would be infinitely easier to move on.

Tatsumi collapsed onto the muddy ground, rolling onto his back and gasping for breath. “Mirial... The rest... is up to you.”

Calsedonia rushed to his side in a panic, Jardock quickly joining her. Elle, who had been maintaining the widespread illusion magic, leaned against a nearby tree, breathing heavily. A small, concerned spirit of illusion gently touched her cheek.

“All right, let’s go!” Mirial snarled, throwing her spear aside and slowly advancing toward the Greater Snow Lizard to take on the responsibility Tatsumi had entrusted to her. “After all this, I can’t let everyone down, not even Jardock!” she complained, yet her eyes shone with determination and resolve. “No holding back! I’m going to avenge our comrades in one fell swoop!”

Blue magical light began to radiate from Mirial’s body, enveloping her and intensifying in brilliance. When the light burst forth, Mirial was no longer visible; in her place stood a creature of a different form.

Covered in slimy scales, with a large head and a rather stout body, it had long limbs with webbed fingers, large bulbous eyes, and gills that moved rhythmically. A massive fin adorned its back, and from wrist to elbow, another set of huge fins extended, their tips shining like sharp blades.

“Uh... A merperson?” Tatsumi muttered as Calsedonia helped him up.

Merperson Transformation. So that was the singular magic Mirial could wield. Her shift in form had come not a moment too soon, and she stood ready to confront the Greater Snow Lizard with newfound strength.



Chapter 16: A Kind of Fish

As magical blue light shimmered among the trees as Mirial's form twisted and transformed into that of a merperson. When the light faded, there she stood, a creature of myth made real.

"Uh... A merperson?" Tatsumi uttered in disbelief as he took Calsedonia's hand and climbed to his feet.

"Is that a kind of Beast Transformation magic? Perhaps we should call it Merperson Transformation..." Calsedonia mused, equally puzzled. "It probably falls under a subcategory of the Water element, which we could call the Fish lineage. But Beast Transformation magic itself is rare, and Merperson Transformation might be unique to Mirial..."

Unique magic was a term used to refer to spells that were exclusive to a single practitioner. Tatsumi had learned about such spells in lectures with Giuseppe. Due to the extremely limited number of practitioners—one, to be precise—the reason behind the existence of such unique spells remained largely unknown. However, practitioners of unique magic did exist, and apparently Mirial was one of them.

"I've heard of upper derivatives with Fish, but lower derivatives? That's something unexpected." Tatsumi wondered if such specializations could still be classified under traditional magical lineages.

Closer inspection revealed remnants of Mirial's clothes scattered around, likely having burst off of her due to the transformation and the subsequent mismatch in size.

The Merperson Transformation not only showcased Mirial's distinct magical capabilities but also introduced an entirely new aspect to the magical world, one where personal and unique spells could manifest in extraordinary ways, expanding the boundaries of known magical classifications.

In truth, it wasn't actually the mismatch in physical size that had torn Mirial's clothes during her transformation, but the magical energy emitted from her body that destroyed them—although Tatsumi and Calsedonia couldn't have known this. However, it meant that not only her clothing but also any equipment she kept on her would be destroyed; hence why she'd previously discarded her belongings and entrusted her friends' keepsakes to Calsedonia.

As Tatsumi watched Mirial's transformation in astonishment, the merperson's expressionless face turned toward him. It nodded its large head awkwardly up and down, perhaps as a form of acknowledgment or thanks to Tatsumi for making the situation possible.

When the merperson—Mirial—turned back toward the Greater Snow Lizard, she dashed forward like an arrow released from its bow.

Tatsumi had told her this was a singular opportunity, and Mirial believed that to be true. If they didn't defeat the Greater Snow Lizard now, it would likely escape and become even harder to capture. A monster that had reason to be wary of humans tended to stay better hidden and became more cunning in its attacks.

Determined to end the battle here, Mirial sprinted toward the Greater Snow Lizard with a speed reminiscent of a fish swimming through water. In what seemed like an instant, she closed the distance to her opponent and was swinging the strong, sharp fins that extended from her wrists to her elbows—her weapons in her merperson form.

The Greater Snow Lizard's scales, which had merely been nicked by Tatsumi's sword, were effortlessly sliced open by Mirial's fins. Dark blood sprayed from the creature's body, staining the small amount of snow that still remained around it.

The monster cried out in agony and leapt backward. Its powerful hind legs propelled its massive body nearly ten meters back in a single bound, putting

distance between itself and the newfound threat.

Unfortunately for the Greater Snow Lizard, the distance between it and Mirial remained unchanged. For every step the lizard took back, Mirial advanced even faster. The monster's cry, full of a mix of frustration at not being able to retreat and resentment toward its assailant, echoed again as Mirial closed in and swung her fins once more. Her right fin deeply sliced into the lizard's chest, while her left fin grievously wounded its right hind leg.

"Amazing..."

The overwhelming speed and power of Mirial's merperson form left everyone in awe. While her speed might not match Tatsumi's when he used Teleportation or Acceleration, it was still formidable. And in terms of sheer strength, she likely surpassed even Jardock.

"Why didn't Mirial tell us about this?" Tatsumi wondered aloud.

"It makes sense," Jardock responded without turning to face them. "Would a girl her age want people to see her like that?"

"Ah, right..." Tatsumi realized the truth in Jardock's words. Mirial's transformation into a merperson, with its stout body, slender limbs, expressionless fish face, and scaly skin, couldn't exactly be described as cool or beautiful. More like peculiar or odd. A young woman like Mirial would have little reason to willingly expose such an unusual form to others, especially considering that the magic left her naked.

Yet, in her merperson form, Mirial was truly incredible. No matter what she looked like, you couldn't help but feel a sense of awe and respect.

The absence of snow had improved both Mirial's and the monster's footing, but Mirial's agility allowed her to easily keep pace with the Greater Snow Lizard, and her overwhelming strength allowed her to tear through the creature's tough scales. She was a fearsome warrior, embodying both power and speed.

"Now, Tatsumi, you can't let Mirial show you up, can you?" Jardock asked, offering Tatsumi his sword. "You have one last task, don't you?"

"Yeah, that's right," Tatsumi agreed, nodding at Jardock before turning to the woman supporting him. "Chiko, just a little more. Restore my strength. Just

enough to eradicate the Demon.”

“Got it, Master,” Calsedonia replied, beginning to chant her spell. When her incantation was complete, Tatsumi felt a slight resurgence of his strength.

The Greater Snow Lizard’s agonized roars continued to echo through the trees. With its right hind leg severely injured, it was no longer a match for Mirial.

As soon as the monster lashed out with its powerful tail, Mirial effortlessly severed it. As blood poured from the stump, the Greater Snow Lizard exposed its sharp fangs, attempting to bite into the merperson’s flesh. However, its fang-filled mouth was sliced by Mirial’s dorsal fin. The body of Greater Snow Lizard, now bleeding profusely from its chest, right hind leg, tail, and mouth, swayed.

At that moment, the emotionless round eyes of the merperson flashed brightly, signaling the imminent end for the Greater Snow Lizard. Lowering her stance, Mirial darted beneath the towering frame of the monster and swung her arms, crossing them midair in an X shape. There was a sharp swish, and the lizard’s right hind leg was cleanly severed.

Even the formidable Greater Snow Lizard couldn’t remain standing after losing a limb. It collapsed onto the ground with a thud. Then, just as it lifted its head to survey its surroundings, it caught sight of the merperson’s body twirling in midair. Curling into a ball, Mirial had begun spinning rapidly forward, her dorsal fin transforming into a circular saw blade aiming straight at the downed lizard.

No thud was heard upon impact, only the gruesome sound of flesh being sliced followed by the softer sound of something falling onto the snow. It was the severed head of the Greater Snow Lizard splitting from its body.

“Tatsumi! The final shot is yours!” Mirial shouted, returning to her human form as her magical energy ran out. As expected, she was completely naked, but there was no time for her to feel embarrassed or attempt to cover herself.

In response to Mirial’s call, Tatsumi vanished. His sensor’s eyes clearly saw the departure of a demonic figure from the body of the Greater Snow Lizard. However, this Demon didn’t resemble the hungry ghosts he’d seen before; rather, it was a tiny Demon, not even thirty centimeters tall, lacking horns and

with a disproportionately small body and limbs compared to its head. It must have been of a lower level than those Tatsumi had previously faced.

The sudden appearance of Tatsumi startled the small Demon, its face twisting as if caught in a grimace.

The Demon probably thought its invisibility would allow it to escape unnoticed by humans. The fact that Tatsumi was staring directly at it, however, made it clear that that wouldn't work. In a panic, the little Demon flapped its tiny limbs, but its attempts at increased speed were futile.

Without uttering a word, Tatsumi swung his brightly glowing sword, cutting effortlessly through the Demon's body. Only he heard its high-pitched scream as it vanished into thin air.

Tatsumi sheathed his sword and turned back to his companions with a reassuring smile and a thumbs-up. Instantly, the worry fell from their faces.

Just then, however, Tatsumi's body swayed. In spite of his vast magical reserves, his physical strength had reached its absolute limits. As he began to collapse, someone quickly rushed to his aid, preventing him from hitting the ground. This person was not his beloved but someone who happened to be closer at the moment of his fall.

"Thank you, Tatsumi. Because of you, we were able to avenge my comrades. And... you looked pretty cool," Mirial whispered into Tatsumi's ear. She had been captivated by the sight of Tatsumi wielding the legendary Heaven magic and battling the Greater Snow Lizard.

Whether or not Tatsumi heard her words, no one would ever know. The exhaustion had already taken his consciousness away.





From behind the unconscious Tatsumi and naked Mirial, a soundless scream erupted. The young girl, still supporting the man in her arms, turned around to find Calsedonia beaming at them with an exceptionally bright smile. However, something about the look sent a chill running down Mirial's spine. But why?

Without dropping her cheerful expression, Calsedonia walked determinedly toward Tatsumi and Mirial. Reaching them, she gently yet effectively took Tatsumi from her arms. It was more a reclaiming than a simple handover.

"A young lady shouldn't be embracing a gentleman in such a state, now should she? Hee. Hee hee."

Though Calsedonia laughed, Mirial could feel an undeniable force behind her words. "In such a state...?" she asked, confused, before remembering she was naked. In her haste to help Tatsumi, Mirial hadn't considered that she had nothing on. Mirial's face turned beet red. "Oh, right! That's right! I am... naked..."

In her panic, Mirial glanced around to find Elle leaning against a tree with a troubled expression, and Jardock shrugging in disbelief.

"My clothes! Where are my clothes?!"

Mirial dashed through the snow, frantically looking around for the exact spot she'd left her belongings on their way to the battle.

Calsedonia puffed out her cheeks. "I'm the only one who gets to hug Master, or be hugged by him!" she muttered, too low for anyone else to hear.



Chapter 17: The Formation of a Party

After successfully defeating the Demon-possessed Greater Snow Lizard and retrieving its head as proof of their victory, Tatsumi's group took a brief rest before setting off for Levantis. Tatsumi, still knocked out from exhaustion, got to ride on Jardock's back—a sight that, while somewhat comical, did not diminish the gravity of their achievement.

The four arrived back in the capital without further incident and went straight to Tatsumi's home, where they set him down on his own bed. Calsedonia agreed to visit the Savaiv Temple afterward to report their success. Elle, meanwhile, parted ways with the group and was even now en route to the Elf's Repose Inn.

"Thank you so much for your help, Jardock," Calsedonia said.

"Oh, it was nothing. But—" Jardock allowed a meaningful smile to play across her lips as she glanced at the large bed where they'd just placed Tatsumi. "—such a big bed, huh? Does this mean Tatsumi is quite vigorous at night?" Just in case Calsey hadn't gotten the message, she winked.

Calsedonia's face turned instantly red. Mirial, standing behind Jardock, also blushed, glancing back and forth between Calsedonia, the bed, and the sleeping Tatsumi.

"Wh-What?! No! My grandfather gave me this bed because I move a lot in my sleep, and yes, Master and I do share it, but it's not like we're vigorous at night or anything. I mean, I wouldn't mind if we were, because Master's very considerate and gentle with me... Wait, what are you making me say?!"

"Careful, you'll wake him up with all that shouting," Jardock teased.

Panicked by this new thought, Calsedonia covered her mouth with her hands and anxiously confirmed Tatsumi hadn't been disturbed by their conversation.

She hadn't needed to worry; Tatsumi's exhaustion was so profound that he hadn't even stirred. Calsedonia let out a relieved sigh, her hand on her chest.

Jardock watched her with a gentle smile. "To be honest, when I first heard about you being called a Saintess, I imagined you being very serious and strict. But the real you is incredibly cute. I can see why Tatsumi fell for you. And by cute, I'm not just referring to your appearance."

Winking again, Jardock turned toward Mirial. "Well, it's about time for us to make our exit. It wouldn't be right to linger in Tatsumi and Calsedonia's love nest for too long."

"That's true," Calsedonia agreed.

"Oh? What's the matter? What's got you all flustered like that? Could it be that this room, where Tatsumi and Calsey share their love every night, is a bit too much for you, Mirial?" Jardock asked mischievously, causing Mirial to blush even deeper.

"That's not it at all! If we're going to leave, let's go now!" she retorted sharply, turning and stomping quickly out of the house.

"Jardock, you shouldn't tease Mirial so much," Calsedonia chided gently.

"Heh heh heh. She's just so earnest—I can't help it. But I think it's good for her. Being too quiet might make her dwell on her lost comrades," Jardock reasoned thoughtfully.

"You're right," Calsedonia acknowledged. She was impressed; despite her rugged and formidable appearance, Jardock was surprisingly considerate and caring. Provoking Mirial like that very well might help prevent her spirits from falling too low.

"Well, I really should be going now. Give my regards to Tatsumi, will you?"

"Of course. Oh, and about the reward for this mission—I'll collect it from the temple and then split it between the five of us."

“Great. I’ll pass the message to Elle and Mirial as well,” Jardock responded, giving one last wink before leaving Tatsumi’s home.

With Jardock and the others gone, a peaceful silence settled back over the house. Calsedonia changed out of her armor into more comfortable clothes, then proceeded to loosen Tatsumi’s garments as he rested on the bed. His armor had been removed after their battle with the Greater Snow Lizard, so he was currently wearing the sturdy leather outfit typically worn under the armor, which might be uncomfortable to sleep in.

As she worked on his clothes, Tatsumi slowly opened his eyes.

“Master? Are you awake?”

“Ah? Where is this? Our house...?” Tatsumi murmured, moving his head slowly from where it rested on the pillow.

“Jardock carried you all the way here,” Calsedonia replied with a nod. “Be sure to thank her next time you see her.”

“I see... I owe Jardock one...” Tatsumi muttered as Calsedonia continued to loosen his clothing. “Thank you, Chiko.”

“D-Did I wake you?”

“No, not at all. I woke up because I smelled something nice... Ah, it was your scent.” Tatsumi reached out, gently picking up a strand of Calsedonia’s hair and bringing it to his nose to confirm the fragrance. “Yep, this is definitely the smell. Somehow, it always calms me down.” He smiled warmly up at Calsedonia. “Hey, Chiko. Can I be a bit selfish?”

“Selfish...? Ah!” Before she could figure out what he meant, Tatsumi had pulled her forward by the arm, drawing her into a tight embrace.

“Your scent really is comforting, but feeling your warmth and softness... That’s the best medicine for me,” Tatsumi confessed.

“Master...”

“Thank you for today, Chiko. It was only because of you that I could fight that Demon,” he admitted.

“It was nothing. It was my oversight that pushed you too hard. But, Master, you’ve become *really* strong. And you looked so powerful fighting the Demon.” Calsedonia blushed happily, nestling her face into the nape of Tatsumi’s neck and gently kissing it, like a small bird tenderly nibbling at its owner’s finger.

In return, Tatsumi lovingly stroked her head, and, almost instinctively, they found their lips meeting in a gentle kiss.

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“What will you do now, Mirial?” Jardock asked her as they walked back to the Elf’s Repose Inn.

“I think I’ll go back home,” she answered, looking down. “To tell my comrades’ families about them dying, and hand over their belongings... I believe that’s my duty as the one who survived.”

Jardock glanced over at her, expression tinged with sadness. “Are you sure you’re not pushing yourself too hard?” she asked, affectionately ruffled the young girl’s hair with a large hand.

“I’ll be fine,” Mirial assured her. “I’m not pushing myself too hard.” Although she initially appeared slightly bothered by Jardock’s headpatting, she eventually let her do as she wished, finding comfort in the warmth of her palm. “And then, after I’ve told their families about them, I’m thinking of coming back here to Levantis. When I do, can I, um, join you and your group again?” Mirial ventured.

“Of course, you’re more than welcome! I’ll let Tatsumi know too, but I’m sure he’ll be happy to have you back,” Jardock assured her, and Mirial’s face lit up with a pleased smile.

“Right! Now that that’s settled, I’ve got to work hard! I’ve got a debt to pay off to Calsedonia, after all.” Gearing up for beast hunting wasn’t cheap, and although there was no strict deadline for repayment, Mirial hated being in debt.

“You’ll be able to pay her back soon, don’t you think?” Jardock asked. “The Festival of Ice Spirits is almost over, and the ice spirits will leave the Great Ice Mountain Range soon. Once the snow melts, there’ll be more beast hunting

jobs. Especially during the thaw, when so many hungry beasts come out, it's the busiest time for hunters."

Many monsters stayed dormant during the snowy season, then became more active to satisfy their hunger once things warmed up. This often led to increased sightings near human settlements, meaning these periods of warmth were fraught with danger due to the hungry, aggressive monsters.

"I'm in the same boat; I can't go back to my village until the snow melts," Mirial added. A road stretched from the royal capital to her village, but in this season, it was impassable.

"Oh? What does that mean? Are you saying you'll be hunting monsters alone until the snow melts?" Jardock raised an eyebrow in question.

"Ah..." Mirial stopped in the middle of the street, turning bright red as she realized she'd misspoken. Just because she was going back to her village didn't mean she wanted to wait to join Jardock's group. She offered a sheepish grin and looked away. "So, um... do you think I could join your group starting today?"



Chapter 18: Beast Hunters

As the Evening Moon season approached its end, the bitter chill had gradually begun to leave the air. In this thawing atmosphere, Tatsumi, Jardock, and Mirial dashed through the lingering snow of the forest, fully armed.

“Tatsumi!” Jardock called out. “One’s getting away! After it!”

“On it!” Tatsumi responded instantly.

“I’ll follow up with Mirial right away!” Jardock added as Tatsumi’s figure vanished, reappearing the next moment just ahead of the fleeing beast’s path.

The creature they were pursuing was known as the unicorn rabbit. It closely resembled the rabbits found on Earth, especially when it came to its pure-white fur. The major distinction between the two lay in the single horn protruding from its head, which made these creatures far more dangerous than their earthly counterparts. They might have looked cute and innocent, but these carnivorous beasts also possessed sharp claws and fangs—in terms of strength, a unicorn rabbit was widely known to be more formidable than a snow lizard.

It was these unicorn rabbits that the group was hunting today. Taking advantage of Tatsumi’s agility to corner the beasts, Jardock and Mirial were taking them down one by one. The rabbits had formed a small group of five, but three had already fallen to the team’s coordinated efforts, with another soon being dispatched by Mirial’s spear.

Realizing the futility of resisting, the last rabbit of the group attempted to flee, but was easily cut off by Tatsumi’s Instant Teleportation. With a defiant cry, the beast lunged at him, its horn poised to strike.

Like the rabbits Tatsumi knew from Earth, unicorn rabbits used their powerful hind legs to propel themselves forward, even across the snow-laden ground. The power behind their jumps made their horn a deadly weapon that could easily pierce through a human.

Tatsumi remained composed, raising his shield to defend against the oncoming assault.

The moment the beast's sharp horn made contact with his shield, Tatsumi skillfully shifted it to divert the momentum of the rabbit's charge. Its horn scraped against the shield's surface with a strident grating noise. As the monster slid past him, Tatsumi's sword flashed in a swift motion, slicing through the unicorn rabbit's hind legs and staining its pure-white fur red.

Now incapacitated and having collapsed onto the snow, the monster was quickly caught by Jardock and Mirial. Jardock raised her two-handed battle-axe high and brought it down with all her might on the slowed beast. The axe cleaved the unicorn rabbit's head cleanly, sending it spinning through the air before it landed quietly on the snow.

With the last one down, smiles spread across the beast hunters' faces.

"We did it!"

"Yeah, I think even Calsedonia won't have anything to complain about this time."

"Right. We've kept damage to the fur and such to a minimum."

The three celebrated their successful hunt with a round of fist bumps while Calsedonia observed them from a distance. *They're pretty well-coordinated*, she mused. *If they keep hunting together like this, their teamwork's only going to get better.* She smiled as she thought of the incredible potential this team possessed.

That said, it's a bit lonely not being able to officially join their group, Calsedonia mused. At this point, the gap between the beginners like Tatsumi and the veteran, Calsedonia, still made it impossible to form an official team.

Calsedonia would have loved nothing more than to share in the same sense of achievement and joy that Tatsumi, Jardock, and Mirial were feeling just then.

But there was nothing she could do about it yet.

If Tatsumi grew to be on par with her, perhaps they would be able to officially team up someday. And that day might not be too far off. Shaking off the loneliness in her heart and wearing a renewed smile, Calsedonia approached the still-celebrating team of monster hunters.

“Excellent work, Master. I have no complaints about how you fought this time.”

“Is that true? That’s good to hear.” Tatsumi smiled broadly, clearly pleased. “Just wait for me, Chiko. I’ll catch up to you soon.”

Calsedonia was startled; had Tatsumi read her mind? But no, he probably just wanted to fight alongside her as much as she desired to fight with him.

“Thank you, Master.” Moved by this thought, Calsedonia snuggled up to Tatsumi and stood on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek, a kiss of blessing and gratitude.



Side Story: Iron Arm

Tatsumi's days had been filled to the brim. As a priest at the Savaiv Temple, he attended lectures given by Giuseppe on the language, general knowledge, and magic of his new world, while as a temple warrior and a Demon exorcist, he also underwent daily martial arts training.

In addition, Tatsumi had lately been making an effort to show up at the Elf's Repose Inn to gain more experience as a beast hunter, taking on as many requests as possible alongside Jardock and Mirial. Of course, his beautiful fiancée was always by his side, though she had her own responsibilities at the temple, and this meant she couldn't be with him every moment of the day. Still, people had grown used to seeing them together at the temple, such as during their lunch breaks and on their way home.

Understandably, Calsedonia didn't join Tatsumi for his academic sessions with Giuseppe. Normally, even nobility would have had a tough time getting personal lessons from the head of the Savaiv Order. In fact, the high priest had only ever taught two students before Tatsumi: the current king's son, Prince Argento Rezo Largofiery, and Argento's son, Archduke Gjoltrion Rezo Largofiery.

It was worth noting that when Giuseppe had tutored Argento, he hadn't yet ascended to his current position; the gift of Giuseppe's tutelage had been born from the priest's close friendship with King Balraide. And even the princes hadn't had the good fortune of being tutored by Giuseppe every day like Tatsumi was now.

Naturally, rumors spread quickly within the temple about Tatsumi likely having a bright future.

“Hm. It seems my son-in-law has mastered the script of this world quite well,” Giuseppe noted about six months after Tatsumi’s arrival.

“Chiko teaches me at home too,” Tatsumi replied modestly. “Both you and her deserve the credit.”

“Indeed, though you’re quite the hard worker,” Giuseppe remarked, smiling and stroking his long white beard. He had heard of Tatsumi’s diligent efforts at the temple, of course, but he was pleased to learn that Tatsumi was also striving to improve himself at home. The goal, of course, was to become someone who could stand shoulder to shoulder with Calsedonia.

Giuseppe found it commendable that Tatsumi was making such effort for his granddaughter. Since being summoned to this world, Tatsumi had consistently put in the work to try and match Calsedonia’s stride. However, Giuseppe had recently heard a rumor about Tatsumi that piqued his interest.

“By the way, my son, I hear you’ve been frequenting a certain tavern lately?”

“A tavern...? Ah, you mean Elle’s place.”

“Oh, Elle, is it? I’ve heard you’ve become quite close with the tavern’s landlady recently,” Giuseppe remarked. His genial smile never left his lips, yet a sharp glint briefly flashed in his eyes.

Noticing this, Tatsumi quickly shook his head. “Don’t get the wrong idea! I mean, yeah, I’m close to Elle, but that’s because she lived in the same world as me! In Japan!”

“What? She lived in the same world as you, you say?” Giuseppe asked, intrigued.

“That’s right. Sure, I feel a sort of strong kinship with Elle, but it’s not romantic. It’s more like... She’s a maternal— No, calling her a mother figure would be disrespectful.” Tatsumi gave a wry smile. “She’s like a cousin. Besides, whenever I go to Elle’s place, Calsedonia is with me,” he added, thinking that this should make his intentions crystal clear. If there were any sort of romantic relationship between him and Elle, there’s no way he would bring his fiancée along when he saw her.

Giuseppe broke into a gratified smile. “My apologies. It’s not that I mistrust you, but given my position, I had no choice but to inquire. You understand, I hope?”

Infidelity was considered a grave sin for a priest of the Savaiv God. If someone under the protection of the High Priest committed such a sin, it could reflect poorly on Giuseppe himself. There were even some within the upper echelons of the Savaiv Temple who feared Giuseppe’s position might be jeopardized by rumors of Tatsumi seeing too much of the tavern landlady. To counter such concerns, verifying the truth was essential.

“Yes, I understand. But I swear by the Savaiv God, I haven’t done anything shameful,” Tatsumi responded, holding the holy emblem around his neck as he spoke his oath.

Giuseppe watched him, smiling in satisfaction. “Indeed. To think that the founder of spirit magic had been living in this city for years without my knowledge! It seems my network of information isn’t as comprehensive as I thought... Yet, for such a figure, one would expect rumors to have circulated.”

“Elle’s kept her identity as the founder of spirit magic a secret since coming here,” Tatsumi explained. “She had some stalker issues before. What made it even more difficult is the guy was a rather powerful figure in a certain region.”

Many sought to become Elle’s disciples, drawn not only to her expertise in spirit magic but also to her elven beauty. Years ago, a certain nobleman had persistently pursued her, hoping to possess both her and her magical prowess.

When Elle rejected the noble’s advances, he’d immediately begun to harass her. Elle had had no choice but to flee the noble’s domain, ending up in the city of Levantis. Now, she disclosed her identity as the founder of spirit magic only to those she deemed trustworthy.

Even Calsedonia, who’d frequented Elle’s establishment, had been unaware of Elle’s significant status. Only a select few among the tavern’s regulars knew of the elf’s true identity, with most assuming she was simply another practitioner of spirit magic.

The fact that Elle had opened up to Tatsumi upon their first meeting likely stemmed from his origins in Japan, a country where Elle herself had once lived,

and the homeland of her dearly beloved husband.

“Tatsumi, I’d ask that you keep Elle’s story confidential,” Giuseppe requested.

“Certainly,” Tatsumi agreed.

“And I swear on the name of Savaiv not to do anything that could disadvantage someone you and Calsedonia care about,” Giuseppe pledged, holding his own holy sigil as he echoed Tatsumi’s earlier oath.

Shortly after that, the day’s session neared its end. “Let’s call it a day,” Giuseppe announced, prompting Tatsumi to let out a deep sigh. As much as he enjoyed these lessons with Giuseppe, they were rigorous and were far from a relaxing time for him.

Giuseppe watched Tatsumi fondly as he stretched his stiff body. Suddenly, he remembered something. “By the way, my son, what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“Today?” Tatsumi thought for a second. “I’ll be having lunch with Chiko, then it’s martial arts training with the priest-warriors at the training grounds.”

“Hm.” Giuseppe’s expression subtly changed. The look on the face of the High Priest of Savaiv could best be described as that of a child who’d just thought of a very fun prank to pull. “You seem to be quite busy. But remember, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I guess I am busy... Luckily, Chiko’s magic helps me recover from fatigue, so that’s a big help,” Tatsumi replied with a wry smile. However, he was too busy enjoying the end of the lesson to notice the suspicious look on Giuseppe’s face. If he had, he might have realized the old man was plotting something.

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Decked out in his training gear, Tatsumi faced Ojin, the temple’s martial arts instructor. Tatsumi was armed with his usual one-handed sword and shield, while Ojin wielded a two-handed axe.

“All right, let’s start,” Ojin announced.

“All right.” Tatsumi nodded, and with that, he charged forward.

Ojin tightened his grip on his weapon, preparing to confront Tatsumi's assault. When he drew near, Ojin swung his axe horizontally at ground level, attempting to land a blow on Tatsumi's torso.

Just before entering the reach of Ojin's axe, Tatsumi drew to a sudden stop. The axe passed inches from his face, leaving a gust of wind behind. Taking advantage of the moment, Tatsumi took a great leap forward, again closing the gap between himself and his opponent.

Now within the axe's range, Tatsumi thrust his sword toward Ojin's throat. Ojin skillfully maneuvered his two-handed axe, knocking the sword's tip away with the shaft.

His sword having been deflected, Tatsumi's torso was now wide open. Ojin wasn't one to miss such an opportunity; he drove the butt of his axe's handle into the opening in Tatsumi's defenses.

A *thunk* echoed and Ojin felt the hit land as reverberations went through his ear and hand, but his face showed dissatisfaction. The axe's handle had struck not Tatsumi's body, but the surface of his shield.

"Hmph, your skill with the shield is as good as ever," Ojin remarked.

"It's all thanks to someone who trained me thoroughly," Tatsumi replied with a smile.

Ojin simply grunted, unamused.

The two of men simultaneously stepped back to create distance between themselves, then returned to their ready stances, before clashing fiercely once again.

"Tatsumi's gotten really strong," one of his fellow trainees observed.

"He was a total beginner at first... He barely even knew how to hold a sword," another priest-warrior added, both of them staring intently at Tatsumi's duel with Ojin.

To them and all the priest-warriors of the Savaiv Temple, it was clear what Tatsumi had been working so hard for. "It was quite the surprise when he

suddenly appeared at this temple, and next thing we knew, he was engaged to Lady Calsedonia. That was quite the shock,” one remarked.

“Yeah, there’s still something mysterious about him, isn’t there?” another mused. “For some reason, the High Priest spends a lot of time teaching him personally. There are even rumors that he might be royalty from a foreign land...”

While Tatsumi had by then fully integrated into the Savaiv Temple community, there were still many unknowns about his background. A few within the temple still harbored suspicions. However, the majority had come to accept Tatsumi as one of their own. The priest-warriors watching Tatsumi and Ojin’s training considered Tatsumi a comrade.

“Well, then. We can’t spend all our time watching Tatsumi,” one remarked.

“Yeah, you’re right... Hey, wait!” another suddenly exclaimed in surprise.

“What’s wrong? Why are you shouting all of a sudden?”

“Look over there.” The startled warrior pointed toward the entrance of the training ground. When his companion turned to look, his eyes widened in shock as well.

“Is that... Is that actually the High Priest?”

“Why is he here? And in that outfit?”

“Your Eminence, what’s going on? Why are you dressed like that?”

Noticing the sudden shift in the atmosphere, Tatsumi and Ojin paused their intense exchange of blows and looked around. There stood Giuseppe—not in his usual garb as the High Priest of the Savaiv Order, but rather dressed for battle just like the assembled priest-warriors. He wore a leather chest protector and notably rugged metal gauntlets, along with protective gear for his legs. Although he didn’t seem to carry a weapon, his posture and movements left no room for an enemy assault.

Seeing the astonished looks on everyone’s faces, Giuseppe smiled like a kid whose prank had just succeeded perfectly. “You all seem to be working hard,” he said with his usual smile, walking toward Tatsumi.

“Um, Giuseppe? Why are you dressed like that?”

“This? Well, I thought it might be time to teach you something other than knowledge,” Giuseppe remarked, bringing his metal gauntlets together with a resounding clang. “Even though I may not look it, back in my youth, I was known as Iron Arm. I can still teach you a thing or two about martial arts.”

“Iron Arm...?” Unsure how to react, Tatsumi turned to Ojin, who wore a somewhat troubled expression.

“His Eminence is correct. People indeed called him Iron Arm,” Ojin confirmed.

Decades ago, when Ojin had first joined the Savaiv Temple, Giuseppe had been a renowned exorcist. True to his nickname, he’d excelled in hand-to-hand combat, and thanks to his prowess as a magician, he’d been an even more capable exorcist than Calsedonia was today.

“In fact, it was His Eminence who drilled me in combat techniques when I was just starting out,” Ojin added.

“Ho ho ho. I’ve heard of your skills as a priest-warrior from Ojin and the others, but I thought I’d like to see for myself. How about it? Will you spar with me?” Giuseppe proposed.

“H-Huh?! With *you*, Giuseppe...?” Tatsumi stuttered in disbelief.

“Hm... Everything’s an experience. Give it a try, Tatsumi,” Ojin encouraged, and there was nothing Tatsumi could do but agree.

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Having moved to the center of the training ground, Tatsumi and Giuseppe faced each other. “Well then, shall we begin?” Giuseppe suggested.

“All right,” Tatsumi replied with equal parts determination and nervousness.

All the other priest-warriors had stopped what they were doing and crowded around the edges of the training ground.

“Here I come, son-in-law,” Giuseppe declared—and then vanished from Tatsumi’s sight.

“Huh?”

Even as Tatsumi let out the surprised exclamation, he quickly sensed a killing intent drifting up from his feet. Before he could even look down, he instinctively arched his upper body backward. A metallic blur shot past at incredible speed exactly where his chin had been just moments before.

That was Giuseppe's fist, Tatsumi realized with a thrill. The old man's uppercut was like lightning, and Tatsumi's evasion of that strike was purely down to the instincts he had honed as a priest-warrior. Though he might not match Giuseppe or Ojin in technique or experience, Tatsumi was far from a novice by now.

“Ho ho, you dodged that, did you? You've indeed become quite skilled,” Giuseppe remarked, resuming his stance with a sly smile.

Seeing Giuseppe's flawless form, Tatsumi mentally prepared himself. The man before him was not the genial father-in-law he was used to. This man was an exorcist standing on a much higher plateau of skill, regardless of his age.

The rules for this sparring match were that only pure martial arts could be used, no magic. That meant Giuseppe's earlier movements and attack were solely the product of his physical capabilities.

Don't think of him as old. Think of him as a way stronger opponent, Tatsumi reminded himself, pushing his shield forward in a defensive stance.

Giuseppe's punches and kicks came like a tornado. The flurry of blows was so rapid that Tatsumi barely had time to breathe, and they weren't just fast—they were incredibly forceful. Quick jabs from left and right, kicks that swooped in on unpredictable trajectories... One moment Giuseppe seemed to expose his back, only to spin halfway around and launch a backhand strike. From the knee lift that seemed to send him springing from a low stance to the headbutts and body checks that came flying Tatsumi's way, Giuseppe's body itself was a weapon. Tatsumi found himself completely occupied with defending against the older man's onslaught.

“Well, there might be a hint of decline compared to his prime, but Iron Arm is clearly still in formidable shape.”

Ojin's murmured praise was heard by everyone around him, as all the priest-warriors were watching in stunned silence. They knew Giuseppe as a magician and as the High Priest, but they had never seen him fight, and they could hardly believe their eyes.

"Hey, that attack... That's not something you would expect from someone who's getting up there in age," one of them remarked.

"Yeah, beyond the sheer speed, it looks powerful too. He could easily pass for someone still in active service, couldn't he?"

"Do you think you could defend against that?"

"No, I'm honestly not confident I could block all of that..."

"But Tatsumi is, isn't he?"

Even Ojin, who was overseeing Tatsumi and Giuseppe's sparring match, couldn't help but be impressed by Tatsumi's purely defensive stance. "He's blocking all of His Eminence's attacks... I think he's gotten even better since they started!"

Tatsumi was feeling overwhelming pressure, yet he used his shield expertly to block attack after attack. Being able to fully defend against an opponent's attacks was a testament to a warrior's strength.

Again, Tatsumi was confronted with an onslaught of Giuseppe's punches. Each strike he blocked with his shield sent a jarring shock through his arm. Then, not giving Tatsumi a moment to breathe, Giuseppe's foot surged toward Tatsumi's nape.

Sensing a chill at the back of his neck, Tatsumi quickly dropped to his haunches. A gust of wind passed right over his head, strong enough to catch a few strands of his hair.

Still crouched and feeling the chill of a sudden sweat on his neck, Tatsumi attempted to catch Giuseppe's leg with a horizontal kick. The High Priest's stance was solid, however, and he easily blocked the kick—and caught Tatsumi's leg in the process.

"What was that kick? That had no strength in it at all!" Giuseppe called.

In less than a second, Giuseppe's leg changed its trajectory in midair to perfectly target Tatsumi, who was caught mid-crouch and couldn't move. The heavy kick landed squarely on Tatsumi's head, sending his body flying.

He landed with a roll and got up quickly, desperately trying to clear the stars from his vision as he searched for Giuseppe. When he finally located him, it was clear Giuseppe was readying himself to pounce once more. He was like a raptor about to swoop down on its prey.

Whatever he's planning is going to be big, Tatsumi thought quickly. Given his unstable footing from the man's last attack, he doubted he could fully defend against another strong blow. Still, Tatsumi prepared to defend himself, raising his shield. But the expected impact never came.

"Huh?" Tatsumi peeked from behind his shield, puzzled to see Giuseppe frozen in the same pre-attack pose as before, not moving an inch. Forgetting they were in the middle of a sparring match, Tatsumi tilted his head in confusion. "Um, Giuseppe? Sir?"

"Son," Giuseppe finally replied.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind... calling Calsedonia for me?"

"Chiko? Do you mean...? Are you saying you've...?"

"Yes, it seems I've done my back in... I can't move."

"Your back... could it be a slipped disc?"

Oh, it must really hurt if it's so bad he can't move, Tatsumi realized. Without another thought, he rushed from the training ground to seek relief for his mentor.

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"Really, Grandfather, you should consider your age!" Calsedonia admonished.

"Miss Calsedonia is right, Your Eminence," Ojin agreed, unable to hide his dismay as he watched.

He, Calsedonia, and Tatsumi were gathered in Giuseppe's private chambers in the temple, where the High Priest lay prone on his large bed. Calsedonia was straddling his back, diligently massaging him. Unfortunately, there was no magic to cure a slipped disc.

"I'm truly ashamed," Giuseppe admitted, more reflective than normal as he quietly accepted the stern words from both Calsedonia and Ojin.

Tatsumi, meanwhile, could only watch silently, offering no comment.

"However, sparring with you, son-in-law, allowed me to truly appreciate the effort you've put in up to today. Once my back is healed, we'll have to pick up where we left—"

"Grandfather!"

"Ow, ow, ow!" Giuseppe couldn't help but cry out as Calsedonia pressed down on a particularly sore spot, likely on purpose.

Tatsumi had to smile at that. Despite appearing repentant, Giuseppe's words suggested otherwise.

"Grandfather, please! Promise you won't do anything like this again!"

"Well, in my youth, they called me Iron Arm..."

"You're not in your youth anymore!" Calsedonia cut him off sharply. Giuseppe had nothing to say to that.

"Chiko is right, Giuseppe," Tatsumi finally said. "In my hometown, there's a saying: 'Cold plunges aren't for elders.' It means older people should avoid doing things that are too reckless or harsh for their age."

"Hm... Even my son-in-law's treating me like an old man now," Giuseppe grumbled, clearly not amused at being chided repeatedly by his granddaughter and her fiancé. He buried his face in his pillow.



It's been a while since I last greeted everyone like this—this makes it the third time. By the time this book hits the shelves, almost half of this year will have passed. Really, time these days seems to be getting ahead of itself, doesn't it? Feels like it's flowing much faster than it used to. It wasn't this quick in the past, right?... Yes, I understand. I'm well aware that this is what getting older feels like. *laughs*

Now, enough with the jokes. I'm pleased to announce that my work, *My Pet is a Saintess*, has reached its third volume. Those who have read the main story by now would have noticed that we introduced quite a few new characters this time. Among them, a certain elf (whether it's correct to call her an elven human or not is another matter) who has actually been acquainted with Tatsumi and Calsedonia for longer than you might expect. A webnovel featuring her as the heroine, just like *My Pet is a Saintess*, is available on Shousetsuka ni Narou! under the title *The Elf is a Freeloader*. If you're interested, I'd be thrilled if you could check it out. It's a bit of a challenge for me, as it's set in a real town. Of course, aside from our elf, I hold each character dear. The lady and the fish, both my brainchildren, were a headache to create. I hope you'll favor them as much as you do Tatsumi and Calsedonia. However, the terms 'lady' and 'fish' definitely won't make sense unless you've read the story. *laughs*

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone involved in the publishing process. My gratitude to Akira Caskabe for the beautiful illustrations once again, and most importantly, to all the readers who have supported this series. Thank you very much.

Muku-Buncho, May 2016

Back Matter

Author: Muku-Buncho

efore I knew it, "My Pet is a Saintess" has already reached its third volume. I'm seriously starting to wonder if the flow of time is accelerating with each passing year. At this rate, I feel like I'll be hitting retirement in no time. But then again, once I retire, I'll have all day to write novels, so maybe that's not such a bad thing after all (laughs). For now, I plan to keep juggling my main job and writing novels, giving my best to both.

[←1]

A “koku” refers to the intervals between the temple bell’s strikes, each one being roughly equivalent to two hours on Earth.

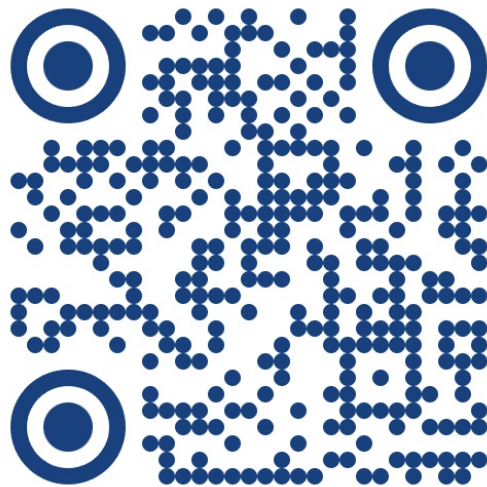
Thank you all

Thank you for completing Volume 3 of "My Pet is a Saintess"! We hope you've enjoyed the heartwarming journey of Tatsumi and his saintess companion. Your support is invaluable to us.

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